

Prisoner Express News Winter 2022

Dear Friends, Once again I get the pleasure of writing to you and sharing "What's up at Prisoner Express." Well, the answer to that is that all of you are. I am impressed with the writing, art, and questions you pose, and the stories you share, and I thank you for creating such a stimulating program. Many of you thank me, but really it is your thirst for knowledge and improvement that drives me. I applaud all you who have not given up, but instead are exploring your creative edges.

You are searching for information and education and connection. They are very healthy pursuits. I tip my hat to all of you. In these pages we will recap what we have all been doing these past months, by sharing some of the submitted poems, art, theme essays and updating you on last cycles programming. You will also see a list of the programs we are offering for this upcoming program cycle. Please respond in a timely manner to these offerings as they are planned to be mailed in late April 2022. Any request for service after that for these specific programs may not be met. The good news would be that if you miss the deadline and then write you will receive the next cycle's newsletter Summer 2022, and once again have another chance to join in at the beginning a cycle. I also use the newsletter to try to answer the many questions you all send in. With the volume of mail we receive, it is difficult and costly to respond individually.

First I will introduce myself, Gary Fine. I began PE about 20 years ago in response to a letter from Dani in TX asking for books. His description of how reading books improved his existence was enough for me and I began sending books to anyone who asked. That got out of hand as I could not raise funds fast enough to meet the demand. In order to serve more of you, PE has been morphing and growing over the years in response to the requests you all send to us, and from our own observation of what types of programming seems most popular. PE relies on a network of volunteers who produce interesting distance education packets for you. We are lumbering along doing the best we can in the challenging environment of mailing things into prisons. If you move, please send us your updated address. Many institutions are now starting to scan and print your personal mail, and they have separate addresses for types of mail, personal versus books and newsletters. We are not personal mail, but instead are sending booklets. Hence our mail should not go to the address that is for personal mail, yet I find the mail is often rejected and told to be mailed to the scan-and-

distribute address. When I send it there it is often rejected because it is in a booklet form or because we use bulk mail to distribute our lessons. Basically, mail can be rejected at both addresses. I am in the process of solving this problem, but for those of you who think you have been dropped from our list, if you are receiving this you know you are still on our mailing list and if lessons you expected did not come, it is because we are not navigating the mail system correctly, or your request for a packet came to us too late to be included in our bulk mailing. We will continue to work on this issue as well as try to figure out how we might communicate to some of you through the tablets many of you have reported are on their way. The tablet companies we hear about are for-profit companies, and while it seems way easier to send our lessons to you through the tablets, it often can turn out to be way more expensive than making paper copies and mailing them to you through bulk mail rate at USPS. I wish this was all simpler, but regular mail seems to be getting more complicated to send to you. We are not going anywhere so if you don't hear from us for what seems like too long, drop us a line so we can hopefully figure out why.

Last cycle we sent a number of packets that asked for some responses from you. [**Astronomy, Design and Creativity, ARTknows, Travel and Leisure and Play Writing**]

The responses are starting to come in, and the creators of the packets are reading through the responses as they arrive. We hope to put together compilation packets that highlight the most interesting answers. In particular I note how interesting and prolific your responses have been to the astronomy packet. I had hoped to create still another lesson in astronomy for this cycle, but I see how busy Kate, who created the astronomy packet will be just reading through all your responses. We will delay offering a second astronomy packet until the Kate can process all the responses. I am hoping though we can include some new astronomy material in the compilation packet Kate is creating based on your answers to her questions from the first packet. We are still seeking artwork to accompany that astronomy compilation packet. Treacy's last ArtKnows packet, "The Sky's the Limit" solicited art about the heavens. The creators of the packets appreciate your feedback on their offerings, and we all get better in creating new packets when you share what was useful and what wasn't

Kylie who offered the philosophy programs last year has managed to read through all your responses. We created and

mailed her response packet and now she is at work creating a new Philosophy packet for the next unit. I know that many of the response packets we mailed were rejected because as I mentioned before it was treated as Friend and Family mail and has to go to another address, especially for prisons now using "Textbehind." I hope to better understand these multiple mailing address situations better in the future. I hope you can understand the complexity of creating a system that meets the needs of each state as well as the federal BOP. It makes my head spin!!

We have been creating collages of your art, poetry, journals and plastering them on the walls outside the library. It looks great, and it gives me great pleasure when passerby's stop and take in at a glance all the creativity you all offer this program. Often passerby's stop and spend big chunks of time reading the work we have posted on the wall. Currently we have completed two collages. Each is 4 ft by 16 ft. We hope to build another this winter.

Years ago, a co-worker informed me that the word recreation, defined as an "activity done for enjoyment when one is not working" is really Re-Creation. When we recreate, we re-create ourselves. With that in mind we offer programs to you in Prisoner Express for recreation, but underneath we are focused on helping you re-create yourself into the person you might like to be. No one can help us if we don't want help, but a helping hand can make all the difference if someone is looking to grow, improve, develop, and learn. We are reaching into prisons to provide you with recreation activities but now you know the truth of our intentions. Everything is always changing and so are you. We hope engaging your creative self will allow you to re-create the life you are leading and hopefully steer you to a path that is richly rewarding and full of meaning.

With that intent here are the programs we offer for the upcoming the coming cycle. Do not delay to long in signing up. We are too small an organization to send lessons to individuals. A bulk mailed lesson can cost .20 cents postage. A first-class mailing is typically more than a dollar to mail. With our limited funds we can best serve you all by only using the bulk mail service to send programs. I know that is frustrating if you miss a chance, but it allows us to do this work on the limited funds we are able to raise.



Jerome Washington

Winter 22 Programs

1. Expedited Books- This is our original program, but it has been modified through the years. This is your chance to receive a customized book package chosen especially for you, based on your interests. This is the only project we offer where we have to ask for a donation for your participation. Each package costs \$5 to \$8 to mail. The books are free, as they are all donated, but the postage costs can get very expensive. We ask you to send at least \$4 to help defray the cost of this program. 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. In the past prisoners have used institutional checks or have friends and family send us stamps to cover the costs. I wish we could offer this for free, but we do not have the financial resources. Please note all the books are donated and if you ask for very specific requests it can be hard to make a good match. Please give us as many topics as you can, so we can make the best matches. For those of you who only want 1 kind of book, say only chess, or something more obscure please note you will often be disappointed. Of course, ask for just what you want, but give us 2nd, 3rd and 4th choices please. It can make volunteers bonkers when they can't make a good match and often your letter sits around while we hope to receive something close to what you want. That is a dangerous situation as we are inundated with mail and things that sit around get lost!! 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. Only participate in this program if you can be patient and have some flexibility about what you receive. We already have about 200 people waiting for their packages. The pandemic has caused numerous delays in this program.

Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell. Covid caused the campus to prohibit students from coming to the library since early December 2021 till Feb 7th 2022. We are getting back into the swing of things, but it takes a while to catch up on all fronts. With that said, I believe we make excellent matches for most of the book requests we receive. 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.

2. Journal Project- So many of you have been participating in the journal project over the years and it is clear that taking the time to write about your daily life can be therapeutic for the writer. Your writing offers us on the outside a glimpse into prison life and humanizes prisoners to all the folks who read your journals. We have many students and community volunteers who come by and read journals... We are still scanning many of your journal entries into our digital data base, but it must be legible to us before we consider scanning it. If you received the last journal packet, that was put together by our new coordinator Grace. I know many of you appreciated the structure she offered in that packet and below she will share some of her ideas for the upcoming cycle of journal programming.

My name is Grace, and I am the Coordinator for the Journal Program here at Prisoner Express. I am a second-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. We are here to support you in any capacity we can, and I hope you will join us on this journey.

3. Poetry Anthology- We are still collecting poems for PE Poetry Anthology Vol 26. Anthology # 25 is almost at the printers. A little more editing is needed, and it is my hope that some in March 2022 Poetry Anthology will be in the mail. If you submitted a poem for #25 than you are in line to receive a copy of the anthology. If your poem came in after we finished collecting for this anthology it is immediately added to the submissions for anthology #26 which we will begin assembling in the spring of this year. Below are some poems that have been chosen by our editors to share with you all. We have been so impressed by the poetry PE members have created, and as we share it with folks in the free world. we find that they are impressed as well. You will see an offering later in this newsletter from Rattle magazine that came about directly from the editor of Rattle reading some of the poems previously submitted by PE poets. Remember to get the anthology, we ask that you submit at least 1 original poem. You can submit as many as you want. Not everyone who submits is included in the anthology as we get thousands of poems for each issue, but everyone who submits a poem gets a copy of the anthology. I know folks can be disappointed when they don't see their poems included, but poetry is a matter of personal taste. Each edition of our Poetry Anthology is put together by a group of PE volunteers and each group has their own taste and preference. Reading one another's work is a great way to find inspiration and understanding of others. We select and choose assorted poems to digitize and add to our PE archive, so one day you may get a letter from someone who has read your poem online. You must sign the permission form on our signup sheet to have your poems considered for being displayed online.

Here are a few poems received during the last cycle we will share here rather than in the anthology.

(Be sure your name and number is written on your poem and all other written submissions to PE as it often gets separated from the envelope.)

Going Viral

by Donald J Warner

The bite in the air reminds me I am alive
A washed out sun paints a pasted image on the brown sod
Appearing as sand with a texture
I'm masked, as most everyone was before the being that is
greater than us
Infiltrated at will
The day, the night, the early morning

When we worked, we slept, we loved
We made threats
Lithely amongst us, without us, without gear, love or lust
Continually pressed, continually toiling the task at hand
In fear we sit, watching in disbelief, cautious, blaming,
victimized, traumatized
Giving power, breadth, silence, tempest
Lied to by the best
Trying, honestly
We are so great at being the best
Of everything
At denial, ego, pressing forth, pressing
On
At death
The excellent hosts we are
Great parties, galas, funerals
We are great competitors
When we control the field
We are perfect
Perfectly designed for this
Choosing the perfect leader
"Only he is capable"
He didn't have a care
Only he lost
He is the only victim, gratefully sharing his victimization
Gratefully share his lies, not the spoils
Where is he now
Who is he killing now
Rounding the corner

Evening Stroll

by Taj Alexander Mahon-Haft

even on evercast eves
at the right time
from the right angle
even mud puddles
on a cracked prison path
reflect clearly the sky
with more colors
than the moment

Defenseless

by Jeremy Brown #609187

"Do not think that what is hard for you go master is
Humanly impossible; and if it is humanly possible, consider
it to be within your reach." ~ Marcus Aurelius
The essence of my reality,
Seems senseless,
Is it because, I feel defenseless?
I traverse through these
Infinite moments,
I view Mother Earth,
I feel Mother Nature,
Fighting back against

the industry,
against systematic onslaught
of Sacred Spaces
and gorgeous
even wonderful
places,
Where are the protests,
that defined our Freedoms,
the invisible yet felt, hierarchical
power structure of this,
Never once Great
Blood Bath of a Nation,
Too many things die,
and cry out their
last breath of
a vibration,
downtrodden
modified
artificiality,
within the Future
of our Fallen Cities,
Nature becomes an overgrown meadow.

The Skin I'm in

by Tika English

What so you see
When you look at me?
The perfect me
I portray to be
Or do you see
The junkie
I can't stand to be
That I'm trying hard
Not to be
Do you see
A perfect family tree?
Or addictions
Passed down into me
How about the happy girl
In the pictures
There's no way
She could be hurt
Now look at yourself
in the mirror
Is your perception
Getting any clearer?
So before you start
Throwing stones
Why don't you look
At the reflection
Of your own...

The Storm

by Ted Cole

A solitary fisherman
in a boat on the Gulf.

The hypnotic sparkle
of sunlight on waves,
the soothing sway of his craft-
unaware, he drifts out to sea.
A cold, wet splat on his neck
jerks his eyes to the heavens,
and roiling black clouds
take his breath away.
He glances shoreward-
too far?
Lightning sears his gaze
as thunder rolls over him,
and he laughs.
It's gonna be a race!
Two hours later,
angry waves shove his boat ashore.
Wet, cold, and tired.
Exhilarated!
But the real storm
waits at home...

A Prison Poet Oath
by David Hehn

We have Poetry in order to
Not Die of the Truth
Our intentions are severe
Our conscience is Good
We Go where angels fly
We Bring back The Light so that others
may see
A Poets Heart is Pure,
We Live so that others Don't Have to
Our Honesty is Harsh
But we See the Beauty Because
we endure the Ugly



Jesse Osmun

4. ARTknows- Treacy continues to nurture the artist in you with her ArtKnows newsletter. Every issue is different, and she may share technical tips on how to create art or she might delve into deeper issues about the nature of art and creativity. I know from all the letters you send to Tracy that she is offering a service many of you find valuable. We are collecting art for our next exhibit. Please feel free to send us your creations. Treacy has requested that more women participate in the art project. Our experience has been that women are hesitant to share their writing and art. We'd love to see your talents expressed in PE. Many of us are shy to show our work, and think it will be judged harshly, but here at PE we value your artistic expression. Practice makes perfect, and we are offering you the chance to practice and for your art to be seen. Below are her thoughts on the programming she will offer next cycle.

Winter to spring greetings!

Hope you all are keeping well!

Thanks for the letters and art that you have continued to send in to PE this past year!

A group of volunteers created an exhibition of the work outside the library enabling the Cornell students and visitors to see the work and read some of your thoughts.

We hope that there will be another spring exhibition at the Big Red Barn, but I guess that depends upon any further variants! We haven't yet resumed the Monday sessions with the students where your art work is shared with them and they write letters to you about your work. Again, it is my hope that this will happen at some point this coming semester.

For the upcoming ARTknows, I plan to update the drawing edition that I created over 10 years ago. I often receive requests from beginning artists and experienced artists for a "how-to-draw" manual. Unfortunately, one does not learn to draw from manuals. Drawing is tactic – it is not linear. What I mean by this is no step-by-step approach to drawing can really teach you how to draw – it can merely teach you to be a robot – which is not drawing or art.

When drawing manuals do approach drawing as a step-by-step process (think of those manuals that give you a step-by-step way of drawing a face) the manual is deceiving you - taking you further away from the business of drawing!

One learns how to draw by observing the world. AND, when we see the world, we don't do it step by step. Consider walking into

a room. Your eyes don't tell you, "step one: construct the walls, then the floor and then the ceiling." NO, you experience the room within the context - encompassing the world of that room. Likewise, when you observe the face, you don't see the features of that face separately – you experience the entire face. Of course, you might settle on the eyes, but those eyes don't make sense unless you experience the context of the forms allowing for those eyes to be seen.

So often I see face drawing as if the features (the eyes, the mouth, the nose) are drawn on the surface of an egg. In these drawings, there is no understanding that the eyes are created by the form of the bones creating a hollow and that a globe is set in those hollows; that the nose emerges from the face and is not on the same surface as the cheeks.... You get the picture.

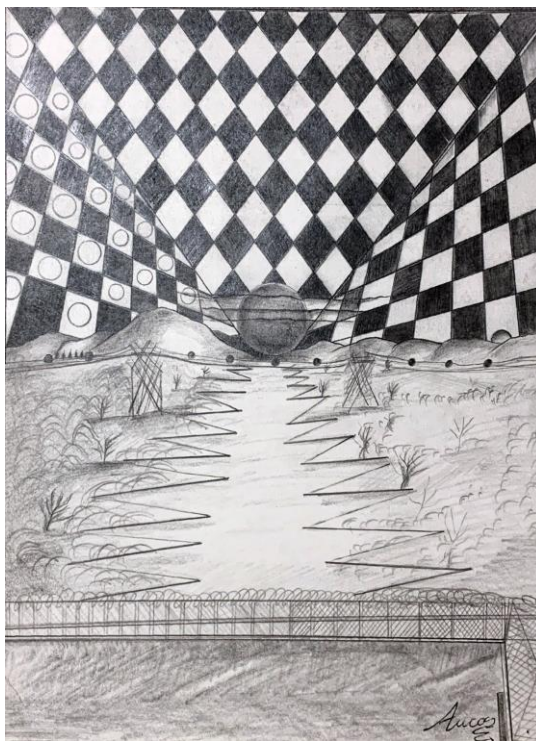
So rather than a step-by-step manual of how to draw, this ARTknows curriculum explores how we see in order to draw and what approaches we have to visually express what we see; i.e. line as expression; light and shadow as a means of exploring space and form; what is volume, what is lost and found in a drawing? There are so many fascinating things visually beyond representation – what do I mean by representation?!

There will be assignments in the curriculum. You are not obligated to complete those assignments, but if you do, the work will be included in the spring exhibition. It might be interesting to couple this year's work with work that was created 10 years ago from the earlier edition.

In the ARTknows, I will keep you posted on special exhibitions and art activities as they are developed throughout the spring and share some of the art that has been sent in over the past half year. Keep drawing!
Treacy

We sadly note the passing of one of our strong contributors to the PE art program dominic marak [He never used caps when he submitted his art]. If you look at the collage on the cover page [pg48], center left, dominic submitted a collage of his face created with cut up scraps of paper. He was super creative. I know hardship can often bring out creativity in some of us. Please share your creativity with us. Your artwork continues to inspire and reinforce in the viewer, the humanity of incarcerated men and women

5. Chess Club- Chess is the program that illustrates our PE program style. We offer you opportunities to dive deeply into your creative self. When you are actively engaged, creating within yourself, conditions on the outside fade, and you are immersed in your own fascinating world. It doesn't matter if you play a focused game of chess in a park, your home or in prison, all the rest of the environment fades away and you are immersed in the game. We want to give you a chance to make magic and have the external prison disappear for those moments when you harness your intellect and creativity. Each chess lesson includes interesting facts about the game and the masters that compete for championships. Also included are chess puzzles and strategies. If you want to improve your chess game here is a good opportunity to do so. We have two volunteers, both named Robert who will put together the next packet. Send any comments regarding chess to them by writing "chess" on the outside of the envelope. Below Robert shares some interesting thoughts on chess.



Miguel Arcos -

I find chess to be uniquely appealing, a cross between a game, a sport, and an art form. Playing over a game between masters is like listening to a symphony, with every move and every note perfect. It's a game between exactly two players, so when you win it's entirely due to your own skill, and when you lose there is no one else to take the blame. And unlike most sports, it requires no special physical prowess, you don't have to be 7 feet tall or able to run faster than anyone, it just requires a sharp mind and an ability to develop a strategy. But like all sports, these talents can be mastered by hard work and learning.

6. Meditation and Recovery- Tara has been creating meditation packets for PE for many years. Her aging mother and other family issues have caused her to step back. Sarah, a student at Cornell has stepped in to explore Meditation and Recovery. **First here's Tara**

Dear friends,-I hope you are all well! Covid is disappearing here in NY, and I hope that's true where you are also. I hope you're using your time well - so many moments can be an opportunity for growth, or kindness. I'm taking care of my amazing 101 year old mom, and I will do my best to answer your letters when I can. I love hearing from you, but please keep your letters short. I don't always have lots of time. I will happily contribute to the next Meditation Newsletter that Sarah is putting together.

You can write to me at : Tara's Voice, PO Box 524, Valley Cottage, NY 10989

May your days be blessed with peace ...Tara

You Can Take Refuge from Afar with Garchen Rinpoche

"Use your time well! Use your time to awaken! Prison is the greatest gift in your life if it leads you to the Dharma, if it leads you to the Buddha !"

Garchen Rinpoche (pronounced Rin-po-shay, and it means Precious One) is one of my main Tibetan masters. I took refuge from him. He is one of the most incredible beings I've ever known.. He has a special place in his heart for prisoners. He was imprisoned in Tibet for 20 years of hard labor, when the Chinese were arresting monks because of their religion. Mindfulness was his major practice for those years. If he was caught meditating, he'd be killed. Some monks committed suicide, but Rinpoche has said that he found joy in prison because he knew he was burning negative karma. And as he told me when we met, "Prison wasn't a bad place for me. I had so many opportunities to practice compassion". He knows the profound power and importance of practicing dharma - mindfulness and compassion - in prison.

To take refuge does not mean you give up your religion. The Dalai Lama said, "if you do Buddhist practices you become a better Christian, Muslim...whatever your religion, because practicing Buddhism helps us to become better human beings".

Rinpoche will give refuge to everyone who wants it. It's a blessing to be connected to his mind stream. Once you have taken refuge with him, as I have,

he will guide and protect you until you are enlightened. And, only do this if you feel to. Trust your calling!

You don't have to, but you can send me the following and I will send it off to Rinpoche. If you can't send any of these, you absolutely can still take refuge with him.

~a clipping or 2 or 3 locks of hair from the top of your head (the crown), cut with sincerity, a picture of you, and if you can, something as an offering (picture, feather, poem, stamps)

You will receive a packet including a refuge card with Buddhist prayers, your new Tibetan name, and teachings. You'll also receive the teachings for, and the Bodhisattva Vow, which you can take after taking refuge. As long as Rinpoche is able to, he will offer this. I highly recommend acting on it as soon as you feel to. I'll let you know when I receive your request for refuge; the turn around from his center is a few months.

If you have already taken refuge with Rinpoche and you have moved, please let me know!

I can send everyone who has had refuge the Bodhisattva Vow, with teachings.

*If you are taking refuge PLEASE tell me if you can get photocopies of pictures of Rinpoche and Buddhas, and if you can get card stock. **Make sure your contact information is on the envelope AND on the letter.** I will write to you when I get your request. It will take a few months til you get your refuge packet. **-Be well-Tara***

*I find meditation to be a great way to gain a little space from the external environment. We all have very little control over what goes on outside us, but when we turn inward it is all about us and creating a resting place where we can relax and thrive. It is only temporary, and we always return to the hustle of the world, but often that short quiet break can give us the strength to face another day, another challenge. Sarah, a new PE volunteer, is excited to create a meditation packet for you. Sarah has told me how meditation has been an important tool in her recovery from substance abuse and she is excited to share what she has learned with all of you. **--Here's Sarah***

Hello! Meditation used to be something that seemed too difficult for me to practice. I was not someone who was in tune to the spiritual practices I often associated with meditation. In fact,

when I first started, I was a newly sober addict who could barely make it through each day without drinking. With some guidance I was able to begin a meditation practice that has continued to help me stay centered and sober for over 5 and a half years now. It has become a way for me to focus my mind and connect with the universe in a healthy manner. I invite you to participate in the next meditation packet if you are struggling with addiction/alcoholism or would just like a beginner's approach to meditation. I believe this packet will be best utilized while journaling as it will help show progress along this journey as well as a way to pinpoint some of the difficulties within. (essay sentence if included). I hope to be a part of your journey towards finding peace and recovery in the next packet. Best, Sarah

I look forward to reading Sarah's packet and I encourage you to enroll if you've got some curiosity about what lies inside when you quiet the ever active story creating mind, and see what lives underneath all that thinking

7. Let's Learn Spanish- This is a comprehensive self-study packet that will help beginners learn Spanish vocabulary and grammar. It is a reprint of the packet Hope put together for PE a few years ago. Many people have asked for this packet since we initially offered the program. Hope was studying Spanish when she put this together. She has graduated and entered law school in another state. Please know the students who work here are moved and inspired by reading your words, and when they leave here many pursue careers focused on social justice and reform. Hope is volunteering for the Prison Advocacy Network while she is a law student. You should now that it is the letters you all sent that moved Hope in this direction. Even though it seems difficult to comprehend sometimes given your situation, your thoughts and words do matter. When you write to our volunteers, many times you are planting seeds that can sprout many years later. Universities, like prisons, always have people coming and going. Most of our volunteers are busy students who make time to help in the project.

8. Philosophy- Are you ready for another thought-provoking lesson from Kylie? I think we should call it the Philosopher's Corner. Kylie has already produced two packets in philosophy that deal with the fundamental questions regarding life and it's meaning. I am sure the next packet will continue to delve into questions that humankind has been pondering through the ages. If you want to expand your ability to think and reason this is the packet for you. Kylie is a former student volunteer who continues to be involved years after she has graduated and left town. Her packets are deep yet also accessible. Pondering existence is something humans have

done throughout history. I hope you to will enter our Philosophers Corner, put your thinking cap on and share your insights and responses to Kylie's packet.

10. Screen Writing- Matt has been sharing creative writing packets focused on screenwriting during the past few years. This will be his third time creating a packet and it sounds like he has learned a lot from interacting with many of you, and he is ready to refine and share again his ideas for how to turn your ideas and experiences into a film script. I believe his packets will aid anyone who has an idea and want to expand their thoughts through writing. Even though the packet will be geared to film writing, the emphasis will be on how to take an idea and shape it and flesh it out, so you are then able to expand it into a complete work. If you are interested in the creative process and how to harness it through organization and effort, then Matt's packet might be perfect for you. His thoughts are below.

Creating a Film Story

When writers create stories for film and television they must consider the unique visual nature of the medium. What works best in a book might not work on screen and vice versa. In this packet, we will discuss how to shape dramatic stories for film. Our goal will be to get you started working on a treatment or outline that could serve as the basis for an original screenplay.

About Me

I am a filmmaker and professor based in New York. I believe creativity is not a magic power that only a lucky few are blessed with, it's an ability that is essential to who we are as humans. It's also a craft: it takes practice and guidance to develop. I know for me I simply wouldn't be able to live without it. I have film stories that have been rolling around in my head for decades and I cherish them like they're my children. If you have that same urge to express yourself, then I'd like to share with you the lessons that have helped me in my journey as a film artist.

11. Immunology and Mental Health- Sara who created the Mental Health packet last year has come back with a new packet offering on immunology and it will include a section on how it can effect mental health. Her research in her last packet was thorough and I know from the responses you sent, that there is a deep interest in understanding the underlying issue of Mental Health. This packet is part of that series, and Sara plans more packets on the subject in the future. If well researched science

presented in an approachable manner interests you, check out this offering. Here's what Sara has to say.

Immunology has been at the forefront of our society for the past few years with the onset of the pandemic. You may have heard terms like variant, herd immunity, or antibody. Even outside of the context of the pandemic, our bodies are constantly fighting off infection and disease. This packet offers an in-depth exploration of the body's various defenses and HOW they work against different kinds of pathogens. In keeping with the theme of mental health that is woven into each newsletter, there will be a short section on the inter- section between mental health and immunology. The newsletter will also ask you to consider and write about your own experiences dealing with sickness, how this may have been influenced by or influence mental health, and current topics such as vaccine mandates—Looking forward to sending you this packet-Sara



Kenneth Zamarron

12. Rattle Magazine- This offering is so satisfying to me and reflects so much on the work you all do. It sprouted from the chapbook project we offered a year ago. For those of you who remember, we sent 300 copies of a chapbook to you all with instructions on how to create a chapbook of your own. About 50 of you sent in chapbooks for us to read. Elizabeth Wolf who

wrote the original chapbook we sent to you, read all your submissions and shared them with an editor she works with at Rattle magazine. He was so impressed that he chose 19 poems from 14 authors to publish in the summer 22 issue of Rattle. That PE poets are being featured in their magazine thrills me. All the folks whose poems were chosen should have received mail directly from the folks at RATTLE as well as a letter from me confirming this. Rattle as an organization wants to encourage poets and poetry, and they will be sharing their magazine with up to 500 of you. The plan is for them to give us new copies of back issues to mail out to you. Tim, the editor will also share his thoughts about certain poems in the magazine we will send to you, to give you insight into how a poetry editor views the poems he is reading. It is my hope that partnering with Rattle will provide you with an expanded understanding of the power of poetry as well as introducing you to some of the tool's poets use to tell their stories. Most poets submit their poems to Rattle online, but we are working out with Tim a way you can send poems by mail to Rattle either directly or through PE. They have a small staff and cannot respond to each poet with a personal letter, [sound familiar] so I want to work out a way that each PE participant in this poetry project [up to 500 of you] can submit some poems through PE for consideration for publication in Rattle. This can all be explained out when we send participants the "Rattle Packet." I invited Tim to share a few thoughts about Rattle and the upcoming collaboration.

Introduction to Rattle

Tim Green

I'm Tim, and I've been working as the editor of Rattle for 18 years, which is hard to believe when I see it written out like that. I never thought I'd spend my life making a poetry magazine, but here we are. I work seven days a week reading submissions, publishing poems online, managing the print publishing schedule, and hosting a live podcast.

Even farther back than that, when I was still an awkward teenager trying to crack my high school's pitching rotation, Alan Fox, the founder of the magazine, was rediscovering his love of poetry. This was 1990 or so, and to this day I don't really know what made Alan do it. Maybe it was a mid-life crisis. He was 50 years old, a successful businessman with a happy family—he had the opportunity to do whatever he wanted, but somehow he found himself taking classes at night at the home of Jack Grapes, a legend in the Los Angeles literary scene.

Jack Grapes was friends with Charles Bukowski, the famously gruff postal worker-turned-poet, but he was also an actor, and

brought the skills of that profession into a workshop he calls Method Writing. It's a spinoff of Method Acting, the technique where an actor will try to relate so much to the character they're playing that they become them—rather than trying to fake crying, a method actor will find a way to actually feel a devastating sadness, and then react naturally to everything that's happening in the film. Simply put, Method Acting is a way to create something real through honesty. Even if the character is fictional, the emotions of the actor are real, pulled deep from the depths of their being.

At the end of the workshop, Jack asked the students to put together a class chapbook of what they'd been writing, and Alan volunteered to choose the poems and make the copies at Kinko's. The class brainstormed on names, and that became the first issue of Rattle magazine.

The idea behind Rattle has always been to publish poetry that uses those principles of radical honesty found in Method Writing. We believe this is what poetry really is, and what all art is really about. It's about seeking and sharing the truths we're holding inside of us that are more real than facts.

Poetry is rooted in the oral tradition, which goes back tens of thousands of years, to the times of human prehistory, where our brains were as developed as they are now, but before we had the tools of the alphabet to write everything down. It's the ancient art of sitting around a campfire and trying to talk our way toward a better understanding of the world around us. The stories that spoke the truths became the myths that laid the foundation for civilization.

Three decades after Alan's first workshop, Rattle has become one of the largest magazines dedicated to poetry in the world. Along the way, it became too much work for him, and he hired me to run it. There's a magazine called Poetry that's over a hundred years old with a massive endowment, and Rattle can't quite catch them, but we're always getting closer, with a circulation now up over 10,000.

The poems that we publish use poetry as a way to speak the truth. Poets achieve that in all manner of styles, and we try to keep the poems varied in their forms and subjects as possible, but they all have that one principle in common. The poems are not telling us what we want to think, or what the poet wants us to think about them, or how fancily they can craft a sentence. When I read through the great many submissions we receive every year, I'm only listening for the hum of honesty—and I think it's something everyone can hear. We lived and evolved in a

world of language, and we can tell the difference between what's true and what's B.S.

Here's an example, one of my favorite poems we've published. This is written by Tony Gloeggler, a New Yorker with a Brooklyn accent, who works by day (and night) as a manager of a group home for adults with autism.

Tony Gloeggler
1969

**My brother enlisted
in the winter. I pitched
for the sixth-grade Indians
and coach said
I was almost as good
as Johnny. My mother
fingered rosary beads,
watched Cronkite say
and that's the way it is.
I smoked my first
and last cigarette. My father
kept his promise,
washed Johnny's Mustang
every weekend. Brenda
Whitson
taught me how to French kiss
in her basement. Sundays
we went to ten o'clock Mass,
dipped hands in holy water,
genuflected, walked down
the aisle and received
Communion. Cleon Jones
got down on one knee, caught
the last out and the Mets
won the World Series.
Two white-gloved Marines
rang the bell, stood
on our stoop. My father
watched their car
pull away, then locked
the wooden door. I went
to our room, climbed
into the top bunk,
pounded a hard ball
into his pillow. My mother
found her Bible, took
out my brother's letters,
put them in the pocket
of her blue robe. My father
started Johnny's car,
revved the engine
until every tool
hanging in the garage
Shook.**



Steve Fegan

It's hard to read a poem like that without getting emotional. Think of a poem as if it were a novel, with a plot. In these 40 or so short lines, we get a whole novel's arc. The title and the first lines set the scene—a younger brother remembering the year that his brother enlisted. We're shown specific details that paint a picture: the Indians baseball team, the rosary beads, Walter Cronkite on TV. The brother's Mustang in the garage. And then what the poem is really about—the white gloves of the Marines knocking on their door, and how the family responded to the tragedy.

Notice how Tony doesn't say that his father was devastated, or his mother became a shell of herself. We don't feel things when we're only told about them. Instead, he shows those feelings through the details, the mother's blue robe, and the tools in the garage shaking with grief as the father revs Johnny's engine. Reading the poem, we become the little brother who's telling this story, and maybe for the first time we can understand a piece of what it's like to lose a family member to war.

Only this story isn't "true." Tony never had an older brother, though he did grow up in 1969 pitching for the sixth-grade baseball team. It was his friends who experienced this loss, and Tony watched it happen to them, and empathized with them, and imagined what it would be like to be the younger brother himself. Factually, the poem is a lie. But on a deeper level, like the best actors who really experience grief while on stage, at the level of the soul, the poem is true. It's truer than the ability to do this, to step inside someone else's life, imagine what it would be like, and then transfer that feeling into someone else is the magic of poetry. It's a superpower that all humans possess because we're all natural storytellers.

One of the mottos of Jack Grapes' Method Writing workshops is to "write like you talk." In the poem above, Tony uses specific details, but he doesn't write in a flowery way—he tells the story the way he might say it if you were sitting down next to him at a bar, using short declarative sentences. Other poems push language farther, and might be more "write like you dream," but writing the way you speak is generally a good principle.

Many of the poems we publish really are factually true, but others are fictions that speak the truth like this. They're all honest, though, and that's what we try to publish.

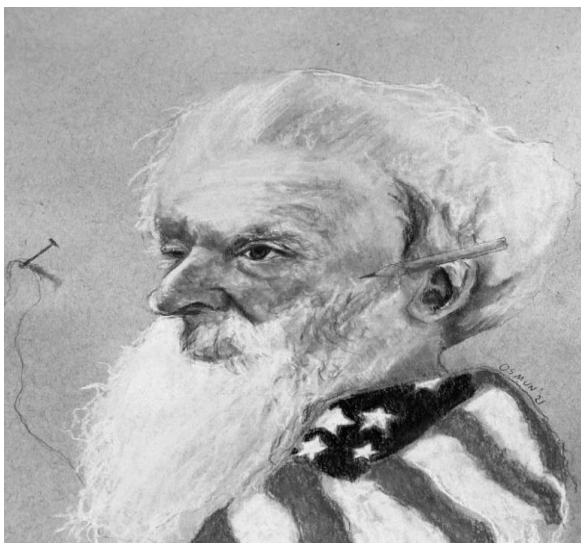
I'd like to invite anyone who is interested in poetry to participate in our upcoming project with Prisoner Express. We'll be donating 500 copies of Rattle to the program twice a year. Those participating will receive a copy along with a letter from me discussing a poem or two from the issue like I just did with "1969."

Our goal with Rattle has always been to be more than just a magazine. We want to encourage as many people as possible to participate in this ancient magic of truthful storytelling. We hope that this project will inspire participants to write poems of their own with that same deep honesty.

Participants will always be welcome to send poems for consideration in Rattle, as well, but do note that we have almost no staff and are unable to reply to submissions other than to vary rarely offer publication. We read and appreciate every one of the 100,000+ poems we receive every year from around the world, but only have room to publish a few hundred. The intention of the project is to inspire and encourage this kind of honest self-expression.

13. Anthology Opportunity- Here's an opportunity you don't have to sign-up for, but rather it is a call for submissions. Sara who also created the Immunology packet offered earlier in the newsletter is a long-term PE volunteer. She has worked in a variety of our projects including coordinating the journal program and creating the mental health unit. She graduated university a while ago but still stays involved with our program. She recognizes the value of the writing you all do and wants to share it with others in the free world. She reads through your writing looking for stories of inspiration and perseverance. She intends to create a book of writings from your submissions. I invite you to submit writings for her book. It's always a long shot trying to get your writing published but seeing how the poetry submitted for the chapbooks have led to 14 poets getting published in Rattle, I want to extend an invitation to you to be included in Sara's project. We don't have the expectation that it will be a money maker, and probably Sara will have to raise the funds to get the book published. What it will do is raise the profile of all of you authors and who knows who might read it. Sara's request is below.

Here is another opportunity for you to submit prose that may be included in a published anthology. The idea is that the anthology will be distributed to prison libraries around the country and hopefully circulated more broadly. The theme of this anthology is stories of growth/strength. Think about your life experiences and how those shaped you. Were there any moments that changed your outlook on life? That made you a better person? Or that shaped the path you see for yourself in a positive way? If you're able to, consider how time leading up to and in prison may have contributed to personal/character growth. There is no compensation for the authors but everyone who has a story chosen will be mailed a copy of the anthology. This project is focused on getting your voices heard.-Sara



Jesse Osmun

Word and Picture Themes

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. At that time we had maybe sent packages to 50 or 100 people. 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" [race, religion, ethnicity]
4. "Mail is the most important thing in my life"

Over and over those same themes 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, 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 these theme packets the tone of the letters I was receiving from participants changed. Your 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 situation. Next people realized that folks of different races, religions and ethnicities felt the same way about what they were 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 was immensely gratified by the writing that was submitted and the growing of a group-mind among the participants. It is an ongoing process and has been developing for years as J. Bauhaus, our longest running contributor can testify. It is from these writers that the whole PE program developed.

We started this newsletter 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 many of you, but certainly for many of the writers there has been a joy in creating and in uncovering a side of yourself that you can share with others.

Currently 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 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 that for every time I hear of mail failing to reach one of you, that it is happening many times 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. I can't afford to reprint them all, so 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. **A kind donation from the Sonya Staff Foundation has allowed me to expand the size of this edition of the newsletter.** This newsletter is larger this cycle, so I can share more stories from the "Cauldron," which is how I see this effort. It's like we are stirring a big pot of soup and your stories are the aroma that comes steaming out. Please keep writing and thank you to all who do.

Before we show you the stories from the last cycle, here are the upcoming word themes:

Censorship	due 3/1/22
Partners	due 4/1/22
Sticky Business	due 5/1/22
Showers	due 6/1/22
Growing Older	due 7/1/22
Awakening	due 8/1/22
Triggers	due 9/1/22
Race	due 10/1/22

Please send your theme topic suggestions to us!

Distant Family

by Hunter Widner

Family /'fam(ə)lē/ 1. parents and their children as a group.

Being in the prison system has brought a new meaning to the phrase "long distance relationship" to me. The prison I am

located at is eight and a half hours away from my family. Twice a year they make a trip to see me, once in March for my birthday and December for Christmas. I feel all giddy when they come, but it turns into heartbreak when they leave.

Phone calls and letters with photos usually make the week better and close the distance, but unless you physically witness an event, you'll always feel a hole inside. Since 2018 I have missed my brother's wedding, my oldest nephew's graduation, and my youngest nephew's first T-ball game. I have photos of the wedding and graduation, but my mom says, "Son, we miss the smile you have."

My parents whom I hold very close to my heart are up in age. My dad will be 70 in November and still works and all I want to do is go fishing with him. My mom is 58, she takes care of three rambunctious grandkids who love their grandparents. My grandma is 82 and is very close to my heart. We tend to gossip for fifteen minutes while using the phone. Every time I read a letter or grab the blue photo album, I feel the distance shrink. One letter that always makes my eyes water is the one from my niece who drew me a jellyfish. As for photos, the one of my great grandma always makes me smile and want to cry.

I treat each and every moment in prison as a day in the military. I await my day to head out the gate where my distant family is not so distant anymore. To quote a song from Staind which is called Outside: "I'm on the outside looking in." I can't wait to be in the photos again. I can't wait for the hole to fill and the distant family to be a close family.

by Meagan Work

I've learned the hard way that family isn't about blood but lessons learned. It's not about the miles between but the loyalty that distance can't define. And it's not about the trials and pain you're bound to face but the way you face them together. At a very young age I grew up tired and scared of the "I love you's". Especially the type that trails before "but," to put to sleep the doubts that whisper to walk away loudly in my ears and the type that leaves behind the bruises, blood, and stolen innocence. I'm sick of promise after promise made about keeping promises that keep disappointment tightly hugging my feet. I'm not bitter. Just sick and tired. How long do they expect someone to believe the nothings spoken by someone who's supposed to be their everything? No more. Family isn't about who laid down to make you but the ones who stepped up to raise you. It's not about whose DNA created you or the blood of one who's rushing through your veins but the people worth dying for because they made you finally wanna live and they give your existence the attention it deserves. Should I tell of the screams that haunt my dreams? Or try to explain how my skin and bones are merely a

container for the pools of heartache drowning my soul? Because if I did, you'd learn that family isn't a word everyone understands or something we're all blessed to be born into. If I did, you'd learn that my mom is a woman I met who's doing life in prison and who taught me that I was worthy, untainted, and lovable. My sister's a girl younger than myself who at a children's shelter, held me while I fought the demons of my flashbacks. My brother is an addict who's not much different from me but put aside his needs and fears to stop the men forcing themselves on that little girl that was me. My dad's a man with not much in his pocket but all the good stuff in his heart, who saw a broken girl and took her off the street under his own broken wing. And my wife, the reason for my sanity, is a woman who has seen and loved me at my worst, smiled at me through my best, believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself, and made it possible to breathe without hurting family. Distant family, it means so much more than blood to me.

Career Change by Jacob Turner

I'm a modern-day Renaissance Man. A polymath, jack-of-all-trades type with a host of self-conveyed honorary degrees in wide-ranging fields: demolition, disfunction, deception, drinking, drugging, disregard for others, selfishness, judgment, bridge-burning, swindling, leeching, lying, and many more. I have a license to fly— from my own issues. I'm a board-certified para-illegal and an influential un-social media personality pulling innocent bystanders into the cosmic mess that surrounds me. My legacy reaches far and wide; the swatch of scorched earth behind me still smokes and smolders and smells of torched potential. I never lacked for work and often employed multiple areas of expertise in my undertakings.

I'm mostly retired now, though. The stress and strain of maintaining impossible expectations became too much to bear. I've scaled back and simplified operations. I now work in renovation— mostly small projects, but every now and then I'll risk a loss in bidding on rebuilding one of the behemoths I used to be so good at dismantling. It's hard work but rewarding.

I don't have much work at the moment. Some people would let this little recession bring them down, but not me. I don't try to live beyond my means, and I find comfort in all the projects I've completed over the past few years.

One major job looms on the horizon, a bigger bridge spanning a deep and wide ravine carved by a swift, dirty river many years ago. The bridge's destruction took place a few years back at the hands of guess who? I didn't mean to totally demolish it at the time, but unforeseen consequences are part and parcel of many of my former trades. This isn't just any old bridge— it's the only bridge connecting my city to the small, isolated town of my brother. I can't complete such a massive

work on my own. I'm going to need his help, but it's almost impossible to communicate with him right now. I have to send him handwritten messages carried by one of the few who occasionally brave the sheer drop-off on this side only to have to scale another gust as steep and perilous, just to visit the secluded villages. I never get a response so I'm not even sure he receives my messages. Even if I could get my brother to stand on his edge of the cliff, and I on mine, I can't project my voice loud enough to be clearly heard— the message easily confused.

My only recourse lay in continuing to try to work on the bridge from my end, hoping my brother will see my work from a distance. And seeing it, perhaps he will gather the resources, fortitude, and resolve to begin working on the bridge from his end as well. Then, maybe, we will speed up the process of this tenuous re-build, and meet each other as both bridge builders and brothers, in the middle of this great divide.

by Phillip L. Rath

Family is the fiber that weaves together our society. Unlike fabrics like silk, satin, velvet, and cotton, our "fabric of society" consists of hundreds of dissimilar fibers, such as rich, poor, middle class, Caucasian, African, Latin, Asian, indigenous, east coast, west coast, gulf coast, midwestern and on and on and on.

The diversity in fibers has made our society what it is today. Every resident of our society is a member of our distant family and lends their own unique color and strength to our society.

Unfortunately, our fabric, or distant family, also contains some abrasive fibers whose evident goal is to cut and fray the fabric of our society and in this manner destroy our society in order that they might create a new society of their imagination.

Fortunately for us, we beneficial and useful fibers not only outnumber the malevolent fibers, but we are also stronger and capable of changing or altering the abrasiveness of the malevolent fibers into a more beneficial fiber capable of adding strength and beauty to our distant family fabric.

We are at a crossroads of history where our distant family seems unwilling to blend together into a wondrous fabric of society and would prefer to fray and separate. Some days it seems those abrasive fibers make up the majority of our society.

Reach out, weave yourself into the fabric and make our society, and therefore yourself, stronger, more resilient, and beautiful. Reach out to those abrasive fibers and encourage them to reform themselves and become beneficial fiber. Don't reject or alienate them.

Remember, we are all distant family and woven together our diverse fibers create an undefeatable and wondrous fabric.

Letter of Regret by Marcus Johnson

Behind razor wire fences, I reminisce about us brothers fighting together, fighting each other. At times we loved each other and hated each other; but no matter what, it was us against the world, against a world that taught us at an early age that life isn't fair. But through the hard times, as kids, we always made the best of it. Like the times I was on the handlebars of your bike screaming as we raced down the broken glass filled streets of Flint, having fun trying to avoid potholes like it was a game, or hopping fences to get away from the neighborhood's feral dogs. We saw the best in each other, and encouraged each other to be the best. Whenever I felt lost, or my path seemed unclear, you gave guidance.

Since you were the eldest, I always followed your lead. As a shorty, I used to imitate your strength whenever I was scared. Growing up in a neighborhood full of rundown houses, hustlers, and bad intentions, your tough love made me strong and prepared me for the hardships of life. Street smart, you showed me how to survive and navigate through adversity. However, as I got older, our bond began to strain. As I came into my own, you left home to make a name for yourself. Left behind, I had to fend for myself. Nevertheless, I don't blame you for wanting more out of life. I do blame you for sacrificing most of our relationship to chase them flashing lights. Yet, I always thought we had time to make it right. But, when I came to prison, we fell out of touch with each other. Hiding in my brokenness, you isolated yourself in pain. Everything changed. The distance that started with you leaving stretched into forever the day I called home to hear that you had passed away.

Outer Limits by Jackie E. Moorehead

My great uncle Fred owned a small farm on the outskirts of a rural farming community in northwestern Pennsylvania, and was more like a grandpa to me than an uncle.

Uncle Fred had an unusual collection of farm animals, such as African chickens that laid an assortment of bright blue, green, white and tan shelled eggs and odd colored ducks, one Canadian goose, one turkey that would follow you around like a pet dog, and a dalmatian.

And of course, you can't have a lot of ducks and a goose without having a pond for them to paddle around in. He had stocked the pond with bullheads (catfish) that he had caught in the lakes and reservoirs near his home.

Uncle Fred worked five nights a week on the hoot owl shift for the local zipper company in Meadville, Pennsylvania. He was the zipper company's millwright, and he set up and maintained the zipper assembling machinery.

One night, the supervisor approached Uncle Fred with both of his hands full of extra large zipper parts and the two long strips of material the zipper was supposed to be assembled on. The supervisor asked Uncle Fred if he could assemble the zipper by hand because it was too large for any of the machines in the plant to assemble.

My Uncle Fred said he took a pair of pliers from the hip pocket of his coveralls and assembled the zipper by hand but did not ask his supervisor what the extra large zipper was for.

Almost a year later on, my Uncle Fred received a special letter from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in Cape Canaveral (known as Cape Kennedy), Florida congratulating Uncle Fred for assembling the zipper by hand for a space suit that the first American astronaut Alan Bartlett Shepard, Jr. wore to outer space on May 5th, 1961. I also read the letter.

by James Bauhaus

My family is distant in a different way than most. When I escaped the crooks who lied to me in prison, I didn't want to screw up anyone else's life by leaving kids with no paternal support. As a refugee, I did not expect to last long in police state America. As the years passed, however, I uncovered two things: the state is even more incompetent than it is vicious, and women often don't need, or want, a male spouse. The first one who impressed this upon me was a prosperous lesbian who was headhunting in the Dallas county library. Though I was still filthy and smelly from days of hiking south by night and lying in dirt and weeds by day, she chose me for a donation after only a short talk. I could not believe it, coming from a time when no one cursed or got ribald on TV or the radio. I wrote about this in "Jail Break!" and its continuance, "Dirty Rotten Criminals: The Branson Years," which are free on my site, www.jamesbauhaus.org/jailbreak.htm and www.prisonsfoundation.org James Bauhaus.

I thought this was just a fluke, but months later, a straight lady accosted me at the petrified forest in Arizona.

My prudish 1950s upbringing was demolished completely while I lived in the underground. My hooker and female addict friends seemed to be finding housewives who were also headhunting. It was like some had married prosperous geeks, or huge men who turned into beer belly couch hogs, and now wanted children from a skinny, smart guy: just his children.

Of course, I succumbed, gratefully surrendering my morals to the new expediency. I have distant family all over the southwest and beyond. Most are white or brown, some are black, and their ages range from 25 to 36. They've all got good mothers who were pioneers of the social and genetic landscape: forerunners of the new age.

I could not be more proud...

Twist of Fate

by Leo Cardez

Last September my prison hosted a Hispanic heritage themed writing contest. The prompt was "Hispanic Contributions in US History"—1 page limit. Huh? Did they think so little of the Hispanic population's contributions throughout American history that one page would suffice? How would one summarize a 600+ year history that begins with the birth of a nation—lest we forget it was Spain (the Latino motherland) that originally financed the voyages that discovered America. I refused to indulge them and instead submitted a slice-of-life personal narrative.

Ignacio chico, otherwise known as Nachito, was named after his father, Ignacio grande, otherwise known as Nacho. He grew up third world poor on the outskirts of Mexico City. He was the oldest of the eight brothers and sisters and often went hungry when there wasn't enough food left to go around. At fifteen, he was forced to leave everything he knew and embark on a treacherous journey to "el norte"—the land of milk and honey.

Nacho and Nachito joined a caravan of other desperate migrants aboard "la bestia" a freight train that crossed Mexico from the southern to northern borders. I wish I could tell you it was a pleasurable jaunt across the beautiful countryside, but life is rarely fair to desperate people without resources. Father and son fought side by side for food, for water, for space aboard the train, often-times sleeping in shifts for their own protection. Upon reaching the northern border they entrusted their remaining money to a "co-yote" who helped them cross the border on a moonless August night. Left to fend for themselves in a dusty desert border town, they heard there was construction work available in a city called Chicago. They worked their way across America, oftentimes sleeping in parks and eating out of garbage cans. Three months later, they arrived on the cold winter streets of the windy city... penniless, homeless, and hopeful.

They found work, menial labor at a fraction of the legal wage. They found a home, an apartment on the dangerous

south side of the city shared with eight others, while applying for their green cards and studying English in the evenings.

A few years passed, it was now the early 70's, they both had their green cards and were in their own apartment a few blocks closer to the lake. They scrimped and saved, sending money back to their family in Mexico, but they could never seem to get ahead. They needed citizenship, but that was fifteen thousand dollars and eight years away... it might as well have been on Mars. But then, an opportunity presented itself: war.

The US was stuck in an unpopular war in the jungles of Southeast Asia... and losing. As the enlistment numbers continued to drop and draft dodging at an all time high the military created a new pathway to citizenship—enlistment. Anyone with a green card could enlist and after 18 months of honorable service would be granted automatic citizenship. Nacho did not hesitate; Nachito was still too young. And so he left for training and within six months he was serving as a truck driver for the mobile infantry. He would write to his son in Chicago, who was doing his best to fend for himself, while sending the bulk of his pay to his wife. Once a citizen he could sponsor his whole family to immigrate to the States. Things were finally looking up. His hopes were flying high even while bullets whizzed by his head.

Only weeks from his father's return date, Nachito received a knock on the door. His father had died valiantly—saving two other servicemen before a grenade took his life. He was given his father's few possessions and a Purple Heart medal he was awarded posthumously. As he held the medal, he wondered what this would all mean for his family now. He would get his answer the following month.

In a nondescript manila envelope Nachito would receive his citizenship papers. To this day no one knows if this twist of fate was a clerical error (it certainly could be, he and his father did share the exact same name) or the result of an appreciative country keeping its word to a grieving family? With his new citizenship in tow he traveled to Mexico and with his father's military insurance pay-out brought all seven brothers and sisters and mother back to a new townhouse in a southwest suburb of Chicago.

He got a good union job at the local steel mill; got married, had two children, three grandchildren, owned his home, and retired to lazy days working in his garden surrounded by his loved ones. He once told me, I am the embodiment of the American dream. It was all worth it, I wouldn't change a thing. I was surprised and asked, even losing your father? Yes, he answered solemnly, life is rarely what we want—but my father wanted to help his family live a better life and he did it... I am sure he is looking down today pleased.

My father's story is not unique—it is the quintessential fiber that is the vast tapestry of the Hispanic immigrant narrative that weaves through the annals of American history. The essence has never changed: hope. Hope drove my grandfather to drag his young son across two nations in pursuit of something better; that same hope carried him across an ocean to fight for his adopted country. And now, that same hope lives in me, his grandson, Ignacio III. It drives me to strive, even while stuck in one of America's many gray bar hotels, to hope for a better tomorrow. To put the work in now, to sacrifice (if necessary) everything for my family, my daughter: Hope Cardez.

Stinkin' Memories by Bryan Noonan

In 2008, my now ex-wife and I celebrated our seventh wedding anniversary. Taking a scenic drive up Michigan's west coast, we headed towards Ludington State Park. We had heard that the area was beautiful, and although it was late fall, we wanted to see the beauty we'd heard about and scope out the park for future family camping possibilities.

I had made a reservation at a bed-and-breakfast near the lake, and we were looking forward to a few days alone without the kids. The crisp mornings and warm days of fall are a favorite time of year for both of us and being near Lake Michigan provided many opportunities for romantic meandering.

Neither of us had been to Ludington before, so we got directions and headed north. But our directions were useless as we got close to Ludington. Road construction diverted us onto alternate roads. Since we were unfamiliar with the area and failed to bring a map (or have a GPS), we soon found ourselves lost on the country roads.

We stopped for directions (my idea!) at a local gas station, and when a customer heard my question, she kindly offered to lead us to our destination. We quickly agreed and set out after this helpful stranger.

The twisting and turning country roads offered many beautiful sights to see, but as we got closer to our destination, I smelled something familiar.

"I smell a wood pulp plant," I told my wife.

The smell is something you'll never forget. During my teenage years in Maine, we had occasionally visited relatives in the towns of Rumford and Mexico, both homes to paper mills. The stench made me wonder why anyone would want to live near there.

Sure enough, off the right side of the road was a corrugated cardboard manufacturing plant. The wood pulp needed to make their product smelled just as bad as I remembered.

I was shaken from my reverie when I saw the prison across the street.

"Hey!" I exclaimed. "It's a prison!"

It was the first prison I had seen in Michigan. Most prisons are hidden from public view by their isolated locations, and this prison was well isolated. Isolated locations to help reinforce the "lock 'em up and throw away the key" mentality. It's easier to forget about the pariahs of communities if they are sight unseen.

We drove on, soon forgetting about both the smells of the corrugated cardboard plant and the misery behind the fences of the prison we had passed.

Almost exactly one year later, my life had changed significantly. I was half-asleep on the ride to my first prison location in the back of a prison van when I was awoken by a familiar smell.

"You've got to be kidding me," I thought angrily as the van slowed down and turned left.

Sure enough, by a strange and ironic twist of fate the very prison I had seen just one year before was the same prison where I started my incarceration journey. Each time I walked the yard and smelled the pungent odors wafting through the fence from the cardboard plant down the road, I remembered that anniversary trip and a wave of sadness enveloped me about all that I had lost because of my terrible choices. And each time the regrets of my past choices diminished the wood pulp stench to a niggling detail of the day.

by Mark Adam Peirano

For crimes we are each charged, guilty or innocent, but for those of us here, we do time for all of our sins, whether or not we could even be arrested for them or not, or whether or not we are guilty of the charges that predicate our being here. It is easy to see which of us is able to choose to accept this reality, regardless of any other injustices. In choosing to accept being here, for however long, and despite our own valid efforts to be released, accept what does come; we each have the power to create a "twist of fate." Even though we may rightly and justly seek release, we can also accept to do this time in a way that, in as much as is possible in prison, helps us to grow and heal—to better ourselves—from the inside-out.

We each can own and control our own power to create a "twist of fate." In fact, from in here, it is one of the few things we actually have real control over, no matter what sidetracks and distractions we think give us some sense, or illusion, of control. Choosing our own "twist of fate" is either the greatest thing we could have ever done or the greatest opportunity we ever let pass by us and out of our grasp. The worst things we do are not often things we could even go to prison for, but the opportunities to accept our fate, and add our own "twist" to make

it good, or better, than what we have each been dealt, for this life and beyond...

A Writer's Fate by Ethan Macks

Writing is a powerful tool in which you can convey a timeless message. It has been used since ancient times. In fact, our history books are full of writing that teaches us what the world was like at that time. Then there are the classics. Novels written by some of the greatest authors we have ever seen. As for me, I consider myself a moderately skilled writer. It is something I am passionate about. But how did I get to where I am now? Believe it or not, I used to hate to write in school. It's weird how by a fateful turn of events I am now trying to succeed in a world where previously I may have taken the talent I have for granted.

People who are gifted at writing are remembered forever. Look at Shakespeare for example. Parody after parody has been spun from the "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo." It's not all fun and games, in fact there are many scholastic opportunities to study the great work of William Shakespeare. Timelessness is a trait of an illustrious author. Another example is one of the most famous manuscripts the world has ever seen. It's a book full of advice and wisdom that changes people's lives. The devout believe it's the actual words of God. That's right, the Bible is an ancient work, a compilation of disciples.

Still to be discovered as a world renowned avid writer is a goal that many of us strive for. It's not easy to do. For example, if you think you can break out of your shell as an author, just sit down and try to write a novel worth reading. To be able to do this takes a tremendous amount of work. I will admit that the first time I tried to write one, I was shocked at the effort it took. I have many stories swimming through the seas of my mind. To cast the net and actually catch one that is worthwhile is an arduous duty in and of itself. So why go through all this trouble? The answer is because not only do I find I'm good at it, but it is something I love to do.

To craft a story and manipulate it in many discrete ways can be compared to an artist creating the Mona Lisa. It takes a skill and level of determination that many do not find the time for. But why not? Putting the pen to paper and expressing yourself

freely is something that is not only healthy, I feel it is the only thing that keeps me from going crazy. To make sense of the racing thoughts speeding through my head at a thousand miles per hour is achieved by constantly jotting down what comes to

me. Sometimes I even get up in the middle of the night to scribe a magnificent idea that I want to turn into a timeless piece of art.

It all started with poetry. I saw that I had an obvious ability to play with words in a way that was aesthetically pleasing to me. Though I also found out early on that if I was required to do this, say for a school assignment, I did not like to do it. It put a stigma on my writing where I felt if it wasn't me doing it for me, well then, I didn't want to do it. Still, I received much praise from teacher after teacher saying, "Keep writing, you're good at it." It wasn't until later in life that I had a paradigm shift and finally decided that I want to do this for myself. Now I can't picture life without writing being a part of it.

Now the true resolution comes to play. I went from holding resentments towards those who "made" me write then wanting nothing more than to be discovered. I may have a few failed novel attempts. I've gone through notebooks with words and rhymes. My work may have been lost or stolen, but one thing that no one can cheat me out of is the pleasure I get from the act of crafting a good story. I may not be able to compose the next Bible or

Shakespearian quality sonnets, but what I can do is free my mind of all the world's stresses that could hinder me. Without a medium to manifest my innermost emotions I have no outlet. I am on a quest to free myself one word, period, comma, and exclamation at a time. I did not choose this life, writing just became a twist of fate for this author in the making.



Len Whitman

By Cody Barnhill

The twist of fate that has led to my current existence is also twisted, tangled, & all amiss. Being born 2 days before Halloween of '80 with weed, coke, pills, & nicotine all mixed into my little human body, this led to yellow jaundice & needing 5 months of being in the ICU for multiple blood transfusions.

After a year or so, my partying parents split, leaving my mother raising 2 children. For the most part, she did an amazing job all by herself, teaching us to walk, talk, read, and write. She fed us, clothed us, & bathed us. Having different fathers, my brother & I share the same origins, but Fate has let us down completely opposite paths. He is doing fabulous. He & his "high school sweetheart" have been together for over 20 years. 4 excellent kids, educated, good job, owns a home, never even been in a jail cell. He wasn't born bathed in drugs, like I was, and his present conditions are, among other causes, a result of that. Don't get me confused now, because although I was given a shitty start, I am admittedly 100% responsible for said current existence. But, let me break down real quick my personal views regarding my ideas of this "Fate."

All of us know about DNA by now, right? This double helix that, at a molecular level, has the instructions for producing & maintaining "us." The DNA is a combination of our biological parents' DNA. It literally defines us. This is a chemical substance of many traits intertwined being passed down from one generation to another, which makes up our genetic code. The DNA is a cookbook, and we, you, & I are the final finished meal that has been created via energy.

The proteins that are involved within our DNA are like the boss and the cells are the employees. These proteins are important, for they determine the structure and function of cells & tissue. They also communicate inside of cells & among other proteins that are also riding around on a cell like it's a boat at sea can identify each other in order to deliver messages, supplies, or just to gossip about the latest trends on Microscopic Media. The cells also secrete chemical compounds to regulate growth, development, & metabolic processes in other cells. This transference is called cell signaling.

Now, I am getting to my main point, trust me, just a little information to be sure we are all in agreement on how we are put together. And trust me, it does in fact, get real. So, during this cell signaling, hormones are used to transmit information from one place to another, like little chemical messengers, aka neurotransmitters. These send information to the brain which then releases certain chemicals which allows us the means to perceive that which is "outside" of us, using the senses of sight, sound, etc. So, for the purpose of shortening my foolish ramblings of stuff that is not within our immediate control, let me just finish with this comparison of our mind (Fate) and that of our

microbiome (Twist of). Did you know that our stomach has a multibillion-member community of life forms that actually sends information to our brain telling it what kind of food it wants, among other things? When we have a craving for... spicy food, for example, it's because of those microbes. It's not "you" that wants something spicy. No ma'am. Our microbiome tells us what to eat, when to eat, & even when to stop.

Now, the mind. So far I've discussed the Twisting of. Let's quickly finish up with Fate. Anything that you do, think, or say creates energy. Do it a lot & we're talking habit energy. The more you do something the stronger this energy will be. When I was given a shitty start, for example, I was provided with a lot of negative habit energy that made it easy & rather enjoyable to do bad things as a kid. Left unchecked over the years, via ignorance of how things work, I found it hard to be consistently good because so much negative habit energy. Again, since there exists a bit of free will, I am now able (we're all able) to take the twisted double helix of DNA & all its instructions & commands in one hand, take habit energy in the other & with unbiased understanding & compassion for myself & all things, I can now begin to Twist what Fate had in store for me, into a newer better human, one breath at a time...

by John Michael Loomis

I was going to employ the wing's trash can, when something caught my eye. "Prisoner Express Newsletter? What's this?" I thought as I removed it from the top of the can. I read Gary's introduction and then browsed through it, and immediately my interest was sparked. This was something amazing, people putting together projects and programs for incarcerated individuals like me. I've been a writer since I was about 9, starting with poetry, short stories, then attempts at children's books, fantasy stories, humor, etc. Now I mostly write lyrics and poetry, but seeing the various essays in the PE Newsletter got my creative juices flowing again, and I began working on journal entries as well. It was just so amazing to find something like PE, and I will eternally be grateful to Gary and the various volunteers involved as well. I am also grateful to my fellow incarcerated brothers and sisters who regularly participate and send in their words and works for me to enjoy, including Lord Cardez, Lord Olms, Lord Bauhaus, Lord Durst, Lady Hicks, and Lady LaFleur. (Camp Prisoner Land sounds like it needs a bad Yelp review and minus 5 stars on AirBnB.) All of you have made me smile, or made me think, made me reflect, made me appreciate, made me relate, or just plain inspired me to put pen to paper and get more involved. I hope that I can start to regularly participate and hopefully add meaningful content, and I look forward to seeing what the Lords

and Ladies have in store for us all. I am so grateful someone else threw away that PE Newsletter and I am the one who found it. While we continue to await all the alleged forthcoming apps on our JPay, this gives me something productive to do with my creative energy. May fate continue to twist favorably for all of us, and good health and best wishes to all of you! I bid thee all good morrow!

by Jeremy Brown

In 2014, the state prosecutor wanted to give me 42 years if I signed "The Deal". I turned her down. I was facing death row for a capital murder. In August of 2014, my death row sentence was mitigated due to a major lack of "evidence." I was found guilty and given life. Instead of death, the Gods gave me back my life! Even though I may have to do life, at least I have a life to do! It's now up to me what I choose to do given a lot of time and a lot of life. I am writing four books, I've read thousands of books and gaining enlightenment through meditation on God's consciousness. What a wonderful twist of fate!

Strangers

by Matthew Ellington

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

Would you mind if I sat next to you—
a stranger on the bus?
Could you look past the differences
that frame the both of us?
Though scars and tattoos seem to make me
less upright than you,
to judge me from my cover is an
unfair point of view.

Would you mind if I lived next to you—
a stranger in your town?
When you find out about my felony,
would you let me live it down?
Your neighbors turn their eyes away,
as if it wasn't clear

that because of my past mistakes
they don't want me here.

Would you mind if I worked next to you—
a stranger making his way?
This job is all I've found so far
to earn a decent pay.
They shut me down in interviews,
as if I wasn't fit
but to swing a hammer, or mow a lawn,
or shovel piles of shit.

Would you mind if I joined you as
part of your society?
An ex-con with this rap sheet and
its stigma forced on me?
I've done my time, I've paid my price,
there's no inherent danger
in treating me like one of you and not
like a stranger.

by Darren Butler

Do you ever wonder who the person next door is? Does it make me strange to be a stranger, stranger than you? Maybe if we stop to think... no. No one has time for that. It is much easier to foster illusions of difference. The neighbors are strangers, stranger than us. We excuse or even admire ourselves in aspects that we abhor in others. As we build good fences to keep the familiarity at bay. All the while we peek through the tiny chinks in that armor to spy the smallest pieces of scenes in a funhouse mirror we could never understand. Then conceive the most horrid possible truths so we can maintain the concept of strangers. Yet we never notice the eyes peeking back at us. Wondering who is that, over there? How strange, those strangers, stranger than us. Never seeing the most horrid possible truth. That we're not strangers at all. If we just stop and think. We'll see that we are all the same.

by Meagan Work

She doesn't so much as look at me as she pierces my soul with her eyes. Looking at her, looking at me, the silence speaks raw honesty & I'm instantly terrified of her. The tears behind her smile, the mask she clearly puts on for the world & all the pain she secretly endures. She devastates my already broken soul. This stranger. This woman I do but don't know. I'm not sure what to think. I need time to understand what's happen- ed. She was just surround- ed by people, making them laugh, seeming so tough & brave. But the minute I catch her alone I watch as

she watches the mascara drip down her cheeks. I hate how she sees herself. I hate how the blood pooling at her wrists is the only thing she finds comfort in, the only demon she has control over. For a moment I imagine living in a world without her... but I couldn't, could I? An ache settles in my chest as she thinks of all the things she'd be leaving behind & all the people who wouldn't notice but should. So, I beg her, don't leave me barely able to breathe through the pain, trying to focus on anything but the black hole that's formed in my soul. I'm not sure I can ever get her back. The way she was before the rapes. Before the betrayal at the hands of her own people. Her eyes cling to me, begging me to force her to think of anything that puts life first. She needs to know she can tell me anything without judgement, that she can reveal the ugly truth. But the idea of being alone with her reality, her secrets, scares me. I fear the road it'll lead me down. The time will come when we need to face the past but not now... please. Stop the tears, quiet the silent screams, put the blade down. Whatever it is, we can get through it. Together. We are strong enough alone. I see her tremble, her body about to give out so I fall to my knees to catch her. On bruised and battered knees, from years of pleading, we pray. We beg, we scream. She whispers to God, words pulled straight from my own heart. Because you see, this broken girl, this tainted stranger... is me.

by Raymond Gomez

I left the USA on a Thursday and arrived on a Thursday in Korea, a beautiful land. Many strange sights, and strangers greeting you with a bow. I was taken aback by how welcomed you felt by them. It took getting used to but driving in Korea was a lot worse than driving in New York City. I had brought my unicycle with me there and the mountainous roads were a challenge. I rode it all around Osan where I was stationed and shocked the locals as I rode by them. I can recall causing Mama-San to lose balance on her head on which she carried her belongings. She laughed, yelling, "Han-kook mongey." One day I got a call from Yong-San, where my unit headquarters were. I was being ordered to report to chapel the following Sunday. Ordered to church? A clown that was part of Ringling Bros turned evangelist was preaching in clown gear. He put on a show with swords then preached the gospel. After the service he called me to report to the office behind the sanctuary. Unbeknownst to me, my commander had told him I rode a unicycle very well, I did tricks with it. This stranger convinced me to use my talent to help the units in Korea (with sponsored orphanages) entertain and help the chaplains preach the gospel. He gave me makeup and a short lesson on how to apply it. I was told I could make a uniform in town for next to nothing. "Oops" the clown was born. I traveled

the whole country with units who had heard of me. Each visit, the orphanages treated this stranger in makeup with love. The orphanage that really impressed me was the one our unit sponsored in Ph Yong-Taek. The 25th trans sponsored a deaf orphanage. This mix of adults and deaf children touched my heart. I was given a Korean sign name and I learned limited sign language in Korean. They lived in a rundown place which was falling apart. No running water and an outhouse. They bathed in the cold at a well. They were so happy and full of love. These deaf children who had zero chance to be adopted were so content with their lot in life. Koreans looked at them as outcasts. I related to that. I had repeated my visits without makeup. I taught one teenage youth how to ride my unicycle. I was so awe struck by their love and peace of mind in the state they lived in. I had to do something to help them. And it dawned on me that I could. The unicycle! I could raise money riding it, 40 miles, from Seoul to Osan. I took the idea to my commander who took off with it. We sold t-shirts, sponsors paid money for each mile I rode. It was all over the country, the newspapers in Korean, American papers for the enlisted members. I was on AFKN (Armed Forces Korean Network). We coordinated with the Korean police and they provided an escort the day of the event. 40 miles for Love was a success. I'll never forget that day. I was between our pickup covered Army truck and a Korean police car. Strangers driving by would wave at me. I made the long haul and at 2PM arrived after 7 hours of peddling. There were Korean dancers in their traditional outfits, news people and crowds of total strangers with flowers greeted me. We raised \$10,000 in American money. By the time I left Korea, the deaf orphanage had a brand new building, state of the art, running water with showers, bathrooms, money left over for clothing. \$10,000 in 1981 was a lot of money in Korean. When I arrived in Korea I was a complete stranger. When I left, I left as family.

by Joshua Rose

I like strangers. You know why? They don't know me. They don't come with loads of preconceived ideas about my motives based on some past mistakes. Yes, strangers are quite alright with me. They are a fresh start. I can be whatever I want to be with a stranger because I haven't let them down yet. Whereas the people who know me, they often simply hate me. And if I'm being honest with myself I can't blame them. So yeah, strangers really ain't too bad.

by Vicki Hicks

In 1991 I worked at Haagen-Daz Ice Cream shop to support my 3 year old son and myself. I had a boss that was a year younger than me and he had many friends that stopped by from time to

time. Though they were in my age range they were mere strangers to me since I did not attend North Miami Senior High with them. This would never happen today because it would be way too easy to identify someone, but back then all of the guys tagged their cars. My boss drove a bug with ONLY BUGGIN in the window. On October 5, 1991 we were working together and we hear a very loud blackcherry Monte Carlo SS with a pink and purple Monte Carlo SS air brushed down the side, pull up and out walks the cutest guy. I immediately told my boss, Matt, you have to introduce me to your friend. He told me "You really don't want to talk to Bobby, trust me." I should have listened. Bobby walked in and began to talk to Matt about how his headers were at the shop getting honed out for better performance. Bobby ordered a peanut butter milkshake, which I made, and his beeper went off. I dialed the number for him which turned out to be his home number. He paid for his milkshake and left. A few days later I remembered the number and called him to ask him out. He agreed to meet me in the parking lot of Haagen-Daz and we went out to eat then to the jetty at Hallover beach. Two strangers met over a peanut butter milkshake, engaged six months later, married a year later, divorced 28 years later sadly, still two strangers.

Oh, the People You Will Meet! **by Catherine LaFleur**

Here in Camp Prisoney Land there are interesting people. I'm sure these are not strangers to you. After reading this you may have a moment of revelatory self-introspection. Allow me to introduce you.

CLEAN UP WOMAN- This individual is both a night owl and an early riser. She can be observed obsessively mopping the day room, the hallways, and the laundry room at odd hours. The daily schedule for cleaning means nothing. Clean up woman says when, where, and how. Did you think you were going to wake up and walk to the shower, the bathroom, or up the stairs to make coffee in the kitchenette? No! The floor is wet! Clean Up Woman is on the job.

THE PHANTOM POOPER/PEEPER(ER)- This person firmly believes nature abhors a vacuum. Her mission is to fill every communal bathroom toilet with the products of digestion and leave behind evidence of her art. I've decided she is the Prisoneyland version of Banksy. However, no matter the size and volume of the product unflushed, there is never any accompanying toilet paper in the pot. I'm not sure which aspect of this disturbs me more.

THE GIRL WHO CRIED WOLF- A naive creature with a nonviolent 18-month sentence who has never been to prison but has watched entirely too much television about prison. On

the first day of my imposed sentence as her roommate, she wanted to tell me all about herself... exhaustively. Then she asked me about myself. Maybe it wasn't a good idea for me to start off with- "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. You are completely safe." I was just trying to let her know things would be okay. The next thing I know she's weeping on the phone to her mom, who calls the prison just to have her baby protected from the murderer roommate. A week later the Girl who Cried Wolf gets the roommate she really deserves. One who belongs to a pack and has a short temper accompanied by hard fists.

BAD KARMA CHAMELEON- She's a tease, always purports to have information about nefarious doings of other inmates. It looks good, sounds good, but never turns out good. And yet the administration continues to investigate her juiceless leads. Her newfound friends are snatched by security in the middle of the night. Sometimes you wake up and two or three cells in a row have been raptured to the SHU. It's catch for 90 days then release. Over and over. At least the Administration has something to put into a report proving they are investigating the flood of booze and drugs. And chameleon keeps changing to fit in with the unaware.

SCHEHERAZADE- Perhaps the most annoying personality of all. And there isn't just one. Every dorm has one resident. She writes and is constantly handing you stories to read. Then the inquisition: Did you like it? What was the best? What didn't you like? Was it too long? Too short? And on and on. A word of advice beware! Stay away from these people because... the only thing worse than being a captive reader... is the true quest of these Scheherazades which is to entice you to write your own stories and submit them to Prisoner Express.

Strangers No More **by Leo Cardez**

Dear Fellow Theme Writers:

Gary wrote something in his "Final Notes" section of the last newsletter that sparked something in me.

"I know many of the regular participants pay close attention to one another's writing, and it is yet another way to build community."

It struck me that he was right. Admittedly, I first scan the writing packets for my own submissions— enjoying the shot of endorphins everytime I see my name in print. And then I scan for the names of other writers I've come to enjoy. People that although are strangers in every real sense, I've come to feel a certain connection to. Sometimes I relate to their stories, having endured similar challenges throughout my incarceration. Other times it is the writing itself that touches me; I am always

impressed by the quality of writing in our shadow community. (Many times it's a tinge of jealousy— wishing I could write with the same raw honesty that cuts straight to the bone.)

So, in many real ways, Gary's right: we are a community. I feel like I already know many of you having read through your personal stories of triumph and struggle; often brought to bouts of uncontrollable laughter or tears— oftentimes in both the same story. But how do we evolve and do a better job of connecting— of building each other up? Is there a way we could work towards a more meaningful, impactful engagement between our fellow inmate writer community?

What if, say, all of us "veteran" writers (those who've regularly submitted for 2+ years to the PE Theme Writing Program) send in our very best piece— one we may like to submit for contests or publication— and open it up for other writers to submit feedback, suggestions, edits, et cetera? Is this something that could be done through the existing theme writing packets (to save PE time and money) or should this be a new initiative? A sort of Phase 2 of the existing writing program? I don't know. I'm open to suggestions.

This piece was supposed to be about strangers, "a person with whom one is not acquainted," (Webster's) but I hope it helps us to realize that we're not strangers. Not really. We know each other. We're all in the same boat struggling to be heard. We're the same. We just haven't met yet.

Interruptions

by Cynthia Newman-Duffield

Interruptions do not only derail things but seem to take on and create their own plot and alter reality.

Never had I thought life itself could be interrupted. Not just mine but also of those who are close to me. ??? plots and storylines altered due to a 'pause.' As if there is a movie playing but just one character is frozen on the frame. This is what prison has done to my existence.

I am an actor on the big screen whose character has been stilled while the rest of the film plays on. My children's lives have continued and although in my thoughts they still need me and are lost without me as I am without them time has marched on. They've blossomed in to young adults. Proms have happened, virginity been lost, goals achieved. And the path of life for our family has been altered.

In the meantime my chair has remained empty and the role of their mother has been played by anyone that is NOT me!

One thing that has played constant, continuous, and unchanged?

Resentments. They criss cross and boomerang back and forth so much that the scheme of life has become encapsulated by a web of unhealthy feelings. Present my poor choices for taking me away! They resent my absence for the effects that have infringed on their lives. I resent the woman filling my shoes during this time while watching and experiencing all the milestones I am missing. She resents the way I feel as well as the fact that I've laid this across her shoulders.

Resentments grow roots. They dig deep and grab hold of your inner core like a 1000 year old oak tree. Trying to let them go is difficult when the Blame Game and the 'whys?' get attached. But in order to keep it moving and stay on course you must press play and press on. The future of the film of life depends on letting go and allowing the other actors assist you in the role.

All of this is happening. All of these distances exist. All due to a 5 year INTERRUPTION!

by Leo Cardez

The laughing outside my cell interrupted my attempt at a peaceful bowel movement. My celly was on a pass and so, the timing was perfect. I set the mood and made the necessary preparations. Lighting, check. Music, check. Window cover, check. Plenty of TP, check. A dryer sheet over my personal fan and angle it so it blows out, check. I sat on the cool porcelain and relaxed. But, it was not to be. What was all that commotion about? Prison living dictated I investigate further; so I flushed, wiped and washed and headed out into the dayroom.

True moments of levity are rare in the Joint. But there are times when you find yourself smiling or even belly laughing -- today was one of those days.

I walked into the dayroom and saw Caveman clinging to the wall in what looked like an attempt to climb it -- like Spiderman. Short Bus, his Spades partner, was squatted down in a duck walk, flapping his arms, and quacking. What the what?? Even in this mindfuck, this was not normal. I asked my neighbor Irish what I was looking at as the crowd continued to gather and the laughter grew. "They lost the game, this was the bet. A spiderman and a duck walk." he told me between chuckles. Soon, I was cracking up too. See, both these guys are seasoned inmates from gang-infested streets. They were well respected in the concrete jungle, but today, right now, they were letting themselves have fun and be the butt of the joke.

It was awesome. For the briefest of moments it was hard men who typically live like a clenched fist letting loose like

young boys -- back when fun was paramount and everything else was just details. We were being silly, having fun, it felt like camp. I laughed alongside everyone, even the officers could be seen laughing in the bubble, eventually even Caveman and Short Bus joined in.

"Get ready for chow!" the order over the intercom squaked, interrupting our bliss. Back to reality. But nobody can take that memory from me; it is just the type of thing that helps me stay moored when the dark times come

Awake by Kevin Murphy

My sleep is interrupted by a TDC officer shining a bright light in my face. I try to go back to sleep but it's no use, I've slept until I can sleep no more.

My shoulder is stiff, and my back and hip are sore from the unforgiving TDC matt that I've been issued. It's like this every time I wake but even more so when I get into my depressed stages where I sleep almost nonstop for days at a time.

It's early morning, a little before two A.M. and I get up and get dressed. The officer will be back before long to let us out for chow and insulin. I'll probably miss chow again but I need my morning shot. Morning and evening doses of my much needed insulin are the only things that I go out of the cell for.

It's the end of winter and the weather is still bearable. It won't be that way for long. Summers in here are deadly. I don't know how I've survived them over the years, the last one nearly got me. I hope I make it through the next one, kind of.

A tv. hangs on the wall right outside of my cell and it stays on. It's loud enough to annoy but not loud enough so that I can make out what's being said. It sounds like it has a blown speaker and it constantly bleeds into my cell.

I Fight everyday. I fight the roachers, the mice, the elements, the predictors. I battle depression, loneliness, and boredom. I seek a way to end the war but I find myself wanting. I breathe in and I breathe out and I breathe in again.

My family and loved ones grow older with each passing day and all I can do is talk to them on the phone for thirty minutes at a time, at six cents a minute. I can hear them age as we talk. With each call I make I can hear how they're growing closer to an end I won't be allowed to share. I know that one day there will be no one left to answer the phone.

My eyes fade and my reading glasses get thicker. The glasses they sell at the commissary, the only ones I can get, are too small and look sadly childish on me. I asked God to not take my sight but like all my other prayers it has gone unanswered.

I want to go back to sleep, to leave this place for a while. Even with my dreams tainted by this prison I still prefer

them to being awake in here. I wish to sleep uninterrupted until I've slept this life away and I can start one anew, or not.

I want, wish and pray and still it's on an unforgiving TDC matt that I lay and try to sleep my time away.

Coitus Interruptus by David Pollard

We'd been arguing earlier in the evening, the same nonsense that we'd argued about in the first place. I'd had enough of it and left my town house to get away from the yelling and to clear my head. Deb tried to stop me, but she couldn't chase after me because her ten-year-old son was sleeping upstairs.

I loved Deb but I didn't understand what it was inside her that prompted her to want to start a fight. We'd go out on a nice date, dinner and dancing, have fun, and then in the car ride home it's like a switch inside her flipped and she'd bring up some incident in our past - something I'd thought we'd long since resolved and gotten over - and she'd be mad all over about it. And she wouldn't quit until I was mad and frustrated and our night was ruined.

This was the first night we'd ever had a big blow out while her son was under the same roof as us. He was supposed to be in bed sleeping, but I doubted it through all his mom's yelling and abusive language. I didn't like to fight, had never even raised my voice at a woman until dating Deb, and I certainly didn't want to subject her son to such turmoil.

Deb had been in an abusive relationship when her son was only five-years-old. It ended when the man was choking her in front of her terrified boy, and she was only able to get free after knocking him unconscious with a brass paper weight to the side of the head. Not something any child should have to see and nor did I believe a child needed to be subjected to adults in heated arguments. So I left.

Deb texted me non-stop and after a few hours of cooling off and the assurance of no more arguing, I returned home a little after midnight. She was awaiting me with open arms while wearing a silk mini-robe and sheer lingerie beneath. The only thing ever gained from our arguments was great make-up sex.

We went upstairs to my bedroom, passing the room where Deb's son slept and the office loft between the bedrooms. Clothes came off and passions came on as Deb and I made love atop my California King bed, our breathing heavy and her moans subdued but still vocal.

"David," came a small voice from the hallways outside the bedroom door, "I'm going to have to ask you to stop hurting my mom."

Deb and I froze in mid-stroke at the sound of her son's voice, the look on our faces of shock and horror.

"Um, it's okay, Buddy," I creaked.

"He's not hurting me, honey," his mom said from beneath the covers.

I rolled off Deb as she grabbed her robe and threw it on, rushing out to the hallway. She returned less than five minutes later looking embarrassed but also stifling a laugh.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"He wouldn't let me tell him anything," she said as she slid into the bed next to me, "He realized what we were doing and ran back to his room embarrassed. He said he didn't want to talk about it, that I could leave his room. But then I saw the black cherry mason jar candle on his nightstand."

"What was he doing with that? That was on my office desk."

Deb nodded with a smile, "He grabbed it because he was planning to clobber you over the head with it."

"What!?" We both laughed at the vision of her son coming to his mom's rescue. "Your son is awesome." I told her.

"I know. Which is why you'd better stop fighting with me."

"Whoa, me fighting with you? No, you're the one - "

"I'm kidding," Deb said as she slipped out of her robe. "Besides, we can't start a new fight until we finish making up for the last one."

I glanced at the bedroom door.

"Don't worry, I'll be quiet," she said as she pulled me on top of her.

by Cody Testerman

The two biggest interruptions in my life involve death or imprisonment. In my case both as one caused the other. When I was free, I was an emo do-nothing bum with nothing to live for. Nothing mattered, not even myself. My mind and morals rotted like my squalor home that accumulated trash. For years I 'lived' like that.

At least until one day I pooled enough ambition and energy to make changes in my life by thoughtlessly ending someone else's. Thus the interruption: You're Under Arrest. Whooshed out of society and into a jail cell to be told that this is my life now.

An interruption is an abrupt action that causes you to stop what ever it is that you are doing and pay attention to the cause. You pause and make readjustments to cut focus off of one task and to this new subject.

Incarceration was my interruption. My wake up call. My forced readjustment. Today I stand as the polar opposite of my previous self and under no condition will I allow myself to be interrupted again.

Interruption or Interception

by Jacob Keiter

I had a job. I had a place to sleep. I used to have friends. I had fun and enjoyed playing games. At one point, I used to smile. Once upon a time, I had a life.

Then it was interrupted by this thing called prison. But was it really interrupted?

I worked at McDonald's, paying me minimum wage, slaving me at work, allowing me to barely make it week to week. I was constantly between homes, packing my belongings into an oversized backpack searching for the next place to rest my head. My "friends" were honestly never there for me whenever it mattered most or if I ever truly needed them, but always seemed to show up whenever I could do something for them. I developed hobbies that didn't quite correlate with my true character. Sure I used to smile, only to cover up the tears and brokenness I truly felt deep inside. Once upon a time I had a life, completely subjected and controlled by addiction, drugs, and strongholds.

Then it was interrupted by this thing called prison. Or was it actually interrupted?

In football an interception is when the opposing team catches an attempted thrown ball and the play is ultimately reversed. In all honesty, my life was only digging deeper and deeper into a hole that was becoming an endless downward spiral. Until prison intercepted that pattern.

Today I am a columnist for a local newspaper, where I am finally doing something I love and enjoy and have a platform to share my story. Today I have a place to sleep every night, without the constant worry of if it will be available tomorrow. Today I have developed a highly valued positive network of friends who will not allow me to turn to a harmful lifestyle ever again. I write, exercise, and play hockey to help release some prolonged built up dopamine. I can look in the mirror today and love who's looking back at me with a most sincere smile. Today I have a life worth living.

Before I could crash and burn completely, prison interrupted that possibility. Prison has prepared me for a proper release to live a life as I was meant to live.

Prison didn't quite interrupt my life, but rather intercepted it

Mail

Mail Call by David Pollard

I've got my headphones blasting loud enough to drown out all of the hooting and hollering that fills the prison unit from 6:30 am to 9:15 pm every day. My notebook is on my 12" x 14" hardcover book I purchased specifically for use as a lap board.

I can write upon it as I sit or lie in my bunk. For just a little while, I can escape these environments by immersing myself in words, writing whatever reality I wish to create.

I used to have some pen pals to share ideas and revelations with, telling stories of the past or dreams for the future. It was always nice to feel a connection with someone, anyone, to think that they actually cared about what I wrote and looked forward to my next missive. But alas, after a few months most vanish into the ether with no explanation, no goodbye. Maybe it's because I use words like missive.

Over the years I've attempted the use of pen pal services, paying a fee to have my photo, description, and desires displayed, but they've never amounted to much. Of course you have to ask yourself what sort of person- in their right mind- would seek out an inmate to write. The last three ladies I heard from more than two years ago were either in an unhappy relationship or had just gotten out of one. Once they get happy again, possibly with my assistance with encouraging words, they have no more need for their barred bard.

Last year I sent out over fifty letters in one weekend to friends and family in my address book that I hadn't heard from in some time, attempting to reconnect and establish communication. I heard back from less than ten and of those only a couple corresponded more than once in the past year. Another time I sent letters to ten people I thought might follow through and I enclosed a second colorful one page letter which I asked them to pass along to someone they know, or even a complete stranger at the grocery store in hope that it might inspire new pen pals to write. No luck, not a single reply or response, not from someone new nor from the ten I sent the letters to.

Our institution does not allow us to correspond with others that are locked up, but of course there are always ways to circumvent the rules that we don't think should apply to us. I had a pen pal for a couple years who was locked up and we sent each other a couple of letters every week and it was a wonderful ride. Then she got out and ghosted me within a month. Hence why most people in their right minds don't waste their time and energy writing inmates.

I do write inmates (I've never claimed to be in my right mind). Even when I'm not in prison because I know the joy and sense of humanity that a letter and photos bring. I'll do it again once I'm out of here so I can maybe help relieve the intense loneliness and lovelessness felt when no mail is forthcoming for weeks after weeks.

Queen sang "can anybody find me somebody to love" and so far the answer has been, 'no they can't.' So I'll keep listening to my music and dreaming of the day when my name

once again rings out at mail call (though maybe I simply haven't heard it because my headphones are on).



Angel Ponce

by Jeremy Brown

Mail is a great topic. Let me first start out by saying there may be future mail changes here in Florida. A new rule is being proposed for prisons which may allow the Department of Corrections to scan all incoming mail through a third-party corporation. To stop this insanity, please go the website, floridacares.org or look them up on Facebook for exact information and to actually help make a change to the system through voice. This is the most practical thing anyone can do. I and others have written letters to the Secretary of Prison's Mark Inch to stop this madness.

So part of what I wrote goes something like this: Our physical mail is a lifeline to the outside world. Digital mail is cold, dead, and lifeless. Scanned mail is not only impersonal, it lacks unique originality. When I receive a piece of mail from the outside world, it brightens my day! The feel of the paper and to look at another person's handwriting is food for the senses and rewards the mind.

Mail reduces loneliness and forms a physical connection to the other person. A chemical bonding agent is released to the brain, it is called vasopressin. Physical mail is

tangible and by touching the piece of mail, the brain releases vasopressin which bonds you to the mail and the person neurochemically. That is why there is such a physical and emotional response from the limbic system. The anticipation of this mental reward is satiated through the physical, unique, tangible reception of a piece of mail.

There is a lot to go with mail, labor, ideas, bonding agents, chemistry between people, job security, and analyzing handwriting. I have a lot of time on my hands to think and to write, so the importance of this medium is nobly noted. As our society becomes more connected through tech services, we become disconnected mentally and neurochemically due to a lack of tangible physicality and the simple beauty behind crafting a letter with words written with emotion, thought, and ideation.

In handwriting analysis, you can tell a lot about a person who actually wrote the letter. Certain characteristics, emotions, and subtle vibrations of conscious will power are behind words and even individual letters. Some of these can be analyzed but there are limitations to how the English wording system operates. In Spanish, there are 42 ways to express love. In English, one. If a person has a low view or low self-esteem, usually the dot over an i is farther apart from the horizontal scratching of the bar. Small handwriting like mine can denote a sense of meticulousness, perfection, or even obsession. For me, I do exhibit some of these qualities. So without further ado, mail or handwritten mail is all inclusive and truly important.

by Jerry Varnell

Mail is a double-edged sword in prison. Your expectations can be positive or negative. To know that the candid response in your last letter to someone could be taken as hateful, could burn bridges that you rely on mentally is nerve wracking. You could sit for minutes or hours just staring at the unopened envelope, knowing that inside are the words that could make or break your relationship. Mail is either a panacea or a deadly poison, or (rarely) both.

Legal mail is another box of Pandora's. The first time you see the legal jargon, you could completely misinterpret what these snakey bureaucrats' spit. Even your lawyer cannot be completely trusted because they do clandestine deals behind closed doors because they don't want you back on the streets. The DA's and prosecutors wear their outrage at your alleged crimes like armor. The jurors are an ignorant audience witnessing the court theater. Ever aloof, your lawyer begs for his paycheck he or she will receive after they convince you your plea deal is just and fair.

Mail from a significant other is like a manna from heaven. The butterflies in your stomach metamorphose into a

warmth that paints a contented smile on your face. As you read a particular sentence, maybe a tear of happiness rolls down your cheek. Only by true experience as a prisoner will this set you free into the warm caress that is this rare emotional freedom.

Voltaire truly summed up the powers of a pen. As long as one has a way to communicate, all is not lost. A different perspective will always challenge others, and this communication of visage can hinder or help. It is up to you how you respond to differing types of communication that makes you a part of the cure or a part of the disease.

by James Bauhaus

Mail is the one vestige of civilization that prisoncrats have not quite managed to exclude from their slow death camps. They despise having to deliver and collect mail. Providing mail service costs prisoncrats too much time and labor. Also, it is a common source of lawsuits when they let the wrong inmate sky-off with your magazines, letters, or legal mail. The prison-kops' incompetence at handling incoming and outgoing mail encourages some inmates to use mail to try and smuggle in things that the kops don't want us to have, like partial nudity, books that tell the obvious truths about governments, and (GASP!) "drugs." (anything that mildly stimulates or causes a bit of drowsiness is a 'drug' to the kops.) Kops use 'security' overkill as their perfect excuse to deprive their helpless victims of education, information, outside contact, hope, and the smallest amount of pleasure or self-esteem.

Drug overkill is their most effective excuse for pinching off mail. Their most daring pogrom is to intercept all of the mail, open it without permission, scan it, then display it to their inmates on a TV or tablet computer for a fee. The kops say that this stops their drug smuggling problem, plus it stops inmates from creating fire hazards with stored paper. They use a nonsensical scenario to turn a cost into a profit: very cunning. The inmate victims have no choice but to accept this farce. No judge will deny the kops' 'logic.' No politician (ex-prosecutor) will find any fault with their secret plan to keep their anti-crime fanatic voters at your expense.

What can we do about the growing problem of the kops taking away our mail rights bit by bit?

We can enjoy it while we still have some, I guess...

by Jack Simpson

February 2020 brought all of us to a new era. At least for me. I don't have to stand in a long line waiting to use the phone. We were issued tablets, so we can contact our loved ones. It made my life so much easier.

Not often do I write letters now. I can text the ones who have the texting setup on their phones. For the price of twenty-five cents, I am given fifteen minutes to get the message done and sent. Still cheaper than writing.

Very seldom do I stand in a crowd listening to hear my name for mail. I have stood there to be disappointed like others listening and hoping for something that never came. Only to walk away with my head down.

Some of the fellows tell me to get a pen-pal. I know there are a lot of people who would love to get letters also. One thing I will not do is play with someone else's emotions.

Once I write a letter and send it out, if that person doesn't write back, I leave it alone and take them off my list of possible people to stay in contact with.

I can just about estimate the time Prisoner Express is about to send out a newsletter. It is just a feeling I get inside.

Mail to me is a way to keep one's writing skills in order. That is one reason I write short stories. To stay in contact with others and to express myself through the mail. I'll keep writing, all of you do the same.

by Scott Petrie

The most important time for an inmate is when mail-call is announced. Monday through Friday, as long as it's not a holiday, are days in which time is counted by when mail-call will be. Weekends suck because there is no mail on Saturday or Sunday, and once mail is handed out on Friday and you've received nothing... Your weekend just became unbearably long as the next mail day, Monday, seems like it will never get here...

For me mail is hope, hope that one day I will get a letter from my sister or brother or one of my children. Mail is like a lifeline to the world in which we no longer belong and for some of us will never see again. I have one pen-friend who has been by my side now for over 3 years. She runs a free book program that sends books to inmates. When I did not hear from her for six months I was miserable and wondered what I did wrong not to hear from her. Turns out she moved from Utah to Colorado and is still there for me, once again at least once a month a letter arrives in which she shares her life on the outside with me. I've told her that books are ok but it's the letters she writes that mean the most. Just recently I have ordered 11 magazines so I will receive mail at least once a month!

"Creativity is the brain's invisible muscle -- that when used and exercised routinely -- becomes better and stronger."

— Ashley Ormon



Heather Painter

by Martin Vicario

Several years ago, I read an article in *Reader's Digest* with the title of *The Lost Art of Writing*. In my three-decade journey in the system, the primary avenue to communicate with family, friends, and the world has been writing. The pen and the paper. Most prisoners will write a letter sooner or later. And then there's 10 percent of the population that recognize the importance of writing. They fall in love with the art, the scent of paper, the flow of the ink, and the infinite power of expression. Ironically, the other 90 percent will solicit a writer or word-smith when the need comes up to write a legal writ, approach a representative, contact the media, or reach out to a family member or loved one. Of all the letters I have written, it is the love letter that affects me the most.

Consider the old timer reaching out after years of exile and thousands of hours of reflection. And on the other side, a prisoner receiving a letter from the daughter he never expected to "hear" from because... And then there is the letter of contrition apologizing for the hurt that has been done. I once took dictation from a fellow prisoner, who was chronically ill, expressing to his family that he would not be coming home even though he did his best to hold on. Most letters written will eventually make it to the mailbox. Other letters never make it to the envelope. The letter is placed underneath the mattress and disregarded. The practice is one that declares release. Then there is the walk to the mailbox, followed by the drop of the mail. Every letter going out is a story pertaining to someone's heart.

It is a nugget in the time continuum of history. And it matters to all that write and appreciate the connection between words and history. Words matter because they connect us. Words encourage, they can give life or take it away.

In this modern area, news travels in many diverse ways. But there is nothing that compares to receiving a letter, especially for prisoners and people hospitalized. The old fashion, dependable mail— usually. Life, love, or death... express yourself. Mail matters!

Getting Started

Getting Started Over by Thomas Black

I must admit, I had found myself in a rut of sorts. Prior to the Covid, I had my routine down. Went to Likewise College four hours on Thursday mornings, then had reading, questions, and an essay to write each week. I also tutored in reading four days a week in the afternoon, a couple hours each day. It was a good routine, felt productive. It helped me educate myself, fill my days, and help others out.

When the virus hit, college and tutoring were shut down, various stages of quarantine were instituted, I got moved several times, and my routine was completely disrupted.

Prior to that I was drawing quite a bit, writing my Prisoner Express entries, sending submissions to a couple publications which support prison reform, and writing to a lot of political parties and politicians about prison issues.

For various reasons, I kinda gave up on most of it. I sent some drawings and writings to PE, then had something of a dry, non-creative spell. I had brief interruptions, I received and completed a couple PE study packs, which I enjoyed. Also an organization WorthRises, which I wasn't familiar with, sent a study pack about the prison industrial complex. It was very informative and provided material to think and write about.

As for the political parties and politicians, I've concluded it's useless to write to them. I had an illusion they might have an interest in genuine correction. Alas, that's not the case. Never received a response from any parties or politicians. What disappointed me the most was the Libertarian Party, neither state nor national responded, which really surprised me. I was an active member at state and local events, meetings, and campaigns before prison. I guess the "before prison" is a key statement there.

So how do I come back? After many months I finally sat and drew some fish and birds, a couple of my favorite subjects. I wrote a piece for the Success theme, and now I'm writing this.

Still no college or tutoring yet, but I'll keep plugging on. It helps me to express myself through drawing and writing, and if someone else enjoys what I've drawn or wrote, well I've made both of us feel better.

Jordan Berg

Getting started... that's exactly where I sit writing this. That's how I begin all writing projects. Some use diagrams, lists, notes, etc., but when I write my thoughts are about a sentence ahead in my mind.

Earlier in the year I was in a 2 year college degree program through the local college, paid for by the 2nd chance Pell grant, but due to my anger, I screwed something up again.

The problem is when I get started with my anger it's very difficult to stop and think as my mind is a jumbled mess. I always know and understand this AFTER whichever incident has happened.

My entire life has been plagued with this problem and no matter the intervention in my life, nothing seems to help. It is not a small matter either.

When I blow up, it's a big deal. I burn bridges, ruin friendships, relationships, and most of all family relationships. I do not do this intentionally, but I can't for the life of me figure out how to stop after I get started.

Maybe sometime in life, things will be better, but I am already 30 years old. I guess on the bright side those blowouts happen less.

by Vinicio Garcia

I guess I had a writer's block since I had a hard time getting started on this theme.

Let's see gentlemen start your engines, starter's gun, the car started, and oh my here it is the starting point—so we have ignition—the Big Bang—therefore, all subsequent getting started began with the Big Bang. But it took another getting started to keep the ball rolling—the ignition of the first stars. Then you stir and heat and voila you have our cozy little planet. So all the smart people said we know how to get started— so they exploded an atom bomb. So the smart people were that close to knowing about getting started. But then the uncertainty raised its little head and said you're just guessing. To make matters worse, it seems the little guys and the big guys have different ideas about getting started. And then there's the self-replicating molecule which nobody has yet figured out how it got started. So many conundrums have left me dazed and confused. It makes me feel like I've been to a whipping post. I will interject here that I was debating whether to use quandary or

conundrum— quandary would have taken me down the quantum path but I chose conundrum. I just like the word conundrum, never got used to it and it rhymes with corundum (ruby) which I am partial to. If you will notice I ended the previous sentence with a preposition but don't get me started on that one. Of course once I thought about rubies I got started on crystalline lattices which reminded me of snowflakes which reminded me of fractals which reminded me how I came to visualize the psychedelic posters of the 60s and 70s. So now that I'm really getting started, I'm going to STOP.

Picture Themes- After a few years of only offering word themes we came up with the idea of including a picture theme each month as well. **As mentioned before we ask for truth aka as non-fiction in the word theme, and you have free reign to create whatever flows through you for the picture theme.** The main requirement is that the story you write has to be connected to the image we present in a way that is recognizable to our editors. Most of you always do that, but we do receive submissions that seem unrelated at times and often they are not included in the packet. A picture is worth a 1000 words, and then we ask you to edit it to 800. Have some fun and see what stories you wish to tell. Humans are meaning making machines, and most things seem meaningless to me unless I find a way to give it meaning. See if you can find meaning in your life and experiences and transform it into a piece of writing you share with the world. There is no wrong way to do this, if you stay within the few restrictions we have listed for this project. You do not need to wait to hear from us to begin submitting your themes. It usually takes 3 months for us to get each months themes typed and mailed., but a packet of writing will be sent to all contributors.



Mindful Meditation Mountain by Mark A. Peirano

Two reflections of a mountain, clear,
in image, so depicted here.
I sit and wonder of the vista, given,
As I'm in a cell— stuck in prison.

Through my mind I can experience, now,
What only an image sends past my brow.
Though on a rolled-up mat-in a concrete box, encased,
I visit, in mind, the free and open space.

My "plasticine" mind adapts my awareness, keen,
To the smells of pines, breeze, and stream.
As I watch— my mind sees itself more clear, inside,
Fears, troubles, aches, worries and catastrophes subside.

My soul is lightened, my focus above, beyond,
Beginning with a picture taken on a raft, in a pond.
The ripples of thoughts and distractions, many,
Fade to love, focus, calm, and plenty... Amen.

Reflections on Relativity by Cynthia Castoro

The sun rises to gently caress the waking sky with a soft greeting and symphonic strokes of pastel, with hints of tourmaline, amethyst and powder blue topaz. Each evening it bids adieu with a passionate kiss, searing flames of vivid fire-color, as a toast to the day, deep into the azure. The rockabye moon serenades the body of the sea with a nightcap of luminous, glistening pearls as the sparkling stars parade in a kaleidoscope of universal splendor. The snow-veiled mountain precipice reveals itself splendidly to the adoring lake, the tango of the conjoined double image magnifies the beauty and intensifies the visual impact.

Perhaps the marvel of the natural wonder is not complete until it has shared, given of itself, or reflected its impression, in order to fully realize its truest magnificence; seen not only in itself but expressed, in tandem, by another. The emblazon sky sings delightfully in its evening encore long after the sun has left the stage and the rock-n-roll sea, having accepted its nightcap, mirrored in moonbeams, whispers its nocturne lure with an enchanting lullaby. Equally, the majestic mountain, in its velvet robe of snow, shimmers in dazzling diamonds, a gift of the sun dance. By intertwining with the other, each becomes more powerful, more evoking than before, elevated by the traces left behind from their waltz together. They complement each other

and bring forth a combined radiance greater than is possible alone.

As humans, we imitate that powerful emulation of nature, challenging one another, echoing sentiment and duplicating appearance. We reflect on each other and, in doing so, take reflection of ourselves. Just standing in front of a mirror and seeing our own reflection can make us pause and look far beyond the image, deep into our soul. We find ourselves staring, even talking aloud to our duplicated self, questioning our purpose, or reliving past events that rush in and explode our mind in a dying second. The inquisitive fear of not fulfilling our destiny or blindly denying our dreams, suffocated by complacency or imbecilic indulgences, grabs hold of us and creeps into our expression.

It suffices to say that when we take our own talent, experiences, positive energy, and compassion and pollinate with others, we are sharing the greater good in ourselves and allowing it to manifest in those around us. In turn, we learn more, experience greater personal growth, and are able to overcome more complex obstacles than when we are made to do so alone. The importance of sharing time or our creative interaction with another person can not be undervalued as it elevates our thoughts and opens our mind to multi-layered thinking.

There is a quote that says, "Knowledge that is shared multiplies while that which is withheld diminishes." It seems plausible considering this: the generous and giving always seem to have plenty to share while the selfish always seem to be holding on tight to the very little that they have. Forgiveness is good for the forgiver for it frees the soul, likewise, generosity nourishes the heart and there is a great deal of satisfaction in helping another person grow their talent or having somebody to help cultivate our own.

The world hungers for each of us to operate in our greatest capacity, to reach our highest potential and to make our contribution to the universe. Every person on this planet has a gift, the key is to discover it, develop it, and divide it in a way that it scatters like seeds in the wind to take root, not only in ourselves but in others, to ultimately harvest a more fruitful relationship, boost self-esteem and develop a powerful self-confidence. The world is waiting for your unique streak of color, for your orchestration to blaze a path and bring out the razzle-dazzle tap dance of your life so that the next time you see yourself looking back at you in the mirror, you see a person that gives your best in life and does so, life gives you its best in return.

by Tamilyn Robertson

When I look at his picture, I think of reflections. The water creates contrast in so many ways. Water within itself is a beauty. It is so transparent.

I remember being in Singapore, amazed by the greenish blue color and being able to see the coral just by gazing from the boat.

Then the water can be a mirror by one gazing upon their looks. Or it can become a tool for one to clean their body or even a source of nourishment.

When seeing the picture reflection upside down, it makes me think of how my life right now is turned upside down.

It makes me think of how easy you can take your life for granted by reflecting on nature or watching water's beauty. Whether splashing upon a rock or just meditating by sight or observing the beauty of Allah's creation.

I also visualize how nature can calm one's spirit and be so serene and allow one peace and tranquility.

The picture has so many unique qualities. It also brings into mind as a storm is approaching and the water and trees must embrace it.

Then the trees put me in the mind of mother and child, for the size has a variation. Then weeping willows give a spooky look like a forbidden place.

This picture gives me so much mixed emotion. Yet I am thrilled to think outside of incarceration.

So, thank you for allowing me to use my brain for more than going back over my life.

Recovery Journey by Leo Cardez

2020 was a beast of a year... my goodness. I mean really. I was locked up in my dismal crypt for the majority of the year just waiting to get sick and die. I watched as my friends and family were taken from me by an invisible enemy. I consider myself relatively stable, but even a rock will turn to dust with enough pressure and time. I was doing everything I could to hold on, but felt desperately unmoored. But, 2021 is here, the vaccine is going into arms, Trump is gone, my facility is starting to ease restrictions, and I started a new job.

I work as a sanitation specialist in my facility's COVID quarantine wing. Frankly, I'm a glorified janitor risking my health and safety disinfecting after COVID positive inmates. But, I can't complain. The job gives the opportunity to leave my cell everyday and do something of value. Even better, I get to go outside as I transport sick or recovered inmates to and from buildings across our vast compound. Even though it's freezing, it's the favorite part of my day.

One rare warm winter morning as the snow began to melt and leave giant puddles, I was returning a recovered inmate back to his building, pushing his property in a giant cart across the yard. The dirt patch we call the soccer field had turned into a shallow lake. The water reflected the bright blue sky and puffy clouds. The angle of the sun shone a shadow across the water of a makeshift mountain range built from our fence line, guard towers, and administrative buildings. They looked like the snow capped peaks of the Rockies right here in Northern Illinois. I was in awe, it stopped me in my tracks and for the briefest moment my spirit soared over the barbed wire fencing. It was beautiful and I was free.

It was the beginning of a long journey back to a better mental state. It was also the catalyst for a newfound purpose: mental wellness.

I started practicing yoga— 20 minutes every morning. It was harder than I thought and although I felt ridiculous in some of the poses, I didn't give up. In fact, it wasn't long until I had found a crew of similarly motivated yoga enthusiasts. I began to see results within a couple months, not so much physically, but emotionally. I was less stressed and anxious. I smiled more and even laughed; dare I say I was happier? I think I was. So much so, in fact, I decided to try another hack: meditation.

Let me tell you, meditation is hard. It's simple enough to start and understand, but the execution is tremendously difficult. I suck at it. My monkey mind refuses to settle down for anything more than 5-10 seconds and they want me to build myself up to a 20 minute practice twice a day? Okay... I'll try.

The biggest change has been looking forward to things again— to thinking ahead, to planning,... to hoping. For example, I am looking into transferring to another facility, one that offers a Dog Training Program. Inmate are assigned pups whom they will train for two years to be service dogs. Can you imagine? How cool would that be? I love dogs. I'm a hardcore dog person. I once broke up with a girl because my dog didn't like her. Dogs not only re-introduce structure and responsibility into our lives, they imbue our souls with purpose and love. Anyone who has ever owned a dog understands the unconditional, non-judgmental love they offer. I often used to think, I wish I could be the man my dog thought I was. Maybe now, I can.

Today, I put in for my transfer. I dream of a better tomorrow. It has been a long journey and I'm not finished, but I do know I am on my way.

by Roderic Pippen Sr.

Just like this mountain I have been able to see my own image, and I can admit that I'm finally comfortable with what I

see. All of my life I always cared too much about what other people saw when they saw me. At 33 years old, I have been able to open my eyes and see myself.

Looking back to my elementary years, I see where my problems came from. In class the "bad" kid always got the most attention from the teacher. Even though I had some of the best grades, I never garnered the attention I thought I deserved. But with my acting out, I got attention from both the staff and females. This was when I decided to be the "bad boy" type of character. A decision that would lead to more negative than positive situations in my life.

Now as a father, I see where I mistook the attention I received as someone caring about me as a person. Now I go overly hard on the attention I give to my own son, so that he doesn't think that he has to act out to gain attention. Being locked up at the moment makes it a little difficult. But if it keeps him from following my footsteps, I will do everything I can. This is the person I see, and I can be happy with.



The Two of Us by Mark A. Peirano

In part, I am still playfully frolicking,
In part, I am as focused as a laser beam.
As I go through life these two sides coincide in me.
One free of worries, the other, free of foolery.

These two halves make the whole of me, for sure,
As well as for many, that can accept this vein.
Each part makes me a whole, all together,
And helps me to see both sides, for my part of forever.

Hero by Catherine LaFleur

I was three, he was five when we met. There were a lot of matchbox cars and action figures I stole from him. If he had

to look for them, I helped. He was my most adored and I followed him like a puppy dog. This is my first friend. Hero.

I had a penchant for wandering away. Both our sets of parents put him in charge of holding my hand. That never stopped. For five years Hero held onto my hand. The only thing better was when I wriggled away, and he'd have to chase me down. Hero was two years older, so of course he could run faster. He always ran slow to give me the thrill of believing I was getting away with something.

Hero's father, a bit of a pirate, was caught with a cargo of marijuana stuffed in his plane. He was sentenced to do time near Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Hero and his mother moved to a city along the Redneck Riviera to be close to him. My parents returned to India for another assignment with me in tow. I cried bitterly at the loss of Hero. The first heartbreak is the hardest. No one else held my hand for a long time.

Is Youth Wasted on the Young?

by Tim Vergason

Catch me if you can, across this sea of sand,
As we seek our fortune, on this golden strand.
Seeking pirate treasures, far beneath our feet,
Glory in the sunshine, hope for something sweet.
Where is time and worry, fallen by the way,
Play with me my brother, all this special day.

Two Boys Tackling a Hill

by Devante Thomas

"Hey, do you think the clouds are protecting us?"

"Yea, why not? You haven't fell down the hill yet," said the older boy trailing behind the stick wielder.

Oblivious to the act of cherishing their freedom. Off into the vast expanse of rolling green pastures, wishing I was protected by the clouds. Running free up exhausting hills. Sweat dripping from my forehead— under the right angle of the surface...

I fell hard down the hill though. Tumbling over daisies, four-leaf clovers and dandelions. Destroying anthills and disturbing burrowing animals underneath the circle...

I wish I could've purposely rolled down the hill... (but I was obtuse) laughing and whooping. Racing back up to do it all over again. A score of 180 in fun challenges.

I itch, not from the red ants crawling over me, for the memory of times when it was my older brother and I or or younger brother and I; out in the wild... innocent, having fun.

Inner cities are distractions. Squirrels can't even recover from watching humans become roadkill.

There's no vast expanse for us to explore three sides of an angle...

Don't even have two boys of my own out in the world— scripting their knees and hands from wrestling in the sticks...

Chasing rabbits or tossing a football without sweating if some bullets will flatten all three into a chalk line.

"Hmm... the bullet hit right in the center," the officer says.

That 16-year-old boy didn't know that "hill" was that big...

Neither does this 28-year-old boy know when the hill will reach flatland as the man emerges with the one shape that molds this destiny...

I'm a square trying to step outside a box,
lost in a field of buried bones...

Stuck in this pris...m...

Well, I did trip into this existence

Where I should've skipped past the cones
that deceived the rods in my eyes.

The skies are closed off, hiding in plain sight.

Will the rain cascade down the slope and flood the bottom?

Can I worry about getting muddy and drowning?

"Hey, do you think dad ever experienced this?" said the boy with his journey-pointing stick.

"Who?" said the following boy.

Freedom at the Monastery by Matthew Shelton

We all have chased something. Girls. Boys. Money. Drugs. A high that will never be the same as that first hit. Now, I choose to chase something different. To chase my childhood self, that kid with the carefree spontaneous nature. To look at the world with the innocence of a child. That kid who tried to chase the wind, catch the dragonfly, had to know what lives beyond the next hill.

As a trustee working for the dog kennel, I have more freedom than I ever did in the world. How many minutes have I stared into the eye of my favorite horse? Connected on a soul level. How many steps have I walked through pasture and thicket, picking wild berries, skipping stones in the creek? How many days have dogs sought my scent while I was looking with childlike wonder at the branch structure of a 200-year-old live oak, planning my ascent?

I don't abide in that awareness all day every day. My environment won't allow it. I call them distractions. My guard must still be up when I enter the fenced in monastery, I call home. But there are still blue skies outside my window, clouds rolling by. By and by. Every day I leave the barbed wire behind, I wonder what I did to deserve such bliss. The animals need me,

and I need them. Something about being in the saddle, just me and the horse. A oneness. A rightness. We chase the next hill together, with childlike wonder.

When We Were Children **by Nkrumah Lumumba Valier**

When we were children,
life was so carefree.
We would run through the fields.
Laughing and playing all day.
The sun in the sky shined so bright.
We could feel the warmth on our faces.
The clouds in the sky would provide us shade in certain places.
We never cared what color someone's skin was when we met.
We played together anyway.
Color of skin never matters,
to children having fun.
Those are the most precious times in our lives.
When we are most innocent to the cruel world we were born into.
I remember as a child,
I had white friends, Asian friends, Mexican friends, African friends, and Jamaican friends.
Rudy and Lessie were gay.
But it didn't matter to me.
They were both so cool to hang out with.
My how things have changed,
since we were children.
Adults create hate to separate.
And they say grown ups
are smarter than children...

My Best Friend Jimi by John A. Thornton

Growing up in my neighborhood was the best place in the world to grow up. Everybody was like family. My best friends were Pat James and Jimi Walden.

Jimi was the best at everything he put his mind to, and we did everything together. If we played basketball, Jimi did it better. If we played football, Jimi did it better. If we wrestled, Jimi did it better. And when we ran, no one could run faster than Jimi.

Once Jimi wanted me to make out with his sister Mae. We kissed, but somehow Jimi's mother found out. She called me over and I told her that Jimi made me do it. Boy did Jimi get it. But we were still best friends, and once we got into a fight and somehow, I pulled the scab off of an old sore that was on my elbow, and it started to bleed. I got blood all over my brother's shirt. So I called a time out, because I had to get that blood off

of my brother's shirt. You see my brother didn't know I wore his shirt and he would have killed me. So, I told Jimi to meet me back here at the same spot at 5:00 pm. He said okay. Well at 5, Jimi didn't show up. So I went to his house to find out what happened. I knocked on the door, and his mother said, "Come on in here, Anthony." (Which is the name my friends and family called me) She said, "What's this I hear about you and Jimi fighting?" I didn't know what to say. Then she called Jimi into the room and boy did Jimi get it. Then she called me, and I ran out of that house so fast. I don't ever think Jimi could have caught me that day. The next day Jimi and I were playing again like nothing ever happened.

One day while coming home from school, we found a one wheel bike. Later we found out that it was a unicycle. Well we pushed that thing all the way home because neither of us knew how to ride it. When we got home, we started to argue over who would keep it. Jimi said he found it, and I said I found it, but in the end, we took turns learning how to ride it. It didn't take Jimi long before he was riding it like a pro. He helped me too! But when I started to ride pretty good forward, Jimi was riding backward. When I started to ride backward, Jimi was riding with one foot.

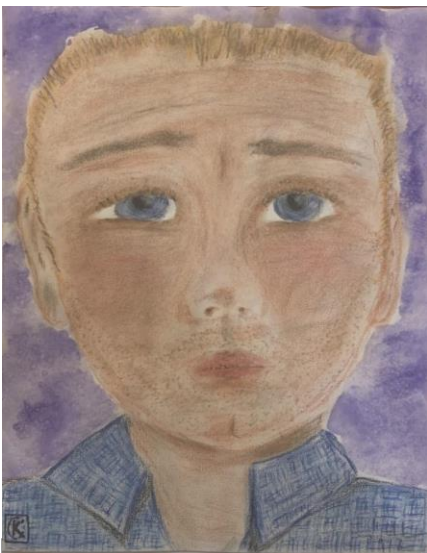
We joined the track team, and like I said before, nobody could run faster than Jimi. Sometimes Jimi would run behind me and sometimes right beside me, but if someone got big-headed and thought they could run faster than Jimi, he would run past them like they were standing still. He ran like the wind. I was proud to be his best friend. Jimi never tried to make me look bad, even though he could have at almost everything we did. No, not Jimi. You see, Jimi was a real friend and I know Jimi didn't want to ever hurt me and we never fought again.

I haven't seen Jimi in over 35 years, and I still think about him and pray for him. But even though I haven't seen him in over 35 years, I don't have to see him to know that Jimi is still my best friend.

Dancing & Prancing **by Paul Bero**

As a young boy,
Oh, I remember it so well,
My dad was a bad alcoholic
For no reason at all,
He'd beat me!
The first twelve years
Of my life
I was terrified,
I had no friends,
Why would I invite

Them to my home?
 Several times I'd run
 To my bedroom
 Go into my closet
 Close the door
 And hide from my dad
 In that dark spot,
 In my room.
 When I was
 In my thirties
 I came to prison
 I found God, Jesus!
 I then found out my dad
 Had been a machine gunner
 In several major battles
 Of World War II
 And I understood
 He drank
 To forget.
 Thank you Jesus
 For finally helping me
 To love my dad,
 But he died
 Before I could hug him.
 I can only hope
 To meet him
 One day
 In eternity
 In a place of joy
 Where I will be
 Dancing and prancing.



Kristoper Storey

Sidekick

by Al Newberry

It was an amazing day, perfectly warm with the sun shining through the wispy clouds overhead. Nine-year-old Alex ran through the field, practicing his flight stance for when he finally became a superhero. “Then they’ll never pick on me again,” he thought.

This was his normal routine, playing alone like this. At school, Alex was “the weird kid.” He’s never been good at making friends, and he felt like an alien never understanding why the other kids “got” each other so naturally. It was like they spoke some other language he would never learn. As could be expected, the other kids teased him mercilessly. Even worse, the school bullies were like homing missiles, aimed straight at Alex.

At the beginning of summer, Alex had made his decision. He was going to be a superhero. He would work in practice until he perfected his superpowers. He spent the whole summer working on his strength, holding his mind powers, and practicing flying. He hadn’t made it off the ground yet, but soon. He could feel it.

Now it was Labor Day weekend, only a couple weekends into his fourth-grade year. Tired from flying practice, Alex sat down “Indian style” in the lush grass, picking birds off his shorts and ankle socks. “What a great day. No one to bother me, and I think I almost flew,” he said to the air. Then he heard it.

“Hey! Alex!” He looked around, shocked at the presence of anyone else in his field. As far as he knew, nobody else ever came here. Then fear gripped him as he recognized Brian Knudsen calling him from the edge of the field.

Brian was a big kid—a six grader. Everyone knew him because he was the most athletic boy in school. Nobody messed with Brian Knudsen. As far as Alex could remember, he and Brian had never met. He wasn’t known as a bully, but as far as Alex was concerned if this “big kid” he’d never spoken to knew who he was it couldn’t be good news.

Faster than he imagined possible, Alex left his feet, running for his life. Brian started after him.

“Alex, wait! I’m not gonna hurt you!”

Alex wasn’t about to find out if this was true. He knew this field and he was sure he could lose his pursuer. He ran into the woods at the edge of the field but forgot the steep drop just before the creek. He started just in time to avoid stumbling over. He was trapped. Brian caught up.

“No! Please, just leave me alone!” he cried.

“Hell, you’re fast,” panted Brian. “I told you I’m not gonna hurt you. I just wanna talk to you.”

Alex was stunned. He was still expecting to be pummeled, but he took a chance. "W-why? H-how do you even know my name?"

Brian grinned. It was a comforting, friendly grin. "Silly. Everybody at school knows you. Maybe they're mean sometimes, but most of 'em kinda like you."

"Really?"

"Really. I've been wanting to introduce myself." Brian offered his hand, and Alex reluctantly shook it.

"You're autistic," Brian observed.

Alex frowned. "So?"

"My little brother is autistic too. High functioning like you. That's why I wanted to be friends. Maybe I can help you get to know the other kids at school. If they got to know you, they wouldn't be so mean."

"Really?!?! You'd do that for me?" Alex said, in tears.

"Of course. I want someone to do that for my little brother. He'll be in kindergarten next year. I'll be in junior high so I won't be able to." Brian grinned again.

The two new friends spent the rest of the day playing and getting to know each other. Even played superheroes, flying around the field.

Ryan kept his word. Alex became his virtual sidekick the rest of the school year. With Brian's help, he began to finally feel like less of an alien. He began to "get" other kids and they, him. Remembering Brian's wish for his little brother, the following year he took a little Riley Knudsen on as his own "sidekick". He was really becoming a superhero.



The Light at the End of the Tunnel **by K. Daniel Okken**

Really, it's all about perspective.

Am I coming or am I going? Am I dead, or alive?

Is this the entrance, or is it the exit?

They are both the same except by one's perspective.

Upon arrival I had only seen the darkness, the walls,

The word "Prison" labeled my home for the next few years; Life was on the outside... the light, the ivy, the plants, the beauty...

But it is really only a matter of one's perspective.

Isn't it ironic; perspective is strange, it messes with our minds? When on the outside, when free, where all the good things of life were...

I died. I became dead to family, friends; they saw me slowly dying...

And did nothing about it. They stuck the knife in and slowly twisted it.

When I came to the entrance, I was already dead.

This was my burial, and no one brought spices to...

... well, make me smell better, maybe? On it.

But one cannot expect a sepulchre to smell good.

"Zombies," "dead men walking," "death warmed over,"

"Hell on earth," "Sodom and Gomorrah," "The pit,"

... Or, is it a place to shine a light, to light a candle.

Can it be that life can be found on the inside?

It's really all about perspective: a light shines brightest in the darkness.

On the inside, I have been resurrected; given a new heart, a new mind;

I have been given a new life, new hope, new dreams...

a new perspective. From the inside I see the light outside...

And that light has shined in my heart, my soul;

Now it's not an entrance into a grave; the stone is rolled away;

It's an exit into a new life; a light at the end of the tunnel.

Really, it's all about perspective.

by Cesar Hernandez

In America, the media portrays— and the public perceives— most prisoners, as all being the same. Prejudice against prisoners means we see people we prejudge as static and unchanging. We decide they are horrible, stupid, no good, or whatever. That's the way they are when we see through a filter of prejudice, we don't see people in process. Prisoners, like everyone else on the planet, are in the process of changing. Prisoners are in the process of becoming more wounded or in the process of growing, learning, and healing.

When we look beyond our prejudgements and see the potential for growth and healing in others, we have to let go of our static images and assume a more responsible attitude to the way we treat those people. Seeing prisoners as people in a

process challenges us as a society to respond to prisoners in a more humane and intelligent way.

Incarceration Inspiration Enlightenment **by Anthony Vick**

Another doldrum day in which I look for inspiration to write behind these walls. Often finding the ebb and flow of ideas dammed behind the mundaneness of a normal day in prison. Surrounded by the same people, movies, games, and other even less exciting stimuli, the tediousness of it all begins to take its toll.

The more I explore the depths of my imagination, I'm able to see the truth. This aforementioned imagination is all I really need. Speculatively I can go anywhere of my choosing. Every thought capable of creating a surreal landscape and words can paint the picture. A world where I can be the king, the God, or perhaps a hero who gets the girl in the end.

Writer's block for me only occurs when I do not write. Once the pen is put to paper, ideas unfold. Often the inner me is exposed for the reader to see. Creativity is in action. Actions stem from thoughts. Thoughts stem from beliefs. My creativity gives my thoughts and beliefs a positive channel from which to flow. For a self-destructive individual like myself this is paramount to my well-being. A most interesting enlightenment.

Writing for myself, my consolation from this plight of mine, does not always mean others will enjoy my narrative. Oftentimes this too conspires to hinder my inventiveness. I must ask myself... "Which is more beneficial, my ego wanting validation from others or my artistic expression?"

There is an artist in everyone I believe. Once a thought is expressed it takes form in one medium or another. Is this not art? What picture will I paint today? What will I show the world? What will I show the world? Is it a great story or an awful exhibition?

The narrative of my life may have come to a dark place but Stephen King is not the author of my tale. I will create the chronicle my own way. Just maybe I will be the hero who gets the girl.

by Joshua Rose

Just outside the door to the prison, the light shines down. I feel the breeze blowing in, then I notice there are no bars keeping me here. All this time I've thought I was trapped, simply because the sign says prison. I guess it's all in how you look at it. I guess it's true: prison ain't a place, it's a state of mind. Sometimes the fences we are behind are ones of our own making or we buy into what the signs say, becoming stereotypes or worse. Never accept what other people tell you. You can't live life in a box that

says prison outside. It's all what you make it. Break your rusty cage and rise above.



Leisure Walk by Jack Simpson

Just had a cup of coffee while the Sun was rising over the ocean. Checking my list of things, I had planned for the day, a leisurely walk on the beach, nothing on my mind, just enjoying the view.

Barbara had just walked in the kitchen and sat down. She had rested well by the look on her face. "Hello, beautiful," I said while pouring her a cup of coffee. "Right," she remarked as we both kissed.

Forty years of marriage and she still set my heart on fire. She had her day planned as well and shopping was not my thing, of course she knew that before we married. I'll go to the opera, country music, to see a movie, I would do anything but that. If she asked me to go, I would never do it and make a scene. Love conquers all.

Barbara yelled as she walked out the door, "Have fun and leave the women alone." She turned and winked. She didn't have to worry, my heart belonged to her.

New swim trunks on and plenty of sunscreen. I stepped out on the sandy beach. A light breeze came across the water. The humidity was high, and the sweat started down my back. Running or jogging was out of the question. A slow walk would do just fine.

Sweat fell from my brow. Chairs lined the beach with bodies looking like overdone toast. No one could tell them they shouldn't be outside too long. Done that and caught trouble getting sleep that night.

Once in a while, I had to dip my feet in the waves to cool them from the sand. A normal person can tell when it is too hot to be outside. A crane and I met going different directions. Too hot to fly, walking saved energy, "Hello, Mr. Crane," I said. The bird walked on as if it had no care in the world. If it could

have talked, it would probably have said, "Bite me." We both went our separate ways.

Hours were slipping by and the orange ball in the sky was sinking fast. When I reached the house, it would be dark. As the sliding door opened, Barbara was pulling up front with packages in the back of the SUV. I could tell by the smile on her face she was happy.

"Hope you like shrimp and flounder for dinner," she said. "That will be just fine," I remarked as my feet moved to the rear and started to gather packages. With the last one in, I got a kiss then took a much-needed shower.

When I came back in I asked, "How was your day of shopping?" She told me everything down to the last detail. While I listened, we split the meal. Sitting and enjoying the meal, my mind went back to the beach.

Only the sound of the ocean and wind in my hair. Sunburned and enjoying a walk by a bird who had no care in the world.

Then she asked, "How was your day?" I had to smile and say, "Just a leisurely walk on the beach."

by Tamilyn Robertson

Two creations made by Allah, yet equal in stance. But so totally different action. One is able to speak with language while the other squawks with unintelligent language. One is called a human and the other is called a bird. Yet one has arms and the other wings. Even the eating is similar, for many humans eat raw food as the bird does. And yes, the bird has a snout and the human has a mouth.

The bird has an advantage. It can fly without a device while a human must use a glider or a plane.

The beauty of the sand and ocean behind is like an ordinary day. But so special, for you don't see this everyday. This is a Kodak moment for real. Then the way it was captured as if both have had enough and they are done for the day. And the bird has got more swag than the human, which is real ironic to me. The human looks well tanned, thirsty, and ready to go lay down after a full morning of sun rays.

Both the bird and human look like they are very light on their feet.

The backdrop looks as if the sun is rising for the day. I just would love to know how they were so fortunate to capture the footage of a photo like that.

by Robert Andrew Bartlett

Victor overslept as usual. He drank his usual breakfast—a raw egg and a can of beer. He pulled on a pair of jams and went for a walk along the beach, pondering the

mysteries of the universe. His life had meaning once. Before the divorce. Before his son went to prison. Before a pandemic forced his company into bankruptcy.

If you hurtled past the edge of the universe faster than the speed of light, would you find yourself in empty space, or come back where you started? What is the diameter of the Higgs boson? How wide is the sea strand?

He passed a large bird walking clumsily in the opposite direction, occasionally poling its beak into the wet sand. It was in no hurry and had no apparent destination. It had huge wings. It could have been flying, soaring about the craziness, maybe heading for a nice tropical island. It could have sex and never make a support payment. It could leave anytime and never be accused of embezzlement.

Frankl had been up for several hours. High tide had been shortly after dawn. Before long, it had been easy to find all the clams he could eat. With his belly full, he longed for shelter from the sun, but low tide was only four hours away so he walked on, occasionally enjoying another tasty morsel while supplies lasted. He searched for intelligent life and pondered the mysteries of the universe.

He passed a slump-shouldered Homo sapien walking clumsily in the opposite direction. It seemed to be in a hurry yet had no apparent destination. It was wearing something made of plant fiber. It served no apparent purpose on land. It would be unnecessary baggage in the air and would create much drag in the water.

Homo sapien seemed to be a very stupid and destructive beast. His life had no meaning. Frankl wondered what possessed the Creator when he made such an ugly animal.

A thin stream of air escaped from a clamshell and became bubbles on the sand. The clam was eaten by a big bird.



I Won't Quit on Me **by Teddy Lewis**

My city and my so-called friends are all gone. This sudden infliction of covid-19 has taken them but I know Allah's everlasting mercy guides me to sudden victory. I can rebuild. I can reform my surroundings despite the odds against me. So now I see and now I know... the animals seem careless toward the sudden occurrence of worldwide trauma yet as I watch a homeless cat crawl directly towards me, how beautiful he seems despite being lost in the wilderness of Harlem NYC... I won't quit the building process which takes a lot of time and precious toll on the mind and body. Be not afraid because after all is said and done good old-fashioned hard work works every time; therefore I won't quit on me and I never will.

Am I Alone by Jack Simpson

Today, I woke up cold and hungry. I really can't remember any days that it wasn't like that. Where I live, food is hard to find. and the only work is ten miles away.

All I have left now is my mother and three brothers and two sisters. My father had passed away after my younger brother was born. Now that I am the oldest, I had to step up and become the man of the house.

Getting dressed, I never asked for food or questioned why I had to go get wood. One thing I did know was Mom had been up all-night putting wood on the fire just to keep it warm for all of us. She has always been my hero.

Snow was falling gently to the ground. It was quiet and the sky was getting bright enough for me to gather wood. At least three loads would make it through the night. The sound that I heard was my own footsteps in the snow. Every crunch brought me closer to home.

Stepping over a log, my foot slipped. All that went through my mind was not to lose any of the wood. Planted face first, I had snow in my eyes and mouth. Finally, my feet had me up and I found my hat. Beating the snow from it, my head was covered again.

The fear of Am I alone came over me while I had laid there. Had I broken my leg, would anyone have found me? I sure wouldn't want to perish like that.

I could tell I had been gone a while. The sky was much brighter now, and the pain of hunger was really strong. Getting weak with each step, my thoughts turned to my family. They came first and what I needed would have to wait.

Walking through the door with the wood, I saw Momma smile. She took some from me and kindled the fire. Shaking the snow off of my clothes, my brothers, and sisters huddle together

for warmth. They were smiling when I returned. I had figured they were glad to see me.

Sitting on my bed trying to gain strength before the next load of wood. Mom said, "Here, son. Eat and get warm." In her hand there was a bowl of soup. It felt real warm to the touch. I thanked her, then I asked, "Did the others and yourself eat?" They all answered with a "yes."

After finishing the bowl of soup, my mother along with the rest said, "Surprise!" and "Happy Birthday!" Every day was the same to me. I never kept up with that day. My mother handed me a coat she made by hand. I took the old worn coat off and put it on. It was so much warmer. Now I can gather wood and be warmer than before.

Years after that day. I never let that one thought cross my mind again. Am I alone? How could I be alone with a mother like that? My brothers and sisters are still my best friends. They are what gave me strength and took that feeling of being alone away.

by Raymond Gomez

At 41 years old, I reached the top of the corporate ladder. I thought I had it all but suddenly everything began to unravel. I had been living life peripherally. I lost my wife and two children in a car accident after she left in anger and drove head on into a tree. She was driving as fast as she could to put distance between us, 95 miles an hour, ending our marriage and never giving me a chance to try and mend things together. I was completely possessed by the voices in my head. And right now, those voices screamed "you loser, you killed your family; kill yourself, end it all." My work had consumed me completely, never giving them time. I needed a sabbatical, a trip far from here alone, away from everybody. I recall smoking an enormous amount of weed and finishing off a bottle of Puerto Rican rum. I took the world globe that belonged to my kids, gave it a big spin, and decided to go wherever my finger landed. My finger landed on India, a place called Maharashtra. Departing South Bend Indiana, I drove 750 miles to New York to make a flight to New Delhi. My journey began with seeking peace within. India, mystical, enchanted. There were monks with orange-colored robes, bald heads, and red dots on their foreheads. I inquired of one of the monks holding a small bowl to collect alms if he had ever heard of Maharashtra. He looked at me intently and gave me directions for the train station. He said he heard of it, but it was in the mount of nearby Vraja. That was what I was seeking. I said, "How did you know what I was looking for?" In which he replied, "The eyes are the soul of man," he knew. Arriving at Maharash, I was met by a spiritual guru. He called to me. It was as if he knew I would be there arriving at that time and moment.

He told me of a child with the soul of a guru, it was her I needed to seek. It was a small hut on a mountain near vraja. There she sat down, a lotus flower growing out of rubbish. She was covered with dirt, with a knit hat and a rose. A beautiful child with an old soul. She was chanting, barely moving her lips. She stared at me and with the look of her eyes she could see my soul. She motioned for me to sit. She then said to me that pain can never be conquered. It's here to be endured. Stay with me here, I will teach you how to meditate, I will teach you Dharma. Looking at her face, it was as if I'd known her all my life. She then said to me "storms come. Grief, pain, loneliness, and fear and they rage like a hurricane, tossing about all the mobile homes in your mind. If you feel like you are a mobile home, then you'll catch hell, but if your understanding is being the sky, you're actually what becomes stormy, rough, and scary. But as the sky, you were here before the hurricane arrived and you'll be here after it leaves. Clouds in a boundless sky. I stayed with her for months and when I left that young child, I was in total peace. The storm in my mind had stopped, calmed down and so did the voices. I never saw her smile, but love and compassion was all I felt coming from her. I arrived back in South Bend, Indiana, a new man.

My Brother's Keeper by George Hesse

"Ok, little brother. Listen up well." "On this trip I'm gonna school you about life. Don't ask why, just take notes, right?"

Days 1-15: My little brother, me, grandma, and two sisters embark on our dangerous journey on foot. When Mom and Grandpa died we sold everything we owned for tickets to a ship bound to a new world. Earth is in ruins after the last global war. Natural disasters maxed out the planet all at once. We have food and water filters plus water. "Little brother, I pray this new world isn't as judgmental as Earth. Mom taught us humanity comes first, be colorblind, we are all people. Focus on what unites us, not what divides us. She is in the spirit world now, little brother. No father, but we got us. Family is the most important thing in life."

Days 16-30: "Ok, little brother, we are making great time. Our older brother died in the last war, right after you were born. I was the little brother then. He taught me some useful knowledge before he left. Look, another storm is coming, but we gotta keep moving while we talk." We meet another group. Some days are extremely hot, other days cold. Everybody is tired, all ages and races. We meet an Asian couple and daughter. Han, Annie, and A'ja. Grandma and Annie hit it off great. Grandma is sick with cancer but she told me not to say anything. "You will be the leader of our tribe one day little brother. Be strong and humble

no matter what. Get out of your comfort zone because you will be the protector. Help those who are weak and most in need, aight, little bro?" Days grow long and people are splitting up. We fight off wild attackers here and there. What has Earth come to? "I can't believe we let Earth get to this point, little brother. You're my best friend, you know? It ain't easy having good pals like you in a war zone. We gotta keep moving. I'm tired too."

Days 31-45: We bury Grandma. "Ok little brother, we're on a schedule. Let's help the others keep up. I miss grandma too, the grieving process is going to hurt, life is full of different pains. Mom said "don't drink to mask it, mourn them honorably." We buried Han after he died when we defended another attack. "Annie and A'ja are family now."

Days 46-60: "Almost there, little brother, keep moving, Earth is mostly destroyed, crazy. Now remember what I'm teaching you, don't ask why, just remember to always be a good guy aight?" Another storm hits and we keep moving.

Well, we made it, the girls are exhausted, 70% of the group is scattered or missing. "People are boarding so listen, I need you to be stronger right now and lead. Han, Annie, and A'ja never had any tickets. When grandma was dying we discussed it and grandma's ticket is for A'ja. I'm giving my ticket to Annie. To keep it 100, brother, I was never going to leave this round. People here need my help more, what's left of Earth brother. If God wills it, I will make it on another round. Your time is now brother, the ship is ready to leave. Stay together and protect the girls, I pray this new world is welcoming. God, look into their hearts. You're my best friend, brother. I'm going to help here. Until we meet again... I love you guys...."

by Cesar Hernandez

When the adults in our life can't be counted on for love and respect, we keep growing physically but a part of our emotional growth and development gets slowed down or even totally held back. Our willingness to trust people, to be open, spontaneous, and loving goes underground. We build walls around our inner child to try to make sure they don't get hurt again. Walls of toughness, emotional deadness, anger and defiance, all to protect that sweet and vulnerable child who waits there scared, hurting, and angry.

When our basic needs for reliable love, comfort, and safety aren't met, it brings about a state of chronic anxiety, fear, shame, anger, emotional isolation, and despair in our inner child that follows us into adulthood. All addiction and most recurring emotional and physical problems in adulthood are a sign that the wounded child within us is trying to get our attention. He or she is still scared and waiting for the missing sense of love and safety. If we want to heal, we can't neglect this part of ourselves.

For us to be healthy adults, as strange as it may seem at first, we must pay attention to the child within, embrace them, and learn to re-parent and be there for ourselves with the compassion and patience that was missing before.

It's best to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. You only get to see one page of one chapter of their book. If you could see their entire book, you would completely understand why they are the way they are.



Me Inside by Scott Curnew

You see me. But you do not see me. You see what I want you to see. You see me tough. You see me hard. You see me stand on my own, by myself. You do not see me. You do not see me cry. You do not see my pain. You do not see my inner softness. You see only the hardened shell, the discouraging mask, the gritty persona I want you to see. This may scare you away when I want you near. You do not see my fear. You do not see my loneliness. You do not see my need. I silently cry out for you. I wordlessly ask for your comforting arms. I blindly seek someone to know me. To learn all about me. To find my inner softness.

Shifting Sands 2 by Mitch Obrecht

Wolfy and I curled up on the sofa to watch a little TV. Tonight was the finale of the latest season of Survivor, and my money was on the Supa Melanie, a were-badger.

A few minutes in, with the final tour going head-to-head in an endurance challenge, the doorbell rang. "Who could it be now?" Wolfy sang, making me cringe. Oh, he had a great voice, but... that song? A sharp elbow to his side emphasized my point.

I popped up and peered through the peephole. Standing outside, wearing a tank top that emphasized her only agreeable assets was Aradia, Wolfy's sister. I didn't even touch the door handle. "I can smell you, dumbass. Open up!" she said through the door.

Super talents run in families, but not always the same talent. Where Wulfriech was a bird, Aradia was a grizzly bear. With her personality, it wasn't a surprise.

Wolfy paused the show. "Go ahead," he said, so I opened the door. My guard was already up.

"What up, bitches?" she asked, strolling in. She went right by me, taking my spot on the sofa. We just stared at her.

I hadn't seen her in over a year, and as far as I was concerned, it wasn't nearly long enough. Silently staring at her wasn't getting me anywhere. "Why," I asked, "are you here, Aradia?"

"Oh, Reginald, darling. Can't a big sis pop in on her favorite brothers?"

"You're younger than we are," Wolfy reminded her. "What did you do this time?"

"What makes you think I've done something? Can't a girl visit her brother out of the goodness of her heart?"

"You have neither goodness nor heart, Aradia. Do I need to call security?"

She looked at both of us, the smile fading into a scowl. "Fine. I need someplace to crash. You don't mind, do ya?"

Breathe in. Pause. Breathe out. Breathe in. Pause. Breathe out. It didn't work.

"Monica kicked you out, did she?" Wolfy asked.

"She's such a bitch! Expecting me to clean up the house and pay rent? I don't think so!"

"Who do you think cleans here? We do. Who cleans your parent's place? They do. Not everyone can afford a maid. Most adults clean up after themselves. It's part of being an adult. Remember?"

"Blah! Blah! Blah!" she said, her hands opening and closing in rhythm.

Wolfy rolled his eyes, then landed on me. A subtle shrug. I nodded just a fraction of an inch, shrugging right back. Gotta love silent conversations.

"One night," I said. "No more. In the morning, you work things out with Monica."

"Sure, sure, one night."

"If you're still here this time tomorrow, we'll be happy to drop you off at Mom and Dad's," my boyfriend piped up.

"Ew. Yeah. One night. She just needs to cool off. Thanks, little bro!"

We both groaned. 24 hours. How bad could it be?

by Kristopher Storey

"You don't mind, do you? Some days I just get sore."

"Not at all, be comfortable," I replied. That was the first time I ever saw Nick without his binder on.

"Sometimes I just want to go ahead and get the surgery, but I'm scared and there's other things I think about," he said.

"Um, I don't have much of an opinion. I mean it's your body..."

"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted. "I know you're the concerned boyfriend and all that crap. For real, I'm trying to talk with you about it."

"Wait, I'm the boyfriend?"

He looked at me shyly like a timid feral puppy.

"Oh, for fuck's sake don't do that," I laughed. "You're right, I guess. I'm just happy to actually hear it after a few months."

I grabbed for his hand and looked at him. "I understand how you feel. Well, I mean, I don't *understand*, but I get that this is important for you. I'm just worried I don't have any reference. Right? Maybe I am too logical about it. I can only weigh the pros and cons. None of which has much to do with how anyone feels than you do."

"I'd thought starting the hormones would help. It's like it's worse some days though. Now my chest feels tender more days than not. Then it's really tough to wear my binder more than a few hours. It was bad enough to shower or look in the mirror, but now I have constant reminders that I'm just not right."

"Not right? You're perfect. I wish you wouldn't get down on yourself," I said.

"You know what I mean. So maybe in time it will get better, but maybe it won't be so bad if I have the surgery. Though then I'll have an ugly scar. Won't that be as much of a reminder as anything else? At least I could go topless at the beach without breaking a law."

"You could always get a nice tattoo."

"Oh yeah, my Amma would just *love* that! She accepts everything about me, but a tattoo would be her limit, I'm sure!"

"Heh, if you say so. I mean, what will she think of me and all mine? Never mind. I don't want to know." I thought some more and said, "I sometimes remind myself that much is won by patience, and we've got to just ride things out and see how it goes. What really matters is how you feel and if you feel loved and accepted for who you are, none of that other stuff matters as much. I mean, I'm just thinking aloud with you. What I do know is we aren't our bodies. Just in a few years we change so much, and our bodies change. We can make changes like get haircuts or whatever, but that's still not who we are. Just know I care about you for you and not how you look outwardly. Gender, sex, and so much more. It's all BS. It's just a construct."

Nick looked at me and pulled me closer. It was different holding him against me and feeling the softness of his breasts. I'd never thought about it until then. I kissed the top of his head. The spiky hair tickled my nose. I hummed that old Violent Femmes song "Punk Rock Girl" which always made him laugh.

"We'll dress like a Minnie Pearl!" he sang back and gave me a kiss.

by Luke Arabzadegan

Pretty lady, who are you? You challenge me to look away from you, and I enjoy it. I see beyond wanton physical desire, beyond the appeal of your youth, and quest to know the source of your passion to freely be yourself. To unapologetically proclaim that people should accept you as you are or get away from you. How inspiring! How profound! You dare me to disregard fashionable norms. What would change were the world at large able to boldly live as you do? Could something as simple as loving acceptance magnify the better qualities, we long to commonly express? Would you be willing to guide me on such a path? The lessons you could teach us all, if only we truly listened. The voices of tomorrow cry for enlightenment. Will you grace us with your knowledge? Freedom from the chains of self-doubt is only the beginning, and you give me hope to embrace this plus more. I seek to know the joy you possess. The peace of self-acceptance you exude calms the chaos in my mind. There is a gleaming of forces beneath your stoic posturing. If only the heart and soul were to lead more than the mind, we could know as you do.

It's the End of the World as We Know It by Catherine LaFleur

I confess, I had early intelligence about the operation. I happened to be at the records room delivering two carts and I saw numerous emptied bookcases used to store inmate files. I had to attend my weekly class held in the Visiting park, there were a multitude of packed cardboard file boxes full of medical records. For two weeks, no large trash bags were issued to the dorms, even though boxes and boxes of them were in the supply room behind the library. Some details had already been leaked to the Camp Prisonery Land herd. Everyone was nervous and fearful. The rumor was, due to staff shortages, 100 inmates would be shipped to the Big House upstate. It is the largest women's prison in the United States and the second worst ratings. The staff did very, very bad things to me there and a transfer there is one of my worst nightmares.

Speculation was rife. Who was in danger of being axed? The behavioral high custody bad girls? Anyone with a technical high custody? Those who wanted certain programs only available at other prisons? Or maybe good behavior transfer requests and work release candidates? Some felt certain they were going, many others felt certain they were staying. Prisonery Land is job-centric. There are many assignments considered an institutional necessity.

Then a reliable outside source informed me eight buses were parked in the back lot of the men's prison next door. That is a lot more buses than are needed to transport 100 female inmates. So I probed my inmate sources. I know women who work outside the gate. I asked, delicately, had they seen anything? They reported nothing. Hmmmm, I thought to myself. That Friday night, I sorted my possessions into a keep bag and an abandon bag.

The selection lists came out at 12AM Monday. The buses rolled onto complex one and parked next to Charlie dorm on the basketball court. A long line of women from complex two straggled down the compound hauling their possessions in plastic trash bags. All the education tutors and teaching assistants passed by, the clothing factory workers, the modality peer facilitators, laundry workers, gardeners, the choir, in short almost the whole world of Camp Prisoney Land passed by my Charlie dorm window. Many of the transportees were considered Institutional Necessity. Denial isn't just a river in Egypt.

After three days of watching transports being loaded and waiting for my name to be called from a list, it ended. Camp Prisoney Land holds 720 at max capacity. Today we have a little more than 200. Only the optical factory, the customer call center, and a handful of inmates to run grounds, food service, and laundry are left. Every adult institution must have a minimum of two law clerks present. This is why the net passed over Nancy and me. The woman in this photo looks like she just emerged from a trying situation. We've been left behind and I'm so grateful.

Future Picture Themes



Due 3/1/22

*Human nature has been sold short...[humans have] a higher nature which...includes the need for meaningful work, for responsibility, for creativeness, for being fair and just, for doing what is worthwhile and for preferring to do it well.-- **Abraham Maslow***



Due 4/1/22



Due 5/1/22



Due 6/1/22

“All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation — it is the Self escaping into the open.”

— E.B. White



Due 7/1/22



Due 8/1/22



Due 9/1/22



Due 10/1/22

Final Notes-Please send any programming ideas you have to us. You are the expert on doing time, and know what services we can create that can help you be balanced and productive. Our funds as I always mention are limited, and we create the most we can with the resources at our disposal. 90+% of the funds we raise are used for postage and photocopy costs. The rest is used for supplies. We are fortunate that the university pays for the students who work with the program, and the Durland Alternatives Library pays me a salary for my library work. PE as a program of the library gets the majority of the work I do at the library. This allows me the continuity of watching the program develop as the students and volunteers come and go. I am fortunate that you all write such compelling letters, stories poems etc that the volunteers keep coming back to read. The library closed for over a year during the pandemic and our new staff needs training. We are slowly beginning to get more people trained and we are catching up, but it will be a while. Be patient with us. I know we are delivering a valuable and meaningful service.

We do care about you and hope it comes through in our packets. I know our volunteers put in a lot of effort to create study units to educate and entertain you.

Here in the free world, we are still living with the uncertainty of COVID. There are some real clear divides in our society on many issues, and it is destabilizing that Americans cannot seem to rally as one on many of the major issues facing the nation. I particularly am distraught by the leadership of the Republican party these days. It seems their idea of success is the failure of any Democrats in office. That leave us all weaker. We are not enemies. We must learn to work together. I read recently that the Republican Party has taken the stance that the protest and ensuing riots at the Capitol were justified political expression. We all watched it unfold on the TV, so it is quite amazing to hear that what we saw didn't really happen. Welcome to the modern world where people will tell falsehoods and never admit mistakes, even when the cameras show otherwise. It twists everything up.

Folks can say that the other side does it too to make a false equivalence, but those paying attention can see the big lie quite clearly. As capitalism creates more wealth disparity, people start living within their own silos based on class and wealth and we seem to be getting out of touch with people who are not in our peer group. Generosity of spirit seems to be shrinking in the "I, me, mine" culture of today. The problem seems too big for any one individual to tackle. I do my best to continue to support all of you through PE and give the rest up to the creator. Most religions seem like fairy tales to me, but I believe there is something universal and spiritual we are trying to catch in the stories about creation and deities we as humans continue to create

Creating and sharing stories is at the essence of being human, and I invite you to share your stories with us through the Journal, Theme, Art and Poetry projects. I understand that your body is imprisoned, and we at PE wish to help set your mind free.

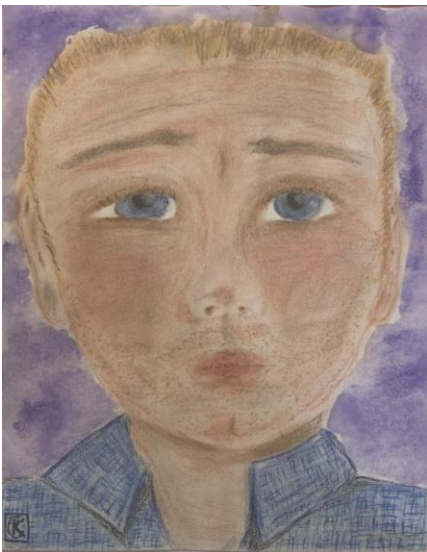
Here's hoping you have had something good to eat today and shared at least a smile with someone or a chuckle with yourself. Keeping a sense of humor through the trials of life is sometimes we can do.

I hope you enjoy seeing one another's art, poetry and writing. Much of the artwork we receive is in color but we reprint in black and white in the newsletter due to the expense of color printing. All of the newsletters are posted on our website and there the pictures retain their original color.

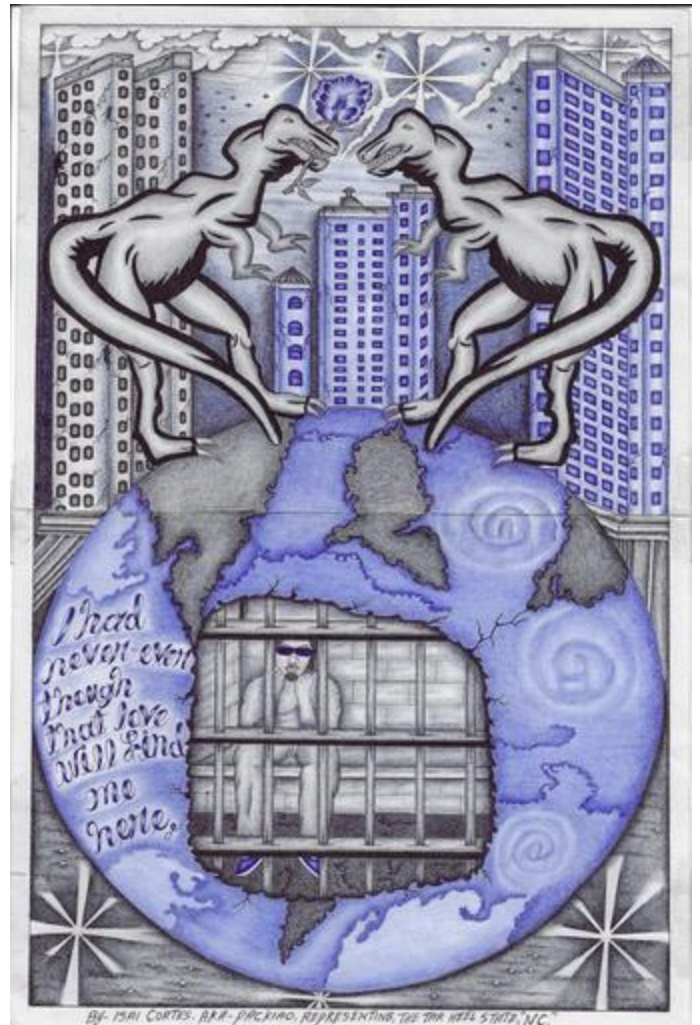
We welcome hearing from you. Your requests, your ideas and your thoughts about life certainly are fair game to share. As I mention we are often unable to reply to individuals. The best way to get mail and see more of the creations done by other members of this community is to participate in our programs.

Remember to get your sign-up sheets in before we mail this cycle's packets. Be kind to one another. We welcome your responses, and we give thanks for existence even though there

is sometimes no escaping the suffering living can bring.



Kristopher Story



Isai Cortez

Elizabeth, who ran the chapbook program just brought to my attention a writing project/contest some of you might find interesting. I have reprinted the instructions for participation below.

Truthout is proud to open submissions for the second year of the annual Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize, for work authored by people who are currently or formerly incarcerated. We will be awarding two prizes, each for an original essay of 1,500 words or less on the topic of prisons, policing or a related subject. It may be written as a first-person narrative (although that is awarded a prize of \$3,000. The essays will be published on Truthout.

This prize is in honor of Keeley Schenwar, who was a devoted mother, daughter, sister, friend, writer and advocate for incarcerated mothers. Keeley was incarcerated, on and off, over the course of 14 years. She wrote often, both poetry and prose, particularly focusing on her experiences of incarceration and addiction. Keeley spoke out

publicly about the inhumanity of the U.S. prison system and wrote about her own experience of incarceration. She wrote this essay about giving birth while incarcerated, and the brutality of being separated from her newborn baby.

Keeley died on February 4, 2020. This prize is in the spirit of Keeley's desire for the kind of world where everyone can live a good life.

Keeley was the sister of Truthout Editor-in-Chief Maya Schenwar, and was one of the inspirations for Truthout's early and sustained dedication to covering the injustices and violence of incarceration and policing. The Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize is reopened each year on the anniversary of Keeley's death to continue drawing attention to the cruel realities of the oppressive systems she struggled against and wrote about. The prize is open to people who are either currently or formerly incarcerated.

The deadline for submissions is May 1, 2022. Prizes will be announced by July 1, 2022.

Essays can be submitted in two ways:

- They can be emailed to essayprize@truthout.org. (Feel free to submit your essay either as an attachment or within the body of the email.)
- They can be mailed to:
-

Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize
PO Box 276414
Sacramento, CA, 95827



Steve Fegan

I hope you have enjoyed our expanded PE Newsletter. For the past 17 years it has been 32 pages. How fun it was to go to 48. Hopefully the funds to do this larger format will keep coming. Please consider donating to PE. A few of you have asked how to donate, and the best way is to send a check made out to CTA/PE.

CTA stands for the Center for Transformative Action. The Alternatives Library and PE are project partners with CTA. Their work provides us with our non-profit status which allows donors to get tax deductions for donating to us. It also allows us to buy supplies without paying taxes. I certainly don't want any of you to do without, to support PE, but if you have funds you can spare it helps us greatly. Many of you donate extra when you send for a book package and tell us to send books to someone who does not have the funds. It is a generous gesture, and we thank you for it.

I know these newsletters are densely packed with words and I hope it is not to much. Being frugal, I try to get as much of your writings and art on every page.

In closing I want to remind you to write legibly if you hope to have your work scanned. Also, if you send your work in on scraps of paper or all sorts of irregularly sized paper or bound it is harder to scan and our archive team may not be up to the task. I know paper can be in short supply for some of you but watching the scanner jam due to the paper is problematic for our archiving team. With the tremendous volume of mail, we get and all the paper you send our way we are unable to save the paper copies. By scanning it and putting on our website it is saved as long as the internet stay viable.

May good health and kind words and actions surround and live within you--Till next time--Gary



Robert Gray

Spring 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**

☐ **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.

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

☐ **Meditation Project**- Yes I want to join Sarah for meditation practices that help with recovery

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

☐ **Philosophy** -Come read and respond to some ideas shared by Kylie on humankind's age old quest for meaning and understanding.

☐ **Immunology and Mental Health**-Come learn ways in which biology and mental health are connected, and learn how your body's immune system protects you from disease

☐ **Learn to Write a Screenplay** - Mathew has already produced an excellent packet on this, yet he says he has learned from his first go round on the subject and has updated his Want to give it a try.

☐ **Rattle Magazine**-Send me a copy of Rattle plus Tim's insights about what a poetry editor look for when choosing submissions.

☐ **Let's Learn Spanish**- This is a reprint of Hope's Spanish packet of 2020. It was meant for beginner's and those who know a little and want to know more.

Please submit picture and word themes directly to us, no sign up needed. Please send a list of topics you'd like for the next word theme offerings

** You only need to check boxes if you want us to display your wrings on our website and to the general public*

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.

Signature: _____

Print

ADDRESS and ID #

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

Prisoner Express is funded by the Durland Alternatives Library, a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action. Additional support comes from the Cornell Public Service Center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives. A grant from the Sonya Staff Foundation has enabled Prisoner Express to expand the size of this newsletter.



A section of the collage of art, journals, poetry, and letters from the writers and artists of Prisoner Express on display outside the library at Cornell University.