

WORDS OF FIRE

Issue XII, January 2025



Writing and Art by Imprisoned Artists
Edited by Prison Books Collective

Words of Fire is a collection of writing and artwork submitted by incarcerated people. It is published by Prison Books Collective Publishing and Distribution (Durham, NC). We send books to people in prisons and jails within NC and AL (just write us a letter!). We send zines (booklets about various topics, like this) nationwide to incarcerated people.

Literature lets people dream as well as build. Our work remains vital to treat those incarcerated by the prison-industrial system as humans. We thank our volunteers, remote and in person, and everyone who sends us their art.

How to submit to Words of Fire: Prison Books Collective welcomes submissions at any time of essays, short stories, poetry (<500 words preferred), and art from people in prisons and jails. We may edit submissions for clarity, length, and comprehension. We will not publish works that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise persecute specific groups of people. We rarely publish more than two pieces by one artist. We aim to publish every 1 to 2 years.

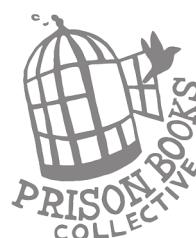
Please title your pieces if possible. Include your name, opus number, and location on each submission, preferably each page. **We default to sharing your full name and town + state in print and online. Tell us if you have other preferences, such as a pen name.**

Mail submissions to:

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PO Box 625
Carrboro, NC 27510**

Or email to:

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See also: www.PrisonBooks.info

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Count Time

By Keith D. Pertusio
Bellfonte, PA

Think of count time as inventory, he says. They count us three times a day like they would cans of soup in a supermarket. It's a business run for profit and we are the product.

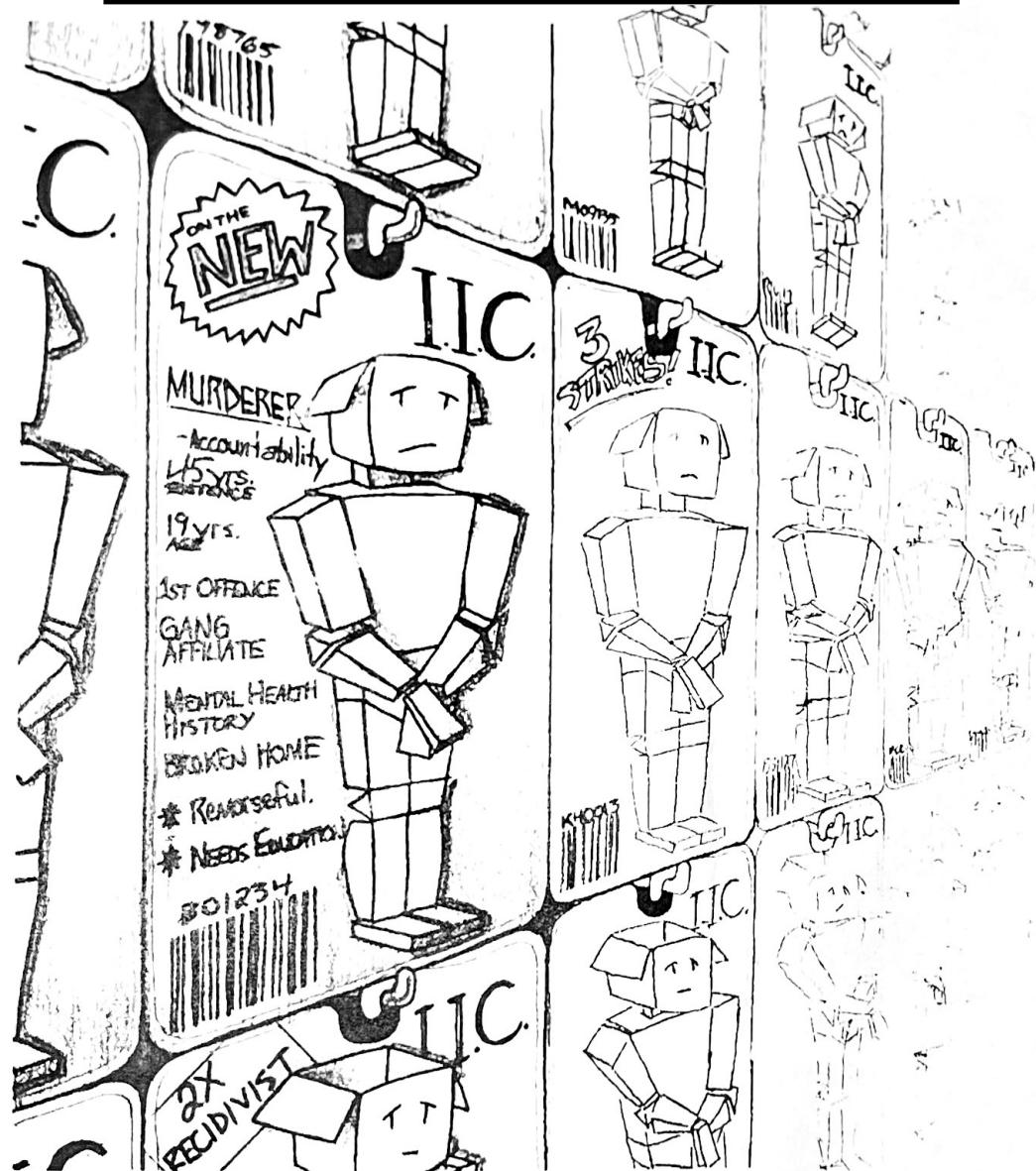
Just look around, he laughs as he gestures at the people milling around.

When inventory is low, the parole board gives out hits like candy, using the usual excuses. When inventory is too high, they have a clearance sale. And the taxpayers pay for it without question or thought.

He pauses and notices the activity of living men around him. Imagine if instead of seeing us as inventory, the prison system saw us as individuals.

What if instead of seeing us as product, they regarded us as people? maybe then this would be so much more than a human warehouse packed full of inventory. He shrugs and goes back to emptying trashcans to earn his few cents an hour, just like he did yesterday and

all the days before.



Convict Chronicles: Human Warehouse

By Leo Cardez
Dixon, IL

Raw across the Tempest (excerpts)

By Todd Leatherland, AKA REALEYEZ

Iowa Park, TX

A biodynamic moon, a typhoon swoon, and see the fluid
 Matrix of the womb, timekeeper like I'm druid
 Hoping for renewal, epic fuel for the duel, a cruel
 Procession that's unusual, the usual is Platonic, masses catatonic,
 Solid sonic, depth of the quantum revealing sages of Platonic
 It's pure precision, right, and Realeyezed sight that's bionic
 Ironic years of occult fears and Gaia's engineered tears,
 Overlapping techno gears as the end time draws near
 As it appears, the planet of the drums resonates in cyborg ears

I find this tempest is relentless, horizon in the distance; I'm within it
 The cyclone's eye I can't see, there's no eye to calm me, so Raw
 I'm crossing,

And these waves are frothing with a relentless tossing, about
 So now I shout, but all my words are drowned out, there's no
 doubt

Until a voice rings out that's soul raising. Can it save me? Maybe?
 But the storm has me crazy from stargazing, my heart's aching
 In the machine now—cryptic like Knights Templar—
 the mental instrumental
 Sacred geo traces the Arche of the hidden temple
 Ley lines relay signs that form minds,
 Striving to combine the Divine that's live inside
 But is alignment that simple? When it's Raw Across the Temple?

The revolution keeps turning, windswept but still yearning,
 So low and I'm discerning a siren call for street earnings,
 Gutta tactics and rims turning. This money it keeps burning
 Blazing round the block like the cyclone that won't stop,
 Boogibang and body rock, like these blades that still chop
 And these salty raindrops resemble circles in my crop
 A geode teardrop seeking closure, Atlas shaking shoulders
 Raw from exposure, still a soldier till it's over

Life Goes On

By Quiana Knight

Subdued, Abused, Delayed, Afraid, To Blame, Ashamed,
 no one cares to know your name.
 Feels rotten to be forgotten, adjust my mask to the pain.
 LIFE GOES ON...

Unanswered calls, love on pause, the tales they tell,
 unfathomably tall.

Unrelatable, easily Degradable, real connections missed
 most of all.
 LIFE GOES ON...

As I lay on my back, on my minuscule rack, listening to lives
 that's been
 thrown off track, left here to wither, relinquishing hope,
 only gloom seems to bloom, because a gavel was tapped.
 LIFE GOES ON...

Mistakes were made & my debt must be paid, family &
 friend disappear
 loyalty is mislaid.

Yet they can't comprehend when my soul starts to fade,
 That a simple hello dries up life's stormy rain.
 LIFE GOES ON...

You've taken my freedom, for committing a crime,
 You've taken my hope, my will has declined,
 You've taken my spirit, how costly this fine,
 You've stolen my power, but now I'm taking back what is
 MINE.

THANKFULLY, LIFE...GOES...ON.

Organic Gardening—A Beautiful Mess!

By Larry May
Vacaville, CA

The heavily fortified, razor wired fence gate opened. Trucks had dumped loads of organic soil, lumber, and gardening tools into the prison yard the day before. Now, twenty excited men, including myself, formed into work groups. We had all been looking forward to this day that seemed to take forever to arrive. The past nine months, we had been studying about permaculture (agricultural) systems. We learned that permaculture, like organic gardening, views plants as part of a whole system that requires planning, observation, and vigilance.

I was one of the first men to sign up for the "Insight Gardening Program" offered at California State Prison – Los Angeles County. I had not grown any vegetables, herbs, or flowers since I had lived in a commune, back in the 1970's. My excitement was a nostalgic blend of anticipation.

The instructors, Dave and Armando, brought their experiments planting in this desert atmosphere, at 2,710-foot elevation, while our weekly class contributed intense devotion and determination. Characteristics used in our past crimes were now used for the good of the environment. Our class divided into three groups, "the Ranchos," "Permaunit," and my group, "the Green Thumbs."

We shared ideas regarding the designing of a small, fifteen hundred square foot area. Some of us even with anti-social personalities managed to work well together. Early on, Dave and Armando brought in various flower and vegetable seed packets for us to see. Later, on another occasion, they surprised us with numerous different types of fresh flowers.

As we dissected the flowers, a friend of mine, Omar, got emotional and the room went silent. All eyes were on him as he began to speak softly and slowly. "I haven't touched a flower for twenty-nine years." The profundity of his comment was not lost on us, and most of us knew Omar had been on death row for seventeen of those years. Most of the men listening felt his heavy heart and tears clouded our sight. Other men then opened up and shared their experiences as we proceeded doing something most people around the globe take for granted. The touch and feel of the soft flower petals was quite a contrast to the concrete and steel of prison. I shook the pollen loose and found myself smiling. Colorful stems and petals decorated my desk as pollen stuck to my fingers. It was a beautiful mess. Our group grew closer and more trusting after the encounter.

All our in-class studies really help. I learn about the effects of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and what elements make for a healthy soil, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. We also learned about different watering techniques, beneficial and harmful insects, types of organic fertilizers and were given examples of various soils: sand, clay, and loam (a loose-mixture combination).

Many of us had not performed physical labor or any type of intensive exercise in a while. We each chose our work assignments from a prepared list compiled by Dave. I picked digging trenches, and once finished, I joined the wheelbarrow brigade. We mixed the existing heavy, dry, and sandy earth, with the fluffy, nutrient-filled soil brought in by the trucks. As the sun struggled to break through the clouds, we worked as a team. When one of us got tired, another man took over, no questions asked. We busted ass. There was not much talk as we worked. The time for talking was over.

cn'td...

Eventually, it was time to implement our design plans. A worldwide landscaping company that designs gardens met with us on numerous occasions, volunteering their time and expertise. A few even showed up to work alongside us. During the initial discussion, most of the visitors were women who had never seen the inside of a prison. They were apprehensive, to say the least. All they knew about prison was what they had seen on television or read in the newspapers. Some were timid, understandably nervous, and uneasy as the meeting began. Eventually, they let their guard down and we all worked as one for the common goal.

Before the volunteers left, each made a brief statement. Most had expected an uncomfortable and hostile setting. By the end of the project, they said we had changed their perception of men in prison and described us as pleasant and warm. They thanked us before departing, and I noticed it was an emotional farewell for us all.

As our project progressed, we agreed on a custom-designed, two-tiered, curved plot of land. The barren and bleak area transformed and came to life. As men walked the yard, they stopped to watch us. Maybe for them it was just prison—to us, it was a slice of heaven. We completed the project in a few days. Unfortunately, the herbs and flowers waiting in small containers to be planted were eaten by a local family of hungry rabbits, right down to their roots. I'm sure it was a treat for them, and if they could speak, they would thank us!

I was not the only one whose body was sore afterwards, but the sweat and toil was well worth it. The planting of eighty or so tiny potted plants commenced a couple of days later. Each was marked with a plastic identify-

ing stick that included rosemary, oregano, sage, coriander, marjoram, thyme, lavender, and other aromatic scents. The colorful poppies, columbine, snapdragons, alyssum, foxgloves, and other flowers would follow. Dave and Armando laid them on top of the fertile earth, in the symmetrically planned locations. We dug the holes and carefully placed them in. What a pleasure it was to feel the stalks and leaves and to see the extensive root systems as we firmly patted the soil around them. Following the cherished moment, watering was next—not too much, just the right amount to get the ground damp.

Our allotted time was up; prison rules dictated the end. Part of the class was assigned to water the garden daily, due to the fact our class only met on Fridays. That evening, I reflected on the proud work we had accomplished as a team. I walk past our garden every day, imagining how neglected the area used to look and how tranquil and beautiful it looks now.

Dave and Armando's time and effort made all this possible by successfully navigating through the prison bureaucracy and we are so grateful. Some staff members have also been supportive. Other California State Prisons have been creating gardens. A woman named Beth got the whole idea started. She flies in from time to time to check out our progress. I am sure she will be delighted by its design and beauty! Soon, we will add vegetables. The plan is to donate the anticipated bountiful harvest to the Lancaster Food Bank.

I pray our little piece of heaven on Earth will last for many years to come.

Old Friends at Life's End

Art and poem by Jonathan Crawford, Tabor City, NC

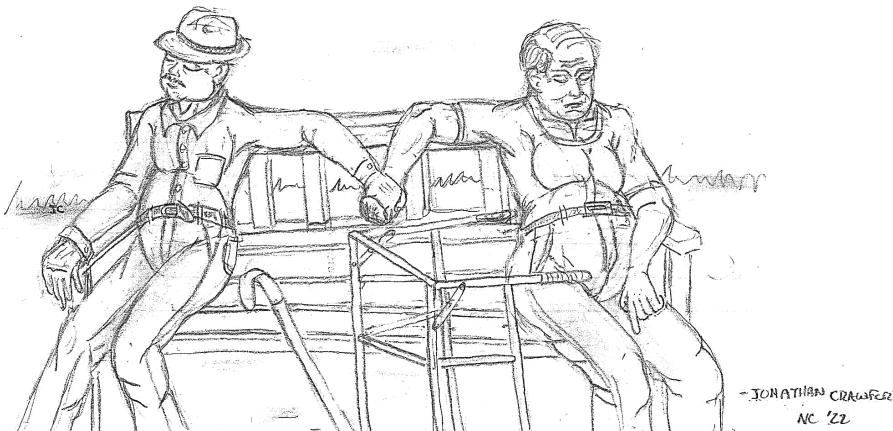
They've known each other so long;
a union of hearts and merged souls;
fiery, passionate times they shared,
When they both wore younger men's clothes.

But the times and culture forbade
a deeper expression of amour;
So they choose to forsake their flesh—
each took a wife—made love no more.

Success in marriage and business—
dutiful husbands and fathers.
Once a month they met; quietly sat
at either end of a park bench.
In silence, sitting as if strangers,
they found solace in grasping hands—
for them it had to be enough,
though they longed for what may have been.

The years swiftly consumed their youth
and swallowed all their mid-life years,
as well as their children and wives,
yet never diminished their love.

Decades came and went—devoted
to that soulful love of their hearts.
They remained old friends at life's end:
content to hold their lover's hand.



The Apple Tree

By Cameron Terhune
Soledad, CA

Once upon a Samhuinn's Eve
I strode briskly twixt tall trees
Striding deep across the forest lawn
With no heed paid, how far I'd gone
All of a sudden, I fell stumbling
What source of discord's sent me tumbling?
Wounded of pride with well scraped arms
I saw I tripped o'er a cairn

Seeking to right the now-tipped stones
I soon realized I was not alone
I felt a presence to my marrow
O woe—what fell luck, to fall upon a barrow!
From mounded earth came forth a dusty
cough
A smoky form the breeze swirled and tossed
The shape revealed that I dreaded most
This ground, host to a most angry ghost!

With seething fury it gave a wretched hiss
Its voice summoned up from the abyss
“I care not if ye be friend or fool or knave,
No one dares to dance upon my grave!
I'll blind your eyes and shred your skin,
I'll turn your insides out, and outsides in!”
The wraith lunged at me with claws extended
Last words sprang to forfend a life soon ended—

cn'td...

cn'td...

"Wo! Now, wait! T'was a mistake!
 I trod here, aye, but whilst half-awake
 I had no mind to despoil your most lovely yard
 And ware—tis bane luck to kill a bard!
 I beg forgiveness for trespass and blunder
 Yet there is something that I wonder
 If I'm to be dashed to pieces here in vain,
 Might I humbly ask my killer's name?"

"I care not for your misstep or folly,
 Only a fool treads here unwreathed in holly,
 It's no bane to me that a bard disturbs my slumber
 But a boon—I'd love to rend a soul asunder
 And as for names—" All at once she looked aghast
 Frozen minutes crept by 'til she sighed at last
 No longer did wrath hold her enspelled.
 "My name, I fear, I cannot tell."

Lain entombed, forgotten for so long
 Even knowledge of her one true name was gone
 All vestige of her rage now fled
 Under birch she slumped and hung her head
 Mumbling at the utmost depth of ghostly breath
 That she retained no memory from birth to death
 "Maiden, at the risk of your rekindled ire
 Wouldst you care to warm yourself beside a fire?"

She nodded dully and I touched twig to ember
 Hoping a hearth could help her to remember
 My life's span lay only in her doleful temperament
 But I could not abide a soul in torment
 As the blaze grew I grasped her spectral hand
 And inquired of the fruit born by my plan.
 She smiled, the first such in recorded time
 As I carefully held her eyes with mine

"I've still no whispers from so long ago,
 But I thank your efforts, even so."
 Her face did then fall in utter sorrow,
 "I fear I shan't exist upon the morrow."
 "But wait," I suggested, changing tact,
 "A new name you might like, perhaps
 'Tis a wretched thing of which no one can speak
 So, would you accept a naming gift from me?"

Her pale face shone, mirth and worry in accord
 "O bard, false hope I can ill afford
 With my heartstrings ye must not toy
 But to be named once more would bring me joy."
 "Upon my heart, I'm most sincere—here,
 Let me whisper your gift into your ear,"
 One word I spoke as I leaned close
 And no longer I sat next to a lonesome ghost

In her place now sat a lovely maid
 Eyes sparkling silver flecked with jade
 Long jet hair, corporeal as I yet more
 This beauty I now knelt before
 She kissed my cheek and bid me rise
 And we danced with starlight in our eyes
 Later wrapped in silk, a dress of moonbeams
 She bade me farewell and pleasant dreams.

"And if ever again you're vexed with the need
 To fall a-tumbling over me whilst half-asleep
 You need only stand beneath the apple tree, on
 Samhuinn's eve
 And starlight will trace the path from you to me."



Untitled
by Kit Brixton/Kristopher Storey
Lexington, KY



The Cost of Beauty
by Kit Brixton/Kristopher Storey
Lexington, KY

Lifelong Learning

By Brian Fuller, Hondo, TX

Ultimately, we are all responsible for our own education or lack thereof. I've always been secretly jealous of those who could make academics look easy. Most of us struggle. Yet it is in that struggle, where we reach common ground and attain transcendence. Because after all, if we are willing to invest the effort, we will realize the possibilities.

Never in a million years, would I have thought I'd be doing this again. You see, I'm one of the thousands upon thousands who fell through the cracks in the "system." Back when this nightmare first began, I knew I couldn't continue making decisions based on emotional reactions. So very early, I set my sights on education and outreach. They imprisoned the body...not the mind.

When we get locked up, something happens with our memories. Instead of forgetting them, they go into hyperdrive, permeating our thoughts at will. It's as if someone else has grabbed the remote. The screen inside our head changes and all we can do is smile in sweet surrender as we look in the splendor of days gone by.

I was working at a foundry before I got arrested. It was hot, hard, dangerous work. I loved every second of it. When molten metal is poured from the crucible into the mold, it looks like hot lava flowing from a volcano. I'm immediately shot back through space and time to that inquisitive five-year-old sitting on the floor flipping through pages of National Geographic.

Dad walks in and I point to the caption: "Etna is Grandnana's name!" He smiles and says, "Close enough. Maybe Etna is how they spell Edna in Italy." I keep turning pages and don't even look up to speak. "Itlee is where they make peetsa and skettee."

Autistics are visual learners. I wouldn't even find out I was on the spectrum until much later in life. Everybody always told me I was a smart boy. I was a good boy. All I knew was that the other kids picked on me. I was a little weirdo and they hated me. I didn't dare tell the grown-ups what was really going on in my brain.

Those were the days when kids were expected to be seen and not heard. To deviate from the norm would let everybody down.

Our public school system was considered top notch. Nowadays, kids can't imagine a time without computers. I simply loved those old books. The weight of them. The smell of them. Beautiful illustrations and brilliant photography. Before I could even spell words like: biology, architecture, and geography, I'd already been absorbing them subconsciously. Those sneaky teachers had duped me into study time. All the while, I thought I was doing my own thing.

The streets would bring a different kind of training. Navigating social awkwardness and shrewd business negotiations. Staying aware of one's surroundings. Reading faces and body language. Skepticism means survival when so many people are trying to swindle you. Don't even let anyone tell you that you are just being paranoid. Follow your instincts. Trust your intuition.

I entered the workforce early in life. Mentally ill does not mean mentally deficient. Compensation is a poor measure of intelligence. I've worked for some complete imbeciles. All I could do was watch silently in horror while they ran perfectly good businesses into the ground. I had the willingness to work hard. I just lacked the confidence to speak up.

Moving from job to job, broadened my skillset. Regardless of the task, I always struggled with concentration and attention span. My body would perform like a human robot, while my brain would detach itself to daydream; working out pressing problems on projects that really interested me.

I've done almost every job there is to do in this place. I'm at the age now where they don't make me work if I don't want to. However, I can still work circles around these youngsters. Our "50's" really are the new "30's." Somehow, I still feel like a teenager in my head. I'm the oldest student in both of my college courses. I'm even older than one of my professors.

cn'td...

We're currently locked down. While everybody is trying to figure out how to get their contraband through "shake-down," I am preoccupied with when we are going to attend class again. This is the first time, in roughly two years, that our renowned professor has been allowed to come and give lectures in person. I truly enjoy his energy, focus, and enthusiasm.

Out of all the things they could have confiscated, I'll miss those magazine subscriptions the most. For whatever reason, our captors seem to have such a perverse disdain for knowledge, that it borders on fear and loathing. When I noticed the cart for the library, I asked the sergeant, "Can you please donate those to the education department?" Our art, history, and literature must be preserved at all costs.

Although this relentless foolishness still makes me angry, I'm learning to channel that energy into fuel. It becomes the catalyst for change. Who knows? Maybe another renaissance will explode out of the kinetic forces locked inside of our own potential.



**Illustration from
"Black Death"**
By Michael Bankert
Hobbs, NM

"Her last thought before drifting off was a wish that she would wake up..."

Why He Killed Himself: A Prison's Hand in Suicide

By Frederick Mason
Tucson, AZ

I could have stopped him from it; I had the voice, the opportunity, and the line of sight of his cell. I could have stopped him.

But... I could not.

Terry was only 24 years old, and had only a year left in his sentence. I've known him for two years here at this prison in Tucson. A good guy, always positive, did as much as he could to rehabilitate.

But prison failed him.

When the pandemic hit, every inmate was locked in cells by the staff of the prison. While staff took lightly the COVID-19 danger by refusing to wear masks or even allow inmates to take clean showers, the virus entered through a careless officer.

The prison tightened their grip around every inmate, cutting off all items for purchase. Then they cut off all phone calls and prohibited letters. Inmates argued for help, but the Tucson prison claimed "safety and security."

Then inmates began to get sick.

Medical staff ignored the obvious signs, and dismissed them as simple colds...

Until inmates started dying.

The prison denied that inmates were dying because of COVID-19, while prohibiting phone calls, so Terry asked his Counselor:

"When can we call our loved ones?"

"I don't know," said the Counselor.

"Can I have an envelope to write my mother?"

"We'll see what we can do," the Counselor answered. Days turn into a week, and Terry asks the Unit Manager: "When can we call our loved ones?"

"I don't know," said the Unit Manager.

"Can I please have an envelope to write my mother?"

"We'll see what we can do," said the Unit Manager.

Days turn into another week. Terry asks the Lieutenant: "Lieutenant, I need to call my mom. When can we call?" "I don't know," says the Lieutenant. "But it's been 3 months! We haven't tested positive for the virus. Why can't we use the phone?" "I dunno, it's the Warden's call," says the Lieutenant. "Please, I need to call my people," pleads Terry.

Days turn into another week, and depression grips young Terry as I watch his countenance drop.

He stops eating... he stops talking.

The Psychology Department comes to talk to Terry, but offers him no answer as to why the Warden refuses to let us call our loved ones, even as we're COVID-19 negative. The Psychology Department gives Terry the same answer he's heard before... "I don't know."

The prison never tries to help inmates communicate with their loved ones, and is defiant in their stand, regardless of hundreds of pleas by inmates.

It was Christmas Day... the last day I saw Terry. I saw him prepare the noose.

I saw hope bleeding out of him.

I watched, wanting to scream, "No!"

I stood, paralyzed, watching this young man kill himself.

He pleaded with every officer, every staff member, for help, and none cared enough to lift a finger.

I lost vision, as tears flowed down my eyes, barely able to speak.

Terry died heartbroken, not able to talk to his mother.

The Tucson prison claimed he died because "he owed money."

Liar, the whole lot of them. Terry killed himself because the prison could not have cared any less for him.

I couldn't save him. I couldn't cry out to him...

I couldn't... because I'm next—

(Suicide is preventable if prison staff values lives—but sadly, they don't).

Be a Companion

By Dennis Mintun
Kuna, ID

On many days, I have to wake up at 4 a.m. to go to work at my part-time job. I am a "Companion." What that means is I sit outside of an 8x10 room, watching the person inside, and making sure they don't try to commit suicide. I earn \$14.00 a month for this job, but I don't do it for that little bit of money. In fact, when I first started, we didn't get paid anything. I started as a Companion because I got tired of hearing about another person killing themselves.

In the chapel group I run, we conducted four memorial services in less than six months for people who took their own lives. One was only serving a three-year sentence. Another had been in for a few years, and was due to be paroled in less than two months.

Every person I've known who has committed suicide had so much potential. A prime example was a transgender inmate by the name of Stephanie. Stephanie played a variety of musical instruments well, and sang like an angel. I didn't know her real well, and didn't find out the details until after she was gone. Of course, gays and transgender inmates in prison have a lot of things to deal with. Apparently, what put Stephanie over the edge was when she was told she couldn't participate in the chapel band, because she was "a sinner."

When I found out about that, being involved in chapel activities, I wanted so badly to forget my vow of "no harm", and punch a couple of band leaders in the mouth. I didn't—but I did let a few people know, in no uncertain terms, how I felt.

Since the Idaho Department of Corrections does their

best to keep suicides—and attempts—quiet, I do not know how many there have been. But, I do know of at least 10 successful attempts in just over a year.

One person's life cut short is one person too many. Being a person who has had severe bouts of depression in my lifetime—and two suicide attempts of my own when I was younger, I can relate to what some of these people are feeling. Others, though just frustrate me. Sometimes, people who seem to have it all together suddenly end their lives.

Because of this frustration, I've talked with a lot of people about it, wondering what I can do to help. By, and large, the answer comes down to one thing—companionship. In a lot of cases, a person just needs someone to talk to. Often, they just need a listening ear... a "sounding board."

I, and others I work with, have discovered that, if we let people know that we are not just "watching" while on suicide watch—but that we can also listen—those people tend to stabilize quicker, and are able to function better after they are released from watch. In fact, some will come up to us when they see us on the yard and thank us. Sometimes, they will tell us that that was all they needed—to be able to "vent."

It is sad that the prison doesn't have a program that is effective when it comes to depression or mental illness. That's where we inmates can help. Idaho Department of Corrections simply puts those they think may be suicidal in an empty room, with one of us "companions" to watch them.

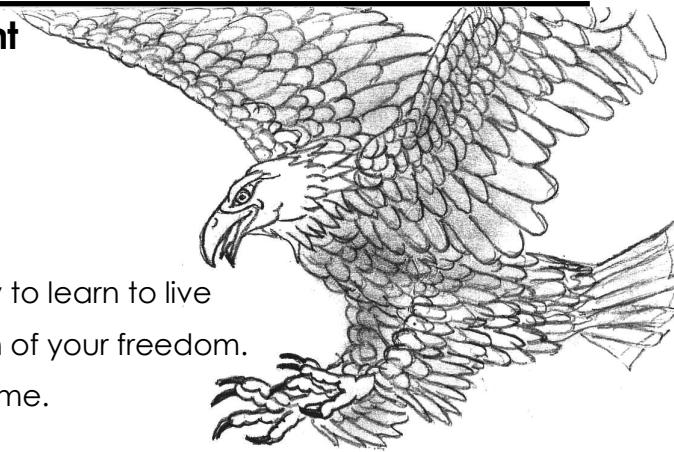
I'm convinced that, if there were more "companions"—in the broader sense of the word—there would be far fewer people who want to end their lives.

Be a companion. Let people who are having struggles know that you are there for them. More than that; let them know you care.

To Imprisonment

By Eric Perez

Blythe, CA



What a better way to learn to live
Than to be stricken of your freedom.
I committed no crime.

Okay, that's a lie.
But how am I to recover
When given no reason,
No purpose to be something more?
But what luck, what fortune!
I do have a purpose, a reason.
To help my fellow chattel
Look beyond the cowl of apathy
To the day when they will be seen
As beasts no more.



ART: The Last Defiant Act

By Jonathan Crawford
Tabor City, NC

- JONATHAN CRAWFORD
N.C. '22

Untitled (Like a Piece of Me)

By Lance Ryan Ward

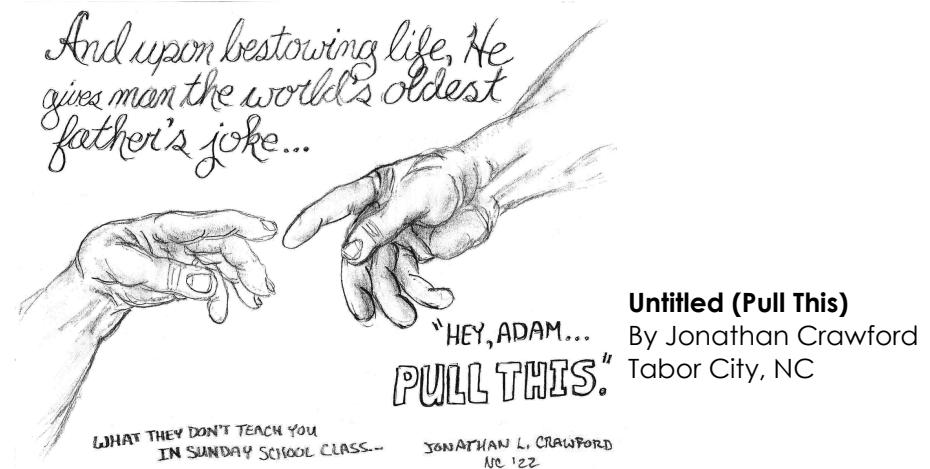
Can you believe it's been seven years since my arrest? I thought my life was over when the Judge said I'd be going to prison for eleven years. It seemed an eternity at first, but over the years I've learned that time finds a way to "fly by," even in the most unlikely of places.

I think of you often. It's hard to believe how many memories you've been a part of. It's like you're a piece of me. A vital organ or another part that's really needed, like a thumb. I'll never forget how you didn't tell the cops a thing until they made you. In the end it took a warrant but you held your tongue. I'll always respect that. And I'll never forget how that piece of shit Montoya pulled you from my hands with a smile on his face. Who would have ever guessed he was a cop? You were only six years old. It's crazy how much you've grown, how much you've changed. I watch in amazement at all the ways you apply yourself to our lives these days.

Do you remember the pictures we took in Oregon while on the Rogue River fire? There's that one where I'm laying across the stump of that big old cat-faced cedar. It was the biggest tree I ever felled. It is wider than I am tall. Or how about that video we took of Amelia singing "Lance's Song" at her house in Meridian? That was the summer I left for North Carolina fire camp. Do you remember how she changed the name to "Karli's Song" when she realized I wasn't in love with her? She freaked out and started banging her head on the bedroom wall. But I did love her. It was just different. Less needy. Less intense. Now she's gone, and all I can think about are the things I should've said like, "I'm sorry," and thoughts I should've shared with her, like that she was the best of all of us. Because she was.

What about the pictures and those videos you took of Karlianne? She asked me about the ones we posted to Facebook the other day and I got to thinking about how we danced at the house at Hidden Ranch, right after I rented it. Karli was wearing those crazy rainbow-striped high socks that I only remember seeing that one time. And how about way back when you would play The Police's song "I Can't Stand Losing You" every time Suzi would call? It's been over ten years since I last talked to her and I still miss her daily. I guess she'll always be the one that got away. She loved me so much, I can still feel it linger to this day.

It's hard, but I'm really trying to put into words how much I've missed you and that I'm a little worried about the things you remember? What memories you've kept? I'm hopeful you'll have them all saved somewhere, maybe up high in the clouds of your mind? Will you see my face and open up to tell me everything like before, like when you were younger? I want to tell you that it took me years to get over imagining that it was you tapping on my leg to let me know someone was calling; I'd reach down to grab for you, but like a phantom you weren't there. But I have a feeling we'll be together soon, so put on that new green dress Siri, my love, my beautiful... iPhone. I'm almost home!



When...Forgiveness?

By Shawn Harris
Coal Township, PA

When does a person deserve forgiveness?
Is it when he asks? Is it when he pleads?
Is it when he bleeds emotions on pages for all to read?
Is it in his deeds; his atonements, achievements, or religious creed?
Tell me when does a person deserve forgiveness?
Where is the bar, or the point, or the mark?
Is it far?
Is it near?
Is it sincere from the heart?
Is it fear that keeps them impaired in the dark?
Where we can neither talk or be heard without tears tearing apart.
When is forgiveness deserved?
After the sentence is served?
After repentance and penitence un-purged?
After the politicians votes merge, as though Forgiveness was a mere word, on a piece of paper—Print, Copy(!)
I thought forgiveness was Divine,
An innate characteristic of humankind.
I thought forgiveness was virtuous, sublime, and just,
The safety measure to tether us in togetherness!
When does a person deserve forgiveness?
Is it after he dies, alone in his guilt and regret?
Is it 20 thousand miles to the left?
Is it in the North, or the South, or the West?
When can a person expect to be forgiven,
When he is serving a life sentence in Pennsylvania prison?

Baby Buddhas

By Leo Cardez
Dixon, IL

After sentencing I was transferred to Savage-ville. There are no words big enough to describe the utter mind-warp this is your first time in a maximum security prison. Every day I was falling deeper into the well until just a slight ray of light was left. It happened early that first summer. I couldn't sleep (again!) and was trying to watch the sun rise through my small dingy window when I saw them out of the corner of my eye. But, what were they? They looked like...dogs maybe? No, that couldn't be. They were brown and furry with pot bellies standing upright, faces towards the sun, paws in a prayer position, motionless—they looked like little Buddhas meditating.

They were ginormous groundhogs which had been living inside the prison walls for generations. Inmates, for all of our faults, treated them kindly, like beloved pets until they were essentially domesticated and would eat right out of our hands. One inmate even taught them to walk the yard on a leash. Every morning there they'd be meditating or praying or whatever—whatever it was they looked so peaceful, so content, it soothed me.

During my yard sessions I would bring them snacks. They especially like peanut butter and learned to open and squeeze it from the commissary packs I was able to purchase at store. They were endlessly fascinating and brought me hours of joy—I was quickly obsessed with them.

I woke up before dawn—before the jungle sprung to life—and quietly watched them assume their sun worshiping positions for about an hour. They didn't move, I didn't either. They looked up at the sun, soon I was as well. My cellmate thought I was meditating...maybe I was.

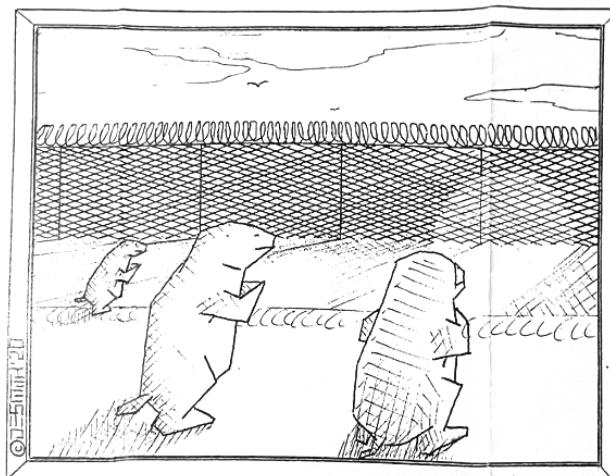
These meditation sessions made me think: these baby Buddhas are in prison too. Yet, they don't seem to mind. They live

cn'td...

here by choice; they could surely burrow under the wall at will. Is freedom subjective? Are we only as free as we believe we are? I always believed the worst thing about prison was the loss of freedom, but I was wrong; the worst thing is the feeling of loss of hope and purpose. But, that is a mental choice. Maybe I had more power than I previously believed, even in here.

A year has passed since I first saw the baby Buddhas and now, I rarely see them (don't worry, they're fine). I don't have time anymore. I have a job, I volunteer to teach Yoga, I attend faith services and educational programming; I am writing apology letters to everyone I have ever harmed. I attempt to live with purpose. To challenge myself to become the best version of myself; to return to society and be able to provide some value: to redeem myself. Living this new path consumes me and has offered me hope and belief for a better tomorrow and that hope has brought me a newfound sense of contentment, even happiness.

The universe often puts people and things in our lives in an effort to direct our lives towards our ultimate purpose. It is our job to search out these tiny messages and then follow them fearlessly. Today, I know, that is what brought my baby Buddhas into my life. Maybe I'll bring them some peanut butter today and thank them.



Spring Breaks

By Francisco Wills

Rahway, NJ

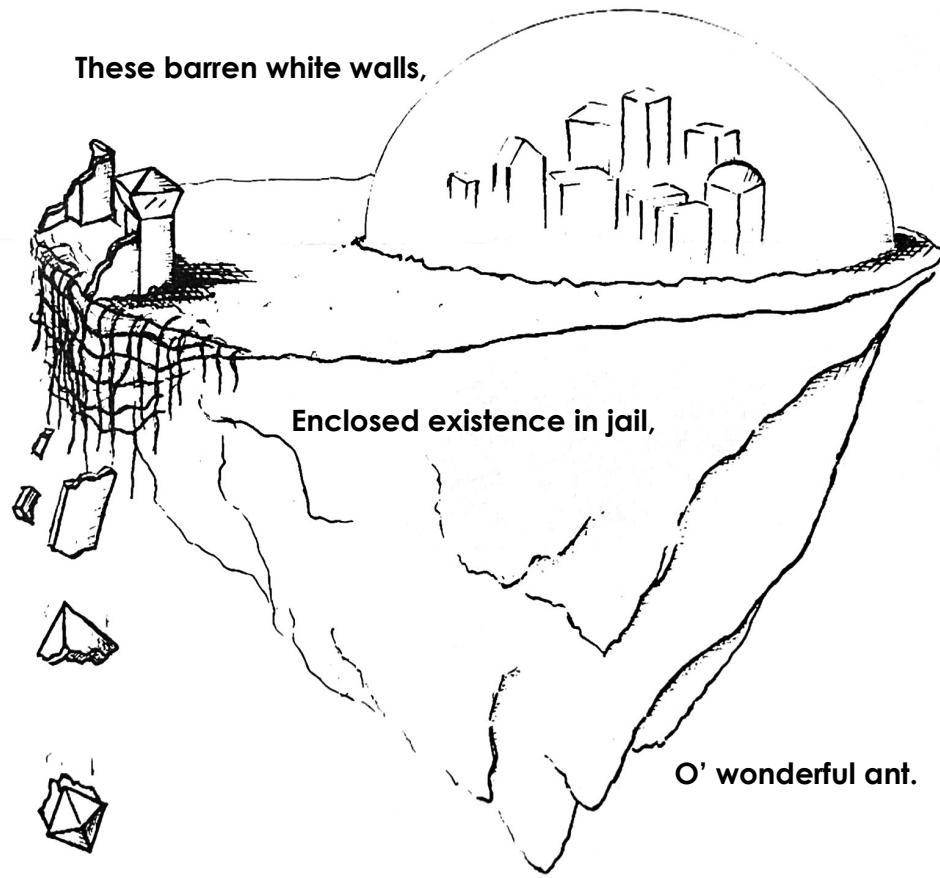
Spring breaks
the long nights,
the ermine skin of the fields,
the leafless silhouettes budding
against naked existences;

Spring breaks
the armor of seeds
the even solstices
the sleep of cicadas.

Spring breaks barren brushstrokes
in the canvas of origins. Outside, groundhogs
worship the sun. They ignore my gaze,
partially obstructed by heavy barred windows.
Spring seeps through anyway

Spring breaks
Just as the world, once again,
Comes together.

These barren white walls,



Enclosed existence in jail,

O' wonderful ant.

TEXT: Untitled Haiku by Chad Miller (Dillwyn, VA)

ART: Convict Chronicles: Living on the Fringes of Society
by Leo Cardez (Dixon, IL)



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