

Included in this issue:



Interview with Utah artist Carole Alden, an associate of Justice Arts Coalition



Excerpt from *Dog Days*, a graphic novel by Jeff Kronenfeld (author) and Russ Kazmierczak (illustrator)



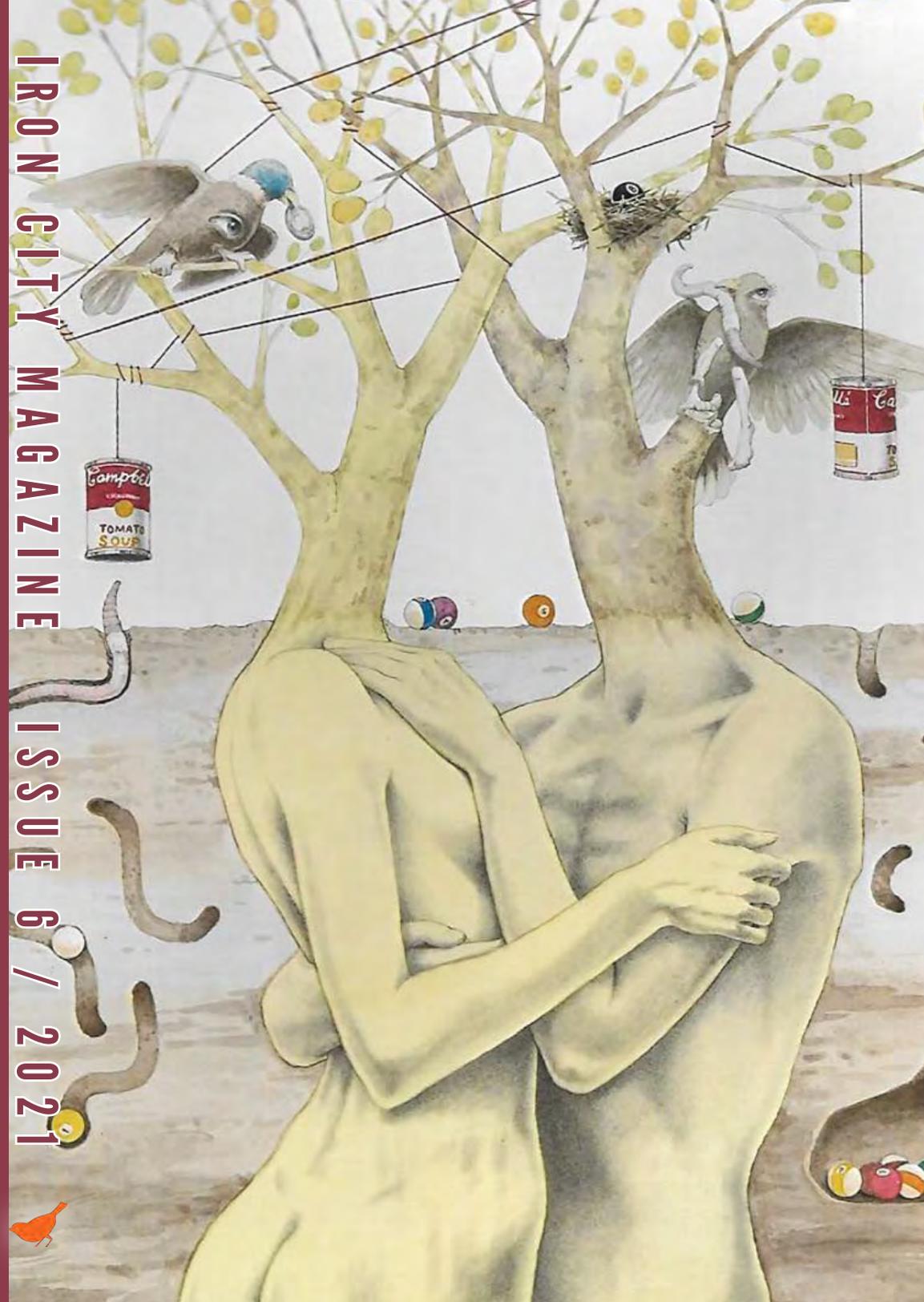
Interview with First Reform S.E.L.F.™ founder, A.C. Amin



\$15 USA / \$20 CANADA



IRON CITY MERCH



IRON CITY MAGAZINE
ISSUE 6 / 2021

**You can support
Iron City Magazine,
and it won't cost you
a penny.**



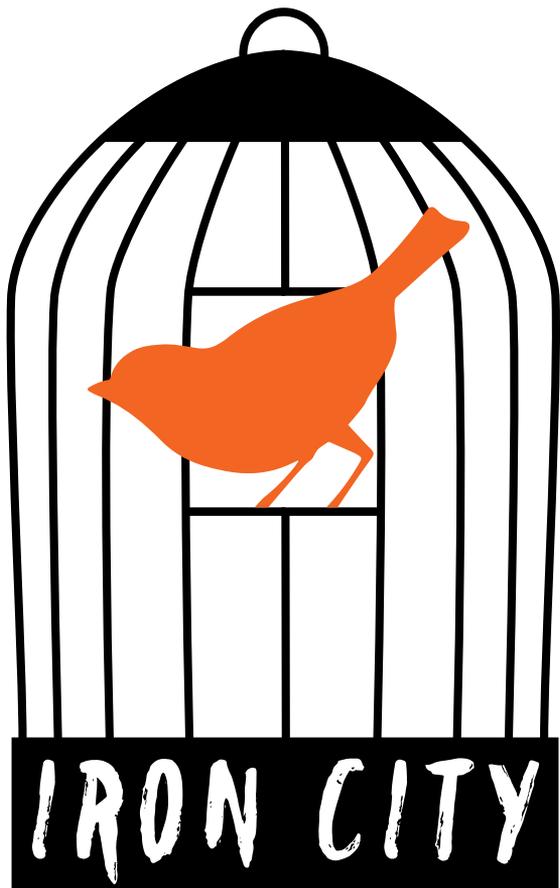
Millions of products on AmazonSmile qualify for donations. Simply go to smile.amazon.com from the web browser on your computer or mobile device, and select *Iron City Magazine* from the list of eligible charities.

Use your existing Amazon.com account, and get the exact same low prices.

Just make sure you use the smile.amazon website every time you shop. *Iron City Magazine* will receive 0.5% of every eligible transaction.

It's that easy.

Cover artwork, *Corner Pocket Call Waiting*
by Sean Fox, Texas
Watercolor and Pencil, 2021
Justice Arts Coalition
All rights revert to contributors upon publication
Copyright © 2021, *Iron City Magazine*
Printed in Arizona



M A G A Z I N E

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

ISSUE 6 / 2021

ABOUT *IRON CITY*

Iron City Magazine is an online and print magazine devoted to writing and art from the prison world. It is our hope that through this creative platform, incarcerated writers and artists find value in their stories, fuel for personal growth, and pride in their accomplishments. Prisoners are, first and foremost, people. They own stories worthy of sharing.

Too often, prisoners' potential is forgotten or overshadowed by their crimes. *Iron City Magazine* reminds us that prisoners make meaningful contributions to our communities. By validating prisoners' humanity through writing and art, we encourage a culture of understanding and transformation.

DONORS

We would like to thank AZ Humanities for the generous grant award that made the publishing of this issue possible.



STAFF

FOUNDING EDITORS

Natalie Volin and Cornelia "Corri" Wells

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Cornelia "Corri" Wells

MANAGING DIRECTOR

Jacqueline Aguilar

OPERATIONS DIRECTOR

Jessica Fletcher

FICTION EDITORS

Jeffrey Kronenfeld and Sophia McGovern

NONFICTION EDITORS

Aubrey C. Spivey, Chris Churilla, and Bunny McFadden

POETRY EDITORS

Jacqueline Balderrama and Bryan Asdel

ART DIRECTOR

Eve Sheppard

SUBMISSIONS MANAGER

Lana Marie Mousa

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Winter Roth

CONSULTANT

Jacob Friedman

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Wayside Wonders

Dear Readers,

As I stand at the door of this new volume of *Iron City Magazine*—this roadside chapel of expression and remembrance, where contributors and readers gather as one across time and space, to edify and be edified with hard-won renderings of soul—I pause...

Despite the often mindless, worldly, at times nefarious chatter all around us, some of it inevitably from our own mouths, I continue to believe that words and other arts matter. Yet I hesitate to speak.

In part because, as rarely happens, I feel I've nothing to add. My typical *modus operandi* in an instructive gathering, by dint of personality, is to sit on the edge of my seat, my hand wagging wildly above my head as I await a turn—unless I just blurt out. Today though, I feel myself a wayside wanderer pausing at the threshold.

At various times, most members of *Iron City Magazine's* all-volunteer staff were my university students. Now they are professionals from many fields—among them a licensed counselor, a high school teacher, a freelance journalist, a university instructor, an insurance company grievance analyst, a singer, a clinical professor, a pharmacist, a website designer, a marketing specialist, an event planner—all of whom for their own reasons remain committed to *Iron City's* labor of true love. This year, in a long convalescence from back surgery, I have largely lingered outside the entrance of this roadside sanctuary and watched with due respect as my former students, with astonishing craft and wisdom, planned and executed this year's pageant, the stars of which are the talented artists and writers herein gathered from the prison world.

There is a vast difference between speaking and speaking up. We are, I believe, as embryo deities or Earth's human fauna, what philosopher Kenneth Burke distinguished as the "symbol using animals," obligated to speak up, to own and share our stories, to tell our truths, however provisional our becoming. The counterpart, of course, to telling is listening, for language and other arts are communal constructs. There are times to speak and times to just pay attention.

I linger at the door to clear my head of outside thoughts, preparing myself to view and hear.

Please join me as I sidle in and reverently take a seat.

"Corri" (Cornelia) Wells

Iron City Magazine, Founding Editor and Executive Director

LETTERS FROM *IRON CITY*

Off the Endless Road

Dear Readers,

An endless road stretches before us or at least we think it is endless. We are tricked by the illusion of a sun rising and setting as if preordained. Our eyes gaze one direction into a moth trap. The more we stay on the road, an endless road, the more we narrow our journey to the asphalt labored along, to prevent straying into uneven ground. No one questions why the ground is considered uneven.

Some roads do end, however, and we always tend to linger at the edge for a second before we make a U-turn back to the start of where we thought we came from. But there is a moment where we think what would happen if I drove on without a road. Where would I go? The contributors in this issue have driven away from the asphalt as creatives must. Everyday life can become a constricted reality if we choose only one way to live and to be "free." Many this year have felt nothing will change, nothing will stop, nothing will improve. Yet a voice inside of us questions, why not?

The artwork and writing in this issue are testament to that question. Why not show the roots of my drawings? Why not find humor when humor is not around me? Why not write sadness when pretending is exhausting? Why not say the truth tamped down inside me?

These questions and more peel from this issue. And I hope each year I can have the privilege of hearing these artistic voices, choosing to go anywhere with their creative self and in turn leaving behind that narrow, impending road that never seems to end but does.

It takes courage to not make a U-turn, to keep driving, to venture off the familiar path, unafraid of who or what is out there.

We give you Issue 6.

Jacqueline Aguilar

Iron City Magazine, Managing Director

CONTENTS

POETRY

Samantha Zimbler, New York	<i>Jamie</i>	1
Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California	<i>badly drawn boy</i>	4
Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California	<i>Still Life With No Miracles</i>	6
Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California	<i>Cali-Penitentiary-fornia #4</i>	8
Melissa Marini Švigelj, California	<i>Poetic Injustice</i> <i>in the Headlines</i>	10
Melissa Marini Švigelj, California	<i>In verse operationalization</i>	11
Tony, California	<i>I Don't Dream</i>	12
A. Xander, Virginia	<i>...My Window, Redux</i>	14
Millicent A.E. Day, Utah	<i>Prison Baptism</i>	16
Jennifer Gilman, Minnesota	<i>Death Sentence</i> <i>to Healthy Touch</i>	18
Gloria D. Nixon-John and Mike John, Michigan	<i>The Cats of Castle Yard</i>	20
Cedar "Azadi" Annenkovna, Colorado	<i>The Last Elephant</i>	22
Jeff-Free, California	<i>Boxers in Heaven</i>	23
Akiva Israel, Prison Poet, California	<i>American Paradox</i> <i>& Its Place in History</i>	26
Lindsey Saya, Arizona	<i>Can I Borrow a Dollar</i>	29
Lindsey Saya, Arizona	<i>Where I'm From</i>	31
Robert Benjamin Stewart, Arizona	<i>Tombstone Angels</i>	33
Robert Benjamin Stewart, Arizona	<i>Her Eyes Were Full of Ideas</i>	35
Latasha Drax, Virginia	<i>Beyond the Wall</i>	37
Matthew Feeney, Minnesota	<i>Incarceration Firsts</i>	38
Brian Warner, California	<i>Smitty's Last Ride</i>	42
David R. Flint, Florida	<i>Clouds</i>	44
David R. Flint, Florida	<i>Black Sonnet I</i>	46
Steven Henderson	<i>nothing is going gentle</i>	47
Steven Henderson	<i>stars</i>	50

CONTENTS

GRAPHIC STORIES & COMICS

Jeff Kronenfeld, Arizona & Illustrator Russ Kazmierczak	<i>Dog Days: Excerpt from</i> <i>a Graphic Novel</i>	52
James Fox, California	<i>Death by Rehabilitation</i>	57
Pence Russell, California	<i>Dark Reflections</i>	58
Steve Romero, California	<i>Chanunka Cartoons</i>	59
Don Swartzentruber, Indiana	<i>Confession</i>	60

FICTION

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota	<i>Always & Forever</i>	65
Willie Fleming Jr., Texas	<i>Surviving Covid-19</i> <i>in Prison</i>	70
Jerry Castillo, Hobbs, New Mexico	<i>Twenty-Five to Life</i>	80
Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California	<i>Homecoming</i>	84
Spider Preston, California	<i>Unexpected Bully</i>	88
Larry Blazek, Indiana	<i>Band of the Child</i>	91
Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California	<i>EMWG-3</i>	93

NONFICTION

Elton Kelley, California	<i>Death By Covid</i>	132
B.E. The Truth, California	<i>For my Pops</i>	149
Matthew Feeney, Minnesota	<i>The Numbers Game</i>	153
Burnice Ford, Florida	<i>The Making of a Monster</i>	154
Chris Cumo, Ohio	<i>Dehumanization by Design</i>	160
Jovanda Phelps, Georgia	<i>The God of Please</i>	165
Ward Allan Yont, Arizona	<i>The Admonsihable</i> <i>Snowman</i>	168
Karen Eckman, Georgia	<i>Death and the</i> <i>Mysterious Father</i>	173
Ojore McKinnon, California	<i>Identify Yourself:</i> <i>Above all else</i>	177
Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California	<i>Priceless</i>	180
John Hovey, Washington	<i>Corona Drive-Through</i>	184
John Lockett, Arkansas	<i>There's Always Hope</i>	189
Paulette Rose Phippen, Georgia	<i>Wade in the Water</i>	193

CONTENTS

Mary Jumbelic, New York	<i>The Visit</i>	197
Seth David, Florida	<i>I Remember</i>	202
J. Terence Schelble, Arizona	<i>All My Years Start in September</i>	207
Albert B. Bell, California	<i>10,000 Year Old Hands</i>	209

INTERVIEWS

Eve Sheppard, Arizona	<i>An Interview with Carole Alden</i>	96
Jessica Fletcher, Arizona	<i>Inspiring Change: An Interview with First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] founder, A.C Amin</i>	124

ART

Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Isabella</i>	3
Marquis Walker, California	<i>Healing Art Final Project</i>	5
John Winkleman, California	<i>Hope Collage</i>	7
Travis Carter, California	<i>BFF under Stars</i>	13
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Antenas</i>	15
Valentino Amaya, California	<i>Love Has No Boundaries</i>	19
Gwen Randall, California	<i>Tiger</i>	21
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Lockdown Nation</i>	25
Evan D. Williams, New York	<i>A Free People</i>	28
Cedar "Azadi" Annenkovna, Colorado	<i>Saint Sebastian</i>	32
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Department of Corrections DOC</i>	41
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Live Fast, Die Young (RIP J.R.)</i>	43
Kevin Smith, California	<i>Surrealist Dream</i>	45
Marco Firman, California	<i>Haiku</i>	49
Jonathan Marvin, California	<i>Learning to Swim</i>	51
Miel Tshitungi, California	<i>Still Surviving</i>	62
Steve Fegan, California	<i>Covid Knight</i>	64
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Malala</i>	79
Guilherme Bergamini, Brazil	<i>Brazilian Public Jail: A Failed System</i>	82

CONTENTS

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona	<i>Mary Terese Schelble</i>	87
J. Terence Schelble, Arizona	<i>Kim Joo Suk Schelble</i>	90
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Scorpion Rockfish</i>	111
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 1</i>	112
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 2</i>	113
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 3</i>	114
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Mother and Child</i>	115
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Mermaid and Fish, Restoration of Affection</i>	116
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Mermaid and Fish</i>	117
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Horned Lizard for Salt Lake City Hogle Zoo</i>	118
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Love Bites</i>	120
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Up from the Depths</i>	121
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Heartlight</i>	122
Carole Alden, Utah	<i>Hope in the Dark</i>	123
Steve Fegan, California	<i>Pablo Picollo Sings</i>	131
Ciriaco Valencia, California	<i>Untitled 1</i>	148
J. Terence Schelble, Arizona	<i>Channel Changer</i>	152
Thomas Applegate, California	<i>The Prison State</i>	159
Travis Carter, California	<i>Tree on Mound</i>	164
Travis Carter, California	<i>Shroom Trinity</i>	172
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Hanging with Daddy</i>	176
Gary Haddock, California	<i>Labyrinth</i>	183
Valentino Amaya, California	<i>Beauty of Life</i>	188
Kazten Somari, Arizona	<i>Hosada (Japanese Woman)</i>	192
David Chehovich, California	<i>Fungi</i>	196
Travis Carter, California	<i>Catching the Red-Eye</i>	206
Ciriaco Valencia, California	<i>Untitled 3</i>	208
Brian Hindson, Texas	<i>Frog</i>	211
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana	<i>We as a Society, Series</i>	212
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana	<i>We as a Society, Series</i>	213
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana	<i>We as a Society, Series</i>	214
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana	<i>We as a Society, Series</i>	215

Jamie

Samantha Zimbler, New York

I pass the blunt to Jamie,
but she's not there.

She inhales deeply and I see
the darkness leaving her eyes,
gradually lifting with every exhale.

Out goes the bad.

We're both wearing outfits the color
of peanut shells, which non-"inmates"
are forbidden to wear in the prison.

Am I in here, too?

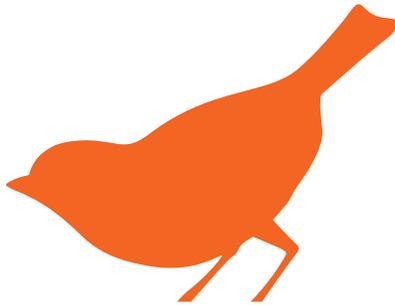
No, we're in a living room in Brooklyn,
and she's devouring the lush colors and modern
luxuries denied her for so long,
like a little girl, roots stunted from a near lifetime
in concrete.

It has been over two decades since we have seen
each other or been allowed to communicate.

I hand back her necklace I've been wearing to hold
her memory close until her release.
It isn't made of stale bread and paint bucket dregs
the way her masterpieces are,
but we agree it is still beautiful.

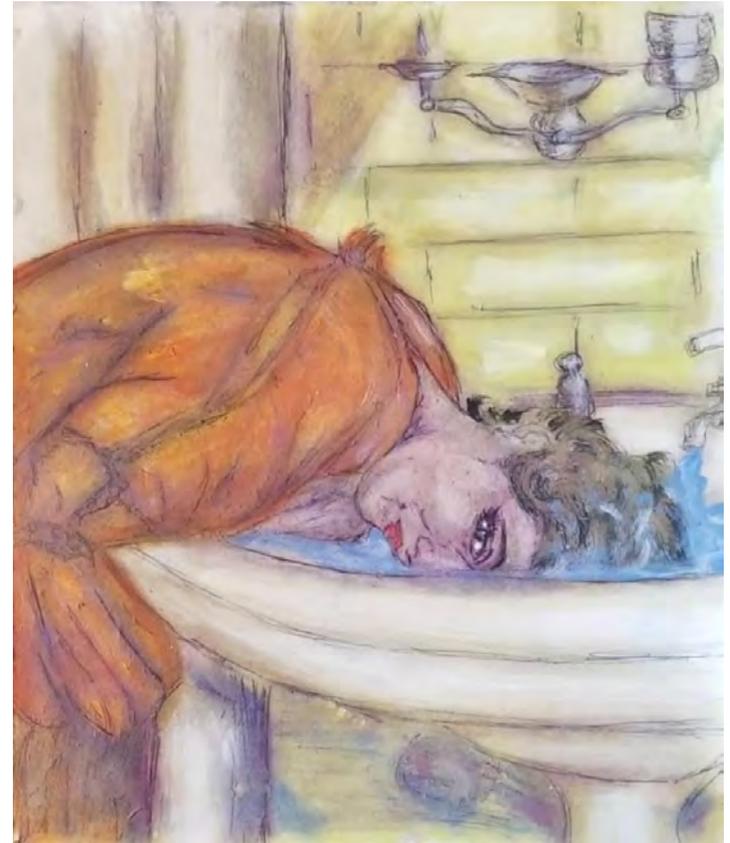
I remember her telling us in class that
since she started noticing her graying hair,
she'd collect the strands one by one
pulling them out to send in an envelope to her mother—

a way of promising herself she'd stay young,
unhardened by bars, maybe.



Maybe a kind of Dorian Gray complex.

As with her dried up paints, the grays, too,
lost their insignificance the more they appeared.
Once she feared the risk of baldness, it was time
to stop sending home these pieces of herself.



Isabella

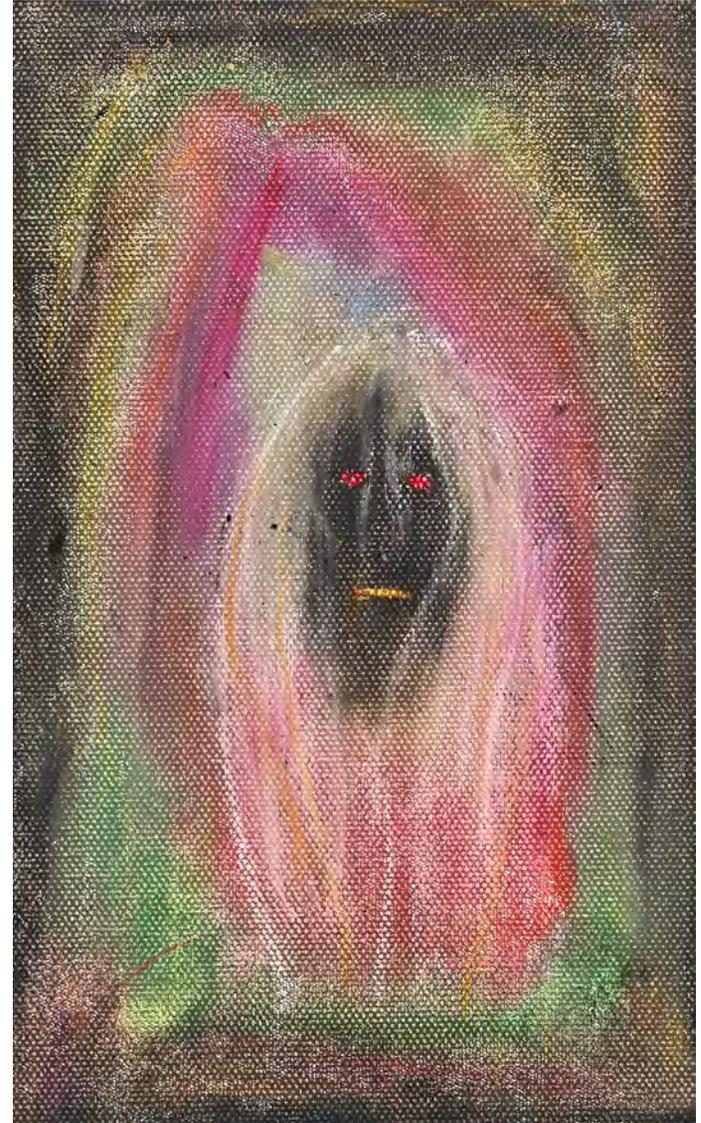
*Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Cardboard, 2019*

badly drawn boy

Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California

born into the latitude & longitude of
 manhandled by the Law
 a defenestration that brings to mind
 been flayed or mangled
 but no only the baby tossed with
 the bathwater
 a trajectory of downward years to come
 & the bad luck that follows
 freight train squeals the smoldering whoosh
 of a bigger fury booming closer
 then ruiction of rumbling smoke-stack
 lightning the meth-
 stupider scribbles of happenstance
 subliminal at the deep end of hope
 some elsewhere ambush
 maw-wide gushing fire & seasons
 of columned smoke
 found kinship with the Blue(s)
 each inhalation of ash
 churning random atoms to thunderstorm
 an affinity for disobedience the peculiar
 truth that foreshadows

a badly drawn boy



Healing Art Final Project

Marquis Walker, California

2019

Project PAINT Artwork

Photographed by Ty Creighton

Still Life With No Miracles

Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California

I worry about the fate of a world without vision, or innovation & *Progress*, the repetition of mistakes we have made, an entropy. We live as if nothing is fragile except our personal accumulation of Made in China Cheap, our scattering into Babel, the rough ranks in windswept & rumble, a velocity as if plummeted from possibility.

We slumber in sleepwalk, praying the same rituals of platitude in every tongue, a twilight consolation somewhere between gasoline and hemlock. Waiting without knowing what we're waiting for—to be astonished by someone, or something else.

Between hope, faith & the shackled Dream—just ask Lot's wife—no one starts over because no one leaves everything behind. Our grasp of truth—forever surprised what people will believe, or want to—evaporated to denial, or the amnesia or obfuscation.

The quick & the dead as fast as Superman, a freight train passing at light speed, its quantum relativity a fifteen-minute clock, an era of mottled-gray seasons filled with abrasions, conflicts & the indifference of a world lately bordering on extinction, become more imminent than impossible—a safety

that leaves no room for miracles.



Hope Collage

John Winkleman, California

Multimedia on Paper, 2017

Project PAINT Artwork

Photographed by Ty Creighton

Cali-Penitentiary-fornia #4

Henry 7. Reneau Jr., California

we running from the Law dog/ keloid scarred
 gouged
 cut to the quick
 bullet perforated
 lynched
 tasered &
 raw-dogged

/the mainstream-

media-

labeled /the meli-Nation/

as rife

with crime & desperation /the bodies piled

bad cop gunshot high

banished to slab concrete &

steel/ com-

pounded/ the Panopticon internment

to gov'ment cell-

blocks/

oozing a dire density

/how drowning

the code-switched background noise

can be

/not only distorts the view/

but what structures it/:

rewritten history

the bigotry of politics

second-class status

ownership/ control &

absolute power/ but

what matters /

cannot be buried /or

abstracted by/ a feigned legality/or /caustic indifference

/once you hear the hand chuffs go ca-chink/

&

the cash register

go ca-ching

Poetic Injustice in the Headlines

Melissa Marini Švigelj, California

The headline read
 "Racial disparities in the juvenile [in]justice system"

And a County Juvenile Court Judge said
 "it's a challenge he faces as a judge,
 'how do we **change them...**'?"¹

The headline read
 "ACLU: More than 30 juveniles transferred to troubled Cuyahoga County Jail
 is a 'grave
 concern'"²

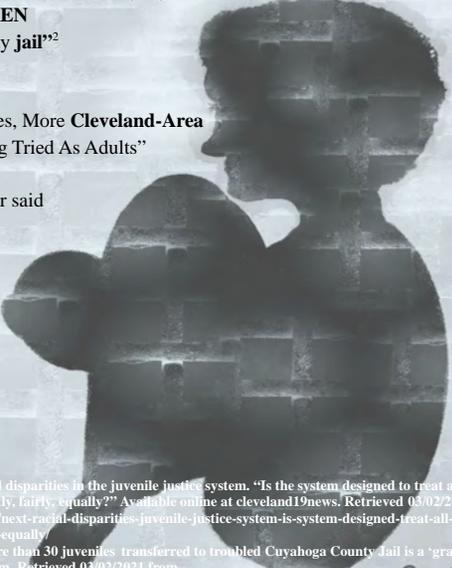
And the juvenile court's administrative judge said
 "in an interview with cleveland.com that judges carefully consider each case before
 sending **CHILDREN**
 to the county jail"²

The headline read
 "Despite Flat Crime Rates, More **Cleveland-Area**
Young People Are Being Tried As Adults"

And the prosecutor said

Nothing

O'Malley's office
 declined to comment on
 his office's use of
 bindovers.³



¹ Forward, K. (2020, December 4). Racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. "Is the system designed to treat all who enter it throughout the process consistently, fairly, equally?" Available online at cleveland19news. Retrieved 03/02/2021 from <https://www.cleveland19.com/2020/12/04/next-racial-disparities-juvenile-justice-system-is-system-designed-treat-all-who-enter-it-throughout-process-consistently-fairly-equally/>

² Ferrise, A. (2019, August 6). ACLU: More than 30 juveniles transferred to troubled Cuyahoga County Jail is a 'grave concern.' Available online at cleveland.com. Retrieved 03/02/2021 from <https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2019/08/aclu-more-than-30-juveniles-transferred-to-troubled-cuyahoga-county-jail-is-a-grave-concern.html>

³ Weill-Greenburg, E. (2019, October 22). DESPITE FLAT CRIME RATES, MORE CLEVELAND-AREA YOUNG PEOPLE ARE BEING TRIED AS ADULTS. *The Appeal*. Retrieved online 03/02/2021 from <https://theappeal.org/despite-flat-crime-rates-more-cleveland-area-young-people-are-being-tried-as-adults/>

In verse operationalization

Melissa Marini Švigelj, California

In verse operationalization

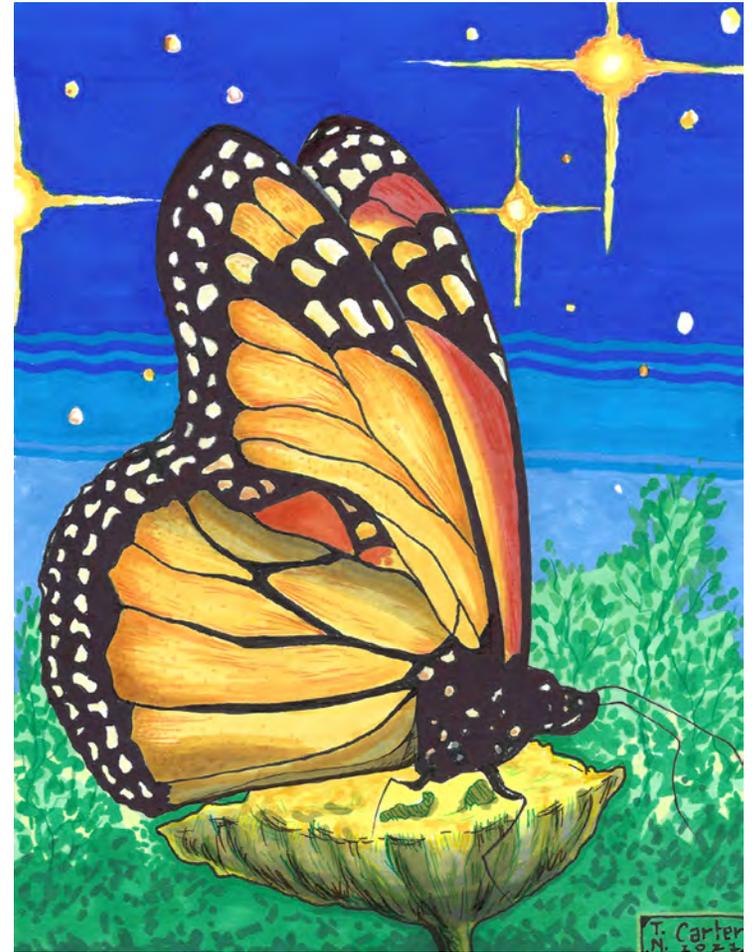
<p>A.</p> <p><u>Equation</u> child + hood =</p> <p><u>Solve</u> child + hood = childhood</p> <p><u>Childhood Variable</u> child(m^2) =</p> <p><u>Evaluate</u> m^2 = more melanin</p> <p><u>Solve</u> child(m^2) = CHILD ≠ adult ≠ adult ≠ adult ≠ adult</p>	<p>B.</p> <p><u>Childhood Variables</u> $m^2(\text{childhoods}) + \check{d} =$</p> <p><u>Evaluate</u> \check{d} = dispossessed, disinvested, divested, dechildhooded, detained m^2 = more melanin</p> <p><u>Solve</u> $m^2(\text{childhoods}) + \check{d} = \text{CHILDREN}$ ≠ adulthood ≠ adulthood ≠ adulthood ≠ adulthood = unsatisfiable falsehoods</p> <p>now find solutions</p>
---	---

Inspired by Giovanni Singleton and sidony o'neal, I wrote this poem on March 5, 2021 as part of a submission for a studio writing workshop course at UCSC. Many thanks to Alan A.P.O. for his mathematical analysis and suggestions.

I Don't Dream

Tony, California

When I close my eyes
 I don't dream...
 But see dark skies
 Storm clouds brewing in the
 distance
 On the edge waiting
 to be brought into existence
 Lightning flashes
 With dark chasms crashing
 Hurricane type winds
 blowing me
 from here-to-then
 Reality's touch...
 A future painted from
 brush-to-stroke
 Life within and Life without
 A blink away
 with no way out
 Dreams or Futures
 we will never know



BFF under Stars

Travis Carter, California

Pen on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

...My Window, Redux

A. Xander, Virginia

Time is space and space is time,
 so I am never still.
 Same window, fences, moon, and trees,
 same scrubby man-made hill,
 but this is a concrete spaceship:
 time flies past the windowsill.
 Time is space and space is time;
 I am a vector with a will.
 I see AC vents corroding.
 I watch the dead leaves mill.
 Vines creep toward the power lines.
 Red paint fades to pink until
 someone finds the time to paint it red,
 but time moves onward still.
 Eroding winds and entropy
 tear at the man-made hill.
 Time moves on and so must I,
 and so I always will;
 I am a spacetime voyager,
 a vector with a will.



Antenas

Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Cardboard, 2018

Prison Baptism

Millicent A.E. Day, Utah

No one acknowledges the power of the flow;
 they just know it is.
 To many beyond the wire or within, it appears
 as a simple necessity of life and human maintenance.
 But to the ones who dwell within, it's solace, it offers forgiveness and
 redemption.
 So you need to enter it. Time to see for yourselves
 the magic within.
 Now all that creates this great divide is olive plastic,
 a grit floor, and a spout of water.
 The ritual begins with literally the push of
 a button.
 As the cascade begins and it flows over valleys
 and curves made above,
 the world disappears and the caterwauling ceases,
 leaving behind the gentle song of cleansing; as
 you deeply listen, the process starts to work its
 true purpose.
 Suddenly a crack in the long held dam breaks, releasing
 from deep within a reflection of pasts unfolded;
 visions of failure are told, reminders of how all this
 trial came to be...
 From all this is born the next and crucial parts of the
 ritual—the forming of small, salty drips and the adding
 of these tearful ingredients to the rivers already flowing—
 blessing the process in play.
 Who knew this would happen?
 No one expected this, no one is prepared, and there is
 no stopping once involved.
It's beyond all mental power now, the immortal
 cries in anguish and will not be silenced,
 yet it must be for fear of disturbance.
 As the flow begins to ease, a new sense
 floods in—one rarely felt, or sadly, felt only by a few,
 it's completely new—
 a sense of peace and calm in the raging

storm of this new life,
 a knowing of forgiveness, love,
 and deepest serenity that only the purest kind can
 create.
 It's upon this humble unexpected altar, all
 is bared, and all is released.
 For once finished, not only is the flesh clean,
 so is the heart, and all the corners of the soul
 are dusted free.
 Just as the rain washes away the scars of
 the Earth, this ritual has made you new and
 clean; ready to grow again.
 So, enter in. It's time to witness the miracle
 beheld within.
 If you're willing, that is...
 For it's only when you're ready and open
 the healing of a Prison Baptism begins.

Death Sentence to Healthy Touch

*Jennifer Gilman, Minnesota
Justice Arts Coalition*

- What is a handshake when someone gets their diploma?
Healthy Touch
- What is a pat on the back to tell someone, "Good job"?
Healthy Touch
- What is a high-five when you cross the finish line?
Healthy Touch
- What is a brief embrace when a loved one passes away?
Healthy Touch
- What is an invisible shoulder to cry on when a friend gets a terminal diagnosis?
Cruel
- What is a double hug with my son, who I hadn't physically seen in 22 months?
A rule violation
- What is a bedside memorial for my grandma, aunt or uncle who died during my incarceration?
Out of the question
- What is braiding someone's hair in your living unit?
Segregation
- I am incarcerated due to my own actions; this I won't deny,
but I am still human. I am still alive, and
without touch some days I want to die.



Love Has No Boundaries

*Valentino Amaya, California
Acrylic on Board, 2020*

The Cats of Castle Yard

Gloria D. Nixon-John and Mike John, Michigan

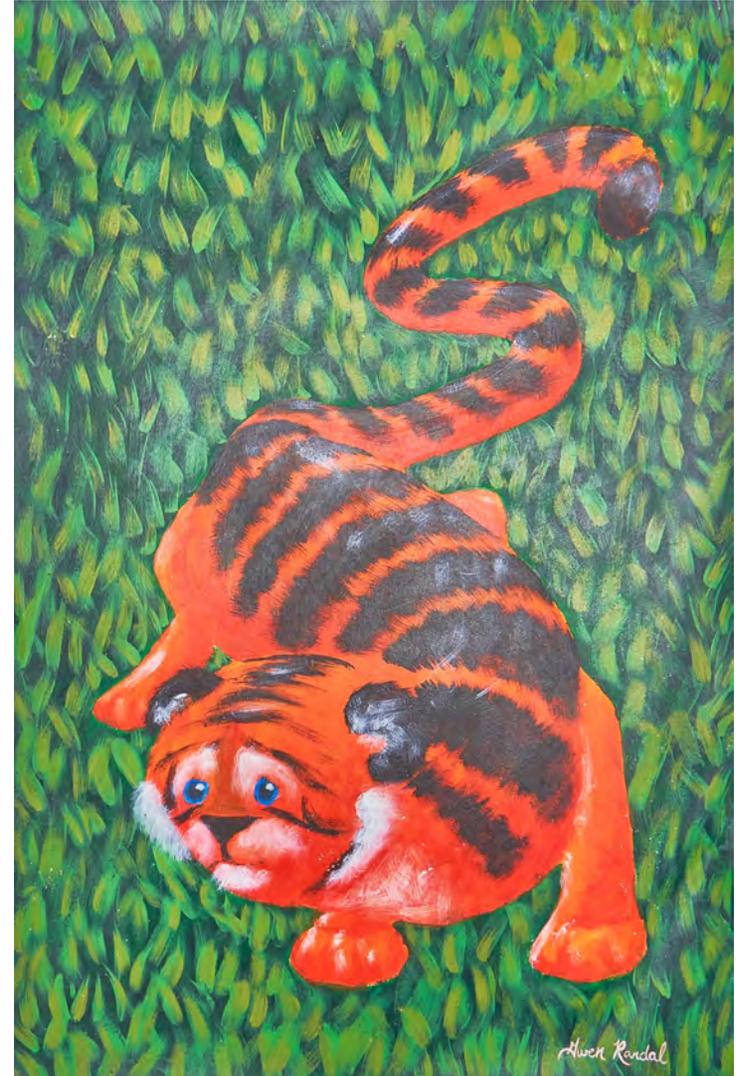
—for the inmates of the Kentucky State Penitentiary

A visitor to the prison,
I am surprised to see
dozens of them muster
into the prison yard,
some from drain pipes
others up and over the outside wall,
their soft agility defying
the rolling maze of barbed wire.

“Most are striped,” a guard informs,
“A mold cast centuries before,
a speck of gold in their eyes
from Blue Ridge foxes.”

The odd one out, mostly white
with just a blaze of black
above bottle-green eyes, paces
like an expectant father
near the riveted door until
a bell rings and the iron rolls and
the men stream out neat in khaki shirts
and trousers, a spool of pale ribbon
unwinding; they might be monks
or factory men holding to routine.

The piebald cat stretches his neck,
discriminates, not that one, not this,
the small head a metronome
until his awaited steps out
of the dark passage, drops to one knee,
touches the singular acceptance,
the arching, breaking grace.



Tiger

Gwen Randall, California

Acrylic on Paper, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

Photographed by Ty Creighton

The Last Elephant

*Cedar "Azadi" Annenkovna, Colorado
Justice Arts Coalition*

You have a beautiful smile
 remarked she
 fingering a necklace unique
 of round white beads antiqued
 I realize; it occurs to me
 her necklace is composed of human teeth!
 Yet horrifying more to contemplate
 had the ivory been obtained
 from a giant magnificent beast
 forced into extinction
 only to be seen
 a rare living artifact kept in captivity
 in a zoo by me and you
 his brethren vanquished
 for tusk and horn
 suppose then no humans remain
 Instead only jewelry made from our teeth?

Boxers in Heaven

*Jeff-Free, California
Justice Arts Coalition*

It isn't easy being different
 It isn't easy to be trapped
 It is so hard when misconceptions
 Assume we must adapt

Baritone in the base of my words
 Cheap cologne masks scents of hurt
 Dual identities, gender discrepancies
 Raw reality, social norms
 Contradictory—
 Hormones, surgery
 Name change? Nah!
 This body still has a box!
 I know it when I clothe it—
 Curves when I expose it...

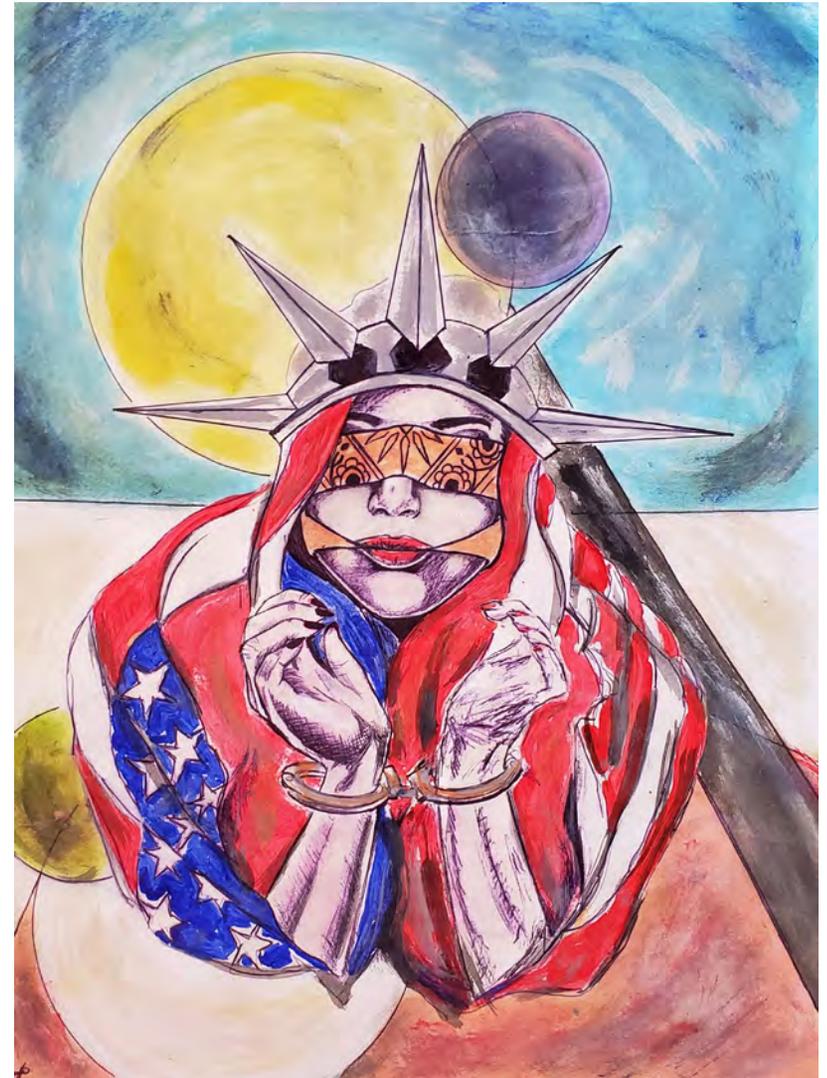
F-E-M-A-L-E
 Pray Jesus won't cringe
 Upon the sight of me
 In my compression chest binder
 Throw holy water on a
 Sin finder

Pray for redemption in my briefs
 Men sized loafers on my feet
 Ignore the handcuffs, please!
 G-A-Y
 A screwed up creator design—
 Eyes on the floor walking by
 Ya'll "hail mary" orientation goodbye—
 But then came pride:
 PRIDE!!!

I shave my head
 Counting back from seven
 Knowing one day

I'll wear boxers in Heaven
Not just the shackles
of mass incarceration
Locked in a physical cell
And mental deprivation

*Peace profounds away discrimination...
I'm coming out of this closeted nation
Feel the strength in this sensation
Being true to myself was freedom
You are my hope, my generation
For you: Appreciation!*



Lockdown Nation
Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Cardboard, 2019

American Paradox & Its Place in History

Akiva Israel, Prison Poet, California

- 1777 Body is property.
- 2020 Body is economy.
- 2020 Dark bodies: objects
to be worn out with the whip; they
are skin, the spiritual
did not need to cut in. Object to
own, exploit, breed—
- 2020 Dark bodies: numbers
to be counted out in cells; numbers
to jail, exploit, kill.
- 1777 Black brains: while economic material,
they're also the biological paradigm
for inferior humanity;
full of decreased intellect,
increased rage—undesirable race.
- 2020 Still, not just raw
but a paragon of deviant psychology:
inferior citizenry
(deadly, obtuse, diseased): criminal race.
- 1782 Quote Jefferson: an animal—the black—
whose body is property,
whose faculties
nature has made
with real distinctions;
in memory, they are equal to whites,
in reason much inferior;
and that in imagination
they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.
- 1776 Quote Jefferson: all men are created equal.

- 2020 A hoi polloi of war officers
in big cities, and for identical reasons,
killed lives in dark skin,
a threat to all skin.
- 2005 Katrina is water—
whitewashed as contained—
full of black bodies.
- 1992 King is beaten: in court, by police: the
angel burns.
- 2020 In eight minutes, fifty-seven seconds,
more dark skin, full of the same blood
—dead on live film. Minneapolis burns.
- 2020 With seven shots and handfuls of
handcuffs, to treat paralysis—
Wisconsin lights up.
- 20?? There will be more skin,
a dark canvas, one more for you,
no other beside
your own: unbreathing,
sponged in the same blood.
- 2??? There we sail in,
where there will be more skin
stitched to voices,
stuffed full of hope,
stitched to dreams,
stuffed full of energetic nightmares.
- ???? All those word-dreams
when you take them
inside, root their voices
deep beneath
everywhere America is burning.



A Free People

*Evan D. Williams, New York
Relief Print on Uncut Currency, 2018*

Can I Borrow a Dollar

Lindsey Saya, Arizona

I

Mother stole a chicken once.
Bare feet
trampling stocks
of bluestem grass, feet bloodied up.
Mother plucked that chicken clean,
while grandmother chided and swatted.
Mother's stomach
was its own language, was too loud
for no chides and no swats,
and grandmother remembered
the murmurs
of her own stomach. With watered-up eyes,
and the smacking of lips, they
ate up in that quietness.

II

On late nights,
she cries in the dark,
so daughter doesn't hear.
60-hour work weeks
on blistered feet and still
daughter spits out brand name cereal
'cause taste buds were raised on Loop Fruits.

III

Captain America ain't shit,
he thinks. Cold forties
are malt liquor heroes.
His old hands
rifle through crumpled-up
lottery tickets. He's lost
count of the papercuts.

IV

Thrift store
tennis shoes made of plastic

instead of leather make
 her toes hurt.
 Thrift store shirts
 with the missing buttons
 and renegade threads
 She yanks
 the tag off, and no one knows.

V

An ash cloud spits
 raindrops on a sign
 that reads, "Anything will help." The man
 holding it has a beard like a bird's nest. A woman watches
 the rain slide along
 his leathery skin. His eyes are stories wanting
 to be told. He stares at her, as she raises
 the car window that separates
 them.

Where I'm From

Lindsey Saya, Arizona

I am from brown faces, from brown limbs, and brown wombs.
 I am from the 9 to 5 people, the feet-ache-for-too-little-pay people,
 the seamstress-drenched-in-sweat people,
 the *one day, one day we will make it out* people,
 the *till then we'll work our calloused hands till they bleed* people.

I am from twirling yellow, green, and blue Folklorico dresses.
 I am from the smell of red chorizo and eggs simmering.
 I am from enchilada grease, from golden fried taco shells,
 from arroz con leche, sweet on my lips like milky first kisses
 are sweet on my lips.

I am from quinceañeras, where round-bellied, dark-skinned cowboys
 dance to the hum of cumbia music.
 I am from the high-pitch call of the mariachi, like a rooster's elegy,
 from lowriders driven by the homies, with their thick mustaches,
 like hairy inverted crescent moons.

I am from old, wrinkled-with-time Mexican women sitting in catholic churches,
 their bowed heads hidden behind shawls.
 I am from tortilla masa worked over and rolled out
 by my abuelita's aged, spotted hands.
 I am from generations of abuelitas, grey-eyed and grey-haired, methodical
 in their mastery of cheetah-skinned tortillas.

I am from bloody sunsets over burning deserts, from coyotes singing
 in moonlight,
 from the sun, from the earth.
 I am from my mother's tears.
 I am.



Saint Sebastian

Cedar "Azadi" Annenkovna, Colorado

Coffee on Paper Lunch Sack, 2020

Justice Arts Coalition

Tombstone Angels

Robert Benjamin Stewart, Arizona

A murder of crows
perched above
coiled razor wire
overlooks tombstone angels
gathered outside the rusted
iron gates waiting for Death.

I see him stroll slowly down
a lane of skyscraping
palm trees, every scene
in black and white—
a faded photograph
from the fifties,
when I closed myself
like a fist.

Last night, I dreamt
of my abuela's blue-beaded
rosary pulling me up
into Heaven, and all
the santitos she prayed to
for my redemption
welcomed me.

Now, in the fourth hour
this God of mine
debates with me, still
unapologetic for the life
He raffled me into.
I plead with Him
about perseverance
being easier said than
living in prison for decades—
what it does to a person.

He turns into the Morning
Star as an old truck used to haul

gun gangs out to bust rocks
 into gravestones—moves slowly
 down a lane of skyscraping
 palm trees casting
 elongated shadows on the tombstone angels,
 following close behind the one
 truck procession to Camacho Hill.

It is the same murder
 of crows perched above
 coiled razor wire.

Her Eyes Were Full of Ideas

Robert Benjamin Stewart, Arizona

We met on my way to purgatory.
 She wore licorice-thick eyeliner—
 reminding me of Cleopatra—
 fluttered her butterfly lashes,
 and cast an amorous spell
 that snaked its way into my nostrils,
 rattled me inside out.

Her eyes were full of ideas
 slithering through her mind,
 venomous things she wanted
 to inject into me,
 though I had to swear
 to keep her mysteries between
 the two of us.

Even so, the house would know,
 its ominous creaks telegraphing
 sensuous details to every room,
 the sheer curtains whispering.
 Gossipmongers to the stars,
 nothing kept secret anymore.

Her room, small and delicate,
 kept us pressed against each other—
 her breath my breath,
 her exaltation my exaltation.

I could not shed *Evening of Paris*
 from my clothes or skin.
 I trudged home shamefast
 in the dark—
 mischievous spirits wisped by
 with taunting accusations.

I unlocked my door swiftly
 and slammed it shut before

any more poisonous guilt
crept up my pant leg.

Beyond the Wall
Latasha Drax, California
Justice Arts Coalition

I found freedom in your arms
even as the armed watchman stood guard
to enforce law and order and restrictions
handed down to hold us down

I found heat in your touch
although outdoors the biting wind bruised my cheeks
and the fallen snow coated our pathway
your warmth embraced me and light escaped
from a dark place

Beyond these walls
There is hope and there is love
Beyond these walls
There is joy and there is peace
Beyond these walls
There is freedom in our future

I hear love in your heart
when the tone of your voice drops to a seductive low
and you whisper *I love you* on the telephone
As you tell me your plans which help shape my goals
all barriers are broken
our limits become limitless
because the strength of our love has the power to extend
beyond these walls

Incarceration Firsts

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota

- I remember fillin' in my first canteen sheet
Hesitant, careful, amazed and overwhelmed by the number of choices.
- I remember my first meal at Moose Lake Prison
Naively taking the Saran-wrapped display tray.
- I remember my first time in a Paddy Wagon
Scrunched in: cold, tinny and disorienting.
- I remember my first jail visit with Mom & Dad
Through glass. Telephone on wall. Mom crying.
- I remember eating my first ever Ramen Noodle in prison
Amazed at the cheap price but worried about the sodium.
- I remember my first night in jail after being arrested
I kept holding my breath, hoping to suffocate myself.
- I remember my first trip on a transport bus
Overwhelmed. Scared to death. Trying to look tough.
- I remember my first (and only) assault
Laughing as I got the shit kicked out of me by *Big Thirsty*.
- I remember the first time I was asked my OID by a guard
He laughed when I told him I didn't know it.
- I remember witnessing my first prison fight
It was in the chow hall—they got pepper spray on my Philly Cheese Steak sandwich.
- I remember the first time a staff person lied to me
The CO told me white shirts were for day-staff and dark shirts for night staff.
- I remember my first time in the main yard
Invited by a senior inmate named Jean, we walked the track and became

friends.

- I remember my first Christmas Concert in prison
I cried because it made me feel almost normal
- I remember my first day in Treatment Core Group
Naively giving advice to someone who told me to take a knee. Cannon became a friend.
- I remember the first time I got written up
It was for leaving a jelly packet on the chow hall table.
- I remember my first cellie at Moose Lake
Luna told me we had to salute the guards for evening stand-up count. I did.
- I remember my first time in the Hole
I lost 14lbs and wrote an award-winning short story about a guy in the Hole.
- I remember the community showers in the intake Block of E-House in Saint Cloud
I bird-bathed for 23 days.
- I remember my first prison visits with Mom & Dad
How blessed I felt we could actually hug each other.
- I remember the first random act of kindness I experienced in prison
Someone left loose-leaf paper on my bed, so I could write. I cried.
- I remember being nervous of my first gang-banger cellie
Till we discovered we both had Miss Shea as our kindergarten teacher.
- I remember the first time I had to shit in my cell
My poor cellie lying 2 feet away on his lower bunk.
- I remember receiving my first canteen order
Thinking it was Christmas morning. After 7 years, it still feels like that.
- I remember going on my first writ

Literally counting the breaths on the drive between prison and court. 172.

I remember the first time I ran into someone I knew from the outside.
Bob's a writer too.

I remember my first DOC meal after spending 6 months on a writ in County
Never imagined I'd miss fresh fruits and veggies so much.

I remember my first out-state transfer ride
In a ghetto-ass van: shotgun bungee-strapped to the cage, and we peed i
a coke bottle.

I remember the first prank I played in prison
A friend expecting me to palm him my cookie received a handful of garlic
butter instead.

I remember the first time I got to walk on prison yard grass
It was fresh and springy, and the air was crystal clear.

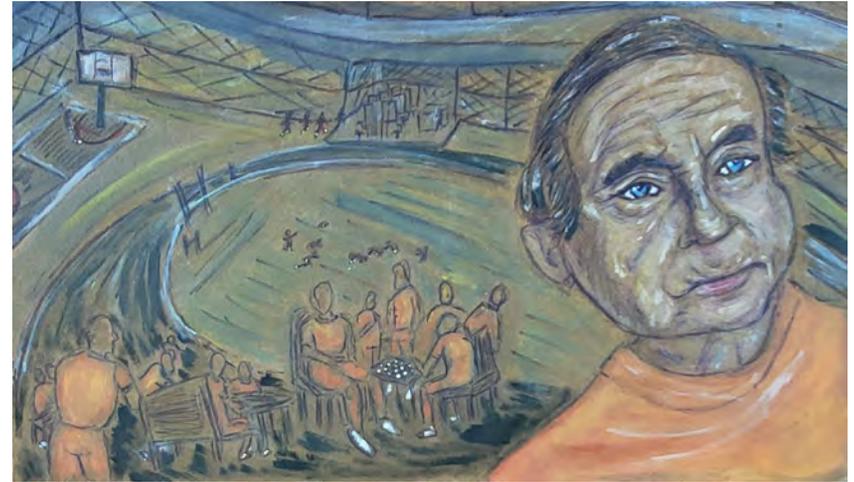
I remember my first chess game in lock-up
Spencer had a temper-tantrum when I won my second game.

I remember the first time I shaved my head in prison
Hoping it would make me look tough and mean. It didn't.

I remember receiving my first death notification in prison
Oscar was the best cat I ever had the honor of living with.

I remember the first time my dad was hospitalized while I was locked up
I felt helpless and worried I couldn't be there for him when he needed me
the most.

I remember thinking that no matter what
I don't want to ever forget again.



Department of Corrections DOC

Kazten Somari, Arizona

Acrylic on Cardboard, 2020

Smitty's Last Ride

Brian Warner, California

"Therefore do not be anxious"

Matthew 6:31

Old men gather on a prison-yard
summer's eve, silent before service,
cathedral's weathered aggregate.

Brother Smitty boarded a bus
to prison hospice,
shackled hands folded.

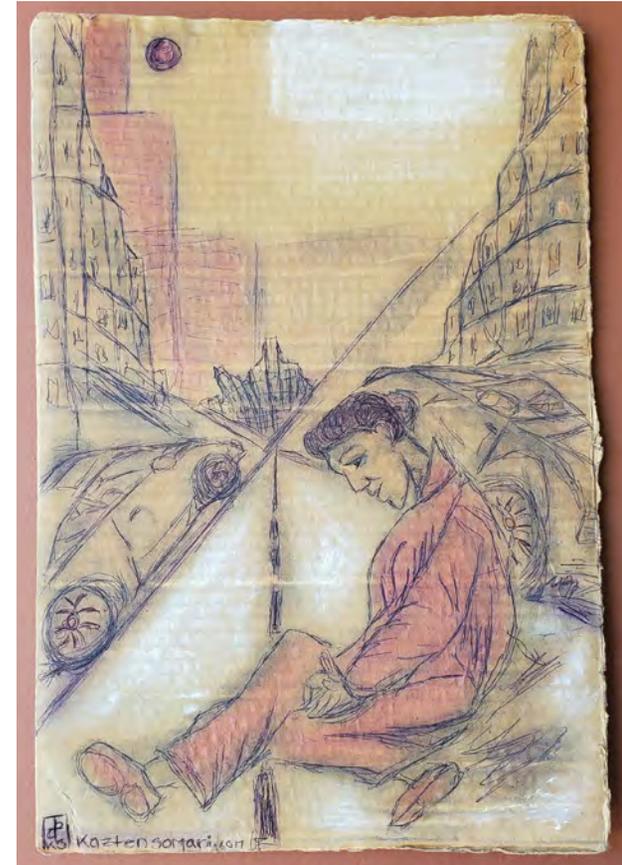
He'd preach from typed notes,
neatly folded, sharing
stories of better times;

how he celebrated purple zinnias
finer than Solomon's glory
onto Love's kitchen table,

munched garden carrots
with kids, in another life
that would be restored.

They are one less,
but the ride's not over.
Grace stands with survivors.

It's said her bus
glides zinnia filled skies
to evergreen gardens Smitty tends.



Live Fast, Die Young (RIP J.R.)

Kazten Somari, Arizona

Watercolor on Cardboard, 2020

Clouds

*David Roger Flint Junior, Florida
Justice Arts Coalition*

Broken rays of sunshine
stray the background blue,
mixed with optic visions
colored with soft hue.
Softness of white pillows,
mixed with plumes of gray,
hovering over open fields
where dreamy children lay.
Dreamy minds form shapes
of birds and butterflies.
In all, it's just a huddled mist
set on an azure sky.



Surrealist Dream

*Kevin Smith, California
Watercolor on Paper, 2019
Project PAINT Artwork*

Black Sonnet I

*David Roger Flint Junior, Florida
Justice Arts Coalition*

Darkened skies filled
with ravens in flight.
Blackened breezes,
empty shadows,
creatures of the night.
Silence and solitude,
unforeseen future
beyond closed eyes,
shaded with nowhere thoughts
of fears and sleepy lies.
Colors of deep despair,
distinct hues of sudden death
void of a starless sky.
A dying soldier's last breath.

nothing is going gentle

Steven Henderson, Arizona

what healed with ease
now scabs and scars
peach fuzz becomes parchment
chamois chafes
into cheesecloth

whippet tight tendons
kangarooed me in the sky
now I bloodhound sag
anchored to the earth

the cynical mirror
I held in timid truce
mocks my turkey waddle
and farmland furrow brow

connect-the-dot freckles
grow questionably cancerous
while scarecrow straw
sprouts in should-be-barren fields

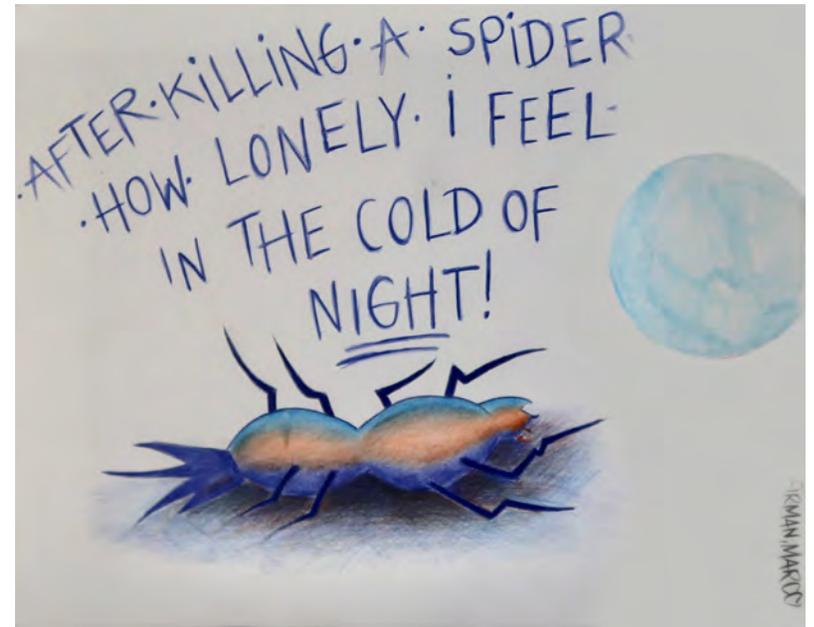
words that tangoed down
the dance floor of my tongue
slip on splintered floorboards
in my maladroitness mouth

names once smoothly sailed
from my mind's bright shores
now facts stay firmly sunk
in murky mental mud

complex concepts nestled
in supple neural nets
now brain teasers bounce and break
on my calcified cortex

my body disobeys

each command I call
nothing is going gentle
in my decay



Haiku

*Marco Firman, California
Colored Pencil on Paper, 2019
Project PAINT Artwork*

stars

Steven Henderson, Arizona

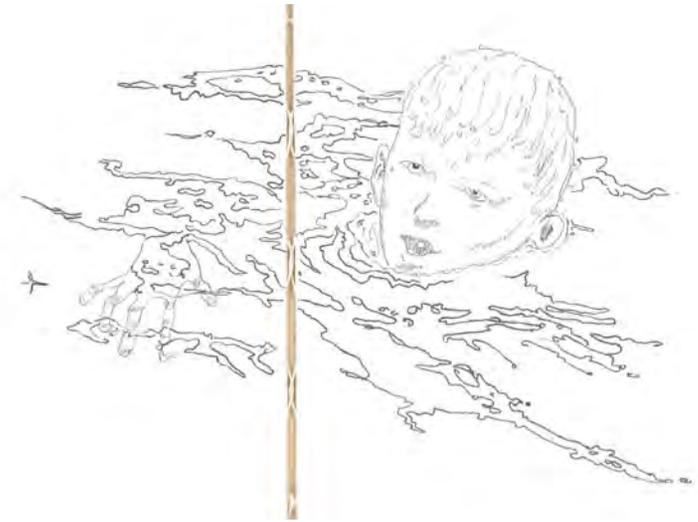
incarceration steals
 often overlooked gifts—
 I long to see stars glisten
 across the infinite depths

security light assaults
 every spiked fence top
 each crumbling concrete block
 casts a sodium vapor seine
 into heaven's seas
 snares far-off photons
 sailing through space

flood lamps fade colors
 shrink distance
 diminish depth
 the underside of sky
 crushes my chest
 pins me firmly to earth

I long to travel
 where I wish
 lie in velvet night
 on soft warm sands
 or green suede hills
 search skyward
 see stars unfold
 like God's finger
 trails smooth through
 the black surf sky
 leaving a bioluminescent wake

the silken evening glow
 softens earth's edges
 makes colors clear
 gives me space to breathe
 I swim weightless once again
 in the sky vast with stars



Learning to Swim

*Jonathan Marvin, California**Pen on Paper, 2020**Project PAINT Artwork*



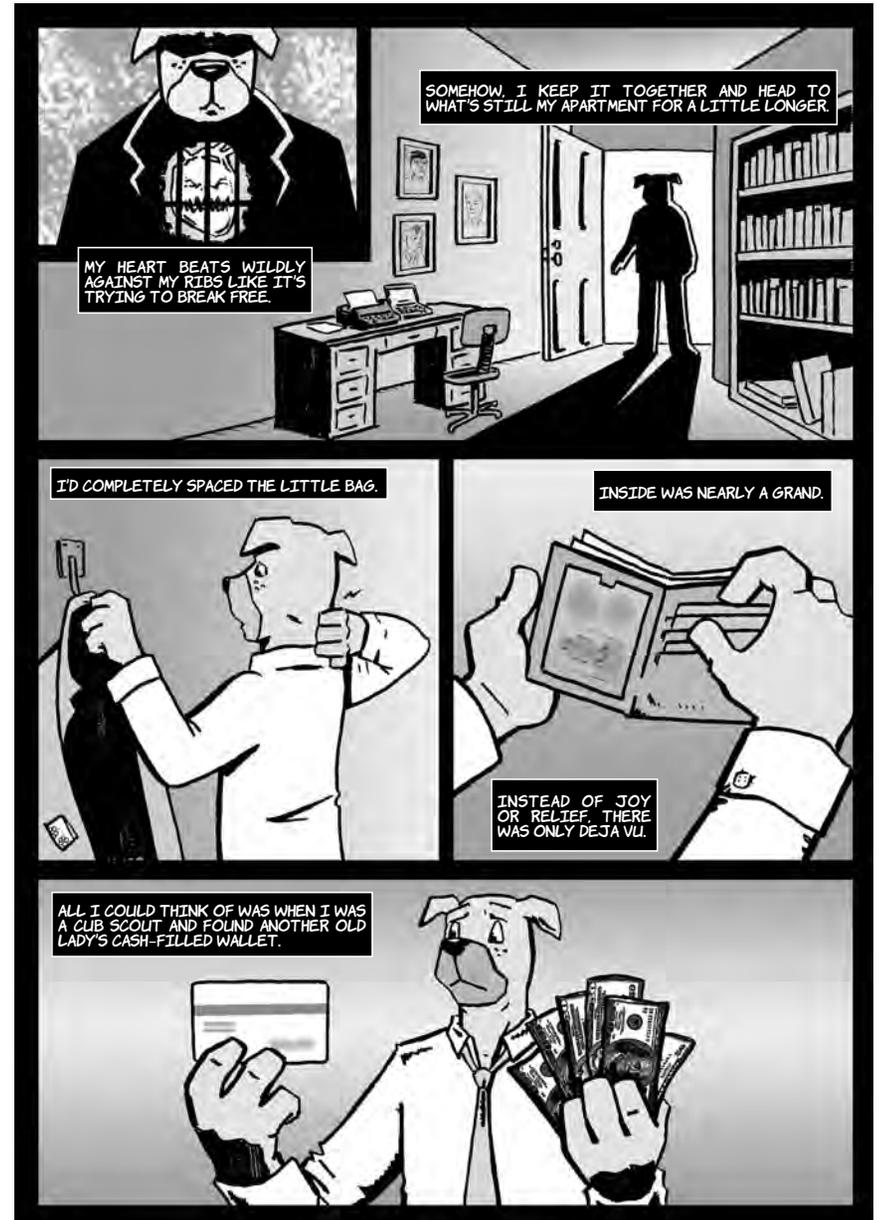
Dog Days: Excerpt from a Graphic Novel

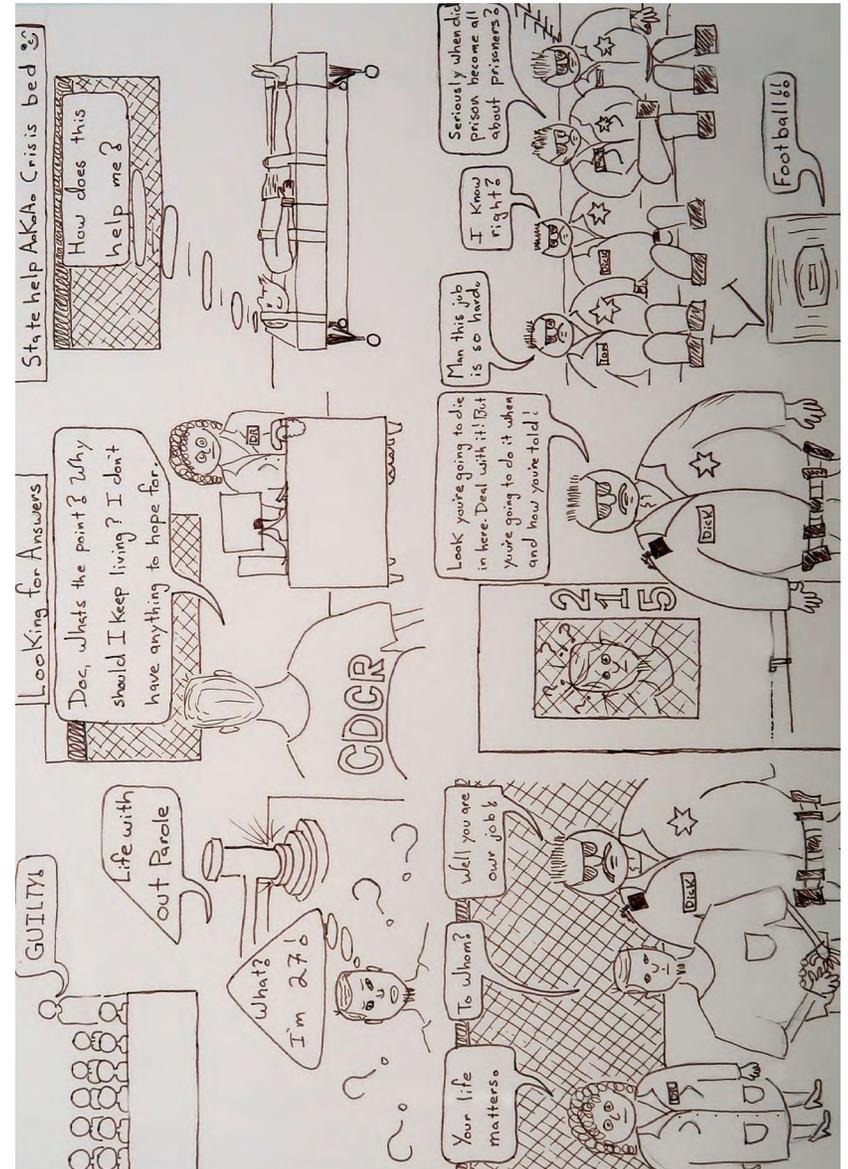
Written by Jeff Kronenfeld, Arizona

Illustrated by Russ Kazmierczak

2021







Death by Rehabilitation

James Fox, California

Pen on Paper, 2016

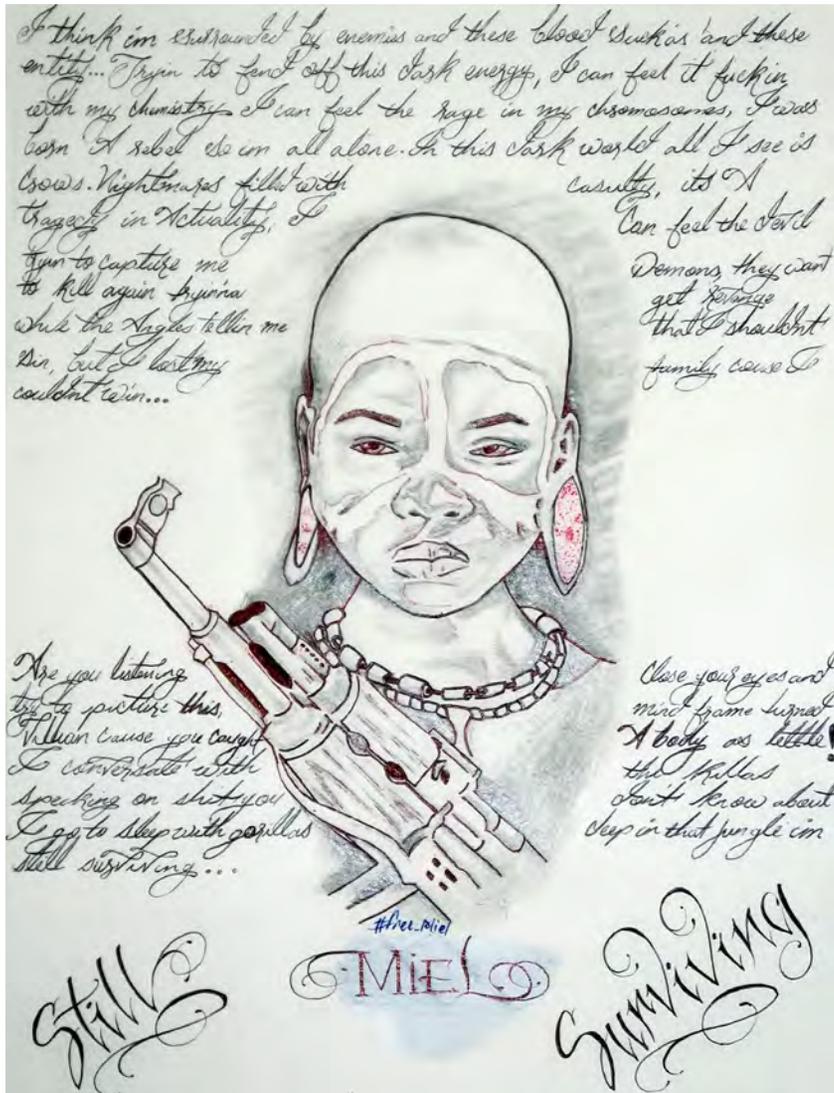
Project PAINT Artwork



Dark Reflections
 Pence Russell, California
 Colored Pencil and Pen on Paper, 2016
 Project PAINT Artwork



Chanunka
 Steve Romero, California
 Pen on Paper, 2016
 Project PAINT Artwork



Still Surviving (inspired by Bob Marley's "War")

Miel Tshitungi, California
Pen and Pencil on Paper, 2019

Project PAINT Artwork

I think i'm surrounded by enemies
and these blood suckers and these entities...

Tryin' to fend off this dark energy,
I can feel it fuckin' with my chemistry.
I can feel the rage in my chromosomes,
I was born A rebel so i'm all alone.
In this dark world all I see is crows.

Nightmares filled with casualty,
it's A tragedy in Actuality,
I can feel the devil tryin' to capture me

Demons, they want to kill again
tryin' to get revenge
while the Angels tellin' me
that I shouldn't sin,
but I lost my family
cause I couldn't win...

Are you listening?

Close your eyes
and try to picture this,
mindframe turned Villain
'cause you caught A body as little!

I conversate with the Killas
speaking on shit you don't know about

I go to sleep with gorillas
deep in that jungle
i'm still surviving...

#free_Miel

Miel

Still Surviving

[Free Transcription of "Surviving (inspired by Bob Marley's "War") by the Editors]



Covid Knight

Steve Fegan, California

Acrylic on Canvas Pad, 2020

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Always & Forever

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota

He had cried nonstop for the last six hours. That desperate, gut-wrenching type of sobbing literally pulled a muscle in his lower back. But even that bright new pain didn't put a dent in his heavy veil of desperation. Nine years in prison had taught him one thing: never show weakness. And yet here he was, a broken husk of a man, sobbing like a new fish on his first night in the joint.

He didn't care. He didn't care about anything anymore. His parents were his hope for a better life after prison, his *raison d'être*, but now they were both gone, just like that.

Fuckin' COVID.

"It wasn't fair," he thought. "I survived COVID in prison with no treatment. Me. I'm fat and got high blood pressure. How the hell do I survive with a cough when the two most important people in my world die? Might as well be three dead, 'cause now I got nothing."

He woke up several hours later, surprised he had fallen asleep. Or maybe he had passed out from emotional pain. What was the difference? He took a moment to lay on his crappy mattress and stare at the concrete ceiling, wishing with all his heart and soul that it had been nothing more than a bad dream, a terrible nightmare.

But, no, it was real. His throbbing back confirmed the worst. No fake news or media hoax. COVID was alive and his parents were dead.

Mike closed his eyes to let that new reality settle over him. His longing to hear their voices one last time made a sour knot in his tired stomach.

His mind continued to wander back to his parents. Because of the prison's quarantine restrictions, it had been over nine months since they had last been able to visit. Seemingly sympathetic, the facility had drafted a brand-new video visiting policy in June, but it ended up as a hoax. Only after jumping through the required hoops to apply for a video visit did the facility finally admit they didn't even have the infrastructure in place for video visits. The policy wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. But to the outside world, the written policy was proof itself that the institution was doing something. Video visits would have been better than nothing, but now it was too late. He had nothing.

His face grimaced as his mind flew over the inmate's usual litany of complaints. Even the illusion of control didn't exist here in prison. We're puppets. Puppets to the guards. Puppets to the courts. Annoying

puppets to the administration. And a cash cow to the local community at this draconic Moose Lake facility.

But that was old news, old pains, all those complaints seemed so trivial after the loss of the only two people in his world who showed him true unconditional love. He had done his best to love them back, but struggled with whether or not that was enough. The daily phone calls were his lifeline, that thin copper wire tethering him to a better world, one where he was still loved and cared for. Memories flowed of the family cabin, his trip to Paris with Mom, and going to work every Saturday with Dad. Dreams of Mom someday teaching him how to cook, hopes of someday learning how to be a good son, dreams that foretold of a future, were all now dashed apart on the cold rocks of reality.

They were ripped away in an instant. Well, five days must have been an infinity for his parents who were on life support, couldn't breathe, and had tubes jammed down their throats only to drown in their own fluids.

Ironically, they were the ones who had kept telling him to be careful. They were so worried about his health in prison. They were both die-hard Democrats and followed the CDC recommendations about social distancing and religiously wore masks. But, two weeks ago, Mom had made plans to shop at Nordstrom. Dad and him both challenged her decision, but she promised she would just be "in and out," insisting there was practically nobody at the Mall of America these days. Well, apparently someone had been there. Someone with the damned virus. And that someone had been more than willing to share the gift that keeps on giving, even with those who were just intending to run in and out.

He breathed in a large breath, held it for five seconds and slowly exhaled through his nostrils. His last facility had once offered a course on mindful meditation, and years of practice made it easier to take a second breath.

He didn't want to breathe anymore. His mind drifted to treasured childhood memories of beautifully prepared Rockwell-like Christmas dinners, laughing as his dad pulled him through the fresh snow on his favorite red sled, and hand-feeding cigarettes to tame deer, back before Mom quit. Family moments, gone forever. Well, the memories obviously still existed, but he had no one left to share them with, no one left to make new memories.

Images fell faster and faster, drifting like snowflakes onto a hot skillet. Silenced memories. A quiet blizzard of love, bittersweet. What once kept him walking proudly towards the front gate was gone forever. Silence.

He drew in another breath as he thought back through the many years of his daily calls home.

He was so opposed to them at first, reluctant to give the impression that he needed anybody. He was afraid to appear weak, like a sissy or a mama's boy.

But he was a Mama's boy and the hollow excuses he used to make up for missing a nightly call made him feel more alone and hollower. Pretty soon the nightly phone calls were a bona fide habit. The self-help books he constantly read stated it takes doing something 22 times in a row to create a new habit. What would the book consider a phone call every night for nine years? He called it survival.

Hope. Family. Love. Peace.

Now all gone.

Prison phone calls were automatically cut off after fifteen minutes, but who can put a timer on love? His Dad even set up a prepaid account with GTL so he could call collect. Could.

Past tense.

No more phone calls home. Ever.

That old faithful telephone number his parents had him memorize before his first day of kindergarten would soon be assigned to some stranger. Someone who would never understand or appreciate the fifty years of safety and security those ten simple digits had provided to him.

His calls from summer camp complaining about the mosquitos. Calls from his college dorm asking for more money. The very first call he made from his brand new, "car phone" (back when they were actually hard-wired into your automobile). Calls from Ireland when he was traveling for his semester abroad, and of course, the cliched "one phone call" from county jail that precipitated his current prison sentence. No matter when or where he called from, there was always somebody there to answer his calls. To respond. To listen. To love.

Oh sure, there were occasional disagreements and family feuds. He remembered when he was working for the American Red Cross in New York City after 9-11, and had wanted to visit his grandfather in Boston for Thanksgiving, but Mom forbade it because his Bumpa and Dad were fighting over something (later, neither side even remembered what).

He had explained he was neutral, like Switzerland, and that 9-11 had reminded him how short life could be and to take every opportunity to visit loved ones. When he insisted he was going to visit Grandpa, Mom accused him of taking sides and he hung up on her.

The memories flowed like the warm melted butter Mom always served with his favorite birthday dinner—jumbo gulf shrimp boiled in beer.

He just wanted to hear their voices one last time...

Holy crap! His current facility had voicemail for inmates! Only fifteen-second messages, frustratingly short, but his Mom and Dad's old messages were still on there. Their actual voices. Saved. Archived. Able to be treasured and saved for a rainy day. Like now.

He flew out of bed, ignoring the ripping pain in his back. He hurriedly shuffled out of his cell to the pod's phone bank, ignoring the daily hustle and bustle of routine prison life going on around him.

Picking up the familiar phone, he held on to hope as he heard that beloved dial tone. Years of muscle memory automatically dialed. He held his breath as he heard it ringing. Wait. That isn't right. It wouldn't ring while accessing voicemail.

Then the realization hit him—he had dialed home. His parents' home—or what used to be their home. Some habits die hard.

Frozen. Emotionally exhausted, he didn't move. Then the phone stopped ringing after only two rings and the familiar automated voice announced, "this call is from a secure facility and thank you for using GTL..."

"Michael?! Oh thank God you called—we've been so worried about you—are you okay?"

His jaw unfroze long enough to stammer, "Uhm...ya...aaaah..."

"Your Dad and I were so worried when we didn't hear from you—thank you for calling! You sound good—are you good? Is everything okay?"

Michael squeezed his eyes shut. "Mom, is this really you?"

That familiar warm laughter. "Of course it's me! I told you I'd be with you every step of the way! Would you like to talk to your father? He's right here—hold on a second. Love you—always and forever!"

"Love you too."

Michael inhaled hope. It had been a bad dream. A horrific nightmare. He felt stupid and giddy with relief at the same time. He heard the phone being passed to his Dad.

"Mikey! Got your last letter—haven't opened it yet, it's still sitting on my desk at work. I've had some deadlines, but don't worry, I won't forget...I'll get to it, I promise."

"Dad, you really okay? I had a dream you and Mom had...had COVID...and I was worried."

His dad chuckled.

"You sure you've recovered from your COVID? Still running a little fever? Maybe you better get that checked out. We're both fit as a fiddle, at least for our age! [click] Oh wait, someone's calling in, it's probably Shannon so I better take this call. Love you. Hang in there."

"Love you too, Dad."

Click.

The dial tone buzzed like a thousand angry hornets. Mike slowly replaced the receiver and sat for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

A bad dream. A really bad dream.

Hesitatingly, he picked up the receiver and slowly called the old familiar number back again, hoping against hope.

The line rang once. Twice...then the automated voice kicked him in the gut.

"I'm sorry, the number you are calling is disconnected or no longer in service. Please check the number and dial again. Thank you for using GTL."

Michael whimpered as he slowly replaced the handset back on the cold stainless steel phone. Not able to let go of the receiver, he hung on and shuddered in shock as a lone tear seeped down his weary face.

Surviving Covid-19 in Prison

Willie Fleming Jr., Texas

Chapter 1: The Invisible Virus Invades the Invisible Men's Warehouse

On January 16, 2012, I was sentenced to forty-eight years in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice for aggravated robbery and aggravated assault on a public servant. It was an excessive sentence and incredibly hard for my family to digest. I was a victim of the opioid crisis. In 2010, I was rear-ended by an eighteen-wheeler and put on opioids. Five months later, I was standing in front of a judge with a court-appointed attorney being judged for my past record, rather than offered help as a victim of an over-prescription of opioids. I was forty-nine at the time of sentencing with diabetes and a stent from a recent massive heart attack. I was soon assigned to the Wynne Unit in Huntsville, Texas. I have always been a model inmate. I have a perfect disciplinary record except for the time I was written up for going to a visit rather than to the infirmary to take insulin. This was the culture of the unit from 2014 until 2019, when we were penalized for small infractions that were really not infractions at all. The punishments included excessive use of force. Men were thrown downstairs or beaten in the infirmary while handcuffed. Officers also jumped on handcuffed inmates, broke their legs, and beat them with keys. The record shows far worse, including death from excessive use of force by correctional officers.

Most men didn't have families that cared. Most supervisors did what is called "whooping the paperwork," or making it seem as if the excessive force was justified. Men who were invisible to the outside world staged a hunger strike in 2017 and that brought journalists from a Houston newspaper to see those of us who were essential enough to command over five billion dollars of the state's budget, but not essential enough to be given an oversight committee of civilians.

When the talk of the invisible virus began, the new administration was in its second year. The K-2 epidemic had worsened the prison environment before the pandemic hit. Most of the men here were just beginning to feel that they could do time without harassment and the threat of excessive use of force by an officer "having a bad day."

The prison industrial complex—essential for license plates, car stickers, mattress factories, and the computer recovery field—became a thriving compound with positive and robust activities in college trades, academics, and religion, seven days a week. There were plays

written and produced by the inmate population, and there was family time spent through marriage seminars and other creative activities. Around March 20th, I was in the commons area, a big dayroom where all the guys watch the news, wait to be housed, or play chess. The whole dayroom was fixated on the news that Rikers Island in New York had confirmed its first COVID-19 case.

Harvey Weinstein, Michael Cohen, Paul Manafort, and even Bill Cosby were all asking for house arrest, and we all laughed knowing that in Texas there would be no early release and no empathy or sympathy. The headlines stated that the CDC was not worried about prisons because inmates couldn't catch COVID-19 while on lockdown unless someone brought it into the prison. We all started looking at the officers suspiciously.

The state penitentiary in Huntsville is an antique prison. Built in 1939, there are six-by-ten feet cells with two people in each one. On average, 120 men shower at the same time. We all use the same phone. Therefore, everybody became conscious of who was coughing. Handshakes stopped before quarantine orders were given. In late March, we were all looking at each other silently thinking, "I wonder if he is getting sick?"

During the last week of March, I was preparing for a sermon as I occasionally give lectures at the chapel. The Wednesday before my planned lecture, an officer passed out during recreation. He just fell ill and had to be taken to the infirmary on a gurney. The following Thursday, everybody who had gone to recreation and could have come in contact with that officer was quarantined. We all felt the anxiety in the air and the impact of the invisible virus invading our environment. Friday morning, April 3rd, I was going over my lecture notes with the chaplain, who had worked for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice over forty-five years. He was a good man who really wanted to help us and impact our lives.

He critiqued my lecture and asked me to explain my points, and as always, he encouraged me to spend time in the lecture talking about good moral behavior. As we talked, he uncharacteristically began to cough. He handed me papers and several books as his cough persisted. He and I joked a lot with each other, which prompted me to say, "Man, you got that lick?" He quickly responded he was fine. At the end of the day, he told me he would be back on Saturday for a special class. That was the last time I would ever see him. He died eleven days later from

COVID-19.

My regular schedule is to call my wife after every lecture or any activity. When I called her that evening, she told me that she had just given twenty-five dollars to an individual who was making masks for the inmates here at the Wynne Unit. She said President Trump and Dr. Fauci were advocating for everyone to wear masks and that Governor Greg Abbot was okay with it. She had just found out that visits were canceled and made me promise to wear a mask. I promised because my wife is my everything.

I went to my cell and talked to my creative and gifted young cellmate, a cook originally from Mexico. He said he would make us a couple of masks, and by morning, he had them made.

I left for my morning dosage of insulin with the mask on only to be stopped and asked, “Who told you to wear a mask?”

I humbly said, “The President of the United States and the Governor of Texas.”

The officers said to take it off.

I said, “I will not.”

Mind you, the officers had on masks, and when I arrived to face their supervisor, I was asked once again, “Who told you to wear a mask?”

My reply was the same. He said, “Either give me the mask or prepare to be segged,” which means to be handcuffed and locked up. I cowed and reluctantly gave up the mask. When I returned to my cell, I found that my cellmate had been robbed of his mask too. That was on Saturday morning. Sunday evening, they brought everybody masks. The officer who had taken mine wouldn’t look my way. By Sunday night, the whole block was coughing. I wondered how many people could have survived COVID-19 if they were allowed to wear masks sooner.

On April 7th, the whole unit was on medical lockdown. No one told us anything. There were no announcements, no leaflets about what was happening.

No nothing.

The only sources of info were the radio, newspaper, and mail—if you received mail. Rumors ran amok. The only thing moving faster than the rumors was the virus, which we clocked by the coughs. On April 8th, I was coughing with a fever and couldn’t smell anything. My wife was writing, but I didn’t dare worry her. Surely, it would pass. I could breathe, so I would just bear it. Besides, there wasn’t any officer or

nurse who seemed to care about anything except ignoring us.

We were all warehoused, stacked on top of each other in six-by-ten cells, given sandwiches, and otherwise avoided at all costs. The invisible virus had invaded the warehouse of America’s invisible.

Chapter 2: Seg the Sick

I was housed in cellblock A-4. It was the hardest block in the general population because it housed guys who had life without parole or who had fifty years or more. I worked daily to keep the peace, encourage the young, calm the old, and mentor young writers and artists. We all knew each other. When the guys who were feverishly sick—unable to breathe or control their bowels—had to be taken out, we started our own count.

The scoop we heard was that a few sick men were taken to Huntsville Memorial Hermann Emergency Room, but many were stabilized and placed in “Seg.” The Wynne Unit’s segregation is home to excessive use of force. The officers are notorious for doing the worst and most inhumane things. The word amongst us on the block was “I might as well take my chances right here.”

My cellmate started sneezing and coughing around the 9th or 10th of April. He noticed marks on his ankles and lost his sense of smell. It seemed everybody was feeling sick but terrified that we would become segged if we admitted we were ill.

We were on twenty-four-hour lockdown, except for taking community showers, or in my case, getting insulin injections. Every day, the news was bleaker than the day before. Between the 7th and 21st of April, melancholy was the mood. Hope was replaced with despair and the weakest amongst us were ready to quit.

Moose, a legally blind, six-two white guy claiming innocence in a sex case, was fifty-three years old with a heart condition. I always shared my coffee and hygiene products. With Moose, I also shared books.

On the 12th, he came out with his shades on and said, “You know, Willie, I was just laying there, wondering who would miss me if I left with Corona. I haven’t had a visit in four years. Everybody thinks I’m guilty. I can’t read my paperwork anymore, and I can’t do eighteen more years of this. I am going to send you the Baldacci books tonight, cause I might try to leave with Corona.”

I stopped him. “Moose, don’t do it. I got you,” I said. He broke and

cried like a baby.

We were in a long walkway wearing only drawers and masks, but the need to hug him was innate. An officer yelled, "Hey, six feet apart!"

I had never written to the psych department in my life, but I wrote to them for Moose. They came to him the next morning.

True to his word, he had sent me his collection of books. All he had to his name.

By the 14th, things were out of control. Coughing, coughing, coughing. Those who left were considered either dead or segged. Those of us who were hanging on despite the symptoms were fearful of both. At least I was. I was waiting for the opportune time to tell my wife. She asked how I was in every letter and was calling every day, talking with the head nurse, who gave her my diabetic readings and temperature check results, but I wasn't admitting to anything else.

The policy was you had to have a fever of 104 or higher to be treated, so I kept hoping and praying. On the 14th an officer announced that the chaplain had died. It was a gaping hole because so many inmates loved and admired him. Then came the news that Preacher Man had died.

Preacher Man was the happiest, most righteous Christian any of us had ever known. He had a song and scripture for every problem and reason, was never immoral or impatient, shared his last, loved everybody, and had the highest integrity. We did not handle the news well.

The block has four levels with thirty cells per level. An officer told a guy on level one that Preacher Man had died. You could hear them asking, "Did you say Preacher Man is dead?"

Further down the level, one voice after another began talking about Preacher Man.

"Who told you that? Did y'all say Preacher Man is dead?"

"Who in the 'F' started that rumor?"

"The Law just said what the Captain said."

Before long someone on row three said, "Y'all talking about Old School Preacher Man? How do you know?"

"He was sick."

Row four said, "Preacher Man died? Hell, we are all dead."

Then the bars rattled as everybody shook them, cursing the Wynne Unit. Cursing and just tripping.

Preacher Man was righteous and had served over thirty-five

years with nothing but love. After Preacher Man died, some of us noticed that none of us were being bothered by the officers. No pat-downs, shakedown, cage-rattling, name-calling, or other common dehumanizing antics. By the week of the 21st, daily cleaning had become a habit for the officers, and the most important thing to us was mail.

My wife was loyal and royal. My ten-year-old son was writing letters to me about his exercises and telling me to be strong. However, I was losing all my energy. It became a chore to walk to insulin, less than fifty yards away. All the extra vitamins, bottled water, and snacks had been eaten. Then the water pipe busted, and it was as if we had been transported from an American prison to Aleppo!

The unit was without water for five days during the height of the coronavirus. No showers, hand washing, or toilet flushing for five days.

Five days.

Five days!

Chapter 3: I Was Given a Prison Sentence, Not a Death Sentence

On the 25th, an irate inmate challenged a guard, which should have led to the inmate going to seg. For the first time ever, we witnessed all the ranks come to defuse the situation and tell the inmate to go into his cell. That's how we knew seg was full. It was filled with the sick, and the stories from those there were getting worse and worse. The first round of coronavirus testing took place on April 26th. I was one of the first to be tested because of preexisting conditions. What was encouraging was that the nurses seemed to be free-world people.

The culture of prison infirmaries is far from humane or sensible. It is quite shocking and takes a lot of getting used to. In prison, the medical staff is trained to turn you away, reduce services, and discourage you from seeking medical treatment. So, if a guy is feeling dizzy and says, "I need to see the nurse," security may take him to the nurse only for him to get cursed out. Many of the nurses are like this and typically speak in annoyed tones: "What do you want? Why are you here? Get over there. I don't have time for this. Put in a sick call. He's faking."

This culture is why there were so many deaths in Wynne. If you think I am exaggerating, please know that I had a heart attack here. Before it happened, I went and complained, and they gave me cold busters. Weeks later, I was in an ambulance going to get two new stents

placed in my heart. I am in the infirmary twice a day, every day, so it is what it is. No fluff, just facts.

Another time, a man with chronic blood pressure and heart issues complained about dizziness, and the infirmary staff turned him away because he arrived in gym shorts. When the new warden heard of this, he himself walked the inmate into the infirmary for treatment. Two days later, they began to retaliate against the sick inmate.

When the coronavirus began to spread, it overwhelmed the medical staff, who didn't believe in saving or rushing to an inmate's rescue. To understand this, you must witness the difference between how medical staff treats an inmate who's down versus an officer who's down. Three distinct things will happen for an officer who is down:

1. The response time will be eighty percent faster.
2. The medical tote bag will have all the equipment.
3. And, if needed, the officer will receive mouth to mouth. The

inmate—absolutely not.

This type of culture persisted during the coronavirus outbreak and is to blame for many of the deaths. However, the next story I will share is the most notable from that section of the prison.

Mr. Ralph Nealy died of COVID-19 in April while being housed on C-2-1-row. He was a good man. From a convict's perspective, a good man is one who owes nobody anything, doesn't bother people, and is not a hustler of other people's commissary or goods. Mr. Nealy had been locked up for forty years. He was still working. He was a waiter in the officer's mess hall. He had blood pressure issues and other ailments. He went to the infirmary on three occasions to complain about lack of energy, chest pains, and the inability to breathe.

Each time, they turned him away. All the visits to the infirmary happened inside of a week. One of the times, he was escorted by an officer. Because he worked and fed the people, it was our hope they would take care of him. But he didn't have a 104 fever. Three hours after his last visit to the infirmary, he was found dead, lying in his bunk.

He had a smile on his face. He had to have made it to heaven. At least, that was what we all thought, not just because of the smile, but because for the last forty years he never messed with anybody. I don't know what he did to get here. All I know is that Mr. Ralph Nealy was a good man. So, naturally, it got all of us thinking, "Wow, that could be me." I wasn't given a death sentence; I was given an excessive sentence because I was poor and had a record from back in the day. However, I

should have the same opportunity as Manafort. He was seventy with a bunch of crimes worth millions, but to somebody, his life mattered. He didn't even do a third of his sentence incarcerated, and I don't think he should be brought back. Instead, I and others like me should be allowed to have the same opportunity. We weren't given a death sentence, but in this environment, leaving those of us who are aged with preexisting conditions is, in fact, a death sentence.

Three days after my coronavirus test, I was placed on cellblock C-4, now dubbed the "Death Block." Every person who tested positive, other than the ones already filling seg, were moved to this block for fourteen days to quarantine. We all refused to look at each other going in. The common denominator was that we all had preexisting conditions: diabetes, COPD, or high blood pressure. Two days in, men started having heart attacks. More emergencies happened and the nurses would come in looking hopeless and tired. Depression and stress were exponentially high. My chest was heavy, breathing was labored, and the lethargic environment began to evaporate all my positivity. I recited scripture to myself, Psalms 23, the key verse: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." I got up and I started boxing and I kept boxing painfully until sweat was dripping and I was telling Corona, "I ain't quitting. I am sentenced to forty-eight years and not death. I will live and not die." That same day I got a letter from my son saying, "I love you and hope you come home soon." After that, I stayed on my feet until a change came.

The next morning, I found out about a diabetic friend of mine who didn't make it. His name was Lorke. No one predicted he would survive prison for twenty-four years. He came to prison when it was still rough, and he had a bad case that made him a target. He was five-six, quiet, straight, and couldn't fight a lick—but Lorke had done twenty-four years and three months on a twenty-five-year sentence without ever getting an infraction. We took insulin at the same time, and when Lorke found out that I was a published author, he wanted to read my books. Thus, we began a five-year association. Over that time, I watched as his body broke down. We laughed about being the only heart attack survivors on the unit. He always tried to keep his sugar levels under a hundred. Then, he got prostate cancer. A year later, he was diagnosed with a degenerative back condition that put him on a cane and within twenty feet from the infirmary. Hearing about Lorke made me realize that somebody was killing us, and it couldn't be blamed on Corona.

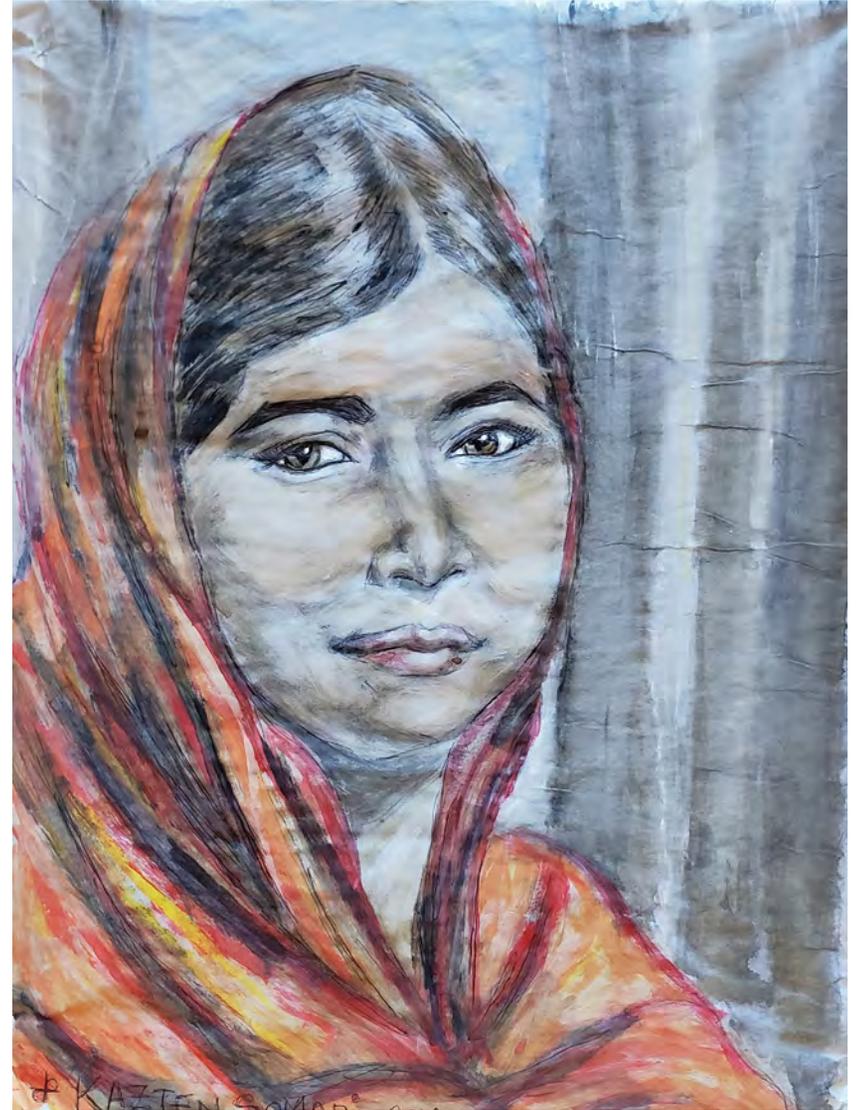
Even at sixty-eight years old, with twenty-four years served on a twenty-five year sentence, cancer, three stents, a degenerative back, and a perfect disciplinary record, he still couldn't go home.

I thought about Lorke while I was getting my insulin today. He was invisible to the world, but to us, he must matter. If he and those like him don't matter, then I too won't matter. Again, the warehouse will be forgotten and left to rot by an invisible lord that doesn't believe we matter.

To date, the official number of deaths for this unit is sixteen. However, the second wave is just beginning. On July 1st, when this was first written, people were contracting the virus all over again. As I close, I offer potential solutions to this problem. Put people in tents on the outside of the units. Increase the perimeter security and make one-man cells. Test, test, test—and sooner.

Talk to us and put out communiqués about what's really happening. Quit treating us like we don't have a right to know. How can the nurses and the security be essential, but we are not? We are vulnerable and at your mercy. Yes, we made mistakes, but we too are Americans. The criminal justice system will never change until the hopelessness and despair we feel are addressed—especially when the invisible enemy respects no one, inside or outside.

If you are reading this and have a loved one locked up, show love, compassion, and human kindness during this pandemic.



Malala

*Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Cardboard, 2020*

Twenty-Five to Life

Jerry Castillo, Hobbs, New Mexico

Once again, I strangely awaken out of my sleep in the middle of the night. The only thoughts that seem to surface in my brain are types of hurt and pain. Could it be that my passion for life isn't what it was? Or that for some reason my faith has become medium-rare? It's hard to tell at this point, so I toss and turn, hoping to find a spot simply to rest my mind, even if only for the moment, but nothing works.

Lying in my solitude, I realize I'm still stuck in a cell! Twenty-five to life is what the judge said before slamming the gavel down so hard you could feel the echo. It's no wonder I can't sleep. I'm locked in a cage in a desolate environment, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, with no place to go. The weight of a hundred years on my chest makes it hard to breathe, and forces me to sit up.

Suddenly, reality sinks in. I'm never going home! The anxiety pours over me so much that tears flow out uncontrollably, pushing me to my feet. Quickly, I splash water on my face in an attempt to camouflage my tears, so others don't mistake them for fears. I'm in a place that leaves very little room for error, forcing me to gather my thoughts in a hurry. I try to focus on something, anything, to get my thoughts to slow down.

Pictures start to pop in my head like camera flashes one after another. Family. Loved ones. Faces of the dead. Damn, I've seen where this is going. I start to remember what I try so hard to forget. I drop and do some pushups. I hit a quick set of thirty-five and I'm back on my feet, pacing in a cell that only seems to get smaller.

Next thing I know, I'm hearing shots fired and a smoking pistol is in my hand as I step over the mess. The memories are so thick I can still smell the scene. My breath quickens. Sweat forms and this damn cell gets smaller and smaller. I drop and do another set of pushups in an attempt to block out the harsh reality.

Two hours pass. My body tires, but my mind races, leaving me restless. This is just another typical night when you're locked in a cage. I lie down hoping to sleep before the day starts...

The struggle is real when you're doing time. Most staff and C.O.s look at us on this side of the fence as if we're trash, scum, or a walking disease that is contagious. The look on their faces and their actions toward us says it all. Not all of us are child molesters, rapists, or ill-willed individuals, but still, they act like we were sent to prison so they can punish us every day, so they can dehumanize us. This is society's

way of sending us to hell. Most of us restrain ourselves from rising against them, against the system and their cruel intent because we're tired of hurting those we love.

Society has taken us away from everything we love, leaving us very little to live for and with very little to lose. I am today where my thoughts have brought me. I will be tomorrow where my thoughts take me. I cannot escape the results of my thoughts, but I can endure and learn. I can alter my thoughts; therefore, I can alter my condition.

I tried to enroll myself into college courses to help with my rehabilitation, however, the system turned me down, saying I can't be enrolled due to the amount of time I have. I tried to get a job and was shut down because I don't fit the criteria.

Life with no possible chance and a past with institutional violence. I'm forced to stay in the pod and find other ways to rehabilitate myself. I work out. I read. I hustle. I eat. I write letters to ghosts because no one ever writes back, reminding me, I'm all alone, doing twenty-five to life.



Brazilian Public Jail: A Failed System

Guilherme Bergamini, Brazil

Photography of a public jail in Patrocínio in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.



Homecoming

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

As I eased to the curb, there were a million thoughts fighting with a zillion memories to play tricks on my mind. It had been twenty-six years since I had laid eyes on this house, but it looked just as menacing. The green paint around the windowsills was still cracked and flaking. The fence to the right of the stairs was still leaning, standing only by sheer will. The paint—then white, now beige—looked just as dingy.

“Hey K.K. Lew, where you been?” The sarcastic remark rang from the top of the steps, as I stepped out and pressed the lock for my vehicle.

Of all the people I had to see first upon my return to the city, neighborhood, street, and house I grew up in, it had to be my bougie-ass sister Nikki. She, who had straight A's throughout high school, was Valedictorian of her class at Berkeley, and held a Ph.D. in child psychology, was so quick to toss it all in your face. Yeah, the same sister our family has never been good enough for.

Of course, I ignored her and her sarcasm, but she had already gotten to me. I re-chirped the lock in order to grab the gifts I stashed in the trunk, gifts for loved ones I knew would either already be in the house or would arrive shortly. They were loved ones whom I, for the most part, hadn't seen in a quarter-century. Like my sister, they had chosen not to visit me over the years, but they would all gather to celebrate and congratulate me for making it out alive. She knew exactly where I'd been, and why, and she still had not so much as sent me a card the entire time.

“So, what, yo' big sister can't get a hug or even a hello?”

We both knew the last thing either of us wanted was a hug. She couldn't have cared less if I said hello or go fuck yourself. But, in this instance, she wanted to go through the formalities so she could hold it against me later if I refused. Being that she was standing right next to me, I put my packages down to give her one of those quick, feelingless hugs reserved for just such an occasion.

“Is that my baby?” rang out just as I removed my arm from Nikki's waist. I looked up to see and hear my mother—all five feet, one inch of her—racing down the stairs, looking closer to forty than the seventy-five she must be. The smile on her face had always brightened my heart and the effect was no different this time. In almost the blink of an eye, she ran straight into one of my patented bear hugs full of love! I could feel her warm tears kiss my neck as my own rolled down my cheeks,

leaving damp marks on her patented headscarf. We embraced for what felt like hours outside of a house with so many memories, creating a brand new one right there: our very first free hug in over twenty-six years.

It was mere coincidence that my return coincided with a sad occasion, but I've often heard that for something to be born, something else must die. My being set free after all that time in legal slavery felt like a re-birth, so I wasn't completely surprised that less than six hours after stepping through the gates of Hades back into the land of the living, my wife received the call stating my maternal grandfather had passed away. It was normal for my family to call her, especially since no one except for her knew I was free. Rather than take the time to call the prison and have the chaplain give me a phone call home so they could give me the bad news themselves, the family would rather just call her. They, over the years, had accepted her as the go-between, knowing she'd see me long before they would, and that she'd fill me in when she did. Only this time, I was out. Rather than accept the phone from her as she attempted to pass it to me, I put my finger to my lips, signaled for her to be quiet about my being home, and motioned for her to wrap the call up.

That was yesterday afternoon, and there I was bright and early the very next morning attempting to bring a little joy to the people I love most in the world, in the midst of our anguish. Although Paw Paw wasn't my mother's biological father, he was greatly loved by every one of his four stepchildren, as well as by their own children and grandchildren. Being that their biological father had passed away long before any of us grands were ever thought of, he was the only grandfather we knew. Plus, he showered all eighteen of us grands with so much love, attention, and affection that had it not been for my punk-ass sister and her evil spiteful ways, most of us never would have known he wasn't our true grandfather. One Thanksgiving, in this very kitchen, when I was about ten, she was denied that last piece of sweet potato pie, which just so happened to be saved for him. She made sure that all of us who didn't know knew once and for all that “He's not even our real grandfather.”

However, that was a whole other story, for a whole different time. As I sit in this cluttered but spotlessly clean living room, that even after all this time feels so much like home, this story is about returning. It's about home. Even though this is no longer my home, it will somehow

always feel like it. So on this dingy couch, I sit with my arm around my itty-bitty grandmother's shoulders, fielding questions about what it was like to do so much time in prison and how it feels to finally be home. Loved ones have been appearing left and right for hours, all here to pay their respect, and each one surprised to find me here again, finally. The mood is somber yet festive at the same time. I can sense, although no one is openly discussing it, how deeply Paw Paw was loved and how greatly he will be missed by each and every one of us, even Nikki.



Mary Terese Schelble

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

Compressed Charcoal on Gray Toned Paper, 2016

Unexpected Bully

Spider Preston, California

It's hard to believe I was ever a small child, but in 1971, I was. I wasn't due to anything other than a late birthday and nature. I guess it was entirely nature's fault, because I had no choice in any of it. I had no choice in the slow growth of my bones, or my small muscles, no choice in the argument that led to the violence that led to the orphanage. Nature, nature, nature, the nature of people.

It was nature that made me afraid walking through the large glass doors and smelling the disinfectant, seeing the women in the light blue uniforms and the faces of the other children. So many faces. Boys and girls, none older than twelve. None with the same complexion as mine. I saw no one like me.

After being escorted through a crowd of children into an office, I sat being instructed for an eternity, during which I constantly checked the faces that stared at me. My guess was they'd never seen anyone of my complexion. I could see my own faded reflection in the office windows as I stared at them. The childcare attendant and the counselor droned on beside me while ugly faces were made on the other side of the window.

One child pushed the tip of his nose upward. I wondered what that even meant. I stuck my tongue out and covertly gave him an index finger with a twist. In reality, it meant nothing. In child speak, it meant a lot. It meant more than my six-year-old mind knew. That child's eyes grew so large, he inhaled. Then he ran off, out of sight. The others seemed shocked, and I began to question my action. Feeling a hand on my shoulder, I faced the adults in the room. School was the subject, but I had no clue to what extent.

Soon after that conversation, I found myself in another, one that was on my level. When you're six, it's easy to understand another who is six. It's not so easy to understand someone who's ten. My conversation was interrupted by the push-nose kid and his friends. I didn't understand the name he called me. No one in my first-grade class used this word, but it did something inside me. It was like I knew the meaning subconsciously. I knew it was bad, like the bad words I wasn't allowed to say but heard adults say often.

There it was again...fear welling up inside me. This time it was different, there was something else tagging along.

"What did you say to me?" I asked the boy, who was a head taller

than me with ease.

"Hey _____-boy," he repeated.

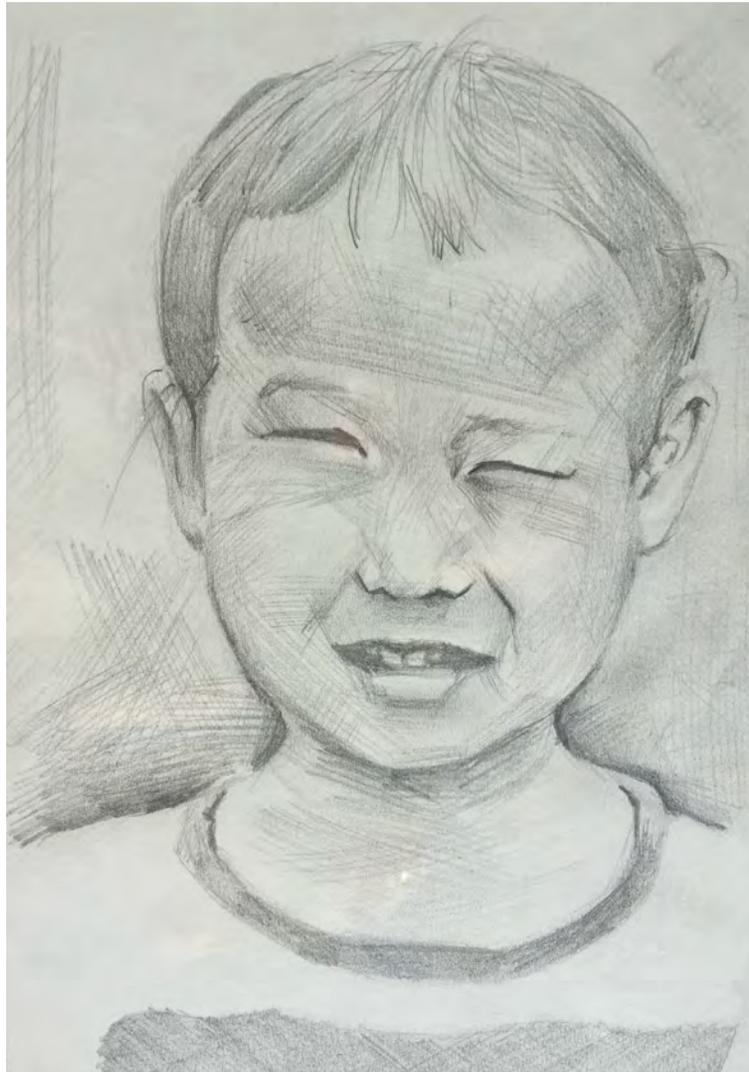
"You can't say that. It's a bad word." I wasn't sure at the time, but it felt wrong. Somewhere in the background, a TV was on. The Jackson Five was singing "ABC." I turned to focus on the sound. Instead of seeing the famous siblings, I saw the floor. The ten-year-old shoved me hard. I got a rash burn where my elbow hit and slid on the waxed concrete. Laughter erupted from every direction. Then, the taunting.

"Look, little _____-boy can't stand up."

This was not where I wanted to be. This was not what I deserved. This was not nature, but something taught. Why would someone teach that to a child? I felt my eyes welling up. They saw it, and this was added to the taunting. The natural thing in me—the flight or fight thing—kicked in. My emotions were a maelstrom, my tiny fist hard, my throat a bed for thunder.

Later, as I stayed locked in seclusion, fist still in a ball, I stared out another window. The counselor's words were still fresh in my head: "We'll have none of that bully behavior here, young man."

I watched children playing. None of them had my complexion. Was I a bully? That's what she said to me, "None of that bully behavior..." I only fought back after being picked on, but she called me a bully and locked me up.



Kim Joo Suk Schelble
J. Terence Schelble, Arizona
Graphite on Paper, 2021

Band of the Child

Larry Blazek, Indiana

The children have started a band with makeshift instruments. A thin boy wearing a striped t-shirt has invented his instrument by attaching electronic components salvaged from various sources to an old whitewall tire. He converted an old radio into an amplifier. Even though it looks like junk, it makes a very loud sound.

Jean invites the band over for supper. They cavort noisily until Jean tells them that it is time to tidy up the house.

The thin boy in the striped t-shirt kicks debris and a crayon into the corner. You point out that this is not how things are done in this house.

He puts the crayon away. He puts the debris into the dustbin.

After supper, the children wander out into the backyard. Some adults come to get their children and stay for a while. You have to shoo a large man with short, dark hair wearing a red polo shirt out of your garden.

The shabby old shed out back has a rack containing old tires near the door. The boy in the striped t-shirt climbs the rack and asks if he can have some of the tires. You give him some.

He helps pick up some leftover scrap metal.

Behind the old garage are the ruins of a structure; pieces of the structure have been salvaged for use on other buildings; some of the fake brick asphalt siding clings to what is left of the walls.

A narrow gravel lane by the garage extends to the woods, where it disappears into the foliage. The large man with short, dark hair in the red polo shirt asks you where the lane leads.

You tell him that it leads to an old house that is most likely haunted. If anyone were to go there, they would surely die—the life would be sucked out of them by evil ghosts.

The children gaze at you wide-eyed. The large man with short, dark hair wearing a red polo shirt laughs.

The children are decorating the yard for Halloween. They are hanging a banner for the pumpkin festival.

Someone is using your welder in the garage without asking. You burst in and demand to know why they are using it. The unauthorized welder knocks down the piece they were welding. It is an old flatiron. It stops near your foot, nearly striking you. It is still glowing red hot from where a large washer has just been welded to the side.

The unauthorized welder removes your welding helmet from their

head, revealing herself to be a young woman with long, curly black hair.

She goes on about how some unauthorized person has been able to open her safe. She rattles on about some other things that have nothing to do with what you asked her.

A short balding man wearing a business suit enters the garage. He is apparently her lawyer. He also rattles on about some mumbo-jumbo that has nothing to do with why she did not ask if she could use the welder.

You usher them out the door.

EMWG-3

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

From his S&T magnifier, Gorlock could clearly see the tiny solar system. Within that system he also saw the third orb from its nova, which sustained the system's only sentient life. It was just a matter of hours before his armada of 1,000 galactic destroyers would drop out of warp, revealing themselves to the numerous satellites in orbit, proving once and for all to the humanoids that they had never been alone.

"Commander, all ships are accounted for and ready to proceed as planned."

"Thank you, Rafika," Gorlock said, turning to his first before adding, "This is your initial trip to EMWG-3, correct?"

"Yes, sir, but I've studied it since the academy. It's such a beautiful system. So full of potential. It could truly be an asset to the intergalactic society. It's such a shame it came to this."

Gorlock was fond of his first. Rafika was insightful, inspired, and capable of doing whatever it took to achieve her mission. Turning back to her, he replied, "True. Let's just hope we're not too late."

With concern in her voice, Rafika responded to her captain's massive back.

"But, sir, do you really think our plan will work?"

Slipping into reverie, Gorlock thought back to the numerous times he had traveled to this system. He recalled the inhabitants, burgeoning societies, and related phenomena he had observed during those visits. On these previous occasions, the missions had all been stealth. Discreet data gathering. This time would be drastically different, nothing discreet about it. If the vast force he held dropped out of warp, the inhabitants of EMWG-3 would begin to panic, and out of fear, instinctively take whatever defensive measures their primitive societies were capable of, which was exactly what Gorlock and his superiors in the Intergalactic Union wanted.

Not that any such measure would hinder the Union's objectives. For though the occupants of EMWG-3 were sentient and had made dramatic advances in science, mathematics, and medicine, they had yet to evolve, either individually or collectively, into who they could become. As a result, none of their nuclear weapons or primitive defenses were any threat to Gorlock's armada. Finally, turning back to Rafika he said, "Operations like these can go either way. All we can do is try. But for their sake, it has to succeed."

“Aye, aye Commander, but I still don’t understand why these beings have refused to heed any of our previous attempts,” Rafika stated.

“All I can tell you is that some species become too self-absorbed during their adolescence to heed even the most obvious warnings,” Gorlock sadly answered.

The Linarians, as members of an intergalactic society of beings, had been monitoring the EMWG-3 for thousands of years. They occasionally sent subtle messages (and not so subtle messengers) to guide the Earthlings toward their evolution and hoped for eventual transcendence. Unfortunately, despite all previous interference, EMWG-3 continued to speed toward self-destruction. So the Intergalactic Union determined it was time to overtly intervene in a last-ditch effort to alter the course of these previous beings’ history.

Like many worlds before it, Gorlock’s beloved Linari included, EMWG-3 was at the point in its evolution where greed and privilege trampled over care and compassion. Cruel and violent people seemed to outnumber the peaceful and kind. The planet’s resources were being wantonly abused and depleted, resulting in cataclysmic weather around their globe, yet no serious efforts were waged to combat these issues. The planet’s so-called superpowers had amassed enough nuclear weapons to destroy ten Earths. All while hatred, cynicism, fear, despair, and divisions grew exponentially.

EMWG-3 was at a crucial moment in its time. If they could not find a way to accept their collective sameness and transition into oneness, they would, like countless other worlds, become the cause of their own annihilation. Unfortunately for them, once a planet strayed so far down this path, there was only one option left, and that was not foolproof.

Still, Gorlock and his armada had been sent across galaxies far and wide to provide EMWG-3 with the impetus for its last hope of salvation: the threat of an armed alien invasion. Best case scenario, the Earthlings would see the dire threat they faced and immediately put all their petty differences aside, banding together as one to fend off their common foe. With all their energies and amazingly vast resources needed against an invasion from a seemingly hostile alien race, they would be forced to see just how alike they all really were and how desperately they needed the entirety of their species in order to survive. This was a delicate game, however. The worst case scenario was just as likely to occur, furthering the divisions that already existed, while giving the nations reasons to destroy each other before the invading

aliens could.

“Commander, we are coming out of warp now. Shall I initiate the attack?”

Carole Alden-Biography-Artist Statement

Utah, 2019

Carole Alden - Biography - Artist Statement

Born 1960 in Orleans, France to American Parents.
 Returned to grow up in the western United States where I developed an abiding appreciation for the natural world.
 No formal education beyond high school.
 Two marriages that resulted in five children and three grandchildren.
 Prior to children, I worked in clay and some bronze. Upon the first child's arrival, my studio needed to be safe, so I switched to fiber work.
 By the time my youngest two were 14 and 9, I had added welding, glass work, and plastic fabrication - sculpture to the mix.
 From 1991-2006 I worked full time, producing sculptures for exhibits and fairs. I also taught work shops in soft sculpture, surface design, and regularly spoke to University programs.
 In July of 2006 life was irrevocably altered by an event of extreme domestic violence that culminated in my use of deadly force to preserve my own life and the lives of my children.
 Without resources for legal representation, I accepted a plea bargain and began a 1-15 sentence for manslaughter.
 Housed at the Utah State prison I focused on maintaining my family connection through drawings, and eventually explored crochet as a means to create sculptural forms.
 Creating art in prison is fraught with angst. You must have written permission, in contract form before starting any sort of art or craft project. Despite adherence to policy, S.W.A.T can sweep through at any time and destroy or discard your art work. I personally experienced this multiple times prior to being transported in 2014 to a county jail for housing. While jail is considerably more restrictive

Than prison in many respects, my experience with staff being supportive of creative endeavors has been largely positive. I have been able to participate in the Hoagie Zoo exhibit yearly, as well as a variety of charity events and other exhibits.
 While widely known for my large, somewhat whimsical wildlife sculptures, I have also developed a body of work that reflects the experiences of women dealing with domestic violence and the legal system. These works have been invited to international conferences and exhibits on Prison reform in California, Maryland, and Helsinki, Finland.
 Having experienced being a battered woman, in a rural setting, with no services available, my hope is to utilize my full size Fish house - studio to travel through similar areas and provide a network of information and assistance.
 Without a larger dialog to address support, and more scrutiny on how laws are enforced, women in rural areas will continue to be left to negotiate their existence daily. The status quo is unacceptable.
 I will continue to use my work to bring focus on this underserved population.

Carole Alden 2019

Photography by Carole Alden & the Justice Arts Coalition

An Interview with Carole Alden

Interviewed by Eve Sheppard, ICM Art Director



Fifth Wheel Studio
Selfie, 2019

First studio post-incarceration

I was relatively competent at it, but it is like an exploratory thing when you are a child; at least, for me it was. It was a challenge; I liked looking at things and seeing if I could draw something or sculpt something that communicated what that thing was, what it was about, what the feeling was that I had about it, the spirit that was in whatever it was. I wanted people to pay attention to the intrinsic value in all of the things that I saw around me in nature, and if they weren't going to go out to the woods to look at a salamander, then I wanted to be able to draw or sculpt a salamander and take it to them and show them how wonderful salamanders were. The biggest part of art when I was little was just trying to share with people the things that fascinated me.



Iguana for Hogle Zoo
Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017
11 ft. long

Sheppard: Why do you create art?

Alden: I create art because it's the type of expression that feels natural to me. Ever since I was little, I've had all these ideas and pictures in my head that I wanted to be able to communicate and, you know, you go through a phase where it's really frustrating because you can see magnificent things in your head, but you don't have the skill to execute them the way that you see them. I really became much happier with my art when I hit my mid-thirties, when I had finally practiced everything enough that

Sheppard: What was your formal art training?

Alden: I am completely self-taught. It used to drive my parents nuts because I would constantly scan my environment for things that I could drag home and make something out of. So that was kind of trying on their patience if they wanted anything tidy. I really am the same way

now. That desire to utilize the things that I see around me has served me well because if you're either living in poverty or you're incarcerated, you don't have access to all of the wonderful art supplies and materials that there are out there. It is a really good exercise in your creative problem-solving skills to, you know, figure out how to do something with



Armadillo

Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017

3 ft. H x 4½ ft. W

Wasatch County Jail

nothing. I'm just about the queen of that at this point.

Sheppard: What inspired you to become an artist?

Alden: That's a funny concept to me because it wasn't a matter of something else inspiring me. I didn't see something and say, "Oh! I want to be that when I grow up." I actually wanted to be a dog catcher, so that I could keep all of the dogs that I caught when I was three. I didn't have



Panther Chameleon
Yarn Fiber Sculpture
2018

3½ ft. H x 4 ft. W (uncurls to 9 ft.)

Wasatch County Jail



Girl with Dragon
8 in W by 10 in H
Colored Pencils and Bic Pens
2012

“‘Girl with Dragon’ represents the desire I had as a child to feel protected.”

creativity like they do in some parts of the country these days. It was a constant subversive act to try to create art in an environment where they were afraid you might be enjoying yourself if you did artwork.

Sheppard: What was the most difficult aspect of doing artwork “on the inside”?

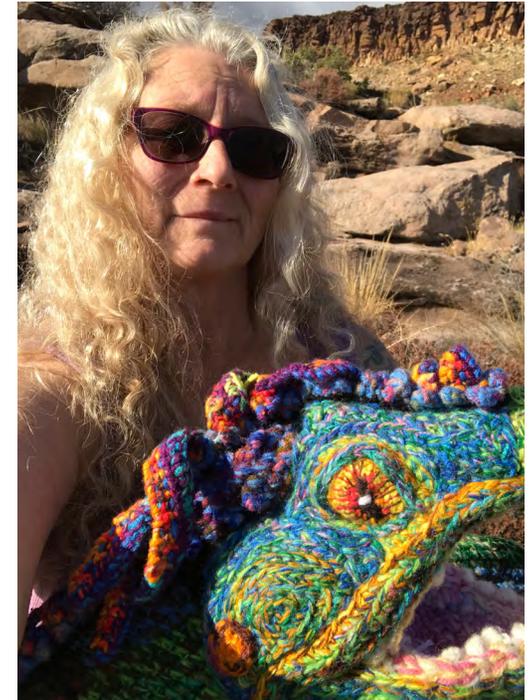
Alden: There were multiple barriers. One was the attitude that you aren’t allowed to do anything that they might perceive you as enjoying. Either they didn’t have materials or if they did let you buy materials, they promptly took them away from you as soon as you did something with them. Like you had to have a contract signed in order to crochet something, and there were all kinds of regulations and stipulations. For any reason, they would just take it away, and even no reason. About every three or four months SWAT would come through and just tear your stuff up and throw all your artwork away and destroy it. Part of you felt this constant background of militancy in your mind of trying to

exposure to art at all in my early years. It’s something inside of you that has to come out. It’s not something external that comes into you and takes hold. Although when you are exposed to different ideas and things that people are doing, there’s a lot of inspiration as far as furthering your own studies and your own abilities and figuring more things out. It gives you a larger palette to work with when you start being exposed to other forms of art, but when you’re starting out it’s just there. I can’t imagine not doing art. When I was little I drew every single day, or I sculpted every single day non-stop, and when I got to prison that was hard because in Utah they don’t have art programs and they don’t encourage

get something done and get it out of there before these goons came and took it away from you.

Another aspect was that your art takes on a whole other life of its own when you’re incarcerated. Prior to incarceration most of the things that I did were whimsical or studies of nature, and they didn’t have a political message or they were for fun and they were things that I enjoyed, things that I was interested in. Once I was incarcerated, all of a sudden things changed and it became a means to show people how bad things really were, what the actual physical effect was on people and the psychological effect.

Even if you aren’t doing political statements with your artwork, it becomes a critical vehicle for communicating with your loved ones. I had grandbabies born while I was incarcerated. I never got to hold them while they were growing up, and I desperately wanted them to know how much they meant to me and how sorry I was that I wasn’t there. And so a lot of the artwork that I did was things for them and my children and my mother, but they just aren’t enough. Even just writing letters or talking to people on the phone—so much of that is restricted and gets kind of lost in the shuffle. But if you can make something for your child to hold every night and know that you made it because you



Artist with Iguana, Selfie
Yarn Fiber Sculpture
2014, Wasatch County Jail
7 ft. H x 2 ft. W

“Built at Wasatch County Jail from yarn culled from projects found in the garbage: solid yarn colors pulled apart from four-strand yarn to single strands recombined to control color variations.”

love them and that you're coming home to them, you know that's very significant and has a lot more depth than anything I made as a gift before I went to prison.

Sheppard: In your talk at the 2021 Prison Education Awareness Conference at Arizona State University, I was struck by your resilience. Is there a relationship between resilience and art in your life?

Alden: Absolutely. When I have an idea it becomes like a compulsion. People accuse me of being patient, and it's like, no! I'm obsessed with getting this completed, and I want it a certain way, and I want it to communicate certain things, and everything's in my way.

So it's like, what do I have to do to achieve what I want to achieve regardless of these barriers? In prison especially that was a huge, huge thing. During my first marriage, I had lived in poverty, and I kind of got used to it then as well. For example, I wanted to enter this particular Choice Design by artist competition, and I did not have money for materials. But when I was grazing my goats in the ditch along the highway, I found some old blankets and sheets that had blown out of somebody's truck on the way to the dump, and I took those, and I cleaned them, and I dyed them different colors. I hand-stitched



Family
8 in W x 10 in H Colored Pencils and Bic Pens
2012
"There are four drawings that incorporate mermaids with children or fish. These are simply joyful pieces."



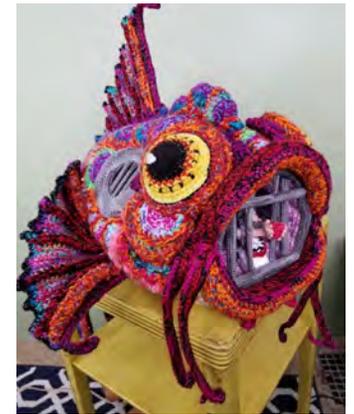
Crawfish
Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017
3 ft.
Wasatch County Jail

them together, and I won first place. So there are things you can do. It might not seem like it, but I feel like there is always something that can mitigate a circumstance.

Sheppard : What advice do you have for other incarcerated people who want to create art?

Alden: I think the most important thing is to develop some peace in your mind. And to do that, you kind of have to unplug from the prison culture. All the drama and the stuff that goes on in there because it is just like, oh man, I don't know. There are so many people there who don't know how to be in society or to do anything without manipulating somebody: it's all about manipulating people to get your needs met.

If you can remove yourself from that part of prison culture and only put time into things that are positive for you, only have relationships with people who bring light into your life, that is a big step towards having the peace of mind to create. You have to find that little kernel of serenity where you close everything out and focus on your future instead of on what's going on around you, you know, who's getting stabbed over a noodle or something. It's like, you know what, that's not my reality; I am not participating. I isolated a lot while I was developing my work in prison, but I also paid attention to other people that looked like they could benefit from learning techniques like that, and so I was happy to work with

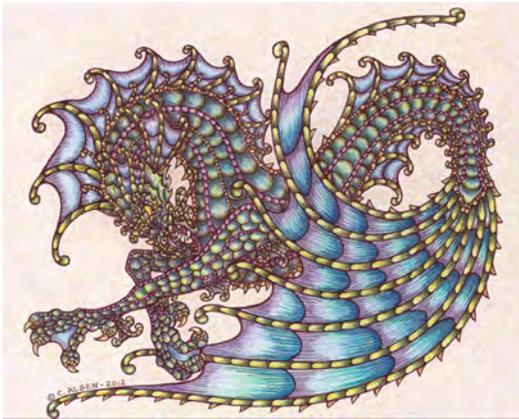


Prison Fish
Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017-18
Size: 2½ ft. H x 8 ft. W
Photo by Carol Clayton
Wasatch County Jail, "A woman is kneeling with her chest torn open and her heart held outside the bars. Her face is without features: deprived of Identity."

people that needed help.

Sheppard: Do you feel like creating art can kick-start creating peace within yourself?

Alden: Yes, I do. It's a good way to kind of pull all of the ugly stuff out and examine it to figure out where it came from and what part you had in creating it and what part other people did. Being able to figure out your own responsibilities in life is probably one of the first things you have to do to be able to change your life and have it be a positive, productive experience. If you go through life waiting for things to happen to you or just reacting to things that happen to you instead of



Hippocampus

8 in W x 10 H in Colored Pencils and Bic Pens, 2012

“The horse sea creature is a hippocampus from mythology. Just for fun.”

I wanted to paint—there was no paint on the commissary list, and we had these like dollar store colored pencils, and so I cracked them open and pulled the lead out of the centers of them and crushed it in these little cups that we had for condiments and let them soak kind of under my mattress with a little bit of water in them for, oh gosh, it was probably about four weeks. And then I cut off some of my hair, and I took a hair tie and some Elmer's glue and a pencil, and I made myself a paintbrush. I had water and I had paper and so I stayed up all night one night painting, and it was very very satisfying. Of course, in the morning the officers were like, “What the hell have you been doing?”

taking the initiative and creating something in your life—then you're always going to be behind the eight ball.

Sheppard: What did you do when you couldn't get the art supplies you wanted? How did the lack of materials affect your art?

Alden: Well, when I was in solitary—I was in a suicide solitary cell for four months, and

(They used worse language than that.) Another time, I used oatmeal to make a wallpaper paste and I saved all my request form receipts, and I did a paper mache project of a dinosaur that was like four feet long and about three feet tall. Again, you know they were a little perplexed as to how that happened. The funnest project was, well, we used to get oatmeal on our tray almost every morning and there's a line in a movie where this guy is like, “Who fucks up oatmeal?” Well, the jail I was at perfected that. It was more like a clod of dough instead of anything remotely edible. One morning I was like, “Yes, I would like all of your trays.” I had about twenty trays of oatmeal, and the consistency was conducive to sculpting a dragon sitting upright with outspread wings, and the head came up and around. It had teeth and a tongue and a tail wrapped around the tray and claws gripping the edge of the tray. I thought, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings by saying that the oatmeal is horrible, but maybe if they see with their own eyes that it's a better sculpting medium than a breakfast cereal, they'll get the hint. I sent it back to the kitchen like that. Well, what ended up happening was the cops took it and let it dry and I had no idea, but they called me out several weeks later. I thought, god, I guess I'm in trouble now. I hadn't had any interactions with the officers at that facility yet; I was just barely there. They asked me to meet in the kitchen and they handed me a knife and said, “Can you get this off the tray without ruining it?” I was thinking they're talking about ruining the tray, but, no, they wanted to keep the dragon. So that was pretty entertaining.

Sheppard: What do you think art does for the soul of the artist?

Alden: Well, I think that it keeps you in touch with your own truth. It peels back all of the layers of crap that build up when you're out in society, wherever society is. Whether it's prison society or whatever culture you're living in, there's just layers and layers and layers of stuff...other people's expectations of you, things that you're raised with, or that you work with. You know we are surrounded by it through our families, the media, school. And art is the one



Eastern Box Turtle with Daffodils
5 in W x 7 in H Colored Pencils and
Bic Pens, 2018
Card for artist's mother

thing that comes so far deep within you that it's your truth—and it might make sense to other people, and it might not. Some people will really resonate with the things that you do; other times people are just like, “What? I don't know.” But it's really important to do and to know what your truth is and to be able to express it.

Sheppard: How powerful can artwork be for those who experience it?

Alden: The first time I sent a piece out of the jail and my daughter took it to an exhibit, it was a hand-embroidered piece of the image that is a part of the triptych that went to the Museum of Modern Art, the woman impaled on the bars, and there were approximately a thousand stitches per square inch in this piece, and my daughter took it to the exhibit. It was hanging up and there was a little blurb kind of describing what it represented, how I felt in the beginning of my incarceration, just immobilized in excruciating pain and hopeless and helpless, like all your hopes, dreams—everything—had just disappeared over the horizon. I felt like my life was just plain over, like where do I go from here? I was suicidal. All that was on the wall, and people stood and read about it. My daughter said there would just be tears streaming down the viewers' faces. So it obviously had an impact on them as far as seeing me as a human being and having some empathy and being affected by it. So that's really different from just making something that just ties someone's couch and drapes together. I think it has the potential to radicalize people for political change as far as the prison industrial complex goes. These issues need to touch everybody for anything to change, and unfortunately it is getting to the point where almost everybody does either know somebody in prison or has somebody in their family that is in prison and impacted by the so-called justice system. It's a hell of a way to get a support base. It would be better if people could just empathize and say, “Oh, this is bad; we need to do something about it.”



Prison Cell Time Capsule
2017-2018

Sheppard: Sometimes there aren't words to express the way you feel to other people except through art.

Alden: Also, there's a lot of times if you're going to write out everything you've experienced, a lot of people can't handle reading all of that. It's hard to express what you've gone through without traumatizing other people, and I don't want to traumatize other people, but there were some things that were so egregious that I didn't know what else to do other than say this is how it was, this is what happened to me, this is how I felt, and still just barely scratch the surface. There's stuff that happened to me that I don't know if I'll ever be able to repeat out loud or visualize. What people see is the tip of the iceberg, and I think that it is probably the same scenario for most people who undergo trauma. They let tiny bits show and see how people react. Are you going to be judged for it or are people going to be sympathetic? Are they going to be helpful or are they going to blame you for the trauma that you have experienced? Women especially go through that. [With domestic violence, for instance.] When I hear the words “Well, why didn't you just leave?” it makes my head spin around. I shouldn't have to feel apologetic for wanting to stay in my own home that I bought with my own money and where I had my career. The person who was violent was an interloper there on false pretenses, and law enforcement should have done their job and removed him one of the many times that I called.

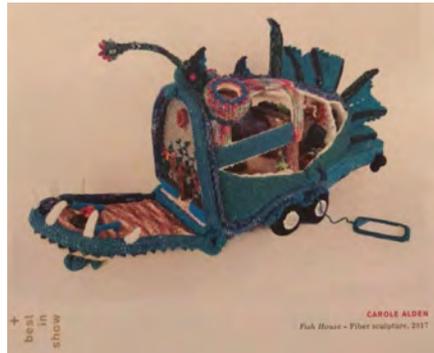


Domestic Deception
Colored Pencils and Bic Pens on Paper, 2011
8 in W x 10 inH
Utah State Prison

“The pregnant mermaid and the male with his back turned has to do with domestic violence. Being held captive by a spouse who hides their true nature. Feeling trapped, dead inside, and praying for your children.”

Sheppard: What is the importance of animals and nature in your art and in your life? How do your life and nature influence your art?

Alden: I think for me the main thing is having the awareness that you're all interconnected, that everything has a spirit of some sort, everything has some kind of energy, and it's important to honor the energy and the spirit that is in every other thing that surrounds us in nature. I think that you learn a lot more about yourself if you have the ability to open your heart to other living things and even things that aren't necessarily living as far as we know, like the rocks. There are no trees out here, which is kind of a bummer; it's mostly just sagebrush and cactus and a few odds and ends of different kinds of grasses. But there are all kinds of lizards and butterflies. I saw a big snake the other day going underneath my generator and that was really cool. There are birds, and we have the coyotes and the bobcats and the mountain lions, all the other critters that you really don't want to have an up-close and personal encounter with, but understanding them is what helps you protect yourself if necessary. It's a part of finding your place in the world, knowing where you fit in. I don't feel like we are above any other living thing. I feel like we need to all work kind of in tandem and be more aware of the needs of living things. And it just enriches your life and it's interesting and it's entertaining. Animals are so funny sometimes. Here's an example. So I have a young rooster that doesn't have any manners yet, so the ladies don't want to have anything to do with him so he's very frustrated and wants some action. Every time a dog falls asleep he goes and hops on the side of the dog's head and makes sweet love to the dog. The dog is just like, "What was that?" So at times they can be very funny. It's never dull, that's for sure. You have a constant input of seeing little relationships developing between



Fish House
Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017
2 ft. H x 3 ft. W

Wasatch County Jail, "Prototype for first home and studio, post incarceration.
Purchased by the Utah Museum of Art."

other living things and you learn so much. I feel very wealthy in some ways being surrounded by living things and being in a beautiful place and having the freedom to do something with it and create out here [Southern Utah] and share it with other people.



First Day of Desert Fish House Build
Welded Steel Livestock Panels, April 2021

Carole Alden is a visionary artist who is creating a healing art space in the Utah desert for other women survivors of violence and trauma. For Carole, fish represent freedom, resilience, and survival against all odds. The Fish House will be Carole's home, art studio, and the hub for sculpture workshops as she creates fantastical, larger-than-life artwork and a life of her own design after surviving violent abuse and incarceration.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Support Carole's powerful vision for healing through art. Here's what your donation will support:

\$20,000 to build the Desert Fish House home and art studio and basic necessities on the land, including water tank and delivery, solar system, composting toilet and shelter, road improvement, and building materials.

\$9500 for basic build out for workshops, including windbreak and tent platforms, craft supplies, cooking and other necessities, and safety and emergency essentials.

\$5500 for ideal workshop setup, including a yurt for classes, solar showers and lights, community garden, and supplies.



First Day of Desert Fish House Build

April 2021

Photo by Unchained Stories

In-Kind Donations: Carole is also seeking in-kind donations of building materials, solar and wind power systems, and other supplies.



For more on Carole's wilderness habitat see her Desert Fish House GoFundMe page:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/desert-fish-house>

All photography provided by Carole Alden & the Justice Arts Coalition



Scorpion Rockfish

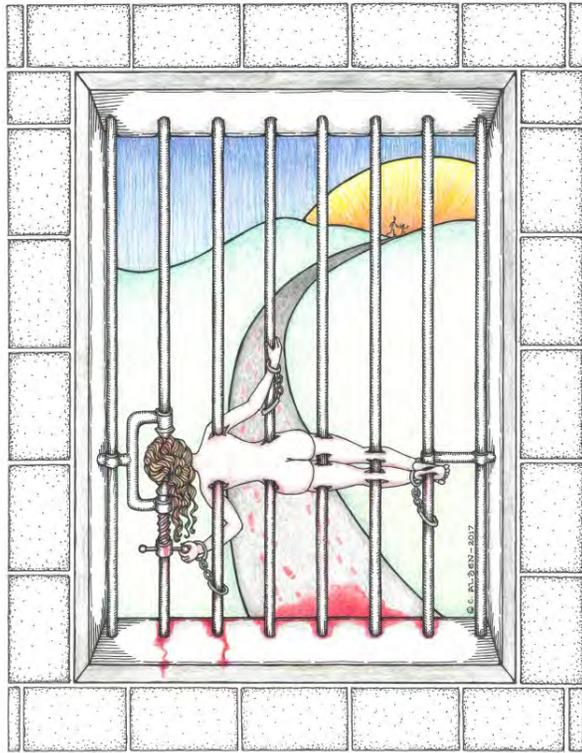
Carole Alden, Utah

Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2012-13

2 ft. H x 3 ft. W

Utah State Prison

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 1: “Woman impaled upon bars’: I originally did this concept when I was very first incarcerated and facing a sentence of 20–life. I had been unexpectedly ripped from my children’s lives. Out of five children I still had two that were young enough to be at home. A 14-year-old son and a 9-year-old daughter. The positioning of the woman represents the overwhelming pain and mental anguish at seeing my hopes and dreams disappear beyond a horizon. I felt helpless and hopeless for a long time.”

Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 1

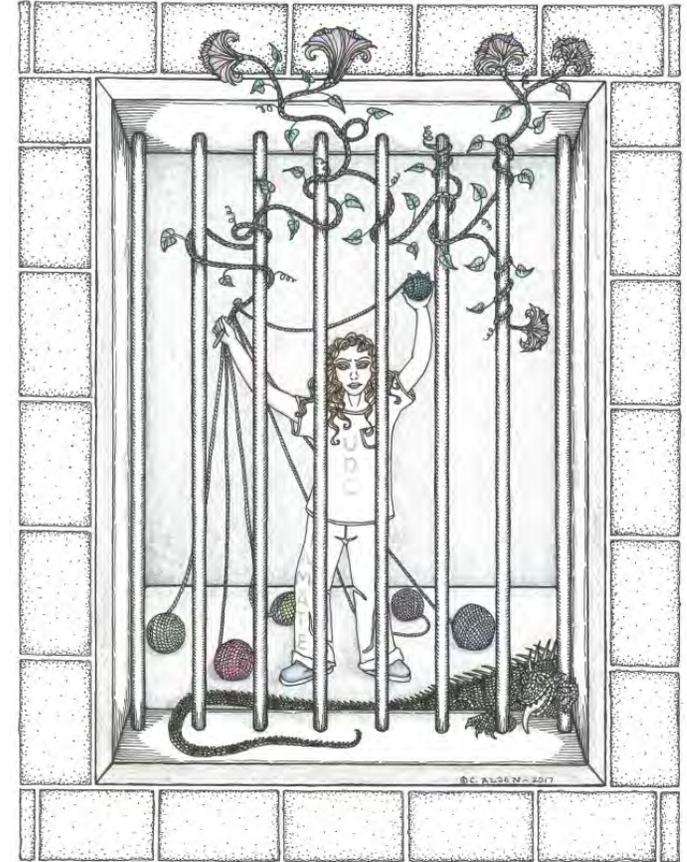
Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2017

11 in. W x 14 in. H

Wasatch County Jail

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Part 2: “The woman crocheting is an act of defiance. This is a mindset developed after over a decade. My body may be imprisoned, but nothing can keep my creative vision from reaching out beyond these walls. Whether it’s beauty, or a statement...it’s going to places I may never. This piece is about finding your voice in whatever manner available to you.”

Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 2

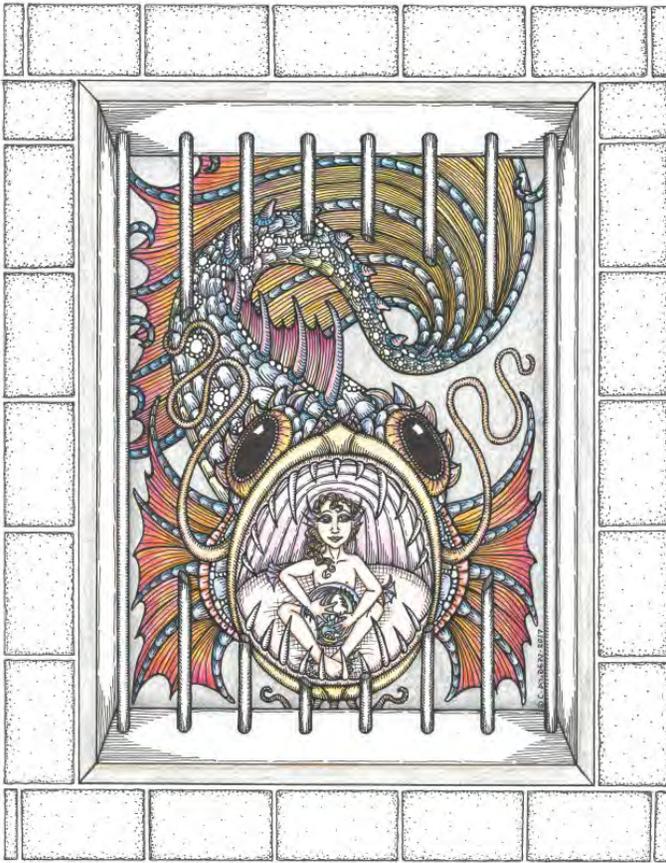
Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2017

11 in. W x 14 in. H

Wasatch County Jail

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Part 3: "In this cell, the fish represents the protective mental and emotional barriers we construct to keep ourselves safe. The child represents the changes we go through to nurture our new dreams."

Prison Cell Bars Triptych, part 3

Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2017

11 in. W x 14 in. H

Wasatch County Jail

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Mother and Child

Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2012

8 in W x 10 in H

Utah State Prison

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Mermaid and Fish, Restoration of Affection

Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2012

8 in W x 10 in H

Utah State Prison

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



Mermaid and Fish

Carole Alden, Utah

Colored Pencils and BIC Pens on Paper, 2012

8 in W x 10 in H

Utah State Prison

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



“Comprised of 600 hours of work and 32 skeins of yarn purchased from prison library job at 86 cents a day.”

Horned Lizard for Salt Lake City Hogle Zoo

Carole Alden, Utah

Yarn Fiber Sculpture, 2017

3½ ft. H x 4 ft. W

Wasatch County Jail

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork





Love Bites

Carole Alden, Utah

Gel Pens on Cardstock, 2021

5 in H x 7 in W



Up from the Depths

Carole Alden, Utah

Gel Pens on Cardstock, 2021

5 in H x 7 in W



Heartlight

Carole Alden, Utah

Gel Pens on Cardstock, 2021

5 in H x 7 in W



Hope in the Dark

Carole Alden, Utah

Gel Pens on Cardstock, 2021

5 in H x 7 in W

Inspiring Change: An Interview with First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] founder, A.C Amin.

Interviewed by Jessica Fletcher, ICM Operations Director

First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] is an organization founded for the specific purpose of upholding the responsibility to nurture, cultivate, and guide youth, women, and men into emotional literacy, character development, financial stability, and life purpose. First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] facilitates self-directed courses that are dedicated to mentoring youth, women, and men within the criminal justice system, returning citizens, and their families. Their focal point is to reinforce that true change starts with self.



As an artist, poet, and mentor, A.C Amin is committed to working with individuals who have experienced trauma and adversity and are seeking growth. Using his own personal experiences with incarceration, he takes valuable self-help and personal development skills and creates thought-provoking workbooks. These interactive journals help cultivate healthy core values for those who have been impacted by the criminal justice system.

Additional information about First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] and available products can be found on their website: www.firstreformself.com.

* * *

Iron City Magazine is honored to feature an interview with A.C Amin

conducted by *Iron City Magazine's* current Operations Director, Jessica Fletcher.

* * *

Fletcher: *Thank you for sharing this project with us! I'd love to hear more about how First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] came to be. What were the challenges along the way? How have you been navigating them?*

Amin: First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] began with my desire to improve myself and help others. Early on during my incarceration, I knew the lifestyle I was living wasn't right and decided to make a change. During my journey, it was difficult for me to easily access self-help materials geared toward those who are incarcerated. Luckily, I had my family. They were willing to seek materials and books to aid my growth. While I was fortunate enough to have assistance, I realized that many individuals with the drive to change have no resources or outside support. This is how First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] came to be! I wanted to provide those who are incarcerated with self-help tools and personal development skills at an affordable price or for free. So with First Reform S.E.L.F.[™], I'm determined to show individuals that change and growth are not only possible, but the journey is also worth it.

Fletcher: *In the "Spiritual Intelligence" chapter of the workbook, you write: "Most of us were mentally incarcerated long before we entered a cell." This sentence elicited an audible "oof" from me on my first read. How have you seen "mental incarceration" manifested?*

Amin: One of the most humbling lessons I've learned about people occurred while working with youth. Despite the fact that we come from different places (I'm from New York and a lot of the young men I work with are from the DMV [D.C., Maryland, Virginia] area, mostly D.C. and Baltimore), our stories and struggles are all similar. In a nutshell, we were all prisoners to either doubt or low self-worth long before we entered a cell. Whether the chains were placed by our own insecurities or by society's disparities, many of us doubted or didn't even consider our ability to be more than who we were.

All I knew was violence and abuse to express myself, substance abuse and addiction to cope, and manipulation and greed to get

ahead. It was all I saw. I was exposed to this mentality at a young age; it was exemplified everywhere I looked: home, school, and within the community. So I believed that was the way things were supposed to be. Anything outside of what I saw was beyond my reach. I was convinced that was the only lifestyle for me. That is the belief of the mentally incarcerated.

My good friend, Alfonso Jones, wrote in his book, *Days Lost*, "... all I know is that the glass ceiling continues to trick us..." A lot of us were fooled, tricked, and manipulated to believe that our potential to grow was limited. Jones advised: "...don't rise without an axe to break through, and carry a parachute." First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] equips people with the tools needed to shatter the glass ceiling, a parachute for the days we fall, and the courage to continue pushing through. My mission is to shatter any limiting beliefs that hold our people back.

Mental incarceration is a real problem. Yes, criminal justice reform is an important fight and we stand with all of those fighting. However, I believe physical incarceration is only a symptom of the real illness: mental incarceration.

Fletcher: You said it is okay to notice the discrepancies between our values and our behaviors. This then became an exercise on exploring "who you want to be and who you end up actually being." Your language is empathetic, kind, and interactive. I imagine that is helpful to many of your readers since self-awareness can also be distressing at times. How did you choose a narrative tone for the workbook? Would you like to share any of your experiences noticing discrepancies between your values and behaviors?

Amin: My approach to writing our workbooks is the same as my approach to mentoring. It's important to me that I speak **with** the individual and not **at** them. It's important that they not only hear, but also feel that I am with them—that I understand and identify with their struggles because they were, and in many ways still are, my struggles too. When I write, I remind myself of the advice I got from two of my mentors. The first was Rashid. He taught me his unique definition of fortitude. He told me that fortitude is a must when calling others to do good and avoid doing wrong. Fortitude is patience, allowing time for

the individual to take heed to your message. It was then that I realized that people don't just change overnight; it takes time. Understanding this, I make sure my approach and narrative reflect that. My second mentor was Aqil. I asked him tips on teaching and mentoring. He advised me to meet people where they are. I accessed the empathy I needed to guide an individual to reach his goal, as opposed to telling him what to do—or even worse—scolding and talking down to him. See the difference? All in all, my philosophy reflects the old saying, "Treat people how you want to be treated."

In our "Spiritual Intelligence" section of the workbook, there is an exercise in which readers contemplate the person they want to be versus the person they currently are. Once the gap between who they are and who they want to be is made clear, First Reform S.E.L.F.[™] encourages our mentees to act toward living a life that aligns with their personal values.

Once I was honest with myself, it didn't take long for me to realize that there were big discrepancies between my values and my behaviors. For example, I wanted my homeboys to think of me as a loyal man, but on the flip side, I lied, cheated on, and mistreated my female partners. I wanted to be remembered as my "brother's keeper"; however, all my conflicts and acts of violence were toward my own people. I wanted to be "real," but I lied and deceived when it benefited me. I wanted to change, but I was the embodiment of insanity. I kept making the same self-destructive decisions expecting different results. I professed self-respect; however, I filled my mind with negative thoughts. I used drugs and took part in unhealthy practices like unprotected sex, poor dieting, and foul and divisive speech. When I highlighted these contradictions, I was able to bring about real change and become intentional about my growth. It was then I was able to be a man in practice and not just in theory.

Fletcher: Your exercise on writing a letter to your younger self requires significant vulnerability, even if no one else sees it! What are the outcomes from those who complete that exercise?

Amin: This exercise is one of my favorites. When reading the guys' letters, it never ceases to amaze me how resilient, self-aware, and

hopeful they are. It just supports my belief that everything you need is already within. It's just a matter of bringing it to the surface. It's moving when I read the advice they give themselves. One brother wrote, "Don't be a prisoner in your head...stay resilient and real. Be strong. This shall pass. You will explore religion and lose family. You will be stripped of your home. You will feel like you will never be free. Keep your smile and always be kind. In the end, you will win. Please...do not let this circumstance change you for the worse." These words resonated with me because I know firsthand how this place can change you for the worse if you don't take control of your growth.

Fletcher: *In one of the sections that explores behaviors to change, you provide a space to write down how some of those behaviors have yielded benefits. What a powerful reframe to help people understand how patterns came to be from a place of survival. That reframe may also help others take the first step toward change. And even more so, it may help those without a history of incarceration better empathize with the experiences that often led to incarceration. What are ways you believe family and friends of those who have been incarcerated or are currently incarcerated can better support their loved ones?*

Amin: The toll incarceration takes on our family and friends is too often overlooked. The truth is, our family and friends are doing time themselves. So my advice will be one and the same: take time to invest in yourself and grow together. If you have the means, buy and read books together, participate in family workshops that are available at the facility, and join support groups. I want to reiterate: *grow together*. This time can be used to get down to the nitty gritty of your relationship, serving as a means to work through issues and strengthen your connection.

Fletcher: *What other thoughts would you like to share about your program and workbook? Any advice or recommendations for others navigating personal growth while in prison or following incarceration?*

Amin: During a time where the call for reform is at its loudest, it's important that we remember true change starts within. The conditions of people will not change until they change the conditions within themselves.

At First Reform S.E.L.F.[™], we have two approaches. An individual approach and a societal approach. With our individual approach, we take valuable self-help tools and personal development skills and turn them into thought-provoking workbooks, interactive journals, and courses that will cultivate healthy core values within our incarcerated youth, women, and men. We currently have our mentorship program, in which we take our mentees on a journey through our four unique aspects of S.E.L.F. (Spiritual Intelligence, Emotional Literacy, Leadership Qualities, and Financial Stability).

We also have workbooks on time management, identifying personal values, a course on criminal and addictive thinking, and other published works on intentional growth and self-reform. All of it can be found on our site: FirstReformSELF.com.

With our societal approach, we advocate for prison reform and transformational justice over punishment and warehousing. The way this country does prison does not work. We need to be focusing on healing, rehabilitation, and getting to the "why" behind the crimes. That is what transformational justice is about. And do not get me wrong, accountability is very important, but transformational justice encourages healing and rehabilitation for all parties involved.

Your past mistakes do not define your future greatness. Everything you need to reach and surpass your potential is already in you. It's just a matter of believing in your worth and bringing it to the surface. Find comfort in your "why" or your purpose because it is in that comfort that you're going to find the strength needed to push through the challenges. Remember, true change starts within!



First Reform S.E.L.F.™ is offering 50 free giveaway copies of “Identifying Our 5 Personal Values Workbook” (1 per person) to the first 50 *Iron City Magazine* readers who reach out to:

First Reform S.E.L.F.™ via
 mail: P.O Box 11910 Gwynn Oak, MD 21207,
 email: FirstReformSELF@gmail.com,
 or contact webpage: www.firstreformself.com
 and mention the *Iron City Magazine* promotion
 to request your free copy of “Identifying Our 5
 Personal Values Workbook.”

This promotion will last until July 2022.



Pablo Picollo Sings
 Steve Fegan, California
 Acrylic on Canvas Pad, 2020
 Justice Arts Coalition Artwork

Death By Covid

Elton Kelley, California

March 17, 2020:

On a sunny and quiet Tuesday afternoon, San Quentin's administration completely suspended all inmate contact with the outside world in an attempt to keep its population safe from the Covid pandemic ravaging outside. Family visits, self-help groups, rehabilitative programs, college classes and all other programs are halted, as are mental health programs. In the same stroke of a pen, medical and dental services are reduced to crisis intervention mode or emergencies only. Inmate library services are curtailed: No in-person recreational or legal library services. Fortunately, I'm housed where there is room to move about, interact with people, exercise, get sunshine, watch the deer, wildlife and people feeding the ever-present Canada geese, pigeons, seagulls and Mallard ducks.

March 19, 2020:

My primary care physician (PCP) insists I move to one of the "blocks," one of several **five-story** structures having 500 cells in the center of a domed shell. She says it's to allow for better social isolation and to protect my health. I object, contending my health is better preserved where I am. I'm overruled.

March 23, 2020:

Six people, myself included, aged 65 and with underlying medical conditions, are gathered and informed of impending moves. I renew my objection to being moved. The lieutenant in charge responds: "This comes from the governor. You're going." I'm overruled again. About 8pm we roll out.

West Block, my new housing, is filthy dirty. Around the inside perimeter of the shell, between tiers 2 & 3 and 4 & 5, there are catwalks for the COs to keep an eye on things. The catwalks are protected from inmate insurgencies by coils of razor wire. (Note from the future: I've never seen anyone on the catwalks.)

The razor wire is the target in a game the upper tier inmates play: See who can get their trash to hang in the wire. What doesn't get caught in the razor wire lands on the common area floor below. Hanging on the wire and littered on the floor are food scraps, apple cores, banana

132

and orange peels, leaking cartons of soured milk, paper, toilet tissue cores, trays of half-eaten meals, old socks, worn-out tees, skid-marked boxers, sheets, pillow cases, orange mesh laundry bags, cardboard, bread slices, and all manner of plastic bags, each bit dusty with age. I suspect it is all loaded with germs, bacteria, and other microbial—if not alien—life. These are the products of "winning." There is little, if any, cleaning of the common area beyond a cursory once-daily sweep.

The room I'm assigned to has an open front, just like the other 499 rooms. There's nothing to stop the debris and germs from infiltrating. The inadequate ventilation allows the stench of spoiled food and human waste to permeate. The conditions here are far worse than the dorms from which I came.

March 26, 2020:

Daily Covid symptoms and temperature checking begin. Anyone over 101° is sent to the infirmary. I'm 97.5°.

April 22, 2020:

About 100 people are transferred from the Q to Corcoran State Prison. Corcoran is a Valley Fever hotbed. Susceptible people are prohibited from being housed there. The 100 are moved without regard to their Valley Fever sensitivities. 97.3°

May 4, 2020:

I get a free ride to the county hospital for a minor heart attack. While under the heavy influence of morphine, I laughingly confess to being "allergic to bullets," despite having never been struck by one. Who knew morphine could be so much fun? Cardiologist stents my heart in two places. I will make a full recovery.

At the hospital, staff test me with my first Covid test. Results negative.

I consider my medical condition is partly owing to the failure of my PCP to treat my elevated cholesterol and my sedentary housing. I have no exercise options because the room is so cramped. 97.9°

May 6, 2020:

Back at the Q, I'm placed in a 21-day quarantine for potential contact with contaminated outside people—while staff come and go with only a temperature check.

I'm not allowed to have deodorant, soap, toothpaste, floss, comb, hair brush, TV, word processor, magazines, newspapers, pens, writing paper pads, envelopes, postage stamps, or any other personal property, personal food, nor clothing other than what I wore on my return from the hospital.

I do get a book. The first 208 pages of "James Patterson's People vs Alex Cross" are missing. 96.7°

May 10, 2020:

I look out the door window and see my property boxed and neatly stacked. I ask the CO for my toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, comb, shampoo, sox and boxers. Request denied. 97.2°

May 19, 2020:

Quarantine complete. I'm brought back to my housing at West Block without my property.

Never mind that my goods are right there in plain sight and ready to go. I'm made to walk past it, leaving it all behind. Meanwhile, no clothes other than what's on my back, and no food, hygiene, reading or letter writing. Great.

My bunkie is away at his prison job. I steal a toothbrush from his stuff and wash it in hot, soapy water, then clean my teeth for the first time since May 4. I clean the brush again and put it back. He's none the wiser. 96.9°

May 21, 2020:

Bunkie returns from his kitchen job and catches me getting his toothbrush. Busted. I act like I'm remorseful, but I'm not, and promise to replace it. (I did.) 97.4°

May 22, 2020:

I get my property after making nice to a CO; this is the prison version of social engineering.

The whole method strikes me as game playing; testing for temperament. Piss off the CO and your stuff gets lost. 98.7°

May 23, 2020:

Bunkie tests asymptomatic Covid positive. I'm not tested. We're both quarantined to quarters. I fear becoming infected but they refuse

to move me to safer, uninfected quarters due to overcrowding. Because the face of our "house" is open, the dirt, germs and trash infiltrates as the bunkie's Covid germs exfiltrates. This venue of cross-contamination is lost on COs and medical staff. 96.7°

May 31, 2020:

SQN reports that on this date The Q has no active cases.

Today approximately 100 inmates arrive at San Quentin from California Institute for Men, a facility with many test-positive cases. 99.7°

June 9, 2020:

We are now in week 12 of Covid isolation. 97.4

June 26, 2020:

CDCR Secretary is shown in TV interview stumbling on the question of exactly how many inmates have tested Covid positive, and how does he know? The interviewer wants to know how the Secretary can be so sure of his numbers if inmates are untested? 99.1°

June 28, 2020:

San Quentin reports 1011 active cases and no deaths.

The entire prison gets Covid tested. Mine returns negative. Bunkie is positive again/still. My quarantine continues because they still refuse to move me to safer quarters. I'm constantly exposed to contamination from bunkie. Our quarantine clock is reset to another 21 days. 97.5°

June 29, 2020:

Normal dinner time is 6:30pm. Confusion abounds due to Covid outbreak in the kitchen.

Dinner makes it to the house at 10:00pm. Starving. 97.9°

June 30, 2020:

One half of first tier's population (half of 200) tests Covid positive.

Covid ignorance looms large, evidenced by bringing in five 36-inch pedestal fans and placing them on the first floor to circulate contaminated air to all tiers. I anticipate watching the virus spread throughout the 500 houses. 97.4°

July 1, 2020:

Kitchen is officially closed due to Covid. We're being fed three bag lunches. It's all carbs and starches: crackers, pretzels, cookies, bread, and cheese. No fruit or veg. 97.7°

July 5, 2020:

Catered meals replace bag lunches. Breakfast and lunches are looking mighty fine compared to the bags. Dinners are most excellent. Lots of pasta, bits of meat, veg and fresh cheese.

Portions seem a bit small. 98.2°

July 7, 2020:

My third Covid test. Quarantine due to bunkie continues. 97.0°

July 9, 2020:

Prison University Project (PUP) reports that 50 SQ inmates are in outside local hospitals being treated for Covid symptoms.

Quoted from PUP's leader on the transfer from CIM to SQ: "...that whole episode merely reflected what happens when an extraordinary capacity for magical thinking converges with overwhelming political pressure, and desperation, to create safety where there is simply none to be found."

July 10, 2020:

My birthday gift from home arrived today. The delivering CO tears the box open to inspect the TV for contraband, all but destroying the box in the process. A good box is a must-have for when I'm moved again. I'll have to find some glue and bits of cardboard for repairs.

TV set up. Check. Wires plugged in. Check. Programmed for my channels. Check. Let the channel surfing begin. Happy 67th to me. 99.0°

July 12, 2020:

MD makes a house call to share that my July 7 Covid test came back positive. No-Brainer, that one. I'm asymptomatic. Quarantine clock reset again: 21 days. My emotions are fairly numbed by now.

TV news report shows giant tents being erected on our baseball diamond to house the Covid sick. Also in the news are civilian protests at the prison gates demanding inmates be released to prevent Death

by Covid. The fear is real among everyone here, myself included. The administration implements riot-prevention lockdown of all inmates in response to the demonstrators. 98.2°

July 15, 2020:

Immediately after setting up the TV, I was sucked into that particular mindless vacuous state that TV tends to induce until...

A CO informed me to pack my gear. I'm moving. He doesn't know where to. After packing, I'm informed that I'm allowed to take only prescription meds, two books/magazines, writing paper, pen/pencil. No hygiene. No toothbrush. No food/coffee. No clothes. No nothing. 98.8°

July 16, 2020:

I'm moved to the Alternate Care Center (ACC) which has been staffed with non-CDCR contracted medical personnel. Such a contrast in attitude: state nurses are abrupt, rude, loud and brash. Contract staff are congenial, caring, conversational and seem genuinely interested.

The ACC is not in the tents shown on the TV news. Rather, the ACC is located in a prison manufacturing warehouse stripped and repurposed for Covid. The prison had been using it to build desk chairs until Covid struck. Enslaved prison workers are still forced to work for pennies per hour. It really is the last legal form of slave labor according to the 13th Amendment: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Overhead is a twenty-foot tall steel-beamed rafter ceiling. Lint, dust, dirt and who knows what else regularly falls to the floor or onto the beds, bedding and people below. There is no space heating, cooling or ventilation system.

The Level 1 (low risk) area is for those who tested positive but are asymptomatic. It looks to have room for about 160 beds spaced six feet apart in a wide-open gymnasium-style space.

The Level 2 (high risk) area houses something like 60 beds for those who have mild Covid symptoms, or are asymptomatic but aged 65 plus with underlying medical conditions. A wall separates level 1 and 2.

The Level 3 (critical care) area is an isolation ward with about 25 beds, used for critical care patients who are highly symptomatic.

The restroom for all patients is located in The Level 2 zone (high

risk). People from Level 1 (low risk) and Level 3 (critical care) must go into the Level 2 zone, and risk becoming more infected, or risk infecting others to a greater degree, depending from which zone they came.

The restroom is equipped with just one urinal, two wash basins and four commodes. Above one of the commodes hangs a hand-written sign saying the commode has been repurposed as a urinal. Of the three remaining commodes, one is non-functionally clogged. Lines form to use the porcelain facilities.

We discover that the hot water runs from about 6AM to 8AM. Then it's unable to keep up with demand. Done for the day.

The guy at the sink cleaning his teeth has the hot water spigot full on. When he finishes he walks away, tap running wide open.

To the nursing staff I insist, by polite request, that my insulin syringes be drawn in my presence to ensure I get the right stuff, in the right amounts. This is my answer to the problem of state nurses inadvertently giving me the wrong stuff, in the wrong amount, which would be fatal. It's my life and no one will care for me like I will.

The contract medical staff collects daily vital signs with blood pressure (BP) 110/68, oxygen level (OX) 92%, Pulse (P) 89, Temperature (T) 98.2°

July 17, 2020:

Trailers for showers and toilets arrive. COs post a sign restricting toilet use to ten minutes at the top of the hour. The sign continues: "depending on staff." We interpret its meaning as "if we feel like it."

BP 121/71, OX 98, P 77, T 97.9°

July 18, 2020:

Thus far we have no towels, bar soap, toothpaste, or other hygiene supplies. Also no laundry service, mail service or mailing supplies.

Some people packed and brought all their stuff. Some of those were allowed to have it bedside (the Haves), while arbitrarily others are not (the Have-nots). Still others were not allowed to bring anything at all. The inconsistency of privilege drives the coffee fiends to the Haves for a fix.

A self-appointed inmate designated himself as registrar of complaints. The Captain tells him he is allowed to bring only two complaints per day.

The planning and foresight that seems to have gone into the ACC appears to fall into two primary categories: 1) Thoughtlessness or shortsightedness borne of laziness, ineptitude, or simply a refusal to apply consideration and empathy for sick or dying people, or 2) see number 1.

Ambulances are a regular appearance as the medical staff ship people off to the hospital. CDCR's Death by Covid Toll reaches 47 human beings. 19 from San Quentin alone.

The deliberate harm, pain and suffering put needlessly upon people is hard to fathom. The COs bark, yell and threaten people as if they were cattlemen ranging beef.

BP 101/69, OX 96%, P 86, T 98.5°

July 19, 2020:

The local TV news report shows many people protesting again at San Quentin's gates, demanding the prison and governor free the population to prevent Death by Covid. A group swells in front of the TV. Excitement builds among the group as they voice hopes of going home early. Some to avoid the plague.

A tremendous pressure is building to reduce prison populations. Will Governor Newsom cave? Where will it end? Will California abolish its current incarceration model? What would I do if I went home? Where would I live? Do I have enough money saved?

BP 115/74, OX 97%, P 86 T 98.5°

July 20, 2020:

San Quentin News (Apr-Aug. 2020) reports 2,089 inmates are stricken with Covid at SQ.

A contractor is in the ACC installing a temporary ventilation system. Indoors they've suspended clear polyvinyl tubing from the transoms overhead that electrical and compressed air supplies to the former workstations. Outside are three huge air pumps, each with 4 push ports and 4 pull ports. The 24-inch polyvinyl tubes now route from the pumps to the farthest reaches of the human storehouse, bringing a complete change of air.

The plastic ductwork is quite a sight to see when first starting up. The droopy plastic hollows pillow like a rat going down a snake's gullet-only faster. And the deafening bellows of plastic snapping firm when pressure slaps the last few inches of vinyl into roundness could wake the

dead. But why would sick and dying people need quiet?

We've been bunking on aluminum tube-framed camping cots since I arrived. Surprise, surprise, surprise. The California National Guard is here today and they're assembling real in home hospital style beds with electro-mechanical features for head and foot adjustments. And whose mattresses are no less comfy than a pillow-top bed. OMG. Final tally is about 275 beds.

There are about 115 guys in Level 1, 90 or so in Level 2, where I have been assigned. Level 3 is fuller, too.

BP 120/66, OX 96%, P 76, T 97.9°

July 22, 2020:

On May 3, I weighed 209 pounds. Three days ago I tipped the scales at 196.4. My BMI max is 200 so I'm not freaking over the lost pounds much.

Someone brought in a mess of outdated magazines from the Marin Public Library. Good reading. Thank you.

My creative writing class is working remotely via the mail and assigned a reading passage from "Born a Crime" by Trevor Noah. It reminds me of myself during my growing up years: "I wasn't a lonely kid. I was good at being alone. I lived inside my head. I still live inside my head. To this day you can leave me alone for hours and I'm perfectly happy entertaining myself. I have to remember to be with people."

I had never heard or read of another person mirroring me so succinctly. It feels great to know I'm not alone. Still, I must make myself interact with people outside my head. BP 107/70, OX 97%, P 89, T 97.4°

July 23, 2020:

I had my first meet and greet with the MD assigned to my case. He was surprised to see me in Level 2. I replied it's likely CDCR is going strictly by the numbers: over 65 and diabetic. MD agreed. I gathered he was expecting someone less able-bodied.

Tonight a bunch of new guys moved into Level 3 (critical care). Some are very, very ill. Vomiting can be heard over at the commodes. I'll stay away till the germs blow out.

I'm reminded of when I was in county lockup fighting my case. A youngster came into our pod. Incarceration for the first time is a mind fuck for most people. He was scared beyond his wits and slashed the length of his forearms with a razor blade, missing his veins and

muscles. I cleaned and bandaged him as best I could with new socks. I told him to keep the socks on his arms because if the cops saw what he did, they would haul him off to the rubber room. A repeat offender in our cage asked me, "Why you helping the kid? Nobody helps people on the inside. Fucking leave him alone." I promised myself then and there that no matter what, I would maintain my civility during my ordeal.

BP 110/64, OX 96%, P 81, T 98.3°

July 24, 2020:

A whole herd of newbies arrived. The place is filling up. Hundreds of convicts, many of them violent, all uncaged and in an open gymnasium-style room. This is usually a recipe for disaster: riots, shankings and gang fights. Thankfully, everyone seems to be preoccupied with wanting to go home and saving themselves from Covid. So far everything is very cool. Met a guy doing paperwork for a Covid lawsuit. He let me copy his notes, which have good info, but they fall well short of what's needed to win release under Covid.

Sparrow's entry in *The Sun* (08/2020) rings true on my ears. "May 28: The word 'crybaby' has done untold damage to men. It says that anyone who cried, at any age, is not better than a baby." He continued, "Suppose an eight-year-old boy is hit in the face with a baseball. He breaks into tears and his contemporaries taunt him with this epithet. Gradually the boy stops crying. The next time he suffers physical pain, he will cry less or not at all. He has severed his ties to his own tender emotions, and now his only pleasure is making others cry." Wow. "In order to commit violence against another, you must first commit violence against yourself." I add to Sparrow's summation the violence inflicted upon the child by an abusive parent.

BP 117/74, OX 96, P 70, T 97.4°

July 25, 2020:

Morning chow is usually brought in around 6:30AM. Today it is 8:30AM. Rather than feeding hungry people, the sergeant lets the food stand to get cold for an additional 45 minutes.

The food delivery worker brought over just four boxes, each with 36 meals. $4 \times 36 = 144$ meals. There's about 160 bodies. Looks like some people are not getting fed this morning. Level 3 (critical care) has no TV. Level 2 (high risk) has a TV, but no antenna or cable.

Consequently, people from Level 2 and Level 3 are crossing over

to Level 1 (low risk) to visit, watch TV, pick up magazines, play cards and generally hang out and socialize. In an attempt to stave off cross-contamination, COs have cordoned off the passageway between Level 1 and Level 2, but not between Level 3 and Level 2.

Because the restroom is located in Level 2, people must cross between containment zones, but can't due to the new access restriction. Restroom use seems to have escaped the cumulative mental powers of the COs. People line up and complain about needing to use the forbidden facilities. About 15 minutes later, crossover socialization resumes.

BP 109/71, OX 98, P 89, T 98.0°

July 26, 2020:

The clogged commode remains unusable. 11 days and counting. It stinks as you think it should. A CO hands me a class-action lawsuit waiver stating I have all my medical equipment.

Because I wasn't allowed to bring my property, I don't sign. He mumbles something I can't hear. Then I find a supervisor CO and ask for my hearing aids. With a promise to bring them tomorrow, she pens a note on her nitrile glove. Later she drops her gloves in the trash. (Note from the future: I never did get my hearing aids.)

In CDCR land, when handed a paper, any paper, it is presumed true unless contested. Time is now to craft my rebuttal to the class-action waiver. Because I don't have access to a photocopier, I write my letter and six copies the 1400 AD way.

Danny is a big man. 325 pounds spread over a tall six-foot frame. He's one of the nicest men I've met here at The Q. He's also a new arrival to the ACC. This morning, I'm jonesing for a shot of java. Danny offers to give me a fix.

Obligated now to engage in conversation, I listen to Danny about his kids. His oldest daughter doesn't get along, he says. A cringe washes over me as he speaks. Danny was likely a fairly mean cuss in his youth, but it's plain to see those days are long in the past. Danny goes on about his son, and they get along well. I feel relieved his family hasn't completely abandoned him while he's been locked up for 38 years.

I have my spoonful of instant Folgers, a prison staple. It's in my cup awaiting a splash of hot water to make my brackish caffeine soup when Danny, not ready to turn loose our chat, volunteers that his parents hit the lotto some years back, netting them about \$10 million. I envision

abusive family members absconding with vast sums. Danny next tells me they've both passed on, leaving him the sole heir. I'm relieved. Closing his tale, he says he gets a monthly check for interest. A small amount goes on his prison account while the remainder accumulates along with the principal for when he gets out. I hope Danny has enough time left in him to enjoy some of his wealth.

My coffee wants milk, so I'm off to retrieve my carton, only to find some damn convict has stolen it. What a circus. A buddy reminds me prison is a "shit show." BP 110/62, OX 96, P 62, T 98.1°

July 27, 2020:

It's a crazy night again. Just past midnight a CO got a radio call that someone was walking the grounds. Alone. Outside. In the dark.

All hell breaks loose because all exits are manned, or supposed to be. Escaping is not allowed. Before the COs could figure out 1) How he escaped the ACC, and 2) How he wandered back into Level 3 (critical care), he was, unbeknownst to the COs, back in his bunk pretending to be asleep.

It wasn't long before that particular someone was collected and taken to the watch station. I suspect he was interrogated and he likely explained about the outside door in Level 2, you know, the one that was supposed to be manned...

I can imagine such a conversation were it me:

CO: What were you doing outside? Me: Getting some fresh air.

CO: You're not allowed outside. Those doors are out of bounds. Me: They are?

CO: Turn around, put your hands behind your back. Me: (I comply.)

CO: Come with me.

Me: (I'm escorted to the watch station where there are 15 or 18 more COs. There's safety in numbers, you know.)

Sgt: What were you doing outside?

Me: Nothing.

Sgt: That area is out of bounds. (He's excited and talking very loud.)

Me: I didn't know that. When did that happen?

Sgt: It's always been that way. How long have you been here?

Me: (I mentally count the days.) Eleven days.

Sgt: Well, then you should have known.

Me: I didn't know it was out of bounds. (These rules must have

been given telepathically because there are no signs. I play along with this guy who is as full of crap as an average cow.)

Sgt: How could you not have known?

Me: (I remain silent wearing a stoic, dumb as shit expression. It works every time to defuse a hot-headed CO.)

Sgt: (He puts on the confused face, like why won't I react? COs feed on people who react and go ballistic.)

Me: (I continue staring at his face silently.) Sgt: Give me your ID.

Me: I dig it out of my hip pocket using a cuffed hand. Another CO, this one on a donut diet, takes my ID and hands it to the sergeant.)

Sgt: I could write you up on a Rules Violation Report. Then those 84 days of good conduct credit you just got are gone! (He's yelling now.) This is serious.

Me: (I'm still quiet.)

Sgt: (Still yelling about something. His face is reddened and has bulging neck veins.)

Me: (The sergeant isn't thinking that I realize if he gives me a write-up then the whole lot of them will get their own disciplinary write-ups because someone was supposed to be posted at a door, but wasn't. So I remain calm and collected.)

The COs do uncuff the guy and let him go back to bed. Then the COs are running around like chickens without heads trying to figure out: 1) Who was assigned to the post, and 2) How to report the event so they don't get in trouble.

About 1:30 AM I get to doze off.

BP 105/61, OX 95, P 72, T 97.2°

July 28, 2020:

San Quentin's Covid death toll is now 19 human beings. 2,159 Q inmates (3,590 population) test Covid positive.

My new neighbor introduced himself. He is a slight man, fair-complected, clean shaven and nearing my age. He seems mostly absent of hair.

John volunteers that he is a Ferrous Equinologist. I deduce that the title translates to something like one who studies iron horses. Steam locomotives to you and me. I'm impressed with his depth of knowledge about train routes and interchanges. It's amazing, and totally useless... unless one is a train nut.

It appears the end of catered food is upon us. For AM chow I was

handed a brown bag of carbs, no fruit, veg or protein and a second, identical bag. Two lunches and no breakfast. Train guy says he got two breakfasts and no lunch. I ask, but he doesn't want to trade. And I was beginning to think he was likeable. He's probably the one who stole my milk. I miss the pasta already.

BP 113/62, OX 96, P 77, T 97.2°

July 30, 2020:

I've been approached by a guy recruiting for a hunger strike to contest being moved to the ACC without his property, like I was, due to Covid. He was hoping to have been released to the street. I agreed with him that we got a crappy deal but a hunger strike seems too extreme.

Ambulances continue to come and go through the day taking Level 3 patients to the hospital. A few "monkey suits" are running around the ACC today. People from FEMA and CDCR in Sacramento checking out the ACC. CDCR is not allowing inmate interviewing. I would like to have talked about the commode that is still clogged since July 16.

An RN stops by to tell me I'm on medical's cleared list for returning to regular housing. She complains that she has become close to many of us and will miss our warm personalities. This was her first time working inside a prison, and her in-prison experience was not at all like what she was led to believe at her orientation. I envision the CDCR perpetuating upon their group the age-old scare tactic that we're all cold, hardened, irredeemable convicts. I share that I'm glad to have been a part of her experiences.

Attachments and dissolutions come with hanging out with the incarcerated, I want to say to her. People come. People go. Seldom do they look back to those they once called "friend," once said "love ya" to, once spent years together in a cage, and, for many, were intimate lovers.

As I recall from my Coalition for Social Justice training, one key to successful rehabilitation lies in the building of relationships that have elements of healing, helping, compassion and empathy. Sadly, the obvious need for positive human relationships is never factored into inmate moves, transitions or in-prison personal growth.

Once medical clears someone to go, then the COs build their own to-go list. At the watch podium, I ask if my name is on his list. CO says, "I don't have a list." I stand there giving him my silent, stupid look. He then asks, "What's your name?" I tell him. "No, you're not on it," he says. I figure he's got his own special kind of rocket science going on,

because, as we see later...

Suze Orman reports in AARP, "Then I remind myself that we are defined by how we think, feel and act. Not by what others project onto us. And I feel great." Just what I needed.

At the end of the day, my ACC quarantine ends. It seems I was on the list after all. Returning to my "house" in West Block, I find that my bunkie is still quarantined. Even though he didn't get moved to the ACC after testing positive three times. Bunkie says his MD cleared him about 7 days ago, but he is still on the list. So I'm back on quarantine till the computer clears him. Problem is the COs won't let him out to go to medical to get cleared.

From all accounts, there seems to be no real promise of a vaccine arriving anytime soon, and a real threat of another Covid wave in our future. God help us all.

BP 113/67, OX 92, P 70, T 97.5°

Update October 20, 2020:

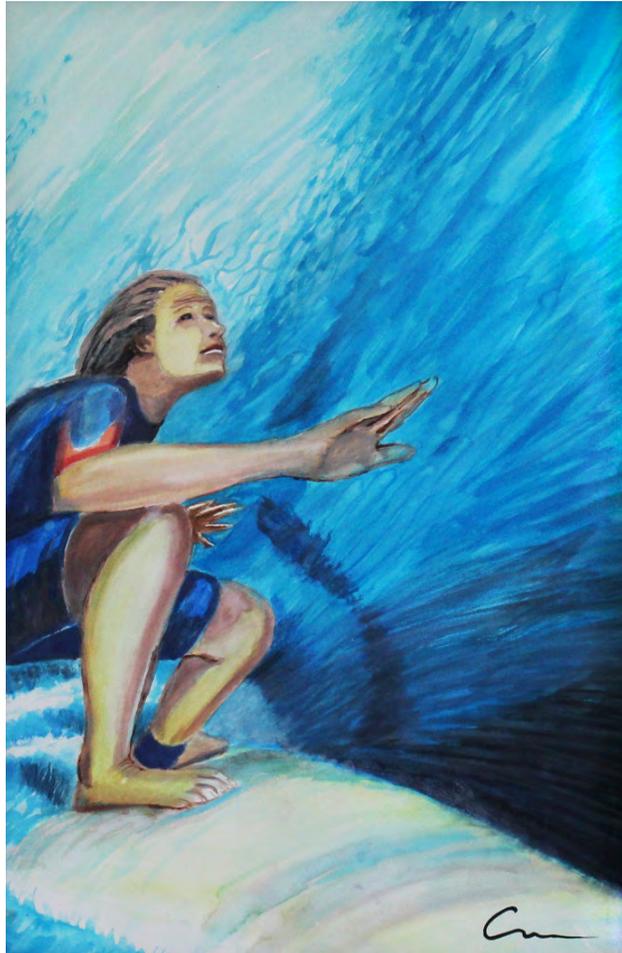
Today Bay Area TV station KQVR 13 aired a report stating the court (of Appeals) has ordered San Quentin officials to release or transfer about 1,000 inmates.

Two days later, during KCRA 3 News at 6AM's broadcast, its screen crawler stated the order is from California District 1 Court of Appeals, ordering the CDCR to reduce San Quentin's population to less than its design capacity, finding fault with prison officials for having been "deliberately indifferent" to the medical needs of sickened inmates, noting the 28 people who have died due to Covid.

I was elsewhere informed that the above litigation is separate from another lawsuit in Marin County (where the prison is located) filed by hundreds of inmates against the CDCR and San Quentin administrators seeking Covid release. Their claims are, again, deliberate indifference to the medical needs of inmates, and that their sentences did not include Death by Covid. More precisely, the prison is held to the responsibility to keep its inmates safe from harm's way, and failed to do so in spite of knowing there was potential for Covid fatality.

There is pain in my journals. In real life sometimes I can hide it; other times it escapes into the presence. Staying alive in the face of a pandemic is serious business, made even more so when dealing with institutional administrations befuddled by "an extraordinary capacity for magical thinking." This pain is fully immersing and subliminal

on a supra-human scale, affecting everything one feels and does while incarcerated. Stifling anger, feigning happiness, and fending off depression and oppression are constants. As I learn to grow senses and feelings I have never before had, I must then immediately wrap them tightly as I await my ticket through the front doors and then let my newfound wings bring me flight.



Untitled 1
Ciriaco Valencia, California
2018
Project PAINT Artwork

For My Pops

B.E. The Truth, California

MY Father, Otis Gamble, was an officer for the Sacramento police department. Don't know how long, or any other details involved. In July 1972, when I was thirteen years of age, he did come to pay me a visit. He handed me a \$20.00 dollar bill and we talked. It was then that I was introduced to two younger, twin brothers and one fine looking sister—their names and ages long forgotten. In 1977, while I was in the army stationed in Germany, my brother Mario would write. Telling me that Otis would come over frequently to inquire about my well-being. This is my letter to my Father, Otis Gamble.

Hey, Pops! Man, it sure was rough comin' up as a lil' dude in Oakland without ya, doing things that young boys do, and dealing with joys and pains was blurry and frantic without you. Eventually things came natural, but there were still many, many struggles I had to deal with like learning to ride a bicycle, play baseball, protect myself, start relationships, do school, and swim. Other neighborhood family members looked out for me, but within these moments things were not the same without your physical and guiding presence.

It's strange about a twist of fate, a shocking paradox I couldn't escape. Only to modulate, to endure, or to burn, and become mindful of the lesson learned.

Mom and Grandma drove me up the wall with their strict, tough-love standard. Always keeping me in Church! I could hardly enjoy life as a growing boy in the 60s. I spent most of the time with my best friend's family because I ADMIRE their family vibe, which I didn't experience, but longed for. I was very shy, and my overall identity was difficult to locate, so I isolated a lot. Unknowingly, God's hands were protecting me. However, I missed out on going to a professional sporting event, missed out on my senior prom, and missed out on someone having my back.

It's strange about a twist of fate, a shocking paradox I couldn't escape. Only to modulate, to endure, or to burn, and become mindful of the lesson learned.

However, by the same token you missed a lot of things I accomplished like earning two SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT BONUS AWARDS, when employed at Mare Island N.S.Y. in 1975 to 1976. You would have been pleased how I excelled in sports. I played defensive end and wide receiver in football. I was an excellent center fielder in baseball, and won first place in a ping pong tournament in August 1991. But the stand out sport was BASKETBALL! I could dribble with either hand, could leap high, and had a jump shot like Oscar Robinson. In 1969, I was a diehard Raiders, A's, and Warriors fan. I needed for us to share my aspirations, and sorely missed not having you around.

It's strange about a twist of fate, a shocking paradox I couldn't escape. Only to modulate, to endure, or to burn, and become mindful of the lesson learned.

After graduating high school in June 1976, I joined the Army, went through basic training at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and scored 466 points out of 500 on the final physical training test. I entered school to complete RADIO REPAIR, then in May 1977, I flew over the Atlantic Ocean into Germany. I was there two and a half years and earned an ARMY SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT BRONZE MEDAL, for MERITORIOUS SERVICE, and HONORABLY DISCHARGED in November 1979 as a SPECIALIST FOUR. When I asked Mom or Grandma about you, they'd just say, "He's no good, so stop wasting your breath." So in 1982, I set off to locate you in Sacramento, to get your version for why you left, but you were not listed in the phone book.

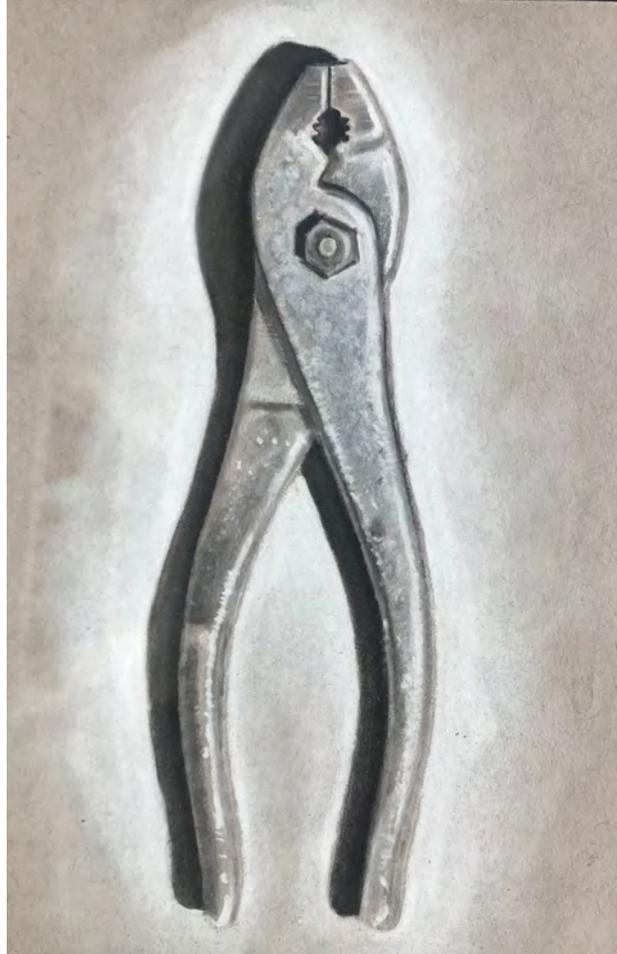
It's strange about a twist of fate, a shocking paradox I couldn't escape. Only to modulate, to endure, or to burn, and become mindful of the lesson learned.

I became a great cook, and learned responsibilities from working to become independent with little or no supervision. I also became a ladies man. I found out late in the game (yes, I'm slow), but nonetheless I was cool. You know what Pops, HOW DID I acquire these writing skills? Creating fictional stories with vivid imagination, and heartfelt poetry, are these talents from you? I developed a deep, deep passion for R&B music at the age of eight. The Temptations were my favorite group, but in the 70s, FUNK MUSIC arrived and I loved the energy it

supplied.

In June 1994, I was married to a wonderful and gorgeous lady, Camille Novy, who bore us two darling daughters, Dolores and Denise. I planned to find you once again to let you know that you're a Grandpa of two adorable baby girls. Then we could sit, hash out things, and then start a Father/son relationship. However, you once again left me, Pops! I DON'T UNDERSTAND, but REST IN PEACE POPS. I'll do my best to push forward, to take care of my family, and do things that are just, right, and honorable. By the way, I found my identity. And you know something, Pops? We do share much in common; you see, your last name GAMBLE, are choices of my existence in this world! MUCH LOVE, POPS, from your son Bryant.

It's strange about a twist of fate, a shocking paradox I couldn't escape. Only to modulate, to endure, or to burn, and become mindful of the lesson learned.



Channel Changer

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

Compressed Charcoal on Gray Toned Paper, 2016

The Numbers Game

Matthew Feeney, Minnesota

What if you were told that by using a special scientific algorithm based on factors including your weight, social security number, and eye color, doctors predict you have a 6.25% chance of dying within the next 5 years? While statistically that's a fairly low number, it does represent a significant chance, one that can't be ignored. Optimists point out that same statistic also means there is a 93.75% chance you'll survive just fine. And it's just a number predicted by some mathematical formula, so it doesn't necessarily apply to you, does it?

In a healthy society, the doctors would strive to do whatever possible to make sure you had the proper treatment, assistance, and tools to ensure you had the greatest odds of success and decrease that 6.25% prediction.

But what if you lived in a world where the doctors did the opposite? If society believed that due to the 6.25% chance that you'll die, you should be presumed and treated as dead now. Instead of helping you, what if upon release from the hospital, the newspapers published your photo and your community held a meeting to vocalize their opposition to a sick person moving into their neighborhood? What if your percentage prevented you from taking a walk in the park? Or made it illegal to have a cell phone or internet access like everyone else. If you are lucky enough to even find a job, the government will send agents to regularly talk to your boss and interrupt your work. You'll be given special curfews and need to socially distance yourself from certain establishments. You may even be forced to wear a GPS ankle bracelet and required to take yearly polygraph tests (at your own expense) to ensure you're in full compliance with all these restrictions. What if the County Attorney acknowledged in writing that he knows those very restrictions he placed on you will cause such extreme stress that the restrictions themselves will increase the likelihood of you dying?

You'd be horrified at such a scenario, such gross misuse of resources. But this is exactly what the State of Minnesota has been doing for decades and is still doing today.

A person charged with a sex offense is sentenced to a predetermined amount of time in a prison. As a sex offender's sentence nears completion, the Department of Corrections applies all sorts of mystical pseudo-scientific actuarial tools in an attempt to do the impossible: to predict the future.

One of these actuarial tools called the MnSOST [Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool] v 4.0 predicted that I had a 6.25% recidivism rate. In argumenta, let's say that is an accurate prediction. That means, of 100 men with my similar history and score, this formula predicts that only 6.25 of them will commit another sex offense within 5 years. Mathematically, that also means that 93.75 of those 100 men will NOT reoffend and will go on to live a healthy and productive life. Yet because it is impossible to determine which 6 individuals will reoffend, the State and County Attorney choose to ascribe to preventative detention and lock up all 100 men in a special secured facility. While the state concedes that statistically speaking, 93.75 of those men are now and will forever remain innocent of any future crime, the state still seeks commitment of all 100 of them for an "indeterminate" amount of time (a de facto life sentence). Because no one can predict the future or prove a negative, there is no way for anyone so accused to prove in a court of law that they won't commit a future crime; there is little legal defense to this scam.

The Constitution is supposed to ensure that all individuals are considered "innocent until proven guilty" in a court of law. The state skirts this pesky Constitutional issue by moving these commitment procedures into the civil court (different than a criminal court) and pretending that locking someone up against their will is not punishment. Federal Court Judge Donovan Frank disagreed and called Minnesota's civil commitment system "Draconian" and ruled MSOP [Minnesota Sex Offender Program] "unconstitutional." Unfortunately his ruling was overturned upon appeal by the state. The state claims that MSOP is not prison because the men are called "clients" instead of prisoners. No matter what you call it, locking up men who have already served their sentence and having them live locked in cells surrounded by razor-wired fences and guards is an expensive form of preventative incarceration.

Remember, these guys already did their time for their crime. They are now being treated as if they're guilty of committing another crime. They're being incarcerated by predictive numbers they were assigned by some pseudo-scientific algorithm. Lest you think these numbers are based on hard science, the earlier version of the MnSOST 3.12 gave me a 83% chance of recidivism. The professionals revised how the algorithm reads and weighs factors and created a new and improved MnSOST version 4.0 that predicted I had a 6.25% chance of failure.

The same facts were used by both tests. Nothing changed except how they decided to factor the data. How accurate would you consider a math test that one day gave you an 83% but when your exact same answer sheet was scored the next day, the test gave you a 6.25%? Such discrepancies indicate that neither version of this test is accurate, yet people's futures are being determined by this tool.

Using an arsenal of such tools is what civil commitment is based upon. It's the Salem witch trials all over, because how can an inmate argue with percentage points arrived at by so-called experts? Who can accurately predict the future? Crystal balls, horoscopes, and predictive mathematics are not a sound basis for justice. Let's use real science to support humanitarianism to help integrate released felons back into a world where they are not only welcomed but assisted in becoming law-abiding, tax-paying members of society. Now THAT's a society I'd be proud to be a part of.

The Making of a Monster

Burnice Ford, Florida

In any country, prison is where society sends its failures. But in this country, society itself is failing.

This quote is from an Ice Cube song recorded back in the '90s. It was true then, and it is true today. Prison is supposed to rehabilitate those who act defiantly in society; however, prisons in America are creating monsters.

Societal apathy is a primary evil where most citizens couldn't care less about what happens to other people, including those in prisons. The problem is, if they run into one of these monsters, they will wish they had cared. If one of these monsters gets out of prison and hurts or kills one of their loved ones, then it'll be too late for them to care.

It is so easy for some people to herald, "Lock 'em up and throw away the key," but that's unfair. For instance, if a person is caught stealing bubblegum on three different occasions, their crimes are elevated from misdemeanors to felonies, and they are then eligible to be sentenced to prison.

Now, most people wouldn't consider that type of person a danger to society, so wanting them locked away for life is out of the question.

Actually, a person who commits nonviolent crimes is usually sentenced to only a year and a day for their first time in prison. But what many don't understand is that doing less than a year in a U.S. prison is more than enough time to turn a mild kitten into a ferocious lion or worse... into a monster!

Before I digress, let me clarify that not everyone who gets out of prison is a monster. In fact, some do come out better than they came in. Also, a person doesn't become a monster because they served an excessive amount of time in prison. What determines whether a person becomes a monster or not is what happens to them in prison.

There used to be plenty of programs that helped inmates. Now, every year, funds are cut and more and more programs are ended. There was a time when an inmate could learn a trade and walk out of prison with a college degree. Today, an inmate is lucky to even get out with a GED.

Without programs that help stimulate inmates' minds, they are left to indulge in all the bullcrap prison has to offer.

There are all types of people who come to prison. For example, there are the weak, the timid, the curious, and the followers. Prison

predators can smell a weak, timid person before they step off the bus. These inmates have only a few options for survival. They include being housed in solitary confinement, paying for protection, or joining a gang.

None of these options is effective. Studies have shown that living too long in isolation can have negative psychological effects. Those who pay for protection are tagged as bitches and will eventually be forced to wear prison panties. And joining a gang will subject them to doing outrageous things like stabbing someone on command. Any of these events can turn inmates into monsters.

Then we have the followers and curious inmates. They want to be around the popular inmates, run with the crowd, or just be part of something. But as they say, "Curiosity killed the cat," which is what happens to them. They are also easily influenced to do something catastrophic. It doesn't take much to turn one of them into a monster.

Everyone has heard or read about inmates being raped, beaten, and extorted while in prison. These experiences cause an automatic change in behavior. These people may have never committed a violent crime, but because of what happens to them in prison, they come out killers.

Prison guards and correctional officers also contribute to making inmates into monsters. Convicted felons are already stressed and emotionally disturbed after being separated from their loved ones. Then they have to deal with unprofessional, antagonistic prison guards. I can confidently assert that every prisoner in the United States has witnessed a prison official commit, or encourage inmates to commit, a violent act on other inmates.

If an inmate does something guards don't like, instead of disciplining that inmate, the guards punish everyone. Then the guards say, "If you all don't like it, take it up with them." I've personally seen many inmates get hurt because of that. If only I had a dollar for every time I've heard an inmate say, "When I get out I'm going to find that guard and kill him!" The morphing into a monster.

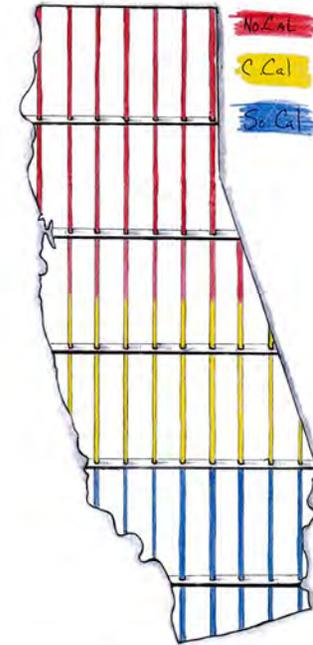
So who's to blame for this? The courts, law makers, prison officials?

Truthfully, the blame has to be on society. The people who put those people in their positions can also remove them. "We the People" are the ones who must get these problems rectified. More programs need to be available to help prisoners succeed in life. Those inmates who don't want anything in life need to be separated from those who do. Furthermore, prison guards need to be properly trained to become

part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

It's past time that society takes a look at what's happening in prisons. If this doesn't happen and one of those monsters hurts your loved ones, then you'll be to blame for doing nothing to stop it.

I, for one, would rather have a productive, civilized, ex-felon living around my family than a potential monster. How about you?



The Prison
State

over # 33 Locations to Serve
You. Prison Art: BY
APPLEGATE, THOMAS - V27045

The Prison State
Thomas Applegate, California
Colored Pencil on Paper, 2020
Project PAINT Artwork

Dehumanization by Design

Chris Cumo, Ohio

“Don’t worry,” the psychiatrist assured me while leaning back in his chair. “You’ll start to feel better in a couple of weeks.” But the medicines did nothing. About a month later, he hospitalized me against my wishes, an action colloquially designated “pink slipping.” Within a few years, I felt such distress that I took every pill in the house and was comatose for four days. Over the last quarter century, I have been an episodic tenant of psychiatric wards. No interpretation of the facts can document improvement in my mental health, certainly not after a few weeks’ treatment.

My decline predated these events. An immigrant eager to conform, I emulated my teachers, learning in fourth grade that God helps those who help themselves and that success requires education and tenacity. This message, reinforcing my propensity for introspection, taught me to escape my grim surroundings through Platonic devotion to cognition. Fleeing the senses’ crass reality, I resolved to think my way out of poverty by projecting images of prosperity and contentment onto the screen of my imagination. What seemed a natural connection among education, diligence, and advancement led me to earn a Ph.D. and publish books, book chapters, articles, encyclopedia entries, reviews, essays, and short stories.

Yet my idealism crumbled as I applied this doggedness to the job search. Academe convinced me, as it does many aspirants, that university teaching is a sublime privilege. But like Tantalus, I could not grasp my desires. The demands of writing for publication and applying for assistant professorships devoured time and energy without yielding employment. Too late I understood that innumerable applicants swamped the few openings. One scholar likened the pursuit of an academic job to the yearning to become a professional athlete or celebrity because heartache rather than success is the norm. This realization led me to broaden my search to nonacademic positions, which prioritize skills and experience above education. This insight shattered my confidence and faith in knowledge and studiousness, deepened my depression, fears, insecurities and anxiety, and led me to seek treatment.

But my psychiatric encounters were awful. I left that first practitioner for bragging and nauseam about his racehorse. Horses are not sinister, but their price, speed, and upkeep did not alleviate my

misery. Other psychiatrists were worse. One deemed me delusional for believing I have a Ph.D. and ordered me to a nearby ward. Another branded me a “loser” like all his patients. A third refused to prescribe a medicine, telling a colleague in my presence that I “would probably sell it on the street.” Still others abruptly changed my medicines, intensifying my symptoms. The tension was unendurable as I felt myself transformed into a violin string stretched to the breaking point. The assault crushed my feeble self-esteem. In retrospect I was a fool to want humane treatment from a cruel system. These woes preface my confession of having seen perhaps twenty to twenty-five psychiatrists and having endured ten involuntary hospitalizations over the years.

My near suicide triggered these confinements because psychiatrists erred on the side of caution. One remarked that, as a businessman first and a doctor second, he would not jeopardize his practice by risking a lawsuit if I killed myself. The safe course was to hospitalize me the seventy-two hours permitted by Ohio law absent a court order for a longer duration. Whenever family and friends thought my depression especially severe, they called a doctor or police to arrange my commitment.

A dismal sum, ten is the number I counted during my last hospitalization. Confined thirteen days without opportunity to consult an attorney or beg discharge from a judge or magistrate, I had time for minutiae. This ordeal followed a 2017 descent into exhaustion. Without real employment, I tried to subsist by cutting grass, writing several reviews and a book about autism, and editing encyclopedia entries about Indonesia. Such overwork is not happenstance but fundamental to capitalism, which dehumanizes by design. Although I had managed similar exertions for decades, I became psychotic that year, taunting my television for lacking resolve to kill me. I told my daughter about winning the 1900 Nobel Peace Prize despite not being born until 1964. A psychologist deemed this fantasy a delusion of grandeur even though psychosis terrifies rather than elevates. My edits degenerated into nonsense, and just before Thanksgiving, police and EMS took me to a hospital in southeastern Ohio, a region with bleak attachment to the past and penury. Places with no future inhabit an illusory earlier time: a golden age of innocence that never existed.

Not by my volition, I found myself naked. I protested, and a male nurse forced me upon a cot with such aggression that I urinated all over myself. Consciousness was fleeting the next days, but I remember parts

of my initial detainment—permitted to wear only briefs—in the ICU and my transfer to the psychiatric facility when a bed vacated. After about a week I learned that although shaving was forbidden, showering was permissible, and soap would be provided for the occasion. Finally I could scrub away urine’s stench, though nothing can erase my hospitalizations’ traumas.

I also learned that the ward housed patients and criminals. This revelation upset me because I recall no offenders in my previous hospitalizations, because dutiful citizens like me fear convicts, and because mental illness and criminality should not be conflated. One thug threatened to kill me. Guards were ubiquitous, especially during meals, when the communal gatherings threatened mayhem. Fights—triggering sirens and broadcasts of the words “code violence”—summoned guards to subdue the pugilists. Outsiders cannot learn of these events because the facility bans all recording devices, including cell phones.

At first, I tried to combat these circumstances, requesting a pen to petition nameless administrators for release. These letters disappeared, nothing changed, and I came to define my efforts as meaningless. Indeed, meaninglessness typifies depression. Months later I acquired copies of my records, which confirmed my suspicion that staff monitored my phone calls. Nowhere, however, could I find justification for the decision to detain me thirteen days without possibility of legal redress. One patient’s claim that he had been institutionalized nearly thirty years alarmed me, especially because the doctor dismissed it as derangement. Insanity was an inadequate explanation because that victim was neither less nor more lucid than anyone else there. The thought that he could not win freedom dispirited me.

These events confirmed what I have always known: a person’s destruction is easily accomplished. All that is necessary is captivity in a system without compassion, rationality, meaning, purpose, or hope of respite. The system—if such a word may be used to characterize cruelty—is remorseless because it denies occupants their humanity. Equally malevolent is psychiatrists’ absolute power; their ability to detain patients surpasses anything permissible in criminal law. Such authority, absent any counterweight, corrupts all who wield it.

Plato anticipated this danger over 2,300 years ago. In *The Republic*, he imagined Socrates and his companions’ attempts to define justice. The pragmatic Thrasymachus steered the discussion toward injustice,

declaring it “more mighty than justice.”¹ Glaucon amplified him, asserting that someone with boundless power and capacity for injustice will steal, kill, and “go into any house and lie with anyone he wished.”²

Against such evils, those of us who endure abuses can only dissent while knowing that limitless power precludes reform. Proof lies in the fact that over three years later, I have obtained neither video of my detention nor legal representation. One lawyer averred that the facility may have violated my civil rights but that such transgressions occur because juries seldom sympathize with the mentally ill. Americans fear what discomforts them, aim to stifle us, and want to purge us from society.

These facts haunt me, though I have learned to endure them in the way that 14th century Europeans confronted warfare, famine, and the Black Death. My endurance stems partly from a stoic understanding that although I cannot change events, I can control my response to them. I can choose to pour my intellect, passion, and energy into every action, even when failure is likelier than success. Conscious of my refusal to admit defeat, I acknowledge my traumas as indivisible atoms in my body and mind. Because these atoms are permanent, I cannot profit by trying to expel them. More concretely, I continue to write because the attempt to create meaning seems to justify my existence. When these efforts do not quiet my fears, I embrace physicality by bicycling or tending the yard, flowerbeds, and garden. The last provides special solace by connecting me to the soil, plants, and regeneration. Its earth almost as ancient as time, the garden is my sanctuary.

¹Plato, *The Republic, in Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1956, 143.

²Ibid., 157.



Tree on a Mound

Travis Carter, California

Pen on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

The God of Please

Jovanda Phelps, Georgia

My mom is always pleading with God. God is the God of pleas. “Please give me this, Please help me.” My mom says these are prayers and God answers these prayers no matter how far-fetched and silly they seem. She says this is a relationship. Not like between her and my dad, who are not together. My aunt said he left because he had no money and he could not be a man without money. He did not ask the God of pleas if he could have some.

My mom says it is because of her relationship with God—why dad left and why God answers her “please.” It is a hot afternoon and I am afraid that the car will stop for good. Not because it will never run again, but because we might have to walk the rest of the miles home and in front of all my friends. If my friends see me, they will know that my mom’s God is a God of poor people.

The car window on my side is stuck, so a quarter of hot air is wafting in, thickening the space. It is Wednesday, and on Wednesdays I do not ride the bus home from school. Instead, I go over to my friend’s house for a couple of hours to study, but we mostly watch Maury Povich and play with Baby-Alive. Twelve is too old for baby dolls, but we play with them anyway. We make storylines about moms and dads who stay together and have money because my God has lots of money, and I do not even have to ask for it.

Since it is Wednesday, we travel home on Nine Mile Road, named precisely for its stretch. On one end, there are new apartment complexes and convenience stores peppering the way, and on the opposite end, is a place called Church Hill, which is not named because it has a church on a hill or after that guy we learn about in history. Some say it is named Church Hill because it needs a church on every hill. We have to go through Church Hill to get to our end of the Nine Mile. Our end has a church and a God.

My hair is long and fake and sticking to my neck as we inch along in Nine Mile Road’s afternoon traffic. The cars sway in the heat, pulsing along in impatience. Brake lights blink, sets of red eyes displaying anger for their lowly position on the road. They jerk and stop and go in the direction of chaos or peace. We move together, but our car travels nine miles to peace, away from No Church Hill.

I am gnawing on attitude, letting it digest to distaste. Why is this the only way home? There are no crowded supermarkets, boutiques

with women coming out, arms full of bags and little dogs, or sports cars doing donuts in parking lots to show how expensive cars do fun stuff. There are none of those things on Wednesdays. The road is black, the empty storefronts are black, my friend's house is black, and my mother's God is invisible. I wish that her God was like mine: green like a dollar bill, and painting over all the black.

The car jerks but not in the trafficky-sludge, slow moving kind of way. Its jerk is uncompromising, unyielding, unwanted, un-understanding. I feel the sting of tears with each jerk. Twelve is too old to cry, even if the gauge on the dashboard is flashing a bright, red *E* for empty and there is no money for gas. We will have to walk. We will walk to Church Hill because that is where we belong. I hate belonging to Church Hill, but living nine miles away pretending we do not receive overdue rent notices or pretending my mom actually eats Taco Tuesday salads rather than take huge, dramatic bites of her peanut butter sandwich like it is just as good, or pretending I have so many Baby-Alives I do not have to go over to my friend's house to play with hers.

My mom looks at me and even though I hate her for smiling, I smile back. Her cheeks give way to dimples like soft grooves in old oaks. Her brow arcs like the end of a rainbow falling into a pot of gold from heaven. She believes in the God of the poor. In her pupils, deep, rich darkness pools into masked sadness as she turns the car key once again. This is the third time the car has cut off completely. I turn to face my window because I do not want to be there when she gives up. Just beyond and through the sad procession of traffic, a Chevron shines like a new sun. The black and red sign is faded and some of the letters are no longer illuminated so it reads: Chero. If only we can make it there without constantly stopping or without the intense whispering. The whispers leave my mother's lips and stick in the tight space like an unrelenting fog. It's thick and too hot so I lift up my hair and wrap it in an unsightly bun, revealing its attachment to my real hair. I only wear it because I do not live in Church Hill, and I made my mom buy it to prove we can wear stuff from the money God, like fake hair.

The car gives up the ghost in a sputtering stop. I hate this car. The heat welcomes itself in, creeping and hovering between my attitude and tears. I hold my head down because in a moment, we begin our walk of the poor. I scramble around in my pocket like there is some change or anything to help my mother pay for gas and instead, pull out a few foil-crumpled, warm pieces of Juicy Fruit. I want so desperately to go

into the gas station and hold the cashier up by gum point. A few bucks can get us to No Church Hill, where we can beg for money without judgment.

PFFLIP!

"Oh my God!" my mother exclaims. She pulls her arm in from grappling with something on the windshield. She is breathless but I hear the excitement riding on her tone like a whinnying horse. She is tracing the four corners of the windshield with her eyes in disbelief. Again, but more to herself, she says, "Oh my God."

"Mom...Mom, what is it?"

She is quiet and her silence is not empty but full. It fills my life with a story. It tells about a woman who whispers to the God of the poor and of the pleas, and he responds like my God of money and drops a wad of cash on the windshield. My mom is holding a thick slab of money in her hand with a smile as wide as Nine Miles. I ask, "Where did that come from?"

She fashions her hands together in a symbol of prayer. She is whispering, "Thank you."

I can definitely get used to this God.

The Admonishable Snowman

The Illustrious and Incomparable Mr. Ward Allan Yont, the Great, Golden Child, Chosen One, Esquire, III and V, and Sir, Arizona

For years I've admonished the scientific community against stating absolutes when postulating the nature of the world in which we live. Because, frankly, I have nothing better to do than sit around all day long and debunk some of the fallacious deceptions that all-too-often get passed around mainstream society as so-called "evidence-based" fact when I've shown, time and time again, the fallible nature of humankind's rational intellect.

Over recent years, and in conjunction with *Iron City Magazine*, Issue 2, I've brought to our readership the startling revelations derived of my personal findings regarding shark research—saving the government upwards of hundreds of millions of dollars in needless funding by totally debunking the long-held "mysteries" of shark attacks.

Then, in Issue 3, I brought to light the devastating havoc that pigeons have ravaged upon the otherwise unblemished history of our nation, while everyone else just stood around and watched these unconscionable atrocities unfold.

And now, it seems that my name will find its way into the annals of unprecedented discovery of my keen observation and prowess. Allow me to expound...

As many may or may not know, water is not only our most precious life-giving resource, but is perhaps the most elegant substance on Earth. The physical properties of water alone are among the most versatile of all compositions known to humankind. Its abundance in our world succeeds from its near perfect molecular structure. The single and solicitous electrons to which two hydrogen atoms amenably complete the outer valence shell of an equally willing and eager oxygen atom, rendering an atomic match made in heaven—H₂O. Never have two elements been more ordained to compatibility.

Regardless of its state—liquid (water), gas (steam/vapor), or solid (ice)—the noble molecule retains its inherent structural vertex of 105°. Consequently, when water freezes, it naturally crystalizes into hexagonal, of six-sided patterns. But when water freezes in atmospheric conditions, another bewitching structure emerges of this symmetrical phenomenon—the enchanting snowflake.

Snow is comprised of small crystals of frozen water that form

directly by condensation of atmospheric water vapor around a solid nucleus at temperatures below 0° C. Snow crystals that form at temperatures above -40° C generally need foreign particles on which to nucleate. Such particles can be anything from silicate minerals of terrestrial origins to other atmospheric pollutants. However, at temperatures below -40° C, water can solidify spontaneously without the need for such nuclei.

The shapes of snow crystals depend upon the temperature of formation and to a lesser extent on the atmospheric humidity. The size of the crystals depends largely upon the moisture content in the air. Crystals that form at higher temperatures tend to grow larger than those at lower temperatures, but still retaining some inherently symmetrical sixfold or hexagonal structure. A widely systematic classification of ice crystals was first proposed in 1951 by the Commission of Snow and Ice of the International Association of Hydrology (CSIAH). Solid precipitation is divided into seven types of snow crystals: plates, stellars (stars), columns, needles, special dendrites, capped columns, and irregular crystals. Other classifications of ice include pellets, graupel, and hail.

However, when we see artistic renderings of snowflakes (such as in Christmas cartoons, for example), they should always and only be six pronged and nothing more—not five, seven, eight, or any other number—in order to be structurally and "anatomically" correct.

*(Note: If anyone ever witnesses an artistic rendering of a snowflake that violates this anatomical rule of thumb, they are urged to contact the investigative arm of the CSIAH immediately, and are instructed to NOT attempt to apprehend the culprits on their own. It is assumed that if such people are willing to compromise the most intrinsic molecular laws, there's no telling what lengths they'll go to in order to serve their unquenchably savage desires.)

Nevertheless, given the near endless variety of crystals, increased exponentially by the wide range of atmospheric conditions and temperatures by which such crystals are formed, multiplied by the innumerable types of nucleic particles, around which the infinite dimensions of molecular configurations of snowflakes so inconsistently arise, it soon becomes fathomable to simply surrender such incalculable terms to the perennial myth of snowflake lore—that NO TWO SNOWFLAKES ARE ALIKE.

And until only recently, I have agreed.

I happened upon the uncanny discovery quite by accident. Nostalgic as I am for the wistful sentiment that snowfall ushers in, I often collect holiday cards that render scenic takes of snow fallen areas across the globe. But it wasn't until only as recently as last Christmas that I received a card from a relative living in New Jersey that would from that point forward antithetically challenge our meager understanding of how ice crystals form—that is, not so randomly, it turns out.



If one looks closely at the two photos, we can see that the snowflake encircled in the front landscape of a Frank Lloyd Wright building designed in Mill Run, PA, is atom-for-atom, molecule-for-molecule, the exact spitting image of a snowflake that had been embedded into the base of a snowman that was constructed by my nephews near Midlothian, VA, only seven years prior!! THE HOLEY GRAILS OF SNOWFLAKES!! (Yes, they have holes in them.)

Needless to say, I was frozen in disbelief when I made the discovery. Yet, the more I looked at it, gazing in timeless wonder, the more it seemed indisputably true. I had debunked yet another of the world's most widely held, yet puzzling myths—from right here in prison.

Just a coincidence, you say? I think not.

*I'll be sending my findings to the Commission of Snow and Ice of the International Association of Hydrology (CSIAH), and will be nominating myself for a Nobel Prize, once I'm recognized for some of my earlier achievements as well. (It may be a while.)

Meanwhile, I can be found casing through some of the latest evidence regarding the Loch Ness Monster and the Yeti or Sasquatch (Bigfoot). Could both of these legendary and mythical creatures be nothing more than a coordinated effort propagated by the World Bank and the Department of Parks and Recreation in an effort to devalue the Japanese yen in overseas markets only to divert the attention of media

away from the fact that Area 51 aliens have hacked into our nations mainframe and have rigged the last four presidential elections...and THAT'S the reason we're in prison—not because of any poor decisions on our part...!!!!???

I think you will find what I have to say over the matter VERY unsettling...

(The answer is, No.)



Shroom Trinity

Travis Carter, California

Multimedia on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

Death and the Mysterious Father

Karen Eckman, Georgia

I had gotten pneumonia at the age of three or four years old and don't remember much after arriving at the hospital other than being told that I went "cold" blue. Once their staff was able to resuscitate me, bam! I was back in the land of the living.

I can't honestly say I remember any blinding white lights or a portal beckoning me to step to the other side. I just know that in that moment, I stopped breathing because pneumonia rattled through my chest like a broken-down motor in a very old car before the motor just quit working. After I quit breathing, I didn't have some profound out-of-body experience where I was able to watch in abject confusion as the doctors and nurses rushed to save my life. I have pictured the scene, though, from what I have gathered on T.V. sitcoms, and I am sure that the staff used those paddles that they rub together to create some kind of electrical shock, then press against your chest to resuscitate your heart. Once the monitor indicated that my heart was pumping again, the tension and frantic activity in the room subsided.

I woke up, but how long after the near-death scare I have no idea, and to my horror, I was encased in plastic. This plastic, I would find out later, was actually a safe zone, and not some scary movie I got trapped in. When you are as sick as I was, and at such a young age, it's a very perilous situation. Other possible visitors posed a direct threat to me, so I had to be protected from germs that the other people carried. This huge bubble of plastic that wrapped around my entire bed like a clear cocoon was preserving my life.

Trying to make out my surroundings was difficult through the filmy view, but I could hear the breathing machines making their steady rhythm, the machines beeping to signify that life was still being lived within this room, and the stark white walls that stood around my bed like pillars of protection. Putting all this together, I came to realize that my tiny body was riddled with illness, and I was lying in bed. The sad thing, though, is that I don't remember seeing any windows with the sun shining in and creating shadows, which is something I always enjoyed. The play on the light that created those shadows opens up the imagination in a young child. You can see shapes and odd faces or you can wake up in the middle of the night thinking the boogeyman is in the room. That wasn't the case here, of course, but there's no memory of windows. Nor do I recall any flowers. Surely people in my

life were concerned and wanted to send thoughts my way? Wasn't that to be expected when someone was in the hospital? Maybe I was all alone, with no one to care about me and left to die by pneumonia in a windowless hospital room. I could see the headlines, "Tragic Death of Young Girl, Alone in Hospital, Suffocates in Plastic Bubble." What a way to leave your mark on the world!

The strange thing about this memory is that I really can never recall anyone in the room with me, waiting in anxious turmoil for me to wake up. I am sure my mother was somewhere; maybe she stepped out to buy coffee to help her stay awake through the whole ordeal. I imagine it had been a long night, or even day for that matter, as she paced the hallways waiting for some news on how I was doing. Maybe she was questioning the doctors about my status, frantic that she would lose me, her only child. Though, what child wants to wake up alone in a strange place encased in a plastic bubble? I can almost taste the fear and confusion, bitter and lingering, strangling me, as my mind raced to make sense of what has happened, how I got there, and why I was alone. I saw no doctors, no nurses, nobody passing by as they trekked the hallways to visit their families. But then a man appeared in the doorway.

Through the plastic, I can't quite make out who it is, but somehow I know that it is my father who has come. Dangling from his hand, by his side, is a cute little brown teddy bear wearing a pink shirt. The fur on the teddy bear looks very light, like it was dipped in bronze. I can't see well, but I imagine fear and worry etched across his brow and bloodshot eyes from being up all night, his face haggard from the long journey it took to get there, with a five o'clock shadow gracing his cheeks. His clothes are probably wrinkled, especially if getting to the hospital took a while. Nonetheless, he is here and I feel that it has been so long since I have seen him, that he has been so far away, and somehow I must have questioned his love for me because the joy of his arrival burst within me that no sickness could contain.

The memory is now so cloudy and I can't seem to get the clouds to part so that the sun can shine upon it and give me clarity. I don't remember my father approaching the bed, but somehow I wound up with the cute little bear and discovered that the front of the bear's pink shirt had written out in red letters "Goodnight, Sleep Tight" and that his palms had little strips of Velcro on them so he could say his prayers. The bear was plush, so soft within my hands. I could have instantly cuddled up with it and fallen asleep. I looked down at this bear,

overjoyed for the gift, but even more overjoyed by the gift of my father's presence.

When I looked up, though, my father was gone. I was baffled that he disappeared and asked myself if it was my imagination that he was even there. The little bear was proof that someone came, and I decided it was better to believe that it was my father than to believe he never came at all.

I have always wondered about my father's love for me, and this memory of my time in the hospital is my lifeline to that love. I didn't know then that not even two years later, in 1986, my father would die in a tragic fall. He fell from stories high in a work-related accident, the impact causing internal bleeding. My father couldn't be saved, forever leaving a gaping void within my life. This was my last memory of him. I don't remember the moment I learned his spirit had left this Earth. I was only five years old. But I *know* that a part of my very being went with him to forever remain connected to his.

In reflecting back upon this memory over the years and its vividness, I never would have questioned its validity. Now that I am older, the memory seems fuzzy, almost like a television having so much static it distorts the images on the screen. I am not certain it even happened. Maybe it was a dream I reconstructed into a memory because of the loss of my father. All my life I have struggled with his absence, so it's possible that as a little girl my mind concocted this dream of a near-death scare so I that I could somehow find comfort from his presence. The dream took on reality, a heartfelt experience I could hold onto to always remember him. It's amazing what loss will drive you to do, to fill the empty spaces within one's mind where memories may not even exist.



Hanging with Daddy

*Kazten Somari, Arizona
Watercolor on Cardboard, 2020*

Identify Yourself: Above all else

Ojore McKinnon, California

How do you identify yourself?

A similar question was posed to me. It was one of many this young brother and I often posed to one another to discover some deeper, compelling insight and inspire self-reflection.

The question asked of me was “If you were asked to identify yourself, how would you answer?” Without hesitation, I responded, “Father, grandfather, son, and good person!” He followed up with “Why do you identify as a father first?”

I went on to explain my position while keeping in mind he had a son. I uphold, with great importance, my identity as a father. Every day I strive to fulfill my obligation as an absentee father, with the goal of never allowing prison to be a barrier keeping me from my obligations and responsibilities. Hence, I elaborated on the importance of being a father and all the obligations that entails—such as being personally invested, being responsible in our lives, being a good example, and adhering to one’s priorities—which requires a devotion to one’s children (not the homies, the Hood, nor the game). It’s a selfless commitment to develop and nurture a child and their progeny for the duration of your life.

At the moment one discovers they will be a father or mother one should embody an ethical commitment to unselfishness, obligation, and loyalty. But some reveal traits of immaturity and betrayal.

That’s not to say from the moment I learned I was to be a father I had an epiphany. I haven’t always identified “above all else” as a “Father First!” There was a time I would’ve confidently stated I am a man first or upheld my gang membership as my identity, with honor and pride, which highlights the identity crisis I was in.

After my conversation with the brother, I reflected on another conversation I had with a prisoner about his five children. He conveyed to me he “raised five children,” which led to an intense debate and fiery disagreement about parenting from prison.

I questioned the notion he “raised” five children from a prison cell (or the Hole, in his case), over the course of the twenty-plus years. Under the most privileged of conditions and circumstances, which death row is not, this would be a remarkable achievement making him a father par excellence! Not only is a prisoner on death row unable to raise their children, it’s literally impossible for anyone incarcerated. The

state restricts and blocks prisoners from actually parenting, similar to the manner the state fails to rehabilitate prisoners. In this case, they fail to provide parenting programs. Surely the state is not going to invest such resources into a condemned prisoner!

Perhaps this person and I possess two different definitions or standards of what it means to “raise” children? Though I proudly identify myself as a father and grandfather, I have never confused that with raising my daughter, who was four years of age when I was kidnapped. I credit her mother and extended family with that honor. Until she was twenty-something, I never allowed ninety days to go by without writing or speaking. Child-rearing is very hands-on, requiring a very involved presence in a child’s upbringing. Hence, it’s not something those with children should proclaim lightly.

A parent’s first obligation to raising a child is their duty and commitment to caring for the helpless child and confirming their role as “First Teacher.” Henceforth, they must possess the foresight and resolution to ensure they raise a fully functioning and accomplished adult that will go forth into society with purpose. After honing their lesson through life experiences, their job as a parent is to equip and instill their child with those inherited heirlooms (the mores or Maa-t) that they may be successful at foraging, interacting, and doing good in the world. How can one perform this selfless act from a cell? Essentially, there is no way an incarcerated father or mother can devote the “quality time” or establish the “essential presence” necessary for a child to benefit from the phone calls, letters, and weekend visits, however regular or irregular. It’s minuscule to the cognizant and emotional investment that’s necessary.

One only need to ask any parent, who is privileged to spend weekends or holidays with their children years on end, how difficult it is to “raise” or “parent” their children. It is difficult to imprint one’s values or establishing that quintessential parent-child relationship, which is rooted in trust, confidence, respect, and appreciation of one another. It’s this quintessential relationship that separates an absentee father or mother, who is concerned and present in a child’s life, from a parent who is actively raising or fostering a child, with love and quality time, with expressed and demonstrative affection, and with encouragement and reassurance.

He also spoke of the role he played in his children’s accomplishments, which left me to wonder: as an imprisoned, absentee

father, how did he nurture their confidence, cheer them on to greatness, and fully appreciate or share in their achievements?

It’s a difficult task because children constantly need to be inspired and empowered, to ensure they are strengthened with resiliency (mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) for all the adversity they will encounter in life. In return, children of parents who do a great job of instilling these qualities will proudly acknowledge and proclaim their parents as role models. Could he truly warrant such accolades?

I further inquired, “Are your children proud of you?”

“Yeah!” he stated.

I followed up: “Have you ever asked them; or have they openly expressed their pride in you without any prompting?”

He stated, “No!”

That answer clarified unequivocally for me that he was delusional about his standing as a father and his significance in his children’s lives.

Without fear, I sought my daughter’s thoughts about how she perceived me and my efforts to be present in her life. As a result, I got a vehemently honest response that I was proud of and satisfied with.

As previously mentioned, I don’t hold any grandiose beliefs about my status as a father or the role I played in my child’s life, even with the commitment to maintain contact, to maintain a mental presence, to convey my love and concern, and to provide what meager finances I could. I’m honestly satisfied that she appreciates and acknowledges my efforts. The reality is, to my regret, the decades and distance have caused a chasm too great to overcome. The restrictions are sufficiently adequate to prevent a healthy and nurturing relationship with my daughter and grandchildren. However, I will always give my determined commitment to cultivating that father-daughter relationship (likewise with my grands). I will always aspire to educate, be a measured voice and guide in their life, and offer resolute wisdom that will be unwavering and unconditional, to ensure my investment is received wholeheartedly, with expectation, and with an intended purpose. But, most of all, have them understand this support is put forth with love and caring. These mores (Maa-t) and efforts can not be restricted or imprisoned. Regardless of the circumstances, when a father or mother is capable, they should never shirk their responsibility and duty to their children. Whatever investment an imprisoned, absentee father or mother puts forth is a powerful example and inspiration to their children.

From my stance on Maa, a voice from Deathrow!

Priceless

Mr. Kevin D. Lewis, California

Money, some say, is the root of all evil, but with the economy the way it is these days, even honest Americans are looking for ways to make quick and easy cash. So for men like me trapped behind the concrete walls and razor-wire-wrapped electric fences of America's prisons, money is more like the root of all joy. For the right amount, slid to the right person, can get some of us just about any of the convenient pleasures the average American has come to take for granted, such as MP3 players, Playstations or other video games, and of course the most joy-giving gadget of all time—the cell phone.

Granted, the prices of getting these items while in prison can run 5 even 10 times what they cost the consumer on the outside. My first cell phone, for instance, cost me \$3,000, but as the Master Card commercial states: "Some things are priceless." Like the day I was blessed to talk to my 5-year-old daughter as she walked to school her very first day. To hear her excitement, her anticipation, then to feel her fear as she realized her mother was about to leave her there by herself with all those strangers. No, I wasn't there physically, but I was able to calm her down and reassure her that it was okay to stay. So in my mind, and probably in hers as well, it felt as if I was right there with her.

Another quick example of a priceless experience is the day my 16-year-old daughter called and woke me up at 2 a.m. crying hysterically and telling me she was stranded because she had refused to give it up to some octopus of a thug, who in his ire at being rejected put her out of his car and drove off. My baby (that's what she will always be to me) could have called any of a number of people, in her time of despair, all of whom were free, but she chose to call me, her father, even though I'm in prison. Although I was mad as hell, the honor I felt at the moment she reached out to me first in her time of need, can never be put into words. No, I could not go get her myself, but I was able to console her as well as call someone who did go get her. Those are the kind of moments that define a father-daughter relationship, and we were both able to benefit from it, all because of a piece of technology known as a cell phone.

Yes indeed, some things are truly priceless, and a device that connects me to my family 24/7 so that I can supply them with the benefit of my knowledge and experience, is definitely one of those things. Sure they allow us to make collect calls from prison. But for

the most part, they limit our collect calls to 15 or 30 minutes at a time. And we're forced to use the phone in a common area, while people are moving all around, yelling, and screaming across the tier at the top of their lungs. Not to mention that often they charge our families, honest hard-working people who are already up against it due to the fact that we, the main breadwinners of the family, are not there to contribute, almost one dollar a minute. Now what real man would feel comfortable exposing his loved ones to that sort of highway robbery?

At least with a cell phone, you can rent it out here and there to recoup most, if not all of the money, that you spent on it. You can even do that to cover the monthly bills. Plus the times the institution phones are unusable are often not the times your loved ones need to reach you. For the most part, the phones in most prisons are only available from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. How does that help your 5-year-old whose bedtime isn't until 9:30 p.m. and who wants her father to read her a bedtime story at night? How does that benefit your teenager that has trouble getting up for school who needs you to call and wake her up every morning because her mother leaves the house for work at five? Neither of whom has ever committed a crime in their lives, except of course the crime of continuing to love a father who is in prison.

It's so crazy to me to see the system in such a roar these days as if cell phones are such a major problem. I have yet to read or even hear of an incident where someone used a cell phone to escape or attempt to. The reality is that most people just want phones to get closer to their families, and the man in possession of one is bound to be one of your best behaved prisoners. Why, you ask? Well, because he or she doesn't want to do anything that will jeopardize their cell phone, of course.

Trust me, I've seen life-long gang bangers turn their backs on gang activity. I've seen hardened criminals excuse overdue gambling or drug debts, even walk away from physical altercations. But better yet, I've seen men become better husbands. Better still, I've seen men become more involved than they have ever been in the lives of their children, all because of having a cell phone. Now isn't that one of the main goals of prisoner rehabilitation? To encourage men to become better husbands and fathers while still here, so they can be more productive members of society upon release?

Of course, having a cell phone at this time is still illegal in prison, but what's the big deal? They already allow us to have our own T.V.s, radios, typewriters, and other appliances. Why not allow us the one tool

that has the potential of helping us become better sons, husbands, and fathers? Why not take advantage of the one tool that can strengthen family bonds and possibly ease a man's transition back into society?

Either way, it doesn't matter to me. I'm a lifer with a very slim possibility of parole the way the parole board is currently set up. So as long as a few crispy \$100 bills can purchase it, I'm willing to accept any penalty they choose to impose. For the chance to continue having a positive impact in the lives of my loved ones that possessing a cell phone gives me. And, personally, I don't believe that is a bad thing or that it makes me a bad guy.



Labyrinth

Gary Haddock, California

Pencil on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

Corona Drive-Through

John Hovey, Washington

(A Washington prisoner gets a glimpse of small-town holiday Americana during the pandemic...)

A COVID-19 Christmas...Just as the Washington prison system is enduring another corona outbreak in several facilities, including the quarantined prison I am incarcerated in, I was unexpectedly taken out into the community for a COVID-19 test.

Ordinarily, prisoners are tested when they are symptomatic, if there has been contact with an infected individual such as the guards who bring the virus into the institution, or if there is a suspected outbreak in an area of the prison. And of course, prison is always a fishbowl of disease and hazard anyway. But in my case, I had been scheduled for some unrelated medical procedures, and understandably, the doctors first wanted to make sure I wouldn't be bringing the virus into the small local hospital.

For me, incarcerated since I was a teenager, it would be a rare journey through small-town Washington suburbia, one of the very few times I've been allowed to view the free world after being caged for decades with a life sentence.

First, I was given the mandatory pandemic-era temperature check by a prison medical worker waving a no-contact Star Trek style thermometer. Once my customary 97.1 degrees was confirmed, rather than a corona fever, my other vitals were taken and I was ready to be prepped for transport.

For most American prisoners, transport consists of armed guards, a security-modified vehicle, a fluorescent target-practice jumpsuit, and being wrapped in manacles, shackles, and chains. I exited the prison, pale, sunken-eyed and rattling like a ghost in a Dickens' story. Sometimes we are in windowless vans, but this time I was luckily blessed with a window. In the facility I am caged in, unusually, the cells have no windows, not even jail-style portholes, and even the housing unit lacks windows. It is a dreary existence without even a glimpse of clouds or sun or birds to interrupt the bleak view of concrete and metal and hatred.

I stared out, wide-eyed, soaking in the landscape, unwilling to blink for fear of missing a new image. The weather was mild and pleasant despite the mid-December Pacific Northwest setting, with calm skies

and scattered grey clouds. Oddly, ducks were the most common birds waddling around this holiday season, flapping around the wet evergreen trees and splashing in the ponds. The only other animals were the occasional dogs, leashed and taken for walks by occasional pedestrians, or bounding along unencumbered as their owners jogged down uncharacteristically empty streets.

Upon arrival at the hospital, it became apparent that the test would be a drive-through, as we idled in the parking lot in our masks. A friendly nurse in a Sci-Fi cybernetic spacesuit wandered out, carrying her paraphernalia. The 3M ventilator belt and plastic-visored helmet gave her voice a metallic echo. The COVID-19 test itself consisted of questions, signatures on a clipboard, and a long wooden swab jabbing the sinuses. The test can feel unpleasant and invasive if someone is unaccustomed to medical procedures, but if done correctly and compassionately, it is quick and painless, albeit uncomfortable. The trepidation is probably worse than the momentary nasal contact. Your eyes may water for a bit, and your nose may feel irritated, but it passes.

The test ended and we were off again. I was free to concentrate on the view and enjoy the sights. It was the holiday season, fortuitously, yet, a winter holiday occurring in a strange new world ravaged by politics, protests, and a pandemic. Christmas songs played on the car radio, adding to the surreal nature of the experience. As the vehicle glided through those narrow streets, I saw holiday decorations and other relentless reminders of the season everywhere.

It was a Monday morning in the small city, so it was difficult to tell just how abnormal the deserted streets were. Parking lots were filled with cars, presumably with employees filling the buildings. All the sidewalks were empty, as were the shuttered strip malls and food courts. Fast food franchises were mostly operating as drive-throughs. Theatres and entertainment centers had chained entrances. The infrequent pedestrians, usually alone and unmasked, furtively shuffled away quickly to their destinations. Down the maze of winding streets and nestled cul-de-sacs, there were no children to be seen, not even in backyards. All the kids were almost certainly indoors staring at various computer screens, suffering virtual school, sampling YouTube, playing video games, or texting or Zooming their friends. Phones and televisions and other screens had already been keeping Americans social distancing from each other long before the pandemic required it. It was impossible to miss that the town was already celebrating the

holiday season, especially Christmas, that most blatantly commercial of all holidays. Some homes had more religious-themed displays, like Christian nativity scenes, and a couple of yards had gigantic light-up menorahs, but the decorations were overwhelmingly secular, and often quite garish.

Another strange thing I noticed was that while most of the houses displayed holiday decorations, a lot featured—not lights and reindeer—but American flags and political signs. Some of the flags were enormous. And perhaps tellingly, a home almost never had both; it would seem jingoism was at odds with the holiday spirit. Still, it was a bizarre and demonstrative juxtaposition of the two Americas we live in, the flip sides of a coin. One friendly and lighthearted and hopeful, the other divisive and troubled and stark.

Even so, visually, the commercial exuberance overpowered everything else. Beyond the glowing, flashing, twinkling lights and ornamented trees were character classics like Santa Claus and reindeer, along with many iconic pop-culture figures from Rudolph and Frosty to Baby Yoda and the Simpsons, and even some Pokémon. I was surprised by the number of human-sized inflatable Snoopy dogs, some in Santa suits, some on his doghouse. Everywhere life-size plastic figures and wire-frame reindeer outlined the yards and rooftops. One house even showcased a particularly impressive Christmas dragon, red and green with enormous wings, festooned with tinsel and lights. A couple of stray, forgotten jack-o'-lanterns and tombstones made me wish my trip had occurred on Halloween!

The last time I actually walked the sidewalks of America I was sixteen years old. In many ways, I was now visiting an alien planet. So much of it looked the same, but under the surface, everything had changed. A parallel universe, an alternate reality. But decades after being exiled from the free world, the teenager trapped within still felt a thrill seeing these ornate decorations and Snoopys, and the beautiful cozy little homes, crammed tightly together in cramped neighborhoods where real estate is apparently at a premium. Quite a marked contrast to the filthy, dingy repetition of colorless concrete boxes filled with cages and despair that is prison. I also envied those deserted streets of fresh air and open environment, when the majority of my life has been wasted away in the ugly overcrowded diseased hellhole prisons of America's hidden underbelly, surrounded by sociopathy and suffering.

A couple days later, my Corona test was negative. I made the return

trip to the hospital for the actual procedures, after first being isolated in the prison infirmary overnight and not permitted to eat or drink. Then I was off before dawn, which meant I was able to see the same city sights, but in darkness. It was fascinating to see the explosion of color from all the holiday lights. Some yard displays were so bright they lit up the entire street. Others were so massive and elaborate they must have used enough electricity to drain a power plant. I never realized residential house outlets could handle so much extravagance.

Aside from some obvious weird technological advances, such as bland electric cars charging at ports, or expensive digital billboards and public screens displaying news and ads, the small northern American town looked largely unchanged since at least the eighties, if not much earlier. I would imagine the progress is more blatantly delineated in the larger cities.

All in all, I experienced a perfect tableau of current American chaos, a snapshot of the conflicted American experience—the promise of capitalistic idealism, the contentious ideological political divide, the ravages of the Coronavirus pandemic upon the lives, hearts, and souls of the people, and upon the economy. But transcending that chaos, there is the survival of the lost dream—the small town goodwill of average decent people just trying to get by and hoping to bring a smile to their neighbors' faces for a winter season, to help the children laugh and play again, to feel safe in the face of a deadly global pandemic, an unprecedented nightmare in modern times.

And all of this was viewed through a car window by one of America's state-sanctioned perpetual victims, a lifer who can neither live nor die. A lone representative of the millions of impoverished and disenfranchised human beings incarcerated in tiny cages stacked in giant fortress warehouses, the unseen silent suffering commodity that fuels the vast, greedy, unholy Prison Industrial Complex, the profitable repository of the deeply flawed discriminatory Criminal Justice System. America's dirty little secret, exempt from any oversight or reform. Prisoners, the only minority that everyone is allowed and encouraged to hate and despise and oppress, the living dead, forgotten and abandoned by modern society, ostracized from our allegedly advanced, enlightened twenty-first-century utopia.

What then shall be the new America that ultimately emerges from this pandemic of viruses and brutality and prejudice and ignorance?



The Beauty of Life
Valentino Amaya, California
Acrylic on Board, 2020

There's Always Hope

John Lockett, Arkansas

It was the year 2015; I had been incarcerated for sixteen years with a possible parole date of 2071. My cell at Tucker Max was the size of a walk-in closet with a small table, a metal toilet and sink, and a concrete bed with a thin mattress. I could hear men playing board games and screaming at the television in the dayroom. In prison, everything was loud or hostile. The usual bleach and chemical smell wafted up my nose and made my eyes burn.

As I looked around the four walls, my circumstances seemed hopeless; I saw no future. I was still hearing voices. Spiders moved under my skin. I suffered extremely violent dreams. There'd be two or more people in a brutal fight 'til the death, murders and gruesome war between angels and demons. I hated sleeping; I hated being awake just as much. The world would be better off with one less weirdo. A thirty-two-year-old male, convicted of murder times three, I had been imprisoned since the age of sixteen. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, articulate as hell, but to no use.

I tried to keep it positive by participating in the gang intervention and prevention programs and self-help courses offered by the prison. I attended church often, donated poems to fundraisers, and performed my gang prevention poems to audiences of program graduates and community activists. I became a prisoner who followed the rules. Each day I tried to be normal. I'd tell the psychiatrist that I was okay when I wasn't. I did my best work shelving books in the library, working out in the gym, playing chess just to relate to reality and to hide that I was in psychotic torment. For a long time, it was my fantasy that I was a pawn in a spiritual war. I needed it to be over.

I grabbed a naked razor hidden under a black cloth I kept on my table, sat on my bed with my back against the wall, and looked out the window to see the world one last time. The rec yard had grass turf and a dirt track (no weights here at the Max), a high voltage fence, an abandoned guard tower, and a cotton field in mid-July.

Moving quickly before I could reconsider, hitting my left arm in the hollow of my elbow, I sliced deep and cut twice to make sure I split the big veins. Opening and closing my fist, pumping blood, I slid to the floor and lay in the puddle that flowed down the side of my bed. My vision faded. Waves of heat and an incredible thirst crashed over me. I needed water!

Thinking I would get to the sink, I stood on wobbly legs and then collapsed. Hitting the floor, vomiting the remains of my last meal, I changed my mind. My afterlife was too hot! From a distance, screams. Then the nurse's face. People were talking but I couldn't comprehend. Hands lifted my body and placed me on the stretcher. They rushed me to the infirmary.

I woke up in UAMS with my left foot shackled to a hospital bed. I learned later they worked on me in the trauma room, saved my pathetic life, stitched me up, and placed my arm in a cast to protect it. There was more: a blood transfusion, medicine to stabilize my circulatory system, and insistence that I rest there for the remainder of the week. Occasionally, doctors visited to see my arm and assess my state of mind. They talked kindly to me. They didn't treat me like a convict.

"Why do you want to die?" a tall, elderly Caucasian doctor asked.

"Ain't no hope," I answered.

One of the officers assigned to my room ministered to me about God, redemption, and miracles.

"You're still young. There's still life to live and ground to cover. I'm a firm believer that God could make a way out of no way. Never say, 'If I get out,' but say, 'When I get out.' Miracles do exist. When you get back to that prison, handle your business and do what's right. God sees your efforts and He'll reward you in due season. He takes care of me and my family. He'll take care of you as well."

And the young nurse assigned to me brought sodas and ice cream whenever she came in to change my IV.

"There's always hope, Mr. Lockett."

She was a slim blonde in her early to mid-twenties. Nice.

"Just think of me as your friend during your stay."

My thirty-third birthday arrived. A psychiatrist entered the room, walked to the whiteboard, and wrote birthday greetings. He talked to me as if I mattered. I don't remember the details but it made me feel worthy of being alive.

After supper that night, they brought me two birthday cakes. Those cakes tasted like life and hope, sugar and sorrow, sweet inspiration, motivation, and a reason to live. I knew I couldn't eat them both, but I tried. It was the first birthday cake I'd had in 16 years and the last one I've had.

When people were kind to convicts, people who weren't obligated, but yet they were, this gave me hope. Before I hobbled out of UAMS

and went back to prison, I felt encouraged enough to believe again and give life another try. Any day was a good day to be alive.



Hosada (Japanese Woman)

*Kazten Somari, Arizona
Acrylic on Cardboard, 2019*

Wade in the Water

Paulette Rose Pippen, Georgia

It was getting late, and school was over for the day. I stood by the library waiting for Edward for over an hour. I had skipped school to be with him. Dada could never find out about this, or I would be dead. “Darn! Where is he?” I asked myself while I looked at my timepiece. My patience was getting the best of me, even though I knew he may have been running late. He had just moved from the city to the country about six months beforehand, but he still did not know how to get around town. Well, that was no excuse. I needed him to show up on this date. We had been planning to meet for a while, but I just could not get away from my parents and the nosy people in my little hometown of Montego Bay. Cars were passing by frequently, when all of a sudden, he pulled up at the front of the library in his two-door PT Cruiser. I had never seen one of those models in town before.

He got out of the car to open the door for me, and I got in. I sat there looking around at the interior of the car. It was clean and smelled fresh like lemon-scented Glade. I still like to judge a man by how he keeps his car. We drove two miles to Pitfour, located on the Northside of town where I lived with my parents and seven siblings. There was a fork in the road, one way leading to my parent’s house, the other veering off into the woods. I had him park behind the trees so no one could see us, and I took him to a small alcove on top of an incline where I had some ackee, saltfish, breadfruit, plantain and two bottles of Ting waiting for lunch. I had placed the food in the alcove before I left for school early that morning.

The smell of the ackee and saltfish gave off a nice aroma of spices. I could smell the garlic, dried thyme, and the habanero peppers. “The food tasted great,” he said after lunch. We decided to relax and enjoy the rest of the day. We started flirting and playing like little children and acting like two love birds coming out of their nest. We hugged and kissed each other feverishly. His tongue darted in and out of my mouth, like my toothbrush when I intensely brush my teeth. His mouth left a slight tingling feeling on my lips, like the cool feeling I get from eating peppermint and then blowing out air. I loved when he kissed me because I could feel the tingling effects for a long time.

I was not expecting to lose my virginity that day, but Edward insisted. He wanted to make love to me, to prove he loved me, and I finally gave in after lots of protesting. We were caught in the moment,

moaning and crying out there in the woods where no one could hear us. It was 4 p.m. Time had slipped away. We had finally reached a climax and I was in pain. My hymen had been broken and I felt no different. I was still alive and of course did not die contrary to the myth my friends spoke about at school. They believed if you got pregnant, you would die.

It was late in the evening when we emerged from our hiding place and we could see the ocean out in the distance. The clouds were hanging low, blocking the horizon and limiting visibility. I could feel the west trade winds blowing a breeze on my skin. I breathed in the fresh air. I could taste the salt coming from the ocean.

He was an older man in his twenties and I was an eighteen-year-old experimenting with the feeling of love for the first time. It was getting late and we needed to leave. I decided to walk home and told him to go. I stood there watching him walk away toward his car. He got in and drove off.

We met several times in the same spot and I never told my parents about him. I never invited him to come over to meet my family. That was taboo on the island. To bring a man home to meet your parents would be a grave mistake if you were a teenager. In the months before my birthday in December, I found out that I was pregnant.

I hid my pregnancy from my parents. I would take a piece of cloth and tie my stomach down so my belly would not show. I was still attending school, and people like myself from African descent were discriminated against. We were often deprived of our natural human rights. My school had students of all different races; however, the students of African descent were treated as inferior. We were given a hidden agenda, which was oppressive and representative of what Paulo Freire called a “banking model of education.”*

Our school taught us to accept what we were told by our teachers and we were not allowed to ask them questions. They did not care about our livelihood, much less our education. My parents were considered crazy by some of the parents living in my neighborhood because my father was a disciplinarian, and we were not allowed to play or mingle with other children. My father would have probably killed me if he found out I was pregnant. I would be chopped like pieces of wood ready for the fire. That was how I felt. I ended up telling my mother about my pregnancy, and sure enough, she told Dada about it. My father grabbed me out of bed one night while I was sleeping. I started to scream at the

top of my lungs begging him, “Dada, no please, you are going to hurt me and the baby!”

He did not care because he kept beating me. I started to scream, which caused my mother and siblings to come running to see what was happening. They jumped on him and the beating stopped. My mother and siblings held him back, which gave me enough time to grab some clothes. I ran out of the house to find safety. I started to walk until the sun came up and I caught a ride to Edward’s parents’ house. They welcomed me with open arms. They were kinder and more compassionate than my abusive father.

*Editors’ note: Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argued that formal education is largely based on a banking model in which knowledge is deposited in the mind of the learner like money in a bank. He called for a “critical pedagogy” where students actively question and personally participate in the learning process.



Fungi

David Chehovich, California
Colored Pencil on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

The Visit

Mary Jumbelic, New York

This wasn't the first time I ever visited a prison. My job took me inside whenever a death occurred. As a medical examiner, I investigated every inmate death. This occasion was different though; it was personal.

On a cold, autumn day, an hour drive from home, I sat in the parking lot with my husband, staring at the protected edifice. A brick guard tower loomed over me; no one was visible on the observation deck. The person manning it must have had a weapon, but with the interior shadowed, I couldn't see inside. Two rows of tall, chain-link fence topped with razor wire fronted the tower.

The perimeter marked the area as a correctional facility, but the architecture was nondescript. The cluster of institutional one-story buildings looked as if it could have been a public school from the 1980s—except for the heavy-duty enclosure.

My husband started to get out of the car.

"Wait," I said, checking my phone for visitor instructions. "We should leave our cellphones, money, and anything metal inside the car."

"We need our driver's licenses, right?" my husband said.

"Yes, of course. Just take it out of your wallet," I said. "Maybe we should put the stuff in the trunk. It won't all fit in here." I couldn't close the glove compartment drawer.

"Good idea," he said. "I need my keys though."

We followed the signs to the intake area. We had arrived early, and no one else was in the waiting room. Two guards sat behind a counter. They continued talking to each other as we stood uncomfortably in front of them. After a few minutes, one of them waved us over. We offered our IDs, which he took and in return handed us a paper to fill out. At the bus-stop-style benches, we noted the form required a DIN—the inmate number for our friend. Luckily, I had memorized it since it had been required on all the correspondence I sent to the prison.

When we finished, the receptionist clicked some keys on the computer and verified that we had a right to visit the prisoner. Presumably, he also checked whether we were felons, on parole, or had any outstanding warrants.

Finally, he spoke: "You can rent a locker for your keys and such. See the list of things you can't bring in." He gave us our visitor passes, then turned back to his partner and resumed conversation. The only item we

needed to secure was the car keys.

Already, I felt diminished. This medium-security world obscured life outside.

As we headed to the main gate, the breeze refreshed us. The relief was temporary. I thought back to the men I had seen die in windowless cells; an image of solitary confinement cascaded over me. I stopped walking. My breathing quickened. Taking my hand, my husband led me forward.

He rang the outside intercom and explained our purpose. A loud buzzer sounded as the heavy metal gate slowly opened. We entered an outdoor vestibule and faced another barrier while we waited for the first door to close behind us. I felt trapped between the two blockades and imagined them closing in on me, like in an Indiana Jones movie.

Another alarm shrilled, and the second metal gate crawled open. We walked the 50-foot entry hallway to the next station, where we were directed to another series of checkpoints. Finally, we reached the metal detector. We hadn't taken a chance with anything that might set it off. At home, we had been careful to dress in clothing without any adornments. We had removed belts, jewelry, and even our wedding rings. As I approached, the guard pointed to my chest.

"You have to remove your bra," he said.

"Oh," I said, blushing, "there's no underwire." I had read that underwire bras could set the detector off, though I'd worn them often enough to courthouses and airports without a problem.

"Doesn't matter," he said, motioning me to get out of line.

I went to the ladies room and fumbled in the dirty stall to take off my bra. The mirror reflected the sagging remnants of nursing three sons. What was the point of this procedure? Would the tiny clasps, integral to almost every bra, set off an alarm? Did they do this to every woman entering? What nefarious thing could be obscured by the minute fasteners?

Controlling the inmates wasn't enough; the visitors were prisoners by extension.

I returned to the line. No cutting allowed. Already thirty minutes of visitation time had been used up in this slow admission process. I watched with humiliation as my bra went through the x-ray detector in a tray and then was handed back to me.

More visitors had gathered, and we entered one by one or in small family groups—again, through the double-lock system. An overseer,

elevated for a good view of the room, supervised each visitor's entry. We gave him our slips of paper with our friend's name on it. He nodded to a specific table where we should wait. We sat in hardback chairs in the cafeteria-style space. I found a bathroom and put on my bra.

As I sat down, waiting for our friend, I felt inordinately nervous. Sitting sideways on the chair or putting hands off the desk or not staring straight ahead might lead to someone shouting, "Guards, seize her." Catholic school training had shaped me into a rule-follower. I still remembered the boys who had their hands smacked by rulers in the fifth grade. If the teacher said, "Be quiet," I became a church mouse. Did our friend feel like this every minute of every day?

After everyone was seated, the convicts were admitted. Our friend approached, looking thinner and more tentative than in his life outside these walls. The beige jumpsuit made his skin appear sallow. His glasses were taped where they had been broken, sitting askew on his nose. Still, his face lit up when he saw us.

At first, words were stilted, conversation stiff: "How are you?" and "How was the drive?" We hadn't seen each other in about three years. After the arrest and trial, my husband and I felt fury and betrayal for a while. I was still angry with our friend for doing what he did—for using drugs, for running away, for touching her. I had expressed as much in letters to him. I had agreed to come see him: an attempt at forgiveness.

We bought snacks and drinks from the vending machine to temper the awkwardness. Small sandwiches were available, automat style. As we sat sipping coffee, we developed a rhythm to talk about life. Our friend, an eternal optimist, told us of programs in which he was involved, required classes he was taking, his newfound fitness and diet regimen. We talked to him about what our sons were doing and how work was going.

Though he had written to us with apologies and regrets, he reiterated his remorse in person using prison parlance. His earnestness showed as his eyes teared up. I had the urge to take his hand and hug him; pain was etched in his face.

"No touching," yelled the guard. I glanced around.

Families reconnected around me. Wives with husbands, mothers with sons, friends with friends—their joy interrupted by disappointment each time a guard shouted a rebuke.

The admonishment provided a segue to talk about where we were. I felt guilty even mentioning the intake process. After all, my friend's

daily experiences eclipsed mine. Yet my surprise at being treated so rudely needed airing. We also offered him sympathy as he began to share stories.

Only a few of his stories came out at that first visit, simple and benign ones. More came out in later visits. The hardest tales didn't surface until after his release. Some of the worst, in fact. I'm sure I still haven't heard them all.

Chairs scraped as people stood to say goodbye after the ten-minute warning. Leaving happened much more quickly than entering. What would our friend go through after visitation? Would he pass through a metal detector? Would he need to strip down? Would he be cavity searched? All the visitors filed out like a funeral procession—quiet and somber. My mood remained unsettled as I passed through innumerable doors, had my identity checked, and trudged the long walkway to the final exit. I watched as many people got on a weekly bus that came from the city (five hours away). Mothers with young children boarded. An entire day of travel for a few hours of proximity to a loved one.

The prison was supposed to provide control for male felons; punishment for illegal behavior. However, the dehumanization felt excessive as it rippled out to anyone connected with the prisoner. A cloak of shame had been laid across my shoulders.

The establishment receded in the rear-view mirror. Quiet filled the car. The indignity of what awaited us over the next five years weighed heavy.



Sun Print

Jonathan Marvin, California

Sun Print, 2020

Project PAINT Artwork

I Remember

Seth David, Florida

I remember...the first correspondence I received from her. I was being held in the county jail awaiting my sentence, which my lawyer had told me was going to be significant. The years of poor decisions fueled by my addictions had finally left me bereft of any compassion from the courts. Inside the yellow envelope was a card containing a handwritten, homemade crossword puzzle drawn in a winding, askew, and juvenile fashion. The elaborate puzzle was festooned with images of flowers and happy prancing elephants and ponies. Love was practically dripping off it, showing the obvious time and care that had been put into its creation. At that point I was ready to face anything the judge could throw at me, knowing all the time we had spent together during those first thirteen years of her life had created a bond that would last a lifetime.

I remember...several months into the first five-year sentence, my mother was finally able to get all the approvals to bring her to the work camp I was assigned to for a visitation, or a “vizo” as it is commonly called on the inside. My ex-wife had made a half-assed attempt at custody and care and, after failing, relinquished the privilege to my mother. The time my daughter and I had spent apart—combined with the brief time she spent with her mother—seemed to have left a mark, which was evident in her hesitance, in her awkward and chilly embrace. The conversation, at times, seemed forced—the first signs of the wall growing between us from bricks of disappointment, accusation, and uncertainty. We ate frozen sausage biscuits thawed by an overworked microwave while she told me of new schools, and I talked of my new job mowing the world. We played simple card games with a deck adorned by the faces of unsolved homicide victims, which we affectionately dubbed “The Dead People Cards.” When the game play became stale, we used the cards instead to see how tall a house we could build before an errant breeze or bumped table caused the whole construction to fall down upon us.

I remember...she had sent me so many doodles and drawings during my first few years in custody that I purchased a separate photo album just to display them. There were multiple dragons and cat-bird hybrids. My favorite drawing was a birthday gift: a cool My Little Pony wearing headphones, standing behind turntables. The mark on his hindquarters was a record with a seed sprouting out of the middle. It

reminded me of all the garden and horticulture projects we had done together. The house I had rented right before my arrest was outside of city limits, and we had planned not only to plant a large garden but also to build a chicken coop because she had always wanted to raise her own chickens. I only got so far as to purchase the chicken wire and steal some lumber, which was left behind the house to rust and rot.

I remember...when the battery of the Macbook went bad. I had purchased the laptop to use for music production, which is now her Macbook for gaming and digital art. From behind bars, I was able to coordinate the purchase and shipment of a replacement within just a few days of her asking. This was the last time she requested or accepted my help in any endeavor. To this day, I constantly ask her if she needs or wants anything from me, but she consistently shuns and denies me the act of providing some form of care and comfort in her life.

I remember...working six fourteen-hour days waiting tables at two different restaurants during my time at the state work release center. I was always so tired after spending the whole week on my feet or passed out on a rock-hard bunk. Despite my desire to spend my precious furlough time with her, as soon as I settled into a real couch or reclined on a real bed, I would fall asleep while watching television or playing video games with her.

I remember...her silent condemnation as I took her, along with my newest girlfriend and her two daughters, to a fall festival and craft fair on the outskirts of the county my probation was in. I offered to buy her anything she wanted, but she declined. This was my third attempt to create a family; I thought I could somehow redeem myself for not being able to maintain one earlier in her life. What I did not realize at the time is that all she wanted was to spend time with me alone: without another woman, without other children, without me falling asleep.

I remember...trying desperately to find some way to bond with her again: dining out, making music, doing art, producing videos, gaming. I always struck out or got a minimal response. I wrote it off as typical teenage behavior and figured she was just resentful at me for not being able to provide a normal childhood for her. I refused to believe we had grown apart to a point where she just no longer enjoyed my company.

I remember...nodding off as I rode in the passenger seat of my mother’s van as my daughter drove the thirty-five miles from her house to mine. I accompanied her, hoping she would feel more comfortable with the drive and therefore visit me more often. I had just started using

dope again a couple months prior, and my junkie lady friend followed behind us in my truck. I had planned to make a nice dinner, but I didn't have enough money to buy all the ingredients. Instead, I cheated at the self-serve register by slipping \$1.00 powdered sauce packets under the expensive items as I slid them over the scanner. When I noticed that she noticed, I justified it with self-righteous rhetoric about how big corporations beat the working man down. After dinner, I snuck off to the bathroom and then passed out on the couch until almost midnight while she waited for me to escort her home. It was a school night. I drove my own truck this time as she followed me in my mom's car on the drive back. I swerved several times off the shoulder of the road. When we got to her house, she stormed into her room and closed the door. At the time, I had no idea why she was so upset.

I remember...the officer, who came to my house to arrest me for violating my probation warrant, was cool enough to let me smoke a couple of cigarettes and make two phone calls before he put me in his cruiser. I called my mother first and requested she tell my daughter to pick up the phone when I called. She picked up on the second attempt; her sleepy voice sounded alarmed and confused as to why I was calling at two in the morning. As I held the phone to my face with cuffed hands, crying and apologizing for my failure, she remained silent before parroting back to me "I love you" and hanging up the phone.

I remember...it took almost one year to get her to respond to the letters I sent to her religiously, almost weekly, since I had once again become a ward of the state. The letter arrived in March, and amongst other bare truths, she told me that she didn't really know who I was anymore or why I even cared about her. How does a father respond to that? I wrote back addressing each point to the best of my ability and started an autobiography, planning to send her five pages at a time. I still keep that letter in the folder I carry with me every day when I go to my job as a math teacher in the prison's G.E.D. program.

I remember...the last time we spoke was about four months ago, sometime around Christmas. My mother just recommended I try sending her a postcard since the last three envelopes I sent her (one containing the beginning of my autobiography) were still sitting unopened on her dresser. I try calling several times a week with the money my mother put in their mutual phone account, but she refuses to accept my calls anymore. I want to find out what she did with the money I sent her for Christmas. I want to tell her about the four

men I helped to get their high school diplomas. I want to tell her I downloaded some of the music she suggested last year onto my tablet (even prisoners stare at tiny screens now). I want to tell her to not be afraid. I want to be a father. Last week, they changed the telephone company and the phone policy. Now, each number called must set up their own account to pay for the collect calls, and her number is not set up. I can never seem to remember why I decided it was a good idea to start getting high again, but I will always remember the reasons that I quit.



Catching the Red-Eye

Travis Carter, California

Multimedia on Paper, 2021

Project PAINT Artwork

All My Years Start in September

J. Terence Schelble, Arizona

I see heartrending futility everywhere I look. The thin man that stands under the trees at the edge of the park with the wistful smile that doesn't look up because he knows I know he doesn't have anywhere else to be or anyone to be there with and how sad that is and that it would only make it worse to see it reflected in my eyes and the man with the silver chest hair who runs laps around the park every day at lunch and the yellow lab that used to run with him and doesn't anymore and the rolling, welling, choking, tumbling, cascading sadness that patiently follows all three of us around the park past the ant mound at the foot of the olive tree and the teenagers that haven't trampled it yet. The man and the runner and the dog he lost and the ants and the mound and the teenagers and me and my dogs wearing a path around the park year after year after year and the fact that all my years start in September and that I can remember the last four or five pretty well. The year I took the dogs and headed up the mountain to the pines and cried it was so beautiful and the year I wanted to do it again and the car died halfway up and the year we all ate cake at the park and no one wanted to be there and the year Emily came late and brought me the set of recycled wine-bottle-glasses that all ended up breaking and last year when I said fuck it and had a party and got a band and a pile of cards from friends I haven't seen since and decided it's okay but it's not, really. And now September's here again and I'm another year older and my dogs are too and I'm afraid to stop and wait for the sadness to catch up.



Untitled 3
Ciriaco Valencia, California
2018
Project PAINT Artwork

10,000 Year Old Hands

Albert B. Bell, California

A long time ago, in a cave, in caves all over the world, I have seen all kinds of hands, hands that were my own and some that were not. How did my hands get to be in so many different places? How did my dad's, mom's, uncle's, and aunt's hands get there? This is a 10,000-year-old question.

I look at my hands in awe. Somewhere I read that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Yes, I like that! These hands of mine are wonderfully made. Made in Oakland, CA., during the Summer of Love, in 1967! I was born with the only pair of distinctly individual hands of "Peace & Love." Not hands for war. Of war. But peace and love. That is until I had several conversations with different scientists and other educated people, including geneticists and a physicist, who informed me that my hands were not only my hands, but in fact, the product of all my ancestors. That is how all of my hands and all of my relatives' hands are in caves all over the world.

Just thinking about the many different things done with these hands blows my mind. These hands of mine washed clothes, made tools, cut up and dressed the carcasses of animals, made war against each other, made loving touches to another, dug graves, cleaned fields of wheat, picked peas and cotton, went fishing in the Louisiana bayous for gar fish, turned bottles of alcohol, turned up the music, chugged beer and smoked gold weed, birthed babies, clapped and slapped, threw up peace signs and gang signs, and wiped away tears of joy and sadness.

These hands climbed mountains, pulled triggers on guns, lit the fuses of cannons, and raised the sails of ships while supporting the sale of the Mother Continents' sons.

Hands free from the color wheel of humanity, from black to purple to blue, these hands grew in the fields and they grew in the deltas, they grew in the great outback near my aboriginal cousins and all the way to the U.S.A. slave shacks. THESE hands of mine, yes they are yearning. Burning by the fire linked to the Trail of Tears! Who dat? The Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole and Ouachita (Washita)! Who dat? The Navajo, Blackfoot, Comanche and Wampanoag! These hands of mine, are their hands, blowing the native flute. Oh, Mary Youngblood! The First Lady of the flute, tell my hands to let the Spirit speak. To let the Spirits of my ancestors say something. Anything. For these hands, are their hands, as well as mine.

I have old hands! QUIET! Let them speak RESPECT OUR ANCESTORS, AND PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOUR HANDS SAY AND DO. They will do many things, have seen many things, touched and made many things.

These, old hands of mine. These 10,000 year old hands...10,000 years... These hands. These hands. My hands love...Hands love. Love is the highest human condition.

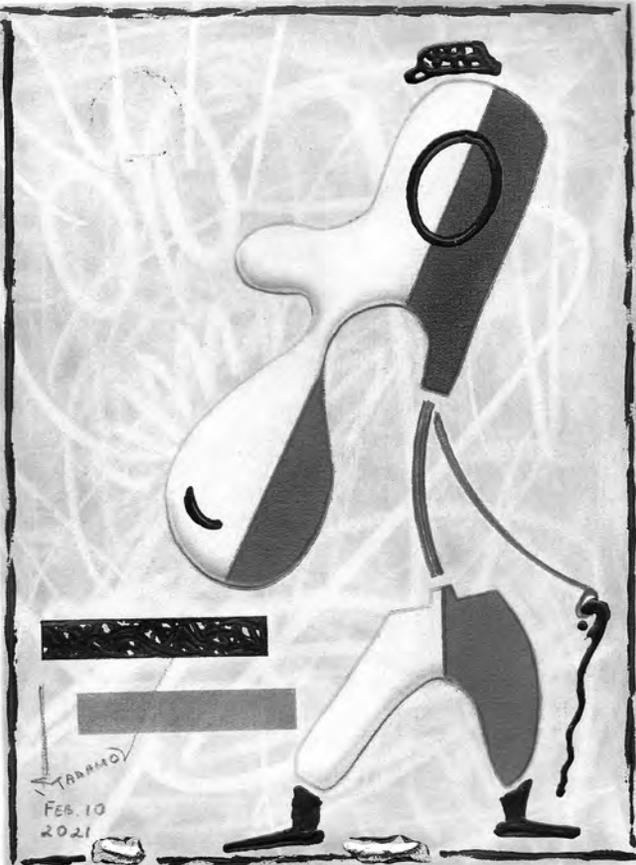


Frog

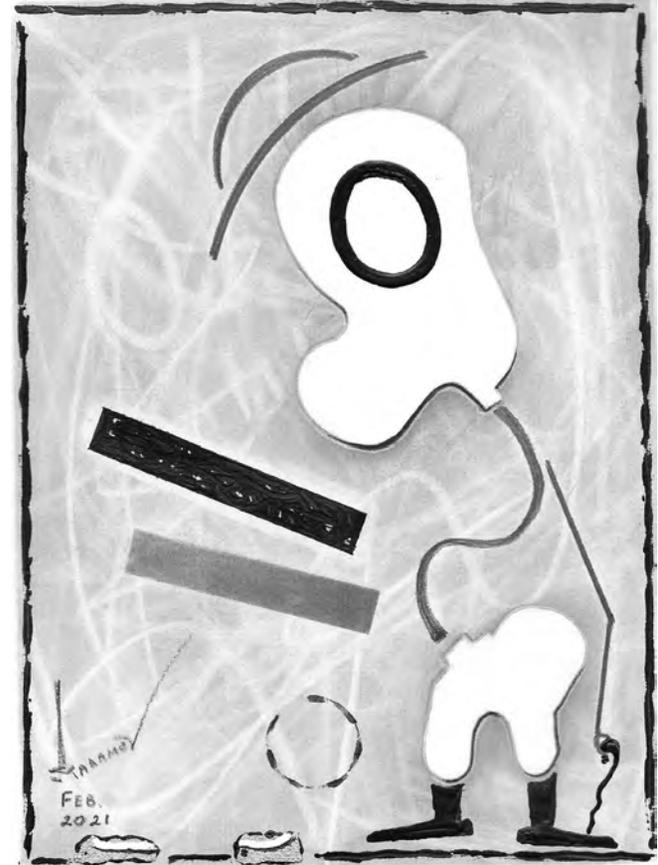
Brian Hindson, Texas

Acrylic Paint on Board

Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



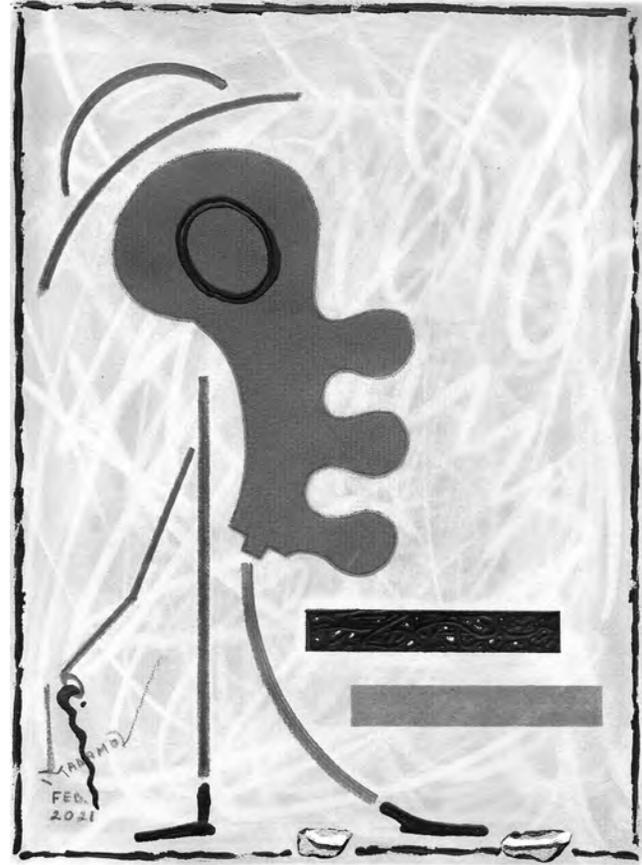
We as a Society, Series
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
Acrylics and Stucco from Death Row Wall
on Charcoal Paper, 2021
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



We as a Society, Series
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
Acrylics and Stucco from Death Row Wall
on Charcoal Paper, 2021
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



We as a Society, Series
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
Acrylics and Stucco from Death Row Wall
on Charcoal Paper, 2021
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



We as a Society, Series
Yuri Kadamov, Indiana
Acrylics and Stucco from Death Row Wall
on Charcoal Paper, 2021
Justice Arts Coalition Artwork



JUSTICE ARTS COALITION

*Uniting teaching artists, arts advocates, incarcerated artists, their loved ones, and allies,
harnessing the transformative power of the arts to reimagine justice.*

Through the sharing of stories and resources, and by using the arts as a bridge between people inside and outside of prison, the Justice Arts Coalition (JAC) unites teaching artists, arts advocates, and currently and previously incarcerated artists and allies, harnessing the transformative power of the arts to reimagine justice. This work stems from the premise that art can serve as connective tissue, weaving its way back and forth through prison walls to foster and strengthen relationships between people inside and out. Art can remind us of our shared humanity, of our common struggles and sacrifices, and that every one of us has unique gifts and a unique story to share. To create a work of art, a song, a dance, or a poem within the repressive confines of prison is truly a courageous and liberatory act—a reclaiming of identity, of possibility, of worth; a demand to be visible. JAC affirms, uplifts, and amplifies the voices of those who venture onto this path towards freedom.

JAC serves as a unifying body for those engaged in artmaking in and around carceral institutions across the US. We provide numerous ways for the over 400 incarcerated artists in our growing network to share their work both through our own platforms and by facilitating connections to opportunities offered by partner organizations like Iron City Magazine, PEN America's Prison Writing Program, and MoMA PS1.

JAC hosts exhibitions, online galleries, and ArtLinks events in which community members view new works by incarcerated artists and write letters to the artists sharing their reflections and feedback on the work. JAC also hosts an arts-focused correspondence program, the pARTner Project, through which incarcerated artists are paired with artists on the outside to exchange letters, creative works, sources of inspiration, and words of support and encouragement. JAC supports teaching artists and arts organizations that provide programs in prison by serving as a hub for resources, community building, and collective problem solving. This aspect of our work has been of particular importance during the pandemic, as all programming in prisons came to a halt with the start of the nationwide lockdowns. JAC's network also includes numerous family members and loved ones of incarcerated artists, as well as formerly incarcerated artists, many of whom connected with JAC while still inside.

To learn more about JAC and how to get involved, visit www.thejusticeartscoalition.org and follow us on social media. Connect with us via email at info@thejusticeartscoalition.org or by snail mail at Justice Arts Coalition, PO Box 8261, Silver Spring, MD 20907.

Many of the art works featured in this issue of *Iron City Magazine* were created by artists involved in



Project PAINT is an arts organization based in San Diego, CA, that operates at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility and California State Prison, Centinela.

Professional art instructors create collaborative projects, conduct visual arts and fine crafts workshops, and provide informative lectures as rehabilitation for people who are incarcerated.

Project PAINT: the Prison Arts INiTiative

Project PAINT was conceived by Founding Director Laura Pecenco in 2012 to fill the gap after the California state prison system defunded the Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program in 2010. Project PAINT was totally volunteer-run until 2014, when the state restarted funding for AIC. Partnering with the William James Association, Project PAINT now employs eight professional artists, including one former Project PAINT participant, who provide art instruction on five yards across two prisons in a variety of artistic mediums.

While Project PAINT communicates through the barriers of prison walls, it also breaks down racial barriers within the prison. When inside artists come into class, all of those boundaries are dropped. Everyone is just an artist.

Laura Pecenco, Founding Director

Laura Pecenco provides oversight of all Project PAINT operations in coordination with the William James Association, California Arts Council & California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Pecenco is an Associate Professor of Sociology at San Diego Miramar College. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego; an M.A. in Sociology from UC San Diego; and a B.A. in Sociology from UC Berkeley.

Learn more

Email: info@ProjectPAINT.org
Website: <https://www.projectpaint.org>

Check out the **Project PAINT COLORING BOOK** on Amazon by incarcerated artists *Beyond Blue: Echoes of Color*. 100% of money raised from this book goes to Project PAINT classes and art supplies.

IRON CITY MERCHANDISE



Find *Iron City Magazine* Merchandise at

Visit

<https://www.redbubble.com/people/IronCityMag/shop>

or

scan the QR code down below

**All proceeds go directly to *Iron City Magazine*,
a domestic nonprofit**

Clothing
Home Style
Office Supplies
and
more



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



M A G A Z I N E
CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

www.ironcitymagazine.org

Iron City Magazine is an online and print magazine devoted to writing and art from the prison world. It is our hope that through this creative platform, incarcerated writers and artists find value in their stories, fuel for personal growth, and pride in their accomplishments. Prisoners are, first and foremost, people. They own stories worthy of sharing.

We are currently accepting submissions of short fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, one-act plays, cartoons, comics, graphic stories, and art for **Issue 7**.

Postmark deadline: **May 15th, 2022**

Please note that submissions are currently being accepted, but final decisions may not be made until October 2022. If you don't hear from us by November 15, 2022, your submission was not accepted for Issue 7.

Submissions are accepted through

- Email: submissions@ironcitymagazine.org
- Submittable Website:
<https://manager.submittable.com/opportunities/discover/190632>
- U.S Mail: Iron City Magazine, P.O. Box 370, Tempe, AZ 85280

We accept both electronic and mail-in submissions. We also accept both typed and neatly handwritten submissions. There is no submission fee. Please include the cover sheet with all your work. Work without the cover sheet will not be considered.

For questions, contact us at submissions@ironcitymagazine.org or the P.O. Box address listed above.

Who Can Submit and What Can Be Submitted

- current/former prisoners: any topic
- current/former prison volunteers: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration
- family/friends of current/former prisoners: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration
- current/former prison staff: ONLY topics related to mass incarceration

Payment/Gift for Accepted Work

Two contributor copies, prison policy permitting.

(Arizona State Prison policy prohibits gifting or paying prisoners with copies. Families and friends may order copies via ironcitymagazine.com. Prison magazine policies vary by state.)

Guidelines for All Genres

We look for quality and originality. Send us writing and art that are compelling, well crafted, and attentive to detail. We do NOT accept previously published work. Please make handwriting legible. Capital and lowercase letters, punctuation, line breaks, and paragraph/stanza spacing must be distinct. (Please **DO NOT** submit work in **ALL CAPS**).

We DO NOT CONSIDER book-length works or pieces that include:

- names or other identifying information of any actual persons who are victims to or guilty of a crime, apart from the author
- nudity or graphically depicted violence
- detailed discussion of drug use

Guidelines for Fiction

- All genres of fiction are considered
- Flash fiction and short stories are preferred, but stand-alone chapters from longer works are considered
- **Submit 1 to 3 pieces**, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words) TOTAL

Guidelines for Creative Nonfiction

- Any true story is considered, but memoir (distinct personal episodes or memories) and personal essays are preferred
- Brief opinion pieces and argumentative essays are rarely considered
- Submissions must be factual and creative (use descriptive details [imagery], paint scenes, provide action, etc.)
- **Submit 1 to 3 pieces**, up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages (4,000 words) TOTAL

Guidelines for Poetry

- All types of poetry are considered
- **Submit 1 to 5 poems**, not to exceed 10 pages TOTAL

Guidelines for Art

- Physical (mail-in) and digital artwork* are acceptable
- No portraits of celebrities
- **Submit 1-5 pieces ONLY.** If you are submitting multiple pieces, please make clear which art piece goes with which title, medium, and year created. Original art will be returned only with a self-addressed, stamped envelope or mailing tube.

*Quality images (300+ DPI) in JPEG, PNG, or PDF formats are preferred over the original art, but we will still accept original pieces and attempt to return them as feasible.

Guidelines for One-Act Plays

- **Submit 1 or 2 plays ONLY.** Each play may be up to 30 handwritten pages or 15 typed pages.

Guidelines for Cartoons/Comics/Graphic Stories

- Both color and black-and-white graphics and cartoons/comics are considered
- **Submit up to 2 graphic stories (maximum of 15 pages each) and/or 3 one-page cartoons/comics.** Please bear in mind that our printed magazine page size is only 8.5 inches in height by 5.5 inches in width. Stories may be fiction or creative nonfiction/memoir. Please specify which on the first page of the consent form.

Disclaimer Regarding Editorial Process

Minor edits to spelling, punctuation, or grammar may be needed. Because communication with prisoners is slow, these edits may be made without consulting the authors. Consent to these edits is voluntary, but not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication. Please state on the submission cover sheet whether you do or do not consent to such changes.



MAGAZINE
CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS
BY AND FOR THE INCARCERATED

To be considered for publication, this four-page coversheet MUST be completed in its entirety. The coversheet may also be accessed at www.ironcitymagazine.org.

If you cannot gain access to a copy of these sheets to fill out and include with your submission, you MUST include a handwritten or typed letter with clear answers to ALL the requested information below.

Your submission will NOT be considered if we do not receive all the requested information.

Fiction: 1
2
3

Creative Nonfiction: 1
2
3
4
5

Poetry: 1
2
3
4
5

Art+medium+date: 1
2

3
4
5

One-Act Play: 1
2

Cartoon/Comic: 1
2
3

Graphic Stories: 1
2

Please mark one of the options below:

- I am currently incarcerated.
I was previously incarcerated.
I have never been incarcerated.*

*If you have never been incarcerated, do you fall under one of the groups listed under the Who Can Submit and What Can Be Submitted section on the first page of these guidelines? If yes, state which and provide a brief description of your relationship to the theme of incarceration. We publish work by those who have never been incarcerated ONLY when that work clearly highlights themes of incarceration.

Blank lines for response

Please be sure your handwriting is easy to read:

Full legal name:

Prison number (if currently incarcerated):

Blank line for prison number

How you wish your name to appear if chosen for publication:

Reliable, long-term address. If you are incarcerated, please also include your prison address.

Long-term address:

Prison address:

Reliable email (if applicable):

Proofreading consent (if left blank, consent will be assumed):

___ I do give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to edit spelling, grammar, punctuation for publishing without prior approval from me.

___ I do NOT give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to edit spelling, grammar, punctuation for publishing without prior approval from me.*

*Consent is voluntary, but because communication with prisoners is often slow, not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication in this year's issue.

Editing Consent (if left blank, consent will be assumed):

___ I do give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to make moderate edits pertaining to structure, style, or content.

___ I do NOT give my consent to *Iron City Magazine* to make moderate edits pertaining to structure, style, or content.*

Authors **MUST** note on the submission itself if any unusual style elements are to be kept so that the editors maintain the integrity of the piece.

*Consent is voluntary, but because communication with prisoners is often slow, not consenting may limit chances of acceptance for publication in this year's issue.

Merchandise Consent:

___ I do give *Iron City Magazine* permission to include excerpts or images from my work on merchandise (t-shirts, mugs, notebooks, etc.). 100% of the proceeds will go toward the publication of future issues of the magazine. My name will appear on the merchandise alongside my work.

___ I do NOT give *Iron City Magazine* permission to include excerpts or images from my work on merchandise (t-shirts, mugs, notebooks, etc.).

I _____ (sign name) hereby attest that this is my original work. I am granting *Iron City Magazine* permission to print my submission if selected for the coming issue, but copyright remains mine. (If submitting electronically, you may simply type your name in the space.)

Date: _____

Thank you for submitting to *Iron City Magazine*!

If your work is not chosen for this issue, please don't be discouraged from submitting in the future.