

For the men of A-Yard

PREFACE

The view of the world from a prison cell is not one I would wish upon anyone but, as expressed those remarkable men who are able to transform themselves in prison and live with some form of dignity, hope and humanity, it is a view that has transformed how I see and experience the world and, in so doing, has enriched me in ways that are beyond words.

One thing I hear repeatedly from those who are incarcerated—and, in particular those sentenced to life or life without the possibility of parole—is a plea, a demand, a cry to be seen as human beings. To be a "prisoner" or "inmate" in contemporary American society means to be experience an erasure: to be the subject of a social process of dehumanization through which the words "prisoner" and "inmate" obfuscate the fact that human beings look at the world from the windows of their cells and see the same sky that we all do; that "prisoners" are intelligent and creative, have hopes and dreams, and are able to love, laugh and hurt just as we all are.

Without such a process of dehumanization it would be difficult, I think, for the current system of incarceration in the United States to exist. Presently, the United States is home to 25% of the world's prison population, despite comprising only 5% of its population. According to Amnesty International, the U.S. stands alone in the world in subjecting juveniles to

life without parole sentences (L.W.O.P.), and one of the few countries in the world to uphold L.W.O.P. for adults without adhering to the Rome treaty—there are currently more than 49,000 humans currently serving L.W.O.P. in the United States. To put these numbers in context, the U.K., a country with a population of 68 million people, incarcerated just 49 prisoners with L.W.O.P. sentences prior to it being made illegal by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013. Faced with these facts, we must all recognize ourselves as citizens of a country that incarcerates unprecedented numbers of human beings.

Within this current system of mass incarceration, we have fixed millions of stories in the past tense; we have freeze-framed millions of lives in a past act (however wrong this act may have been) without the prospect of that person being seen in the present. In such instances, it is not that we have simply punished men and women for their past actions but, like a bad B-movie, have also written the story of their lives with a predictable ending that tediously unfolds before them. We have, in effect, ossified human beings in the moment of their crime that for many occurred when they were teenagers. Like some state sponsored Miss Haversham, we have stopped the clocks of lives all over California by denying prisoners the right to be seen in the present—by refusing to recognize that change, remorse, shame, guilt and transformation can occur—and as such, we have made a judgment that conflicts with the values (as well as European laws) of human rights that we profess to uphold around the world.

To experience profound transformation in prisoners and to be part of that process is, therefore, to experience—very tangibly—the fundamental error at the heart of the American judicial system: that it fixates on punishing men and women for past crimes but does not ask, what these men and women can become. As these stories attest to, oversight of this simple fact not only impacts the lives of those that are incarcerated but of all us—we Californians, we Americans, we Humans: we who uphold this system through our willingness to forget or remain ignorant that it exists; through our inability to see beyond the one dimensional representations of prison life on our television screens; through our capitulation to discourses of fear, and through our apathy.

When I first visited California State Prison, Lancaster what I saw there were not prisoners, but cages filled of hundreds of lights-lights of knowledge, wisdom, compassion, love, insight and remorse. It was if as hundreds of candles had been locked in a distant closet, or that the stars had been hidden behind the blanket of the desert night, denying us the light that they had to shine upon the world.

This journal is our attempt to uncage these lights.

It is our hope that these stories enrich you in some way and, as such, illuminate why we are diminished as a society by our current system of mass incarceration. We do not offer any answers to the challenges of criminal justice in the United States but simply invite you to see the world with incarcerated men- to see the sky from the perspective of their cells. We ask you to question whether or not you think transformation is possible, and to take a look at our system of mass incarceration with these thoughts on your mind and these stories in your hearts.

—**DR. BIDHAN CHANDRA ROY**
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"Irredeemable" by Chris Mann & Chris Branscombe

LISTEN

By: Travielle Craig and Andrea Romeo

Only one man survived J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*.

He sits alone on the periphery—just outside of the 3 x 4 frame—knees pressed to his chest, doomed to rocking back and forth with the tide. You can't see him, lying just beyond the frame but he sees you, feels your breath like a warm humid wind when you get too close to the art. He'd probably say something once in a while if it weren't for the sand in his mouth, pressed into his gums, rubbing his throat raw.

He sits in silence listening, writing messages on the soft parts of the shore. But just when he's finally got a message across, the riotous tide swallows up his words once more.

I am the last man standing. Every now and then, like a ship or plane that passes by, I get a visit from family. I wave. I yell. I cry out for help, hoping they will see me, hear me, rescue me. But they don't. I walk away mad. Mad because they left me. They left me but I am happy. Happy about seeing them, hearing them, talking to them—even if they don't talk back.

The man sits in the frame. The frame hangs on the wall. If people looked close enough, they could see the man is still breathing. The waves are still rolling. The chains around his wrists still clink against each other. The painting is centuries old but oil never dries. There are people still waiting to be saved.

I am the last man standing. Loneliness and regret are my constant companions. The loneliness is not from being alone. I feel alone because I can't see it, but time is moving. Life is happening.

Everything is moving, but him. He's seen the same wave live and die in the same instant, retraced his steps in the same circle, and counted the same sunset a million times. And although we aren't all stuck in a frame, we all live under the same sun. While we live beneath the pleasant warmth of distant rays, there are those who live their entire lives burning under the relentless stare of the eye in the sky.

I grew up in Los Angeles. I was born at Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in 1974. Here I sit in this prison cell where I have been for the last 23 years, writing this letter to you. Growing up in the hood, I learned in and out of the home to fight. The L.A.P.D. used to jack us up. They used to make us put our hands on the hot engine hood of their cars and threaten us with jail time if we took them off. While our hands burned, they laughed.

While we pretend to walk freely through a world that does not belong to us, there are those who hang like pictures on a wall, and it is not enough to peer in every now and then. History does not only present us pictures of kings with pale skin and opulent thrones. There are also images of kings in chains, linked to one another, being led onto ships-or more recently, into 6 x 8 cells. The windows on the world are now embellished with metal bars.

I am the last man standing. I am the only person still behind bars from the Rodney King Riots. I am just number 98882. Can you imagine being a number? Over time, your number replaces your name. All you are is that number.

2.3 Million.

According to the Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities in 2005, the American Criminal Justice System holds more than 2.3 million people on their castaway steel-and-brick islands.

And yet- every man is piece of the continent, a part of the main.

You can keep a man in a cell but eventually he will seep out. His words a sweet milk, a silky black ink, unheard, unseen, will ooze from the pen onto a sheet of paper that will sag, unable to hold his voice within its thin blue lines.

I used to love writing but I stopped because I felt that nobody was listening. Nobody cared. So I lost my voice and acted out violently and I destroyed lives, families, communities. But I'm learning that I can repair some of the damage I caused with the right words.

He begins to whisper as he writes and although no one is listening, his voice flows quietly past metal bars. From the paper, to the floor, the words roll down like water and righteousness, like a mighty stream. His words, no longer confined by the page, sneak through the cracks on the walls.

Words can do more damage than any type of violent act. They're more powerful than any gun. They're sharper than any knife. They're hotter than any fire. They are an everlasting record. They are spirit and they are life.

But the storm in *The Slave Ship* continues to wreck. We are stilling telling the same story. We also are still learning to listen.

I'm waiting to get off my island.

THE LONGEST RIDE

By: Justin S. Hong

I awoke, startled by the slight jerk of the prison bus. It felt like a freezer as I breathed in the cold, dry, and recycled air. In a futile attempt, I tensed my body to keep from shivering. I was in one of those frozen meat trucks that I have only ever seen in movies. Swaying carcasses on meat hooks off to the butcher shop.

Next to me, a tattoo-riddled "ese," seemed to have taken up more space since we first sat down. Sighing in discomfort, I watched his baldhead bob in and out of consciousness.

I was embarking on an 18-hour drive, with a life sentence, to one of California's most violent prisons—Pelican Bay. The stories told about my destination could be the sequels to Stephen King novels. Wearily, I scanned my surroundings for any sign of the bogeyman. Most of the passengers had fallen asleep to the low hum of the bus's engine, while a few watchful eyes seemed to share my sentiment.

A stone-faced officer watched from a steel mesh cage behind us, his ivory shotgun daring any unruly behavior. Warned by him earlier, to "Shut up" or face consequences, none of us was so audacious to find out what they were; we rode in silence to the soothing sounds of jazz radio.

The bus lugged a consignment of society's castaways, murderers, rapists, thieves, all indistinguishable in our red paper jumpsuits. We had been traveling for 3 days, making the

occasional stops and layovers at Tehachapi, Folsom, and San Quentin, industrial warehouses where the defected are tagged, tossed, and forgotten.

My neck and shoulders ached from the long hours in restraints, hands cuffed and force folded in a state of perpetual prayer. Chains on my feet dug into my ankles as I tried to stretch my legs. The handcuffs connected to another chain around my waist that prohibited no more than a couple inches of movement. Torturous if one was to have an itchy nose.

I heard the clanking and scraping of chains dragging across the floor, as I watched a prisoner waddle to the bus's outhouse. He stopped every few steps to regain his balance on the swerving bus. Using a combination of his feet, knees, and fingers, he jerked and flipped open the toilet seat. What followed was the assailing stench of festering excrement that had been accumulating for days. Holding my breath so as not to gag, I silently prayed that my bladder could withstand the duration of the ride.

At 18 years old, I punched my own ticket to this prison bound convoy. Living my life in the revolving doors of bars and nightclubs, I basked in the glow of strobe lights and glory of street fights. Gang affiliated, mixed with alcohol and drugs, topped with an umbrella of low self-esteem, made for quite the nasty cocktail. Impulsive with a propensity of always trying to prove myself, my goals usually consisted of looking up from the bottom of a tilted bottle and selling enough drugs to support my criminal lifestyle. While celebrating my 18th birthday, my gang and I got into a bar fight with another group of guys. Following them to the parking lot, we viciously attacked and murdered Brian Chin. It was senseless, without reason, and secured my window seat to prison. Moving forward, I have spent many nights, wallowing in regret and remorse, wishing I could turn back the hands of time. However, the hands of time do not tick that way, Brian will never be able to spend time with his family, his newborn child, meanwhile, the world ticks on without his contributions.

I stared out a bar-bolted window to see a familiar world passing me by. The sky was dark, but on the cusp of an impending sunrise. Purples and blues colored the atmosphere with streaks of pinks and oranges intensifying the horizon. Its vast beauty reminding me of all the things I took for granted.

A few curious on-lookers drove by as they made their early morning commutes. Stories began to formulate as I pensively watched my on-lookers go about their lives. A man on a cell phone became a businessperson working out the final details on a business deal. An excited truck driver was on his way home after weeks on the road to see his wife and kids. An affectionate couple held hands as they sped off towards a romantic getaway. I contrived in contrition as I realized that I might never experience these things, that I had forfeited my place in that world.

I gazed in reverence as we approached the majestic Redwoods of northern California. Their sheer size seemed to defy the industrialization of us mere mortals. For centuries, they stood unaffected by the changing world around them. If I could only stand as strong and rooted as they were, maybe I too could survive.

Navigating through a labyrinth of trees and twisted roads, we finally arrived at our destination. My fellow passengers were awake now and shifted in their seats for a better view of the concrete fortress. There were whispers amongst the prisoners about the "SHU" (Security Housing Unit) and "Big homeys" that seemed to heighten the anticipation.

Barbed wire and electric fences surrounded the sterile, gray, concrete walls. Ominous signs depicting electrocution, gunfire, and certain death warned against any attempts of escape. A fantasy crushed by the impossibility of the notion.

As we entered the compound, we went through several gates and checkpoints. I found it odd that the undercarriage

was checked with large mirrors; who in their right mind would want to sneak INTO prison? Once we came to a halt, a burly correctional officer came onto the bus with a roster of our names and pictures. With a booming voice, he bellowed, "When you hear your name, call out your CDC number, and make your way to the front of the bus!"

One by one, our names and CDC numbers shouted and one by one, we emptied the iron icebox. When it was my turn, I two-stepped and hobbled my way to the front. Hopping off the bus, another officer replaced my handcuffs with another pair with a practiced efficiency. Shuffled off towards the prison's R&R (receiving and releasing), I found my place in the assembly line of shambling zombies. Slippers dragging across the gravelly ground, I felt a sense of relief that the bus ride was finally over. A relief that was short lived as I entered the looming doors of Pelican Bay.

BEHIND THE GREY MOUNTAIN

By: Andrew Kicking Horse

All that matters is my heart beats.

In the spiritual life of Native Americans, ceremony plays a unique performance-based, dialogical, and interpretive role in communities. For Native Americans in prison, the fastest growing reservation in the United States, this is an amplified experience. The sweat lodge ceremony, a part of Native American spiritual culture here at California State Prison, Los Angeles County, has been a part of life for indigenous people for centuries. As one Elder stated, "I did not choose to be Indian...I was born Indian."

The power of the sweat is in the ceremony itself, enabling its participants to have continuing relationships with higher spiritual powers, and yet no revelation is universal. Just as there are many tribes, there are many different ceremonies and as time continues to pass, conditions change. Attending sweat lodge ceremonies is the single most important and widespread religious activity among Native American prisoners. It provides a unity of traditional and spiritual expressions and serves as a humbling experience. When someone enters the sacred sweat lodge, they do so on their knees, to symbolize their connection and closeness to the Mother of all: the Earth.

If you remain true to your faith and beliefs, you will begin to understand your path in life. I pray the Creator will continue to bless your journey.

AHO! All my relations,

ANDREW KICKING HORSE
CHOCTAW

LORENZO FLORES

I used to love to write poems when I was a kid. I even won a contest in middle school when I wrote a poem about the Dodgers winning the world series in 1988. I'll never forget my teacher, Ms. Robbins, how excited she was for me and proud of me and my writing. She inspired me so.

She used to work with me individually and gave me literature to eat up and be inspired, such as the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe. Unfortunately, it was a very dark time in my life, I was a constant victim of domestic violence in my home so I was permanently taken away by the courts and thrown into the foster care/ group home system.

Eventually, I rebelled and ran away. I raised myself in the streets. While indulging into my criminal lifestyle of gang leadership, drug dealing, and drug using, I decided to write poems again. Lots of times when I was intoxicated or posted up keeping lookout at night waiting for the enemy gangs to dare come look for us, I'd write poems.

I once had a portfolio full of poems and my friend Danny Butler, who to me was a normal person and citizen (a registered nurse was his occupation), one day read them and was very impressed and intrigued with my poems. So much so he wanted to help me possibly publish them. He looked at me in a whole different light. He believed this may be an actual future for me and out of my lifestyle.

Before I could type them into his computer I went to a "get together" and took my portfolio with me to show some woman who wanted to read my writing. She loved them. I left on an errand and upon my return she was gone, along with my poems. I was very upset - better say distraught - and so was my friend Danny. He asked me if I remembered my poems by heart, and I just did not. At least not most of them. But he asked me to just write new ones and that was the solution. I said "sure can, absolutely!"

So, this poem from 1996, the first half of "Night and Day," was one of my first (if not the first) of my new portfolio of poetry.

I remember riding passenger in my friend's car with my gun in my waistband writing this poem as we cruised somewhere. I folded it up when I was done and it ended up in my wallet.

My best friend had just been murdered. I had the weight on my shoulders of leading the gang I was a part of at the time. So, on paper I wrote down in my poem who I thought I should be and become; a prophetic fulfillment of the lost young man I was doomed to be.

In my poem I wrote "suicidal method is the key," something I truly believed was the only way to get dire situations accomplished, with a do-or-die mentality once I'm in motion. Well thank God it didn't work.

My poem was used against me in court by the prosecutor (D.A.). He blew it up really big on a board and put it on a stand and put it in front of the jury to prove I had the mentality of a hitman with no remorse. It helped the jury to find me guilty of conspiracy to commit murder (Which never happened, thank God). I was sentenced to 25 years to life and was found guilty of 2 attempted murders on police officers for shooting at their car in a high-speed chase. I received a consecutive life sentence for each police officer and another extra consecutive 20 years for the rifles.

Did I deserve all this time? Yes, that old person does. Even though no one was physically hurt in this case, I was going to kill that individual for financial gain, and my escape was by all means necessary. That old person (me) was a danger to society and a danger to himself. All them years represent a 100 % safety to the public from that lost, sick, and violent individual.

Now that new man that wrote the second part of "Night and Day" is primed for that unique blessing of a second chance. I, this new man, appreciates the fact of what this time did for him, for me. A preservation of life for all parties involved,

the community and myself. The chance was given to live and be born again, to morph from the cocoon of pain and hurt, to heal and help others heal, to love others without expecting them to love me back. These are the hems I've gained from my time put asunder. I can now see the day light, and the sun feels so satisfying on my face.

NIGHT AND DAY

By Lorenzo Flores

PART ONE (1996)

So ruff, so tuff,
 So hard to snuff,
 Kills with a smile,
 No anger sensed for a mile,
 A corrupted childhood formed the mold,
 A destructive protection to those valued gold,
 A real metropolitan gangster on the next move,
 Self, mind and soul is only to prove,
 Suicidal method is the key,
 Less than a second done quicker than the eye could see,
 Taken as a profession,
 Teaching how to take your last breath is the lesson,
 Everything is done with reason,
 New holidays called the killing season

PART TWO (2016)

a distorted sense of justice and order was my demise,
 Out of the ashes of a life sentence I rise,
 The insight of my life has awakened me,
 From the bondage of wrong thinking, I'm set free,
 To serve others with love is my newfound joy,
 I have finally healed from being that abandoned, broken boy,
 On my way home now, I have a new mission,
 To help our young ones afflicted with my old condition,
 To live a life of love and not hate,
 That as long as they breathe it is not too late,
 That the time is now and not tomorrow,
 Not to be like me and serve twenty-five years of sorrow.

AN IRREPARABLY GOOD MAN

By: Allen Burnett

I weighed just 155 pounds. I stood 5'5". I sat there on the floor, my chin resting on my knees and my back against the graffiti-sprawled concrete wall separating a rusty toilet from the rest of the men.

Recycled air, stale and polluted with cigarette smoke. The monotone voices of dozens of men, each struggling to hide their nervousness by laughing and lying to each other, trying to kill time while waiting to hear their names for their day in court. Some spoke Spanish, some Vietnamese, but everyone cursed in English. I was surrounded by predators and giants. Intimidated I sat watching quietly, waiting. The holding cell was cold, the loud, senseless talk was maddening, the overcrowding suffocating. It was a room made for twenty people but today there were bodies packed everywhere and it stunk. There was a pungent smell, a mix of stress, funk, and ass-with a hint of disinfectant.

I spent three hours in that once white room, reading and re-reading old, peeling graffiti, counting cracks in the walls and floor, and studying the worried faces of the men before my state appointed lawyer, Mr. Goran, appeared at the holding cell bars. His slender six-foot-four frame was topped by grayish curly hair and his ashy white skin sharply draped in a light blue suit. He wore expensive shiny black shoes. I watched him search the holding cell for me as I navigated the crowd of bodies, making my way to the opposite side of the bars directly in front of him. As if on cue, the room went quiet. There was no privacy there. This was our second meeting during the month that I had been in jail. I examined his face for a hint of good news, but it was void of emotion. Mr. Goran was stoic. He started to whisper as I leaned in closer. He did not say hello, or ask how I was holding up. In a matter-of-fact tone

he muttered, *"The District Attorney has decided to seek the death penalty."* There was no break in his voice, no sympathy, no humanity. *"I will try to come by the jail tonight to discuss our options,"* he continued.

"Our Options." I repeated his words in my mind. I was trying to process his last statement, "death penalty" when he looked down at his watch and just as quickly as he had come, he was gone. I watched him walk away. I watched as long as I could before he was out of my sight and I could only hear his shoes click around the corner and down the corridor. I was afraid to turn around and face the stares of those strangers in the holding cell. I gripped the bars to steady my feet. My heart pounded hard in my chest and loud in my ears. This was not real. I kept telling myself, *"This isn't real."* Somehow, I found my place back on the floor, placed my back against the wall and tucked my knees as close as I could in to my chest. This time, I buried my head into my folded arms and did exactly what any eighteen-year-old would do facing the death penalty.

For two excruciating years, I waited for trial, making many more trips to that crowded holding cell. I thought of suicide more times than I could remember, but like everything else in my life I couldn't even get that right. The two years I spent in jail were a precursor to prison, a breeding ground for ignorance and racism. Jail introduced me to being called the word "nigger!" Not once or twice, but constantly. I had the word hurled at me so many times that I used to joke it was my middle name. Jails are backward places where everything is segregated the dorms, yard time, showers and the collect call phones. Prison politics encourages it, and the prisoners enforce it. On those rare, "oops" moments when the deputy would open the wrong door during another races time all hell would break loose. Since the first day I stepped foot in jail it has been hunting season on Blacks. I was warned never get caught alone.

Nothing about jail was easy. Three months into my 19th birthday I was involved in my first race riot. Coming back from Church, I was suddenly caught in the dorms vestibule while another dorm was coming in from the roof. Outnumbered, I swung at everything and everybody with my Bible. Thank God for hardback books.

Because of my size and age, I was bullied and embarrassed. I lived in constant fear and stress. I walked on eggshells in the dorms, careful not to get in anybody's way. One morning an older man talked to me so bad just for sitting on his bed, that from a distance you would have thought that I came out of his testicles. Once going to visit, Mr. Goran a deputy yanked me out of line and off my feet by my neck. I learned a valuable lesson through that experience; if a deputy asks you, "where are you going?" never ever, respond with *"where do you think I'm going?"* It's just is not a good idea.

While in the county jail, I had a little bit of everything imaginable thrown at me or on me: hard plastic cups, a bar of Ivory soap, hot water, hot liquid detergent, a bag of piss and a couple things I will keep between God and myself. Confused and depressed, I was an emotional wreck when I finally made it to trial. Not only could I not focus on the trial, but I had not even begun to focus on why I was in jail in the first place. Trial lasted a month. It was a blur of testimony. There were multiple theories of guilt, Natural and Probable Consequences, Special Circumstances allegations, felony murder rules, and *"every man for himself."* All wrapped in an ill-prepared defense. The jury deliberated for two days, two long days that resulted in a guilty verdict on every single count.

I was ushered into the courtroom from that same holding cell that I had become so familiar with in the two years I had been in jail. My jumpsuit was bright orange and three sizes too big. I wouldn't be wearing my personal clothes on sentencing day. Shackled at the ankles with my wrist cuffed in the front, I walked slowly into the courtroom. The shackles were tight. They cut into my skin leaving red welts around my ankles and clinking with every step.

I was seated in a wooden chair and pushed up to the defense table next to Mr. Goran. He ignored me silently perusing over his notes. After a minute he simply said, "How are you holding up?" I managed a "fine". "Good man" he responded. Mr. Goran leaned in close to me. He had a secret. "I'm going to ask the court one more time for a new trial or a lesser sentence." I stiffened in my seat. Just the mention of a new trial gave me a slither of hope. I let my mind drift.

I could not sleep the night before trial. I sat at the desk in my dimly lit cell imagining how great it would be if they would let me go home. In my mind, I saw myself at the park playing basketball with my friends. My last good memory before being arrested. I thought about school the summer before and my guidance counselor telling me that if I applied myself I could be a good student. I imagined myself sitting in class, listening to the professor, taking notes, periodically peeking at the clock. It was almost over. I thought to myself, "*I'm going home.*"

I heard voices around me murmuring. I stopped listening, tuned them out. I didn't want to be there. I concentrated on the clock, watching the hands tick by. My concentration was broken when I felt Mr. Goran squeeze my shoulder and explain to the court why I should have a new trial. As if for the first time, I looked up. The courtroom was crowded. I scanned the faces. Everyone was tense, tight jawed, somber. No one would meet my gaze except my mom. She was sitting two rows behind me. Our eyes locked for a moment and she gave me a reassuring look that everything would be okay then motioned with her head to face forward. Mr. Goran continued to plead for a new trial while the judge listened. From the bench, he looked large and uninterested in the whole routine. He was older, in his late 60's with white hair and wore wired rimmed glasses that indented the bridge of his nose. He remained silent while Mr. Goran spoke, contemplating before looking directly towards me.

"Life without Parole." Those three words cut deep into my chest. They reverberated up my spine, crawled like spiders over my head, into my eyes and face and into my mouth. I promised my mom I would be strong. I remembered, fighting back my tears. Life without Parole. In that instant, it all became clear to me. I had no value. I was diseased, hopeless and being sent away to die.

Hidden under the menacing nighttime shadows of the December clouds, the prison resembled a medieval castle with iron bars, huge granite stone blocks, and an enormous King Kong Door that kept the peering eyes out and kept the monsters in. Shackled, waist chains, hands cuffed in front. I shivered at the prison gate from a mix of fear and cold air. "*Its giants*

here," I thought nervously. To this day people shake their heads sympathetically whenever I mention that I started my sentence at New Folsom. I used to describe the experience as a long drawn out *nightmare*; while at other times, I would brag, referring to Folsom as my *alma mater*. Sometimes I would rationalize suggesting, everyone should start there, and *learn how to do time*. The truth is it was a traumatic experience; Folsom was the most violent and predatory place you could dump a 20-year-old first termmer.

In Folsom everything and everyone seemed big to me; the yard, the cells, the weight pile was so huge it looked like a full-scale construction site, with all the iron bars and plates laying around. The men would lift, pull, grunt, and cuss at the weights, day in and day out, and the weights would clink, clank, and clunk-cussing the men right back. Both the guards and prisoners looked like they were made for the place, they were giants. In my young mind, I wanted to be a giant too.

I was one of three new arrivals that year: Derwan, Kiki, and myself. They called us Fish. I didn't understand why until someone told me it was because we looked out of place; like a fish out of water. Neither one of us were over the age of 22. Each of us had Life without Parole. We were strangers, brought together by our age and sentence. On Saturday mornings, we would meet up on the hill next to the weight pile, with the rest of the fish our age and hang out. The topics of conversation were always the same: jokes, X men, rappers, girls and prison politics. Derwan had long dreads. He was dark skinned and chubby with pearly white teeth. By early April, Derwan was beaten and raped repeatedly by his cellmate, a giant who called himself Baltimore. When he finally got the courage to report what was happening to a nurse, his bravery was rewarded with a slice from mouth to ear for snitching. Kiki was bi-racial, Black and Hawaiian and a little slow. The older men would say he had the word sucker written across his forehead. Kiki was always trying to fit in, trying to prove he was *down, smart*, and more Black than not. Determined to fit in, he volunteered himself into the safe keep of a dozen prison knives. He swore he had the best hiding place ever, but two weeks later, he threw them all away during a major prison search to avoid being caught. This common sense decision

resulted in Kiki getting stabbed in his lung and almost dying on the way to the medical.

I felt sorry for Derwan and Kiki, but there was nothing I could do. Having Life Without Parole meant that, outwardly, I had to accept the violence or become a victim to it. I felt trapped, imprisoned inside a prison. I carried my sentence around with me with shame, like a scarlet letter. I hated the way people would look at me when they found out how young I was and the sentence I had. Their expression reminded me my diagnosis was terminal. I was dead. I just didn't know it yet.

There were no therapeutic groups in jail or Folsom. There was nothing to help me transition from my friends and my mom and little sister to life inside a maximum-security prison. There was nothing to set me on the right path. There was no right path. I had no incentive to program in a positive way. I lost all hope. My depression turned to anger. Stress was a bad cold I could never shake, and to make matters worse, during my first orientation committee, "welcoming me to prison," I was handed a copy of a letter the District Attorney wrote that was placed in my personal file, which stated that I was irreparable. I was the driving motivating force behind my crime and it would be fitting that I never get out of prison. That letter was the final peg that drove me to defeat.

Those first years in prison were the hardest for me. I was surrounded by violence, and drug abuse. It was common to see men snorting heroin on the yard through a visine bottle, or smoking weed. Drugs created problems that were resolved with a slashing or stabbing. Per prison, politics violence was always the answer and Alcoholism was the norm. Drugs and Alcohol helped people cope and when stress and feelings of abandonment were finally too much to bear suicide was the final option. One Saturday a man hung himself. They said he was having problems with his marriage. He hadn't heard from his wife in months and then one day a letter came, a Dear John. Apprehensive, he tore open the envelope. Before he even sat down to read it, he knew it was bad news. She was leaving him for another man and wanted a divorce. She was running off to Atlanta with her lover, and believed he was a "good man" and deserved to know the truth about her affair. His cellmate found him hanging from the end of the top bunk.

We sat at on the side of the weight pile and watched them rush his lifeless body on a gurney to the medical. A nurse ran along the side of the gurney, pounding away at his chest. The sheet knotted around his neck. The silence was broken when someone said, "*this is going to have us on lockdown*". It was then that I understood what hardened meant. No one was moved by the suicide. Loss of life had become expected, normal.

With a heavy sigh of relief, I left New Folsom in 1997. As if jail was not enough, I survived two prison wars and a major race riot a year earlier, all by the grace of God. The thing about prison wars and riots are that everyone becomes a target. Age doesn't matter, surrendered hands, wheel chair or crutches, stabbed and bleeding, it doesn't matter. To the guards, anything in blue, victim or victimizer, you can be shot. Despite the fact that I walked away from these experiences physically unscathed, they left me emotionally scared and traumatized. I became more and more detached as the years passed. I never learned how to take responsibility for my crime, I just blamed everyone else. I had become worse, a grown child with awful coping skills, and muscles. I had become a giant, yet mentally and emotionally I was the same dysfunctional kid at the time I was arrested, just angrier. I protected myself to whatever degree necessary, including manufacturing weapons. It wasn't until I ended up in California's notorious Pelican Bay State Prison that I decided that I needed to change my life.

Four years later, I found myself in administrative segregation on Bed Rock fighting a weapons case. Bed Rock is a cell made completely of concrete with two bunks side by side and two cubbyholes at the base of the bunks to keep your personal belongings. The bunks are an arms distance apart. My cellmate was an older guy I'd met years before at Folsom. Owl was in his forties, tall, balding and built like a full back-a giant. He didn't talk much initially, but when he did, his speech was deliberate and focused. He commanded your un-divided attention when he spoke. Over the next four months, I absorbed what he had to share. I learned that he had been in since he was eighteen, like myself. He was also sentenced to Life without Parole. He started his time in the historic San Quentin in the "bloody 80's." He told me many war stories, but the ones that

affected me the most were the stories of the family members and friends he lost over the years. He lost his mother and his father the very next year. He explained to me the feeling of hopelessness he felt not being able to attend his parent's funerals. He was alone and bitter. To deal with his grief and loss he immersed himself in the prison sub-culture and accepted his sentence as his fate etched in stone. He would die in prison.

Owl's stories became warnings to me. They made me reflect on the path I had chosen for myself. I began to fear the future. I didn't want to die in prison and more so, I didn't want to lose my family while serving Life without Parole. I didn't want to be alone. I realized I was only feeding the hopelessness. By choosing violence over change, I was creating a hole I would never climb out.

I was twenty-seven years old when I left Pelican Bay. I wanted to change but I wasn't entirely sure on what change required. It became a gradual progression. I stopped associating with individuals with racist ideologies. I avoided those conversations all together, especially ones regarding prison politics: which group is pinning for control of the yard, who owed who money, who got stabbed. Those things became pointless to me. I wanted something better for myself. I wanted to be a better person. I enrolled in vocational classes, searching for different ways to educate myself. I began occupying my time with constructive activities and gained a sense of accomplishment. It felt good. I managed to remain disciplinary free long enough to earn a custody reduction because of my change.

My guidance counselor told me of a program in Los Angeles County that I might fit into. Mr. Mayor was a Vietnam vet who always had a story to share. He would sit in his office, his long legs stretched across the floor with his pale hand doodling in the air as he talked, looking over his brown framed glasses. He spoke of his friendships in Vietnam. He learned what real friends are and what loyalty is. He talked to me as if I were a real person with value, not just an inmate. Sometimes I would stop by his office just to experience an unbiased "real conversation." He always ended our conversations

with "you're a good man." I liked that. It made me feel good that he saw quality in me. No one had ever told me I was a good man before. I believed him.

For the next two years, he tried to get me to Los Angeles County, but it was always "closed to intake." I just kept on programming, staying out of trouble and doing my time as constructively as possible. Then, in 2010, I was finally accepted to Los Angeles County. My mistake was sharing the news with my co-workers, who responded with nothing but negativity. They called the Progressive Programming facility a protective custody facility. A place where they housed snitches and pedophiles. I bit right into the peer pressure, doing everything I could to get out of the transfer. I refused to go to a facility with a bad reputation, even on a positive path. A Life Without sentence forced me to do everything in my power to hold onto a respectable prison reputation. It was all I had left. Whether or not the rumors were true about the Progressive Programming Facility didn't matter. Life Without Parole is a trap that dictated every decision I made for the rest of my life. In prison, it only takes one time for someone to say you are "no good" and the probability for you to get stabbed shoots to 10. I couldn't take that chance. When Mr. Mayor found out about my change of attitude, he called me in for one of those "talks." When I entered his office, he gave me a look of disappointment, removed his glasses, pinched the nose-bridge, and leaned back in his chair in a long exaggerated motion. It was hard for me to meet his gaze; I focused instead on his thinning hair.

I was embarrassed. I saw the inconsistency. The truth was I was afraid. I'd claimed to want to change, to turn my life around, but my recent activities showed otherwise. I'd been cuffed up twice since my transfer approval, and each time, sent back to my cell with a warning. I was given the benefit of the doubt because I'd been programming for so long and so well in contrast to my past. Everyone was trying to help me and I didn't understand. I was so afraid of what other people would think that I almost squandered a life-changing opportunity. I tried to explain my concerns, feeling trapped because of my sentence. He listened patiently, even nodding emphatically. When I was done, he gave me a reassuring nod and reminded me I

was a good man and that everything would be okay. He silently handed me my transfer papers and began reading off all the programs that Los Angeles County had to offer.

I have practically grown up in prison. I spent the latter half of my adult life raised between six different maximum-security institutions: New Folsom, Kern Valley, Tehachapi, Corcoran, Pelican Bay and Lancaster. It didn't take me long to adjust to the new facility. I immediately enrolled in the college program. College gave me a new perspective about life. I had an "aha" moment once I finished my first semester. I loved the feeling I had when I was done. I finally did something right. College showed me options that I never thought existed. I also began participating in the Men for Honor cognitive behavioral therapy programs and learned about childhood trauma, causative factors and the ripple effect of my decisions. These programs taught me the importance of taking responsibility for my actions. I began adopting new coping skills and love for myself, and others. Church has become the foundation of transformation, my love for God. Twenty-five years ago, I would have never imagined being the person I have become; I am so far removed from that eighteen-year-old kid crying in the holding tank. I often wonder if that person ever really existed. It only took one person to see value in me, to encourage me, and help me see the value in myself, which helped me see the value in others. Today I am working towards my BA degree and I have dedicated my life to helping others. I was never irreparable. I have always been a *Good Man*.

RULE 10

BY: DAMON MATTHEWS

It was 2 a.m. when they pulled into the maximum-security prison. With shackles clamped painfully around his wrists and ankles, Brian Kilgor peered aimlessly from the windows of the stuffy bus, eager to get into a cell and mattress after a miserable eight-hour ride. The cold, dark California desert matched the mood of the human cargo. Serving year twelve of a sixteen-year sentence for armed robbery, Brian prepared himself for the drama and hate that followed him from prison to prison like a sadistic show.

Before his arrest, Brian was a rebellious eighteen-year old gang member who enjoyed being one of the guys in his sunny, crime-riddled San Diego neighborhood. However, after his arrest he experienced a different dynamic amongst his rowdy homeboys. In jail, he learned that there was less of a laid-back camaraderie and more of a structured pecking order with consequences for rule breakers.

This really rubbed Brian the wrong way. He didn't appreciate having to answer to a fellow gang-member just because he was new to the jail system. He decided to do everything in his power to make a name for himself so he could be the one giving orders, not taking them. Being one of the guys was no longer enough.

Brian was convicted and shipped off to prison one year after his arrest. He knew ascending to the top of the gang food-chain required violence. Brian had that covered thanks in large part to a physically and sexually abusive father. However, the proper timing of his violent outburst is what set him apart. Attacking a guard in full view of influential gang bangers or inciting race riots "just because" were a couple tactics Brian employed. He even extorted weaker crews, taking

their drugs under the pretext that he would pay for them, only to stiff them and distribute the dope to his own homeboys. These calculated, and often impulsive, acts made his name known on general population yards throughout the State. He became respected and admired by his clique, and feared and despised by rivals. Eight years into his sentence and Brian had achieved Alpha Dog status.

That was then. Today, Brian's rock star treatment is all but gone. Now, the thirty-year-old is considered a pariah. Previously, his arrival to a new yard prompted generous care packages from his homeboys. Now, he was lucky if he was afforded basic respect. Worst of all, he's no longer worthy of the customary small handwritten note (often called a "kite"), listing all his friends and foes on the yard. As perks go, that was Brian's favorite. A man cannot become a top butcher without getting blood on his hands. Having that list kept him in the know as to who he may have to confront; so, arriving at the prison in the dead of night, without that kite to look forward to, left Brian in the dark, literally and figuratively. There were occasions when he didn't have to confront anyone; potential targets would voluntarily go into protective custody (PC) to avoid his wrath.

"What a difference four years make," Brian thought as he, and the rest of society's rejects, were herded off the bus like degenerate sheep. These days it's him entertaining the idea of going PC. Barely paying attention to the guards' profanity-laced orders to keep quiet and form a tight, straight line, Brian reminisced about the night when all his prison troubles began.

Four Years Earlier...

Relaxing in his cell watching television, Brian was enjoying a rarity in California's notoriously overcrowded prisons - a night in general population without a cellmate (aka "cellie"). His previous cellie paroled two nights prior, and with the State's prison population bursting at the seams, Brian was sure he'd get a new one the same night. Instead, the gods of solitude smiled down and allowed the "King" to have his broom closet-sized castle to himself for a second consecutive night.

Tipsy off inmate-made alcohol (pruno), and stoned thanks to a small amount of smuggled-in weed, Brian was in the middle of flubbing yet another "Wheel of Fortune" puzzle when the steel cell door rumbled open.

Brian quickly downed the bitter drink he was nursing - a precaution just in case a guard was approaching his cell. He got up to investigate. He wanted his gang tattoos on display just in case a new cellmate was coming, so he decided not to put on a shirt. He positioned his athletic six-foot-two frame at the threshold of the door to block the entrance, preparing to vet the potential new cellie. This posturing was done more out of obligation than defiance. Although gangs are similar in that they all have unwritten rules, in prison, a lot of gangs - including Brian's - have rules that are actually written. Often referred to as a "Constitution," these rules are numerous and very strict.

Along with the ubiquitous "No snitching" (Rule 1), and "No backing down from a fight" (Rule 8), there is also a laundry list of do's and don'ts regarding cell behavior. "Allowing someone mentally unstable to move into your cell" is also a no-no (Rule 12). These rules were established long before Brian came to prison. Now that he was a leader of his clique on that particular yard, not only did he have to follow them, he also had to punish those who didn't. The punishment could range from mandatory exercise, to being stabbed.

To those on the outside looking in, some of these rules may seem petty and odd - "No hanging your feet from the top bunk while your cellie is on the lower bunk" (Rule 15) - but in the volatile world of maximum security prisons, these Constitutions are effective at keeping violence down.

The last thing Brian wanted was a buzz-killing confirmation. He looked out of the cell hoping to see one of his homeboys. What he saw instead was a dud he didn't know heading his way carrying a bed roll. Brian sized up the guy - slim, fir, maybe six feet tall and no visible tattoos. "I can take him," he thought to himself. Gangbangers put out a certain aggressive energy when meeting other gang members for the first time. Brian did not detect that energy in this guy.

With guards watching from their posts and inmates looking on from their cells, the unit fell silent with anticipation. Brian was fully prepared to put on yet another violent show if the situation called for it. The guy walked up to the shirtless gangbanger, smiled, and extended his right hand for Brian to shake. Still blocking the entrance, Brian shook the guy's hand and asked two of the most commonly asked questions prisoners pose to one another upon meeting. The first being, "What do they call you?" Most convicts have monikers, and asking a guy "What's your name?" comes off as narc-like. He told Brian he went by the name "D2."

Brian's follow-up question was, "Where are you from?" This seemingly innocent query is often considered challenging or threatening because if the person being asked answers by naming a rival neighborhood, he may have a fight on his hands ... or worse. In the streets, sometimes punches are thrown, or bullets start flying if the guy even hesitates to answer. So, the "Where are you from?" question automatically puts a guy on the defensive; gangbangers hate that. Brian knew this but he didn't care. He was in full intimidation mode.

D2 didn't seem to notice. He told Brian he was from Fairfield, a small city in Northern California not known for crime. Brian found it weird that they guy was sporting a goofy smile. Chalking it up to nervousness, he allowed the man to move in with no objections, prompting the guards to relax and the other inmates to go back to whatever they were doing in their cells; there would be no show tonight.

Once D2 unpacked and settled in, Brian courteously offered him some weed and pruno. D2 was more than willing to indulge. The two spent the next couple of hours getting loaded and talking about their backgrounds. Brian learned that D2 was four years older, loved reading and watching movies set in medieval times. Brian also learned that his new cellie never came across a drug he didn't try at least twice.

D2 had a naïve, child-like fascination with the gang lifestyle. This amused Brian. D2 reminded him of the nerdy character Carlton Banks from the sit-com "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air." Brian found it refreshing to be in a cell with a

"square" for a change. He didn't have to be hyper-vigilant, worrying about constant rules. D2 surprised Brian when he produced some much more potent weed for them to enjoy. For the first time in a long while, Brian didn't mind having a cellie.

Days passed and Brian noticed something different about his new cellie. Brian was used to being around cutthroats and hardened criminals - D2 was the polar opposite. He was an average working-class citizen in society who got caught up in California's draconian Three Strikes Law. Done in by one-too-many drug convictions, D2 was a fish out of water doing 25-to-life instead of a much-needed rehab stint. But it was something about D2's mannerisms and the way he spoke that struck Brian as ... odd. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

In prison, as one might imagine, there is plenty of idle time. Inmates spend a lot of that time reading. Whether fiction, non-fiction, law, or religious text, prisoners read it all. However, no matter how many spiritual awakenings take place as a result of the voracious reading, at the end of the day porn is still king. With no women around to scratch the itch, inmates clamor for nudie magazines.

Brian was no different. He had a small stash of "smut" that he thoroughly enjoyed - especially when he had no cellie. Brian was a star football player in high school, and this made him a bit of a ladies man. Although girls were all over him, Brian, like a lot of other teenagers, was heavy into pleasuring himself to girly mags. Of course, he hid this shameful habit, convinced that he was the only one doing it regularly.

Somewhere along the way there came a point when imagining naked women wasn't enough. Taboo thoughts started to invade his fantasies - thoughts his peers wouldn't accept or tolerate. This only added to his shame. Around that time in his life Brian became more short-tempered, rebellious, and a little less comfortable in his own skin.

One day after he and D2 finished off a joint, Brian prepared to head out to the prison exercise yard on a cold rainy morning. Prison guards in the gun towers must have a clear line of sight to quell acts of violence with their mini-

14 rifles; so the yard offered no overhead protection from the rain. Brian was guaranteed to come back to the cell soaked.

Bewildered, D2 asked, "why are you going out there when it's raining like that?" Brian told him that under his gang's Constitution it was "Mandatory that all homeboys go to the yard, rain, sleet, or snow" (Rule 4). H explained how even during a time of peace, a riot could happen over something as small as a misinterpreted look; so, all available hands had to be on deck. On his way out the door, Brian gave his cellie permission to look at his porn collection while he was gone, a common courtesy convicts show each other when they get along. A couple of hours later, Brian returned drenched from the rain. D2 made no mention of the porno magazines.

Days later, on his way to a dental appointment at the prison infirmary, D2 gave Brian a fat joint and gave him permission to look at his stack of smut as well. Feigning anger, Brian chided D2 for not offering him a look sooner. D2 laughed it off.

"Your collection is so" vanilla," I figured you wouldn't know what to do with my stack," D2 stated with a sly smile.

The term "vanilla" went over Brian's head, but he was too self-conscious to ask D2 what he meant by it. After D2 headed out to see the dentist, Brian sparked up the joint and began eagerly flipping through the large stack of skin magazines. A few pages into the first magazine it began to dawn on Brian what D2 meant when he called his small collection of porn "vanilla."

Brian was accustomed to the standard "Penthouse" fare, but what he was looking at now was ... different. Better. Maybe the weed was making it more intense. Yes, there was the usual content Brian favored (i.e. naughty nurses, Far East geishas and black women with shapely derrieres), all of which are popular in prison. However, as he sat there gawking at large-breasted women engaging in various sex acts with men and women, Brian noticed something. Some of the women performing those lewd acts weren't women at all. They were dudes!

"What the fuck?!" He muttered out loud. Shocked, yet transfixed, Brian continued to flip through page after page. He loved women - slept with plenty of them prior to his incarceration, but Brian could not deny it; he found those triple X images hot. In fact, he couldn't recall ever being that excited. Once again, just as it was when he was a teenager, Brian was alone - pleasuring himself.

Minutes after his marijuana-enhanced climax, Brian's euphoria was replaced by guilt and shame. He also felt conflicted. Brian knew he had to get a new cellie as soon as possible. D2 was a cool dude, and Brian really didn't want to kick him out, but the Constitution clearly states: "no gay cellmates and absolutely no homosexual acts of any kind" (Rule 10).

Questions raced through his mind. "Do I really have to switch cellies?" "No straight person would be into this kind of shit right?" "Then what the hell does that make me?"

When D2 returned from the dentist that day, Brian was feeling unsettled and awkward. He could not stop thinking about those magazines. He wanted to grill D2 about the smut, but he couldn't do so with conviction after what he had just done.

Brian felt bamboozled. Had D2 been a transsexual or someone noticeably gay, Brian would have invoked Rule 10 immediately, even if it meant being thrown in "The Hole" for refusing a cellmate. Even though Brian enforced his gang's Constitution regularly, the truth is he resented Rule 10. He always did. He saw how other cliques went as far as allowing sexual contact, with the caveat being the act had to be deemed "manly." They subscribed to the twisted prison logic that performing fellatio on someone makes you gay, while being on the receiving end does not. To them, penetrating a willing transsexual or raping a vulnerable inmate is manly and something you brag about without being labeled a queer, but if you voluntarily allow another man to penetrate you, you're the

"F" word.

Brian was simply curious. He kept his taboo desires to himself for years, even while sleeping with all of the football groupies and bad boy chasing girls in high school. He didn't feel like a chick trapped in a dude's body or anything weird like that. Nor did he want a same-sex relationship; the thought repulsed him. Although his urges were strictly physical, Brian never sought out, or even met, anyone who made him want to explore that side of his sexuality. He didn't have a type. Oddly enough, that all changed when he got busted and saw something he had never seen before.

It happened while sitting in a crowded, musty holding tank in San Diego County Jail. Brian looked across a hallway to an adjacent holding tank, also packed with inmates waiting to be cuffed and bussed to their court appearances. As he scanned the miserable faces, something caught his eye. In the midst of the thugs, mentally deranged and unkempt drug-addicts, sat a beautiful Latina with fire engine red hair and perky breasts, dressed in jail house scrubs like the male inmates. He wondered why she wasn't in the holding tank down the hall with the female inmates. She smiled seductively when she noticed Brian staring. He waved and returned the smile, thinking to himself, "I still got it." Confused and a little concerned for the chick's safety, Brian asked the guys next to him why the guards put that "bad bitch" in a holding tank with murderers and rapists. The tank erupted in laughter. The guys had to explain to the clueless Brian that the "woman" he was making goo-goo eyes at was a "punk," a term Cali prisoners use when referring to transsexuals.

Brian was mocked mercilessly by the other inmates that day. And although he was embarrassed, he was also mesmerized. From that day forward he became obsessed with the idea of being with one of them. He now had a type.

In prison, transsexuals are regularly victimized by

other inmates, so they are often placed in protective custody. However, there were occasions when Brian would see them on general population yards. They'd give themselves female names, soften their voices and walk around the yard wearing make-up and altered clothing in an effort to look like women. Brian found the spectacle of it all distracting. It was bad enough the prison had real females (nurses, counselors, C/O's etc.) walking around that he lusted after but couldn't have. Now there he was doing the same thing with the transsexuals. This frustrated him to no end because he had to do so covertly.

The last thing he needed was for his homeboys to notice him ogling punks. After all, he had a reputation to establish. So he kept a safe distance and merely watched as other hard up prisoners propositioned the punks by offering food, money, and protection in exchange for agreeing to move in with them.

D2 was not a transsexual, but Brian now found himself in a cell with a guy who may very well be into dudes. All of D2's idiosyncrasies began to pop up in Brian's mind. The way D2's natural baritone went up a few octaves when he would ask for something. The odd hand gestures and the frequent compliments - all of these things were more pronounced whenever they smoked pot - and thanks to D2, they smoked a lot. Brian initially chalked it up to being around a square for the first time. Now, with a slightly paranoid perspective, he saw D2's behavior as ... effeminate, maybe? Then he thought, "Is that why the muthafucka was smiling at me when he moved in?!?"

Every street-smart instinct in Brian implored him to kick D2 to the curb immediately. He just couldn't bring himself to do it. He kept finding excuses as to why there was no need. For starters, he genuinely liked D2 as a person. Plus, there was still a possibility that the guy was straight.

A week after his initial solo tryst with the smut, the two of them had just finished getting high and Brian couldn't hold his tongue any longer. He needed answers. "So what's with the punk magazines?" he asked.

D2 laughed. Brian wasn't sure why, but he just waited. D2 made no apologies. "They're not punk magazines; as you can

see I'm into all kinds of porn. I draw the line at animals and kid shit, but everything else is fair game."

"Are you gay?" Brian asked.

"I wouldn't label myself that. Matter of fact I wouldn't label myself at all," D2 stated bluntly. Brian fell silent. D2 went on, candidly admitting to sleeping with both men and women during his drug-fueled past. He explained, "a person cannot prevent their bodies from being attracted or responding to someone, whether male or female." He caught Brian off guard when he told him he was attracted to masculine men, not the "garden variety penitentiary punk." Brian knew right then that D2 was interested in him.

Ignoring his inner censor, Brian, for the first time ever, confided in another human being and spoke about his secret attraction. "If I were to fuck around it would have to be with someone who looked like a bitch." He and D2 didn't have the same friends so Brian figured it was safe to tell him. Although D2 didn't share the same attraction - he found transsexuals "ridiculous" - he made it a point not to judge.

While Brian struggled to suppress his urges, and tried to train himself to keep his eyes off of the women wannabe's on the yard, his cellie had no worries. Throughout his prison stint, D2 had to be careful with whom he shared his sexual history. Convicts are not known for their tolerance, especially gangbangers. He had plenty of cellies that never knew about his porn stash. Over time, however, he became intuitive enough to discern who would be accepting of his sexual fluidity. To that point, he sized up Brian immediately.

Weeks before moving in, D2 spotted Brian standing in the weight pile clandestinely checking out the backside of a gaggle of punks walking by. Brian had no idea that he was also being watched and admired. He didn't know D2 counted himself lucky when he serendipitously moved into Brian's cell. Brian had no clue that his new cellmate gave him access to his magazines more for strategic reasons than for mere jailhouse courtesy. He employed the same tactic with his seemingly endless supply of marijuana. Having been around drugs long enough, D2 understood

their un-inhibiting effects. Brian lowered his guard and unloaded his secrets, not suspecting he was being wooed. This, along with D2's low key disposition led Brian to give into temptation. And although he kept the act "manly," the fact of the matter was that he broke Rule 10.

Back to present day.

The booming voice of a guard brought Brian back from his trip down memory lane. Two and a half hours had passed since disembarking from the bus and now they were being assigned cells in the intake building. New arriving inmates are placed on orientation for a couple of weeks, during which time they are segregated from the general population, interviewed, classified, and given the opportunity to go PC. This is done for legal reasons. Contrary to popular belief, the State doesn't just throw inmates to the wolves without the prisoner's consent.

Brian was grateful to be housed with an elderly gentleman who knew nothing about his past. This allowed Brian to sleep easier, something he finds difficult since being crushed by a television during his slumber by one of his cellies who was scared, but obligated to do so.

The following morning, Brian caught another break. He learned that all orientation inmates are fed in their cells rather than in the cafeteria. This allowed him to gather intel while remaining unseen by potential enemies. The hunted needs every advantage possible - stealth was Brian's friend. Brian found out that his former homeboy "Eddie G," a guy he did dirt with years ago, was now calling shots on the yard. Brian knew Eddie G was fair and reasonable, and he felt he actually had a chance to last for more than a few weeks on this yard without an attempt on his life. He also knew from experience how strong pressure is on leaders to punish rule-breakers and earn stripes in front of their crew. Far too often peer pressure trumps

fairness and reasoning.

Brian woke up early and went to the sink to wash up. He stared at his reflection in the mirror as his old cellie slept quietly a few feet away. Brian studied the once-flawless tattoo on his chest. The name of his gang was printed in bold letters above his left pectoral muscle. Now, thanks to an attack from an assailant armed with a knife fashioned crudely out of scrap metal, part of one of the O's in the word "Blood" was gone - replaced by ugly scar tissue.

Brian rubbed the two-year-old scar, thinking about the failed attempt on his life. The fingered a different scar on the back of his neck - the result of a razor attack a year later. Receiving battle scars from his own homies was the last thing Brian expected when he became Alpha Dog. Looking back, he also never imagined breaking one of the rules he swore to enforce.

Every time he paused to reflect on his time in the cell with D2, the more bitter he became. Oddly enough, he wasn't mad at his former homeboys for the repeated attacks. "Rules are rules," he thought. Nor did he blame himself. Brian directed his anger squarely at one person: D2.

Brian felt used and taken advantage of; a real blow to his manhood. However, that's not why he was bitter. He willingly satisfied his curiosity, and enjoyed it too. No, Brian was bitter because D2 exposed him. Brian wasn't sure who he told, or why. At first he theorized that D2 blabbed to a friend whom he mistakenly trusted with the secret. But not so deep down, Brian believed D2 did it with malicious intent because Brian was only interested in one thing, while D2 wanted more. Days after experiencing that one thing, Brian moved out of their cell and into a cell with one of his homeboys, pissing off D2 in the process.

The homeboy he moved in with got wind of the egregious rule violation and ended up

being the guy who tried to crush his skull with a television as he slept. Prison yards are like small towns - no secrets are safe.

Brian realizes that it wasn't worth it. He still had to wait a few more years before his parole date, and he considered going PC during his orientation interview. Not only would he escape the attacks, but he'd also be able to live in a cell with whomever he pleased. However, in spite of his misstep, Brian still considered himself a badass. Going PC would feel like a bitch move and Brian wasn't ready to give up on being rebellious. Yes, he was at war with his homeboys, but he's won some of the battles. The guy who busted him over the head with the TV had to have eye socket surgery. The guy who sliced his neck lost a tooth before his back-up ran over and finished Brian off.

Happy and more than a little nervous to be off orientation, Brian prepared for the yard. Fear of yet another beat-down, along with salacious thoughts of hooking up with a punk, urged Brian to go PC, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. So, he decided to man-up and do what he'd been doing for the past four years. He made himself a knife and headed out to general population - ready to put on a show.

MUSING TWO. DARKNESS

Being in prison is . . .

Waiting for letters nobody writes,

Waiting for visits that never take place,

Wondering how time could move so slowly,

Wishing that I weren't so lonely.

-John Manning.



"Waiting" by Chris Branscombe

THOUGHTS OF THE INCARCERATED SOUL

BY: ANTHONY MCDUFFIE

Thoughts of the incarcerated soul, are like nomads that roam
the Earth to gather seed of happiness, to plant in the soil of
the mind;

With hopes of cultivating a harvest of long lasting joy, in the
heart of the troubled soul;

That confinement done made cold. So cold you could feel the
temperature drop to 90° below zero - like weather of the North
Pole.

So chilly, like the winds of Chicago. You would shiver at his
thoughts to let go, shun goals, and lose hope.

When the mind is diseased, the truth becomes unreal and the
incarcerated soul feels the same pain millions of Syrians feel,
after being displaced.

The mind tends to wander into this dark place of devastation,
despair, and desperation, like Haitians after Hurricane
Matthew.

Imagine being inside a hurricane with 200 mile per hour winds,
blowing at you.

In contrast, "with the faith of a mustard seed..." Jesus said,

"one could move mountains...", and so the thoughts of the
incarcerated soul becomes his strength and power to travel
into the core of mountains, digging deep inside the core, like
miners digging for Gold; hidden treasure that has been lost
throughout the ages; that even sages hint, the quest shall be
a lifetime journey. Yet the journey of the incarcerated soul
begins like a philosopher, philosophizing ideas, beliefs,
truths, traditions, and creeds.

So he reads and reads and reads, until suddenly, one day, he
stops reading and realizes an ever present gift he had all
along.

It was the philosopher's stone. His very own precious golden
Thoughts...

Written by A. McDuffie (10-8-16)

INTERMENT HYMN

BY: D. WHITLOW

Agony,
Born inside,
A paradise made irrelevant,
Define myself,
By the cuts I make,
By the blood I spill,
By the breath I waste,

As I chase,
My memories,
I burrow deeper in my unmarked grave,
Distant hopes,
Fade away,
As the vulnerable skies turn a desperate gray,

Left to mumble drunk,
On wounds I fear,
Will make me see inside myself,
A gruesome face,
Stares down on me,
From a broken mirror,
Unravelling,

I don't want to live,
I don't want to die,
My interment hymn howls as I,
Detached from this,
My shattered mind,
I will find peace,
Comatose by design...

CURSED

BY: D. WHITLOW

All of those people we once knew,
Having quietly faded from our view,
Never to return-never to renew,
Promises made and forgotten,

In between blank stares of absence and doubt,
Lays still,
The silent (embracing) ghost of memory,
And though our minds race to remember the face,
We only see the eyes-beacons of flame,

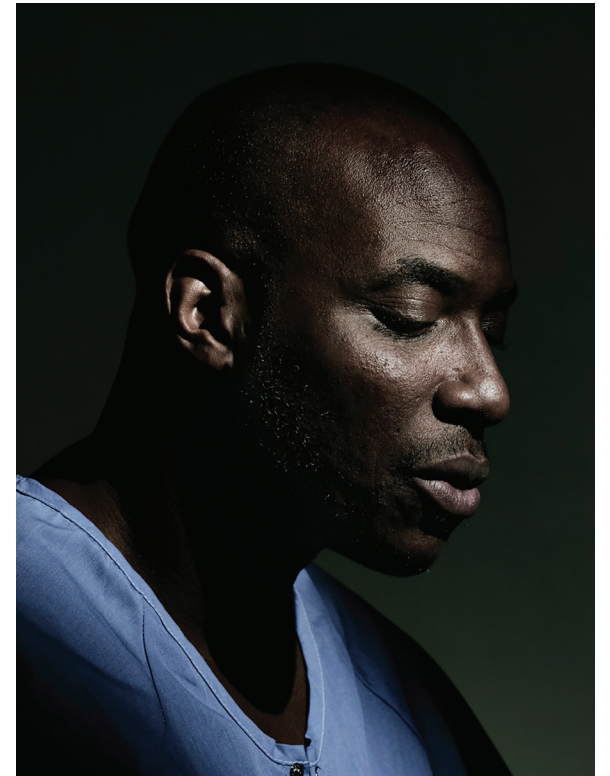
Outside,
The lackluster winds pour through your silken hair,
As my fingers are destined to do,
A waterfall of satin thread;
Endless nights pass with our breath shortened by loneliness,

Where have I fallen?
Just beyond my reach, a timid hope still flickers,
Still shivers like a frozen blaze,
There is nothing in my darkness,
Corrupt and barren,
I can remember how we used to laugh,
(nothing was real except each other, but now?)...

UNSPOKEN THOUGHTS

WRITTEN BY: T. BELL

When I think about it, doing time is a messed-up feeling.
Mind moving slow, staring at this concrete ceiling.
Replaying conversation in my mental history.
Wondering if for me people truly have empathy.
I hear the stories, listened to complaints about life.
On how hard it is and the many thing that isn't right.
I'm there in the ways I can, I lend my ears.
I give advice with words that help dry their tears.
But very seldom is concerns shown my way.
When it is, it's in general like, "how's your day."
And every time my response is somewhat like a robot.
I say, "it's all good" but I know it's not.
On the surface it's cool, I'm holding up, physically fit.
Educationally growing, mentally strong, spiritually lit.
Emotionally, I'm torn down but only when I think about it.
Others inability to empathize, leaves their words for me to
doubt it.
When they state "I love you," how can it be sincere.
The support is absent and for me they're not here.
I don't want to ruffle feathers, so I keep this within.
I utilize my journal and express with this pen.



FIRE-BASE RIPCORD: THE DEATH OF INNOCENCE

BY: JAMES KING

After S.E.R.T.s training (Screaming Eagles Replacement Training), Mac and I had hoped to get some down time. We had met during S.E.R.T.s and naturally buddied up after spending 7 days, sharing a foxhole every night and spending time together during classes and training during the day.

But as we tried to kick back and rest up after returning to our parent unit, the first sergeant of our platoon came into our tent and yelled, "Everybody grab yer shit and ruck up. The old man of 3rd brigade, Colonel Harrison has op-conned 2nd platoon of the 0-deuce to his command (the term op-conned meant operational control). You're go'n to Ripcord."

Mac and I eventually picked up on the fact that we were joining an operation already in progress. That operation was code-named "Texas Star". It's objective, like all operations in that sector of I-Corp, was search and destroy. It began the 1st of April, 1970, and officially ended the 5th of September of the same year. This operation involved several units of the 101st Airborne Division which we were a part of. Although Mac and I were in different training cadres at Fort Sherman in Panama, we both did our Advanced Infantry training there which was "Jungle Training". I would eventually come in handy while we were on Fire-Base Ripcord.

In 1968 and '69, the 101st Airborne went up against 324th and 304th N.V.A. (North Vietnam Army), the 6th N.V.A. regiment, the 803rd regiment and the 29th regiment. That was a lot of enemy personnel imbedded and dug in throughout the A Shau Valley where Ripcord was located. For two guys who had yet to see combat the thought of that many personnel surrounding our position was some scary shit, to say the least.

For the N.V.A., the western half of these Northern provinces was a crucial jumping-off point in their diligent

struggle to conquer South Vietnam. This is where Mac and I came in. We were just two of several replacements that had been scattered throughout the 101st. It was now our turn to fend for our lives and those of our platoon in the never-ending battle to halt the communist insurgents from occupying the A Shau valley, using it as a base of operations to advance further south.

It was late afternoon, still our first day at Ripcord, when our platoon sergeant approached Mac and I. He said to us, "you two better try and catch some zees, you both got guard duty tonight at 2300."

Mac and I said in unison, "yes sir, sarge." Mac and I continued to talk awhile longer. Mac came from Northern California near Sacramento. I hailed from Louisiana. Mac was 17 when he enlisted and turned 18 this past May. I too had enlisted at 17, but it would be a few months before I turned 18.

I asked Mac, "Why did you join up, Mac?"

"Aw shit Jim, I was fuckin' up in school and would flunked out and my dad wasn't have'n it. So he and my grandpa sat me down and read the riot act to me. I was told to get a job but all I could get was a job flipping hamburgers at the Dairy Queen in town. Anyway, the old told me that I had to enlist to get my act together and took me to the recruiters office and signed me up. The recruiter told me and my dad that I could continue my education, the ly'n fucker. What about you, did you enlist?" Laughing I said, "yea, I enlisted."

"What you laughing at Jim, what's so funny?"

"I'm laugh'n at yo dumb ass and me too. Both of us are dumb fucks to believe what them liar's at the recruiters office said. They told me and my old man that because of my age, I'd be sent to either South Korea or Germany. I asked for Germany and my dumb ass believed the lyin piece o' shit when he said ok, Germany it is. So my dad signed me up too."

"What 'id you do, fuck up in school like me?"

"Nah man I ain't as dumb as yo ass. I just gotta temper. I was being bullied by this tall, lanky kid. I would fight 'im back,

but I was always on the receive'n end of an ass whuppin, until my brother taught me how to get past his long arms. Hell, the dude was 6'8". Anyway, one day he fucked wit me again and I beat the shit outta his ass. All those ass whuppin's I got from him, I gave 'em all back to his black ass. After that he and a couple of his friends jumped me after winter prom, so I got my grandma's .38 pistol and shot the fucka in the head. Las I saw of 'im he was float'n in a canal. Two girls seen me so I ran and my dad said I had to enlist. It was the best thing for me because I needed some discipline anyway. So here I am Mac, sitt'n in this shithole wit yo ass."

Mac laughed and we continued talking for awhile longer before we went into a bunker to eat and catch some zees. Mac and I were drawn to each other and were becoming friends. The more time we spent together, the friendlier and closer we got. He showed me photos of his girlfriend and family, I did the same. The old salts who'd been in country for awhile and were still in one piece, would tell you in a very direct manner, not to become close friends with anyone. If one of you is killed in action, it's hard to pick up the pieces and move on. Or worse, you become shell shocked, which is a state of complete disorientation in which case you have to be med-evac'd out.

This of course, as an edict much easier said than done. It didn't matter that your life expectancy in a firefight was about 7 seconds. We weren't there actually defending our won homeland, we were defending the guys fighting next to you in an overall effort to stop the insurgence of communist troops from the North. Making friends is just human nature, unless you're a cold-hearted bastard. In many cases your life might very well depend on the guy next to you. In my case, that guy was Mac.

At 2300 hours, Mac and I moved out to our fighting positions on the perimeter, per sarge's orders. He came over and said, "stay alert guys, the guys on this post before you had heard noises down below consistent with enemy movement. This spot is at the top of a deep ravine that goes down into the jungle thicket."
"Got'cha sarge," I said to him.

There was no wind this night and the mosquitoes were eating us alive until someone came by with bug repellent to ease our pain. The guys in the fighting position just over from us were making themselves a big target by talking too loud. The reasoning behind it, I heard later, was that "the gooks knew where we were" but it was still a cardinal sin! That was because you also can't hear the enemy out in front of you. We bummed a light off their lit cigarettes and kept them cupped to avoid making targets of ourselves. There were enemy snipers on the hills across from us.

Those guys down the trench were maintaining a M60 machine gun on the berm. It must've been 2 1/2 hours later, around 0200, I heard them snoring. I began to pray then I stopped, "what was that?" I thought I heard a noise somewhere down the hill in front of my position. I listened vigilantly for the next 15 minutes or so, but I heard nothing. Then a few minutes later it was back again. I tossed a rock at Mac. He quietly eased over to my position, right up next to me. "Mac, did you hear any noises?" I asked. "I thought I heard a noise consistent with something being dragged."

"Shit, that's exactly what I heard." We both stopped, looked over the berm and down the hill for what seemed an eternity. It was pitch black and I couldn't see shit, even trying to use my night vision that we all naturally have. We listened for 30 minutes. At this point, we knew we weren't mistaken. We both definitely heard the noise again. It was like something being dragged uphill. But this wasn't just any hill.

I unfocused my eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of anything at all just to confirm our suspicious instincts, but it was no use. It was like a wall of darkness that kept closing in on us as the night went on.

I decided to do a low crawl over to the guys snoring. At this point, Mac and I both was scared as fuck outta our minds. They should have given me a "who goes there" challenge, but I got nothing. I kicked one of them in the foot and woke him up.

"What the fuck..."

I cut him off, "guys, we heard a few time like something being dragged uphill."

They both sat up and listened for all of a minute, but heard nothing. One of them said to me, "you're full of shit" and uttered something about being "scared ass cherries." I was tired of being called a "cherry"; it really struck a nerve when he said it. So I said to both of them "fuck off asshole" and went back to my position. I told Mac what they said about us. Mac said, "fuck 'em, they're just a couple of dickheads." Right at that moment we heard it again! Were we the only one's paying attention? No one else budged an inch or said anything! Were Mac and I imagining hearing these sounds?

I told Mac, "go up and ask the sergeant if we could get some illum." Illum is an Illumination flare that will light up more than an acre of area like it was noon. The only drawback to sending up a flare, it will also give away our fighting position as well.

It had been 5 or 6 minutes since Mac left, when I heard the kerplunking thud sound of the flare leaving its tubular chamber. I saw it open up and start its descent back to earth under its mini parachute. What I saw next, and what I experienced for an hour after that, was a fright no man should ever have to face, not to mention, a 17 year old. It was just the beginning of what could've been the end.

When I raised my head just enough to look over the berm, what I witnessed was every soldiers' worst nightmare come true. It was an enemy invasion, of whom we crudely referred to as "gooks." As loud as I could, I screamed, "sappers in the wire! Sappers in the wire!" There were too many to count. Before I'd even realized it, I'd emptied 3 mags. No matter how many I took out, more seemed to appear.

Green tracer rounds flew past my head from every

direction below my position within my purview of 180 degrees. Screams from below screeched in my ears as the gooks were being gunned down. Then there was an explosion just off to my right. My worst nightmare now seemed catastrophic. That explosion took out the two smartasses who were manning the M60. There went most of our firepower on this sector of the berm! In lieu of that, I pulled the pins on 3 frags and lobbed them over the berm. I ducked a second before each of them exploded to avoid catching any shrapnel. When I looked back over the berm I could see the carnage they left behind.

In what seemed like no time at all, I'd burned through 7 mags. I could still hear the enemy screaming as their child-like bodies were being ripped apart by lead and grenade shrapnel. I'd gone through so many magazines of ammo, the gunpowder fumes and the smoke from grenades and the enemy's satchel charges were starting to burn my throat and nasal passages and my eyes as well.

It was out of pure instinct of survival that I made my way over to the M60 machine gun position. The two smartasses both had bloody head wounds and had fallen on top of one another. I didn't even have time to check and see if they were dead or still alive. At the top of my lungs I yelled, "Bravo, bravo" which was our call sign for the medic. I lobbed 3 more frags down into the wire. The screams never stopped!

I looked down and realized that I only had 4 mags left. I yelled, "ammo, ammo" and could only hope to God I got resupplied within the next few minutes. The N.V.A. down in the valley and from hills across from us were dripping 82mm mortar rounds on us at a sustained rate, about 20 second apart. The flying dirt and rocks stung my face...more flares were launched from up above and behind us. Our artillery was trying to quiet the enemy mortars. Our Quad 50's were shredding the enemy below us and across at hill 1000.

I again looked over the berm and couldn't believe my eyes! At first glance, I estimated a count of at least 100-150 more enemy coming up through the wire. The M60 already had a 100 round belt in it, I took control of it and got in on the

party by utilizing the M60's superior firepower to kill as many as possible and hopefully drive the rest back down into the thicket of the "aw shit" valley.

I aimed down the slope, just above ground level, and cut loose. After the third 100 round belt, the barrel turned bright orange from the heat of so many 7.62 bullets passing through the barrel. That's when Mac showed up with the sarge and a medic.

The sarge said, "control your rate of fire." Mac changed the barrel for me and fed another hundred round belt into it. I opened up with a sustained rate of 6 round bursts, monitored by the tracers which were every fifth round in the belt of ammo. I did a search and traverse, 45 degree sweep of the slope down in front of me. The N.V.A. was still hitting us with mortars, R.P.G.'s (Rocket Propelled Grenades), 51's (the enemy's heavy machinegun rounds) flying past my head. It was indeed, more than I bargained for, especially after being promised a duty station in Germany.

From the time Ripcord was opened, the N.V.A. had launched several attacks against the Firebase. These were only probing attacks against Ripcord to discover fighting positions, our response time. Each time the enemy would attack, they took note of everything, from alertness of those on the berm, to what we would respond with. All this was being recorded for the upcoming battle for Ripcord. The report they would give tonight would not be a good one having lost so many men. Indeed, it was very costly for them tonight. Yet, they were a determined foe.

Eventually, after the better part of an hour, the fighting came to a lull, I don't know for how long. The fight for Ripcord came July 1st, 1970, that fight would last for 23 days straight. This story that took place in a dark moment of American history...a story hidden in the annals of time...a story kept in the darkness of Pentagon archives...a story the Pentagon does not want to be told. There are no official documents to confirm this account of how we left Firebase Ripcord...yet they know it's true.

It was July 23rd, 1970, 1145 hours, mortar rounds rained

down on us continuously now, it would have been almost surreal if not for the death and destruction that came with it, like miniature eruptions of a volcano..R.P.G.'s, 75mm recoilless rounds were a constant pressure on my ears as they mixed in with the enemy's mortars. Sappers had overran the perimeter and the CP, the gooks' .51 cal's were ripping us apart on top of this fuck'n hill as if the gates of hell had opened up. The enemy had come up the side of Ripcord to announce that they were here to take back their hill from us. The gooks were everywhere now...they had swarmed over the rim of the hill like angry army ants and were devouring everything in sight. We fought back, we fought hard and with a purpose of survival...our gunships were helping us to evacuate...I was burning through belts of ammo as we leapfrogged backwards toward the LZ, I had used all the belts that Phil carried and now I had burned through all but two of the belts I was carrying. The enemy was trying to stop us from leaving this fuck'n hill. They kept coming and kept fighting and if not for the heroics of our gunships pilots braving the anti-aircraft and .51 cal's to mow down the N.V.A. who were coming after us, I truly thought we might not make it off this hill. The evacuation had been going on all morning and four pathfinders were helping us off this hill, a mixture of the 101st, the 506, 501, and the remnant of the 502 infantry. The sarge had led us backwards through all the gooks threw at us, the enemy that wanted to add us to the American body count. **We fought and fought, trading bullet for bullet.** Phillips went down next to me; he'd only tripped over something and fell. Finally, the sarge said run for it. We ran toward the LZ, the pathfinders were waving us on. We ran with the enemy's bullets helping us along. Something hit me in my boot heel; I went down and rolled looking up. Someone's hand helped me get up and we ran with the rest of the guys. I had one belt of ammo left-if I ran out of ammo before getting off this hill I wouldn't last two seconds. We were the last squad headed for the last two slicks that were leaving Ripcord. The 324th and the 304th N.V.A. divisions had truly committed to deny us this hill, and then the worst thing that can happen in combat happened. As I jumped up onto the floor of the Huey, I turned around and ran that last belt of ammo at the gooks. I looked and

to my horror I saw arms waving, the arms of our guys waving, laying there on the ground wounded in this fight to keep the hill, laying there wounded and we were leaving them.

I pointed and yelled over the noise of the chopper, "Sarge, look-the wounded" and I attempted to jump from the Huey as it lifted off, leaving Ripcord. There were 7 to 9 wounded G.I.s laying there waiting to be evacuated and though I was out of ammo I tried to jump back on Ripcord. We do not leave ours behind...hands grabbed me, holding me, stopping me from jumping from the Huey. I screamed, "No!"

I screamed over the chopper noise with tears in my eyes, "we can't leave 'em...we can't leave 'em", as Sarge and a couple of others held me. I kept saying "we can't leave 'em" over and over, as my voice got lower and lower. I tasted the salt of my tears and blood that I shed as we flew off the east side of Ripcord.

"We can't leave 'em, we can't leave 'em, we can't leave 'em," I said just above a whisper

MUSING THREE. TOGETHER

It's so easy from in here to allow a distance to develop that separates us from the rest of the world. You must help to shrink that distance.

-Duncan Martinez



"Our Lady Justice" by Chris Branscombe

ALONE WITH YOURSELF

BY: ANDREW KICKING HORSE

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you'll risk looking like a fool for love, for dreams, for the adventure of being alive. It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain! I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it. I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wilderness and let ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, or to remember the limitations of being human. It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself, if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul. I want to know if you can be faithful and therefore be trustworthy. I want to know if you can see beauty even if it's not pretty every day and if you can source your life from the divine God's presence. I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of a lake and shout at the sliver of moon, "Yes!" It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children. It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back. It doesn't interest me where or with whom you have studied. I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

AN EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

BY: TIN NGUYEN

When he was 25, clad in a double red jumpsuit to label him as high-risk security, and shackled with waist and legs restraints, he was waiting for a hearing on a murder case.

As he was standing in the holding tank with his co-defendants, contemplating the gravity of the crime and the bleakness of his future, one co-defendant asked, "Hey Tin, what are you?" With a dumb look on Tin's face, because he did not comprehend, his co-defendant clarified, "You ain't Vietnamese cause you can't read or write Vietnamese, and you ain't American cause you can't read and write English." Tin recalled his reply as if he has just spoken it. With rage in his eyes and anger in his voice, he replied, "I'll tell you what I am when I get out of this chain, and beat you and choke you with it." Until this day, he still could not understand where the rage came from. Perhaps, because he was still in his youth or did his co-defendant hit the core of Tin's insecurity with that question.

Coming to America at a young age was confusing to him. He was trapped between the generation of Vietnamese refugees that knew they were Vietnamese, and the generation of Vietnamese Americans that were born here. At the age of five, he had to learn a new language, but he did not yet understand his first language. Trying to learn his ABC's at school, and speaking Vietnamese at home was taking its toll. He would rather play marbles. Falling behind in his English as he grew. His family was too busy (earning monthly rent) to teach young Tin proper Vietnamese. The community labeled him unintelligent. Through the years, he heard comments ranging from "dumber than a cow" to (in its most polite form) "some are good with their brain, and some are good with their hands. You're the latter." Using this as his justification, he decided school was not for him. This is the heart of Tin's insecurity. Dodging reading and writing became his most adept skill. He

played the role of a dumb criminal and a hard gangster to cover what he felt was his lacking in his brain. Fortunately, for him, in his early 30s, Tin fell in love with reading thanks to J. R. Tolkien's Trilogy "Lords of the Rings." (That is another story.) However, when California State University of Los Angeles (CSULA) and Dr. Roy entered Tin's live, his insecurity slowly faded.

Dr. Roy has not only taught Tin how to competently read and write, but through the process Tin came to a revelation that he had a brain all these years, as he stated in one of his reflections:

"Upon reflecting on my first few reading and writing assignments, I realize that I wasn't lacking a brain, but I just didn't wisely use it. My writing wasn't good but it's not bad, and it can be improved. And isn't that what having a brain means? Isn't it to constantly learn and improve oneself? And that's just what has happened during these two classes with Dr. Roy."

When comparing his first reading and writing assignment with his most recent assignment, Tin discovered that both his reading and writing had dramatically changed and improved. For instance, he does not just read for the comprehension, but also as he reads, he questions and analyzes the material's perspective, genre, narrative, etc. it comes from. His writing is structural with stages of brainstorming, outlining, free writing, rewriting and numerous revisions. His narrative writing style has transformed to an analytical writing style, and those are just the educational aspects.

What CSULA and Dr. Roy gave Tin was life changing. They have given him hope and not just hope for the future, but hope in living, in being good. They gave him the courage to think outside the box, and risk leaving his comfort zone. For example, he described a crucial event that in hindsight was life altering. He stated in his reflection: "I spotted Dr. Roy on the yard, so I slowly looked around to make sure no one notice as I creep toward him. With one final

look over my shoulder, in a low voice, I asked for his help on my thesis. Dr. Roy taught me and with a sign of relief, like a thief, I scurried away. Then bam! In class, in front of my peer, Dr. Roy asked, 'So Tin, do you have a question?' Very uncomfortably, I was like, 'Dude, nooo!' However, he insisted, 'I think you do. Didn't you asked me something about the thesis?' I stated, 'Confidential' under my breath, but I relented. As trivial as this may seem, it had a big implication in my live. Dr. Roy had brought me out of my comfort zone. You see, when you live in an environment (maximum-security prison) where the strong prey on the weak, you will learn quickly not to show any weakness. Asking for help is considered as weakness. There were times that I would count hours, minutes and seconds until my cell's door opens, because something violence was going to happen. I could have asked the officer, who was counting ever two hours for help, but live or die, you don't asked for help. That's the code that you live by in prison. Because of Dr. Roy, that wall came crumbling down. The mask of a harden convict slowly came off. I no longer had to put on that tiring façade of "I don't care, stone cold or I'm doing life, try me?" My perspective on asking for help was slowly changing. I began to view asking for help as a sign of maturity and strength, and not weakness. This build confidence and strength within me, and I developed the insight and courage to leave my comfort zone of fortified walls that I have built in last 18 years. I now could engage myself in an academic discussion with my peer, which has helped me to improve both academically and personally."

CSULA and Dr. Roy also instilled in Tin that regardless of his past or present circumstances, it does not dictate who he is and who he can become and that there is good in him if he chooses to embrace it. It is a choice. They accomplished this by demonstrating their kindness, and providing him with knowledge, tools, and an opportunity to learn. Tin was able, through critical thinking, to begin to see the bigger

picture in a broader sense, and not in the narrow view he once possessed. He could see the probability, but also possibilities in his future, because he recognizes that he is good. As Socrates once said, "Man's crowning achievement is knowledge. Having attained knowledge, man would do the right thing, he would be good...That education should make a man a better citizen and a thereby a happier individual." From his own experience, Tin states, "after thousands of years, I found this philosophy to stand the test of time."

With the confidence that Dr. Roy has given him, and the opportunities that CSULA has provided, Tin has become alive. No longer walking among the living dead (serving life without parole), aimlessly roaming the prison yard and desperately searching for what he craved: hope, love and purpose. He has dreams and aspirations. His goals for the future are to double majors, obtain a Masters in Business Administration (MBA), and eventually a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). He will also become a professional artist, but ultimately he dreams of doing his part with what is given to him. He realizes that this is going to be a long and difficult climb, yet he states, "The Mountain's might may be high, but the will is mine. It is not the might of the Mountain, but it is the might of my will that I will surmount the mountain."

Whether Tin will succeed only time can tell, but with the generosity of CSULA and Dr. Roy, he knows that he is going places. No matter if he is sitting in a prison cell, he is no longer at a standstill, at the mercy of his circumstances. He will grow along with the world and move along with his life. One thing for sure, he now (after 18 years) can finally answer his co-defendant's question: "What are you?" Answer: "I am Me."

FADE IN:

BY: DUSTIN AND TAYLOR

INT. DISTANT INTERTWINED MINDS - SUNRISE

It's a certain kind of lonely
Shouldering through a crowd of drones
To swim in an ocean, surrounded by people
Buzzing together with the heat of Mob
While waging wars in your head
While I try to understand
That are like silent films of the past
How crushingly alone
Playing over and over
Thinking for myself can be.
I can't explain how desperate I am to connect
I am the deaf guy dancing at a party
But the wires in my brain
Out of time, lost to the moment,
Must have short-circuited when I wasn't paying attention
But not the happy version, no,
To the monotonous drone of the ticking clock
I am the deaf guy dancing amidst everyone
That everyone else seems content
The moment after he realizes how out of time he is
Living their lives in time to
How far away from everyone he is
Tapping their feet in time to
By handicap and isolation
The hands of ticking time
A different thing
Until death taps them on their shoulder.
Tap, tap, like a slap
Am I the only one
The Mob laughs
Losing rest
As the handicap struggles
While contemplating the restlessness
But even that I cannot do the same

That pulses throughout my body
The distance created by being off-beat
In time to a ticking time bomb
But just a tad too much
That I hear far off in the distance
The distance too much,
As I watch the sun rise
So much between him and everyone else.
Even further off in the distance.
Between me and everyone else.
Together lost.
FADE OUT.

Duncan:

"It was Taylor's idea. She sent me half of the text and asked me to add to it. Hers is everything that is not indented, but for the script stuff. I read it carefully, what she had done, and felt the intense loneliness that she was writing about. I got it completely. Prison is full of people, but at the same time you are utterly alone.

There is more there, of course, but that was-for me- the key. My initial idea was to continue it going forward, but then I realized it should be a sort of duet, two lonely souls talking over each other-unheard in a sense, and lost, but conjoined by the idea. I like to think that it worked.

I like to think that it is more than just the two of us."

Taylor:

"The two pages of poetry that my penpal, Duncan, and I have created is by far the most meaningful work that I have ever been involved with. The poem that we collectively wrote was inspired by a letter where I mentioned how beautiful the sunrise was on a particular morning. I asked him if he was able to see the sunrise from within the prison. His response provoked the collaborative poem which exposes a common feeling of isolation, appreciation of nature, and human frailty between the two speakers. When I received Duncan's response to my lines, I was overwhelmed by the collective isolation that we both felt."

MY SEARCH FOR MEANING

BY: DORTELL WILLIAMS (WITH RESPONSES BY SHANAY COLEMAN)

Convicted of murder in 1992, at the age of twenty three, I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. I was raised in a home where putting on airs was the name of the game. What went on in the home, stayed in the home. I learned later that internalizing only nourishes a volatile combustion that inevitably releases itself -- on its own terms. Later I learned that the paradox of deleterious secrets is that they bar us from the very help we need. Secrets make it impossible to get help because secrets, by their very nature, preclude us from reaching out.

At a tender age I experienced my sour share of domestic infighting and street violence. I was led to feel worthless by influential professionals in my life, such as teachers. I had no meaning in my life nor did I see any meaning for life. I had absolutely no direction. Worst of all, I had no inkling as to my own potential. I would later respond to these formative "models" by projecting my internalized anger on to an undeserving society. I started stealing cars. My criminality progressed to selling drugs and eventually I graduated to calling hits on others I perceived to be a threat to me. I walked the stage a convicted of murder.

I was a misguided, violent and dysfunctional person. I fit perfectly within the confines of a neighborhood that was morally bankrupt. Criminality was my norm. I was completely desensitized to violence. I was never taught to address my "issues," let alone how to address my issues, or that I even had issues in the first place.

It was ignorant, narrow-minded and negative people who helped shape me into the destructive person I came to be, such as my high school counselor who told me I "wasn't college material." This, just when I had finally decided to do something with my life. This rejection by society, through the

voice of my counselor, sent me straight into the underworld. It was a decision I, and only I, alone made. Admittedly, it was a lifestyle I embraced.

In prison I began to read for the first time. The Autobiography of Malcolm X had a profound effect on me. Following Malcolm's example taught me how to teach myself. The Bible offered me a moral compass. My new direction led to new associations. These positive associations led me to peer-led classes such as critical thinking, parenting and creative writing. Eventually I gained enough trust from my peers, and confidence in myself, to teach my own creative writing class. I became chairman of the Men For Honor academic group where I saw the need for and began teaching victim sensitivity. These and other classes helped me to pinpoint my character defects: lack of self-esteem, negative coping mechanisms, blaming and selfishness, among others. Since that time, at the genesis of my turning point, it has been selfless, caring and compassionate people who have helped reshape me into the person I am today; a person who strives daily to make amends, who feels heartfelt empathy toward the suffering of others.

It was because of these, my personal heroes, that I was able to earn a masters degree in theology. When I earned my degree in behavioral science, it came with a personal letter of accolade from the dean acknowledgment I had ever received, defying my high school counselor's disbelief in me.

I am now traveling fast toward a bachelors in communications at the California State University at Los Angeles. I am studying hard and doing the inner work to prevent myself from ever going dark again. I now see the fruits of positively contributing to the world I once victimized are endless, beginning with personal peace and the knowledge that I can impact the lives of others in constructive and transforming ways.

Shanay's Response, September 27, 2016

The search for meaning has taken a toll on mankind; however, reading your search for meaning was a tremendous inspiration. It truly touches on emotions, emotions that I have long tried to elude.

I am originally from Iran, from a beautiful city named Shiraz. I was lucky enough to be born into a loving home with my mother and father, as well as two older brothers. After I was born my father began to worry about my future since the regime in Iran had gone from bad to worse. Women are extremely oppressed there. If stopped on the street by the police, an issue such as having a tad bit of her ankle showing underneath the required clothing for women could result in acid being thrown in her face, or worse, being stoned.

My father decided to move us from that barbaric and poverty-stricken life to Sweden. I was three-years-old. While none of us spoke the language, we were surrounded by the love of each other, a minimum of 25 close-knit family members.

Growing up in Sweden was one of the toughest periods of my life. The Swedes stood out as white, with blonde hair and blue or green eyes. The typical immigrants, the Middle Easterners, Africans and Latinos had darker hues. My physical description fit right into the stereotypical immigrant mold. People like us were automatically judged as criminals. We were viewed as a threat to the Swedish culture. They called us "Black-heads." This is where the process of my search for meaning started.

I began school at six-years-old. I was excited because I wanted to learn. However, it wasn't long before I became discouraged. My positive mindset was turned negative. I was told that I "wasn't good enough," or that my kind could not succeed. Teachers told me this.

From the ages of six through ten I was bullied by Swedish classmates. They made fun of my appearance. They mocked my awkward pronunciation of Swedish words. I had no friends to play with during those years; I was an outcast in a foreign

land. I never told my parents. I held my troubles a secret from everyone. I grew angry and angrier.

During middle school I discovered that my anger was a useful weapon the Swedish kids feared. Recognizing this new-found power, I refused to be anyone's punching bag. I put my foot down and stood up for myself. By high school I earned a "bad-ass" reputation for fighting, girls or boys. People began to respect me tremendously. I know it may sound like I became a bully, but I never disrespected anyone who didn't have it coming or anyone who seemed weak.

When I was about fifteen-years-old I found my way to the 'hood of Gothenburg, Sweden. Gothenburg was where I began to see people who looked more like me. This is where the "black-heads" settled. It began so simple; I had a friend who took me to a rougher part of the 'hood. Before I knew it, I was hanging around the "gangster-elite." As ashamed as I am in retrospect, I have to admit that I was proud to feel so powerful and untouchable. People actually feared me. I felt like I had won the culture war because I finally found a place where I fit in. Just like that, I had lost touch with the higher standards and expectations of my family. I had become part of a world I had no business in.

My older cousin, the Philosopher, a thoughtful and insightful man six years my elder, initially reinforced my adaptation into the criminal way of life. He had already been to prison, was forced on to the streets and knew the game well. He took care of me and always made me feel safe. I loved him with all of my heart. Eventually he urged me to leave Sweden and seek a better life in America. He encouraged me to pursue my life-long dream of becoming a doctor. I wanted to be a corrective surgeon for impoverished youth with facial deformities. My cousin believed in me more than I believed in myself. I followed his direction and at the age of twenty-one, I began my American journey.

Sadly, the Philosopher and I had a huge disagreement just before I left. On September 2, 2016, my cousin was brutally murdered. We never reconciled. I was devastated, Mr. Williams. I don't understand the meaning of life when life can be so

brutal. I'm sorry I never got a chance to tell him that I love him before he was killed. How can I move on when I'm carrying this much pain and anger? Since his death a war in Gothenburg has been declared. Vengeance is the talk of the town. Will the cycle ever stop Mr. Williams?

Dortell's Response, October 1, 2016

Dear Shanay,

It is such a pleasure to meet you, and to share with you. I found your story extraordinarily moving, bringing me to tears twice, and requiring a break several times before concluding.

Yes, as you noted in my essay, I lived that same self-destructive lifestyle. Like you, I adopted a pattern of "negative think" and it led to a lot of bad choices. Now I teach "positive think" or what is formally called cognitive behavioral therapy. We teach methods of healing, healthy coping skills and esteem our peers by reversing their negative perspective. We all have an important role in the world, and we all have enormous power to be the change we wish to see in the world.

One of the first things we teach is that all human beings make mistakes. The Bible is full of "heroes" who were every bit as fallible as the rest of us. Have you ever considered that God used three murderers to write some of the most significant portions of the Bible? Yes, Moses wrote the Torah, David was the protagonist of many historical books and Paul, later known as Saul, wrote a third of the New Testament. If these people can change, and were used as examples for inspiration, then I am inspired! As the saying goes, "It's not where we've been that matters, but where we're going." In spite of your hardships and bad decisions, you're well on your way to being a doctor, Shanay. Like your cousin, I too believe in you.

The question is, how do you get past the loss of your cousin? You are angry that you were not afforded the chance to reconcile or tell him that you loved him. Yet I wonder

if your goal to overcome the loss is the right mission. You described your cousin as an insightful mentor who guided you and instilled positive insights into your life. Perhaps the goal should be to carry him on, rather than seeking closure. Personally, I was encouraged by some of his philosophies and his spirit. His advice for you to overcome your environment is universal. That could help anyone. His guidance in seeking better things in life, and not being stranded in rotten places is a reminder we all need. Perhaps his talents could continue on through you. He could continue to touch others, as he touched me, through your conveyance of his unique insight.

As for your inability to tell him that you love him, well, I empathize with you. Yet I wonder if we could rephrase the situation. For one, you said you were close. I would imagine that, without question, he knows you love him. No disagreement, no matter how charged, could break the bonds of pure love. I also deeply regret that you missed your opportunity to reconcile, but considering your bond, I think it would be unfair to deny him the benefit of the doubt that he wanted the same. Surely, like you, tragedy melted away any resentment he might have had, even if it was at those last critical seconds. I believe this with all of my heart, simply because of the description of the love you two shared. How does it make you feel to look at the situation from this perspective, Shanay? Please be honest. There are many ways to address trauma and pain and I will gladly work with you to bring the level of healing you need.

Sincerely,

Dortell

PAWS FOR LIFE II

BY: SPOON JACKSON

The new group of
dogs have come
and gone

There were 10 dogs
this time
all ten with their
own way of doing
things

All ten just wanting
to be loved.

Randell came back-
because he could not stand
to be alone
in a room

While all life moved
around him.
this time he has been
adopted out
to a better place
A Bonanza.

Then there is Sunshine
whatever happened
to her before she
came to prison pained
her so. She could only
dream of relaxing.

There was Atticus the Mangled
dark striped
Hyena looking hound
that walked on his paws
like a dancer, head held
high

From afar Atticus may appear
mean
up close he is all love and
rolls on his back and closes
his eyes for as long as you
choose to rub his belly
and neck.

There was Boris, the little general
who walked like a tank
unafraid of anything and looks
like the dog from Little rascals.

There was Barrister, a part
Golden Retriever when he
left today.
As everyone patted him
and said goodbye
he knew he wasn't
coming back

So before he left the
main gate of the prison.
He broke away and ran
back down to 5-building

But he had to go
to a better place
he didn't know.

There was Marmaduke
The biggest dog-big
and silent and a gentle
giant-he, would sit
for hours like a lion
just relaxing-
I heard him bark
once or twice.

And when he did not
want to move he didn't.
He dropped like a sack of potatoes to the

ground an lie there.

There was Paws
part Great Dane and Pointer
named after the paw shape
on his neck.
he had the colors of Saturn and was
almost as big as Marmaduke.
He loved balls and played
with them endlessly.

If a ball was near
him he could focus on
it for hours----
hand balls, soft balls, soccer balls
footballs, basketballs
if he could reach a full
Moon in the sky
Paws would have played
with it too.

They all left but Charlie
a lovely tannish Akita Shepherd dog-
like a sled dog with two
different colored eyes. I am sure
he'll be adopted one day.
for a few days he'll get
all the love

LETTER TO DR. BIDHAN ROY

It comes from a place of deep sadness, of remorse and pain. A pain and grief that has not relented for more than 28 (now, almost 29) years. A lifetime.

The object of the pieces is a woman that I deeply loved, and cared for, and to this day still do. Though it sounds trivial and even trite to say so, it was as if she was a soul-mate. I could always sense when something was wrong with her, or whenever she was in need. She even commented often that it was if I could read her thoughts. She was from New Zealand (Auckland), and when this happened to me, returned back to New Zealand with her family-brokenhearted, and feeling betrayed. Except for the occasional visit by an attorney or a private investigator (and even these stopped years ago), I have had no visitors for the entire time I've been in jail, and prison (28-29 years). She lives half a world away. Thus, when my sun sets on the western sky, hers rises. I have struggled to always find a cell facing the west horizon so that just as it dips below the horizon I think of her, and pray her life is good, and that she is safe.

All those years I have strove to establish my innocence, and for her to know that I never lied to her, or betrayed her trust. I struggle every day to remain positive, and to do good for others, to help heal their lives-to honor the memories of the times we were together.

I am working on another appeal, but even so I worry about what she may think when the day comes that after 28 to 29 years, she finds shwas wrong about me. I have sent her letters, birthday and Christmas cards that remain unanswered. I have heard she was married twice, but I don't know. While I always hope and pray she is happy, and safe-there is still the fact that I

was not there for her whenever she was trouble, and that even though I am truly innocent, I am guilty of not being there when I was needed most, as I always promised her (and her silly folks) that I would be.

Nothing, Professor Roy-not even freedom, will ever change that guilt or the fact that I failed her.

This has, and continues to haunt me every minute, of every hour, of every day, for 28 years.

I hope this might explain things better to all involved.

Again, Thank You

Thomas Michael Simmons

ALMOST

BY:THOMAS MICHAEL SIMMONS

Ten thousand, one hundred forty-five. How many Suns have set over my world, to rise upon yours.

Light wanes, spectres return as I float aimless-lost amidst the cold eddies of memory. Each, precious and dear, balanced precariously upon another, never fading.

It was, almost...

It seems a lifetime ago when a life so graced held a certainty in ability that bore the audacities of possibilities; now, crushed by the overwhelming weight of profound, relentless grief wrought by loss-the loss of you.

Always I am reminded-some sight, a sound; thoughts yield to the soft shuffle of distant feet to the smell of fresh-brewed coffee that you'd place into the microwave a few seconds more to greet another day. I'd close in to steal a frothy kiss as you'd brush your teeth, only to be sprayed as you'd open your mouth and drag the bristles across them. You'd giggle though, knowing the inevitable was to come.

Whether heartache or heartsong, there was ever that gentle smile, and caring eyes that bore witness to the wonder you found in everything-and a laugh so clear and pure no shadow of the heart could withstand.

It was, I was, almost...

A sojourn-ten thousands of miles of living, along hundreds of paths-then the warm embrace of your arms, where at last I found solace, and home. We'd part, and moments later nothing seemed aright. You were missed.

Now the moments have passed into hours, hours to days, days to

years, years to... memory. A memory of that which was...

almost.

But memory claims a price - the cold reality that you aren't here. No words, religious or philosophic; no chaste attempt at explanation could ever help cope with the utter and complete absence of you from my life-an unending ache that ages with the scars gazing back from the mirror of a concrete tomb.

But the ache, the memory, makes you more present now, rather than thoughts destined for an unknown oblivion.

You dwell in my heart, my mind, always-a pole star in this endless night that guides me-yet ever beyond reach.

It was, almost.

Ten thousand, one hundred forty-six. How many Suns have set over my world, to rise upon yours.

NEO-COLONIALISM

BY: ANTHONY MCDUFFIE

Neo-Colonialism is the rise of fascism, of American politics that invites racist Cabinet members in the Oval Office despite, the Constitution! THIS IS NOT WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE

Neo-Colonialism is breaking treaties with indigenous people, and building oil pipelines that contaminates water, thus destroying our lifeline. Must we wait to the day of Armageddon to heed the signs?

Neo-Colonialism is the new form of suppression, oppression, and repression of poor and colored people, locally and globally, by wealthy powerful tyrants, these giant bullies prey on the gay, the weak, and the migrants.

Neo-Colonialism is state-sponsored terrorism of black communities nationwide, by law enforcement, which murder black lives and approve of mass incarceration, THIS IS UNCIVILIZED!

Neo-Colonialism is white supremacy and misogyny, it is drone strikes on Syrian children, and destabilizing countries, such as Iraq and Yemen.

Neo-Colonialism is multi-national corporations that destroy Earth every second, minute, and hour without any concern except the corporate dollar and holding politicians in positions of power.

Neo-Colonialism is a monster that must be stopped! So I urge every human soul who comes across these words, to take action like verbs and allow your voices where ever you are to be heard, remember take actions, be heard.

MUSING FOUR. BEYOND

I have been, and continue to be, reintroduced to
the uncomplicated, joyful colors of my humanity.

-Bradley "Woody" Arrowood



Untitled by Si Nguyen

THIS IS WHAT SELF-REHAB LOOKS LIKE

BY: SPOON JACKSON

Poetry, music, song and speech
going places
Places unheard of and unseen
- Drumming in time
Guitars strumming the line
Putting a human face
Putting a human landscape
on the scene

This is what self-rehab looks like

Big C elegantly singing
his songs
Moody rocking blues
J. rich spitting his verse
Ken H. making a stand
with penetrating words

Jon G. there sharing
Puppy love -
Spoon Jackson weaving
His poems out of nothingness
Chris B. immortalizing Karma
Rescued dogs in paint

And it's true none of us
are saints
Some broken people
Who have rebuilt their lives

This is what self-rehab looks like

Scott B., songster Pebbles
Common, John Legend,
Geri Silva shines like silver
Coming into the pit
of prison

Exposing the growth
of the young and old
Exposing a system stone cold
Exposing the system
failing souls

Showing the human faces
Prisoners creating light
in darkness
Through the art
From the heart.

This is what restorative justice

Looks like
This is what self-rehab
Looks like

Come you who doubt the flow
hear the songs and speech
hear the stories, poems and articles

and don't demonize
but humanize
We all have one foot
in darkness
and one foot in light -
Nothing human is foreign
to any of us

Prisoners picking up
Puppy pooh
Service dogs serving
The few, the proud
and open hearted

This is what self-rehab looks like

This is what restorative justice looks like
this is what it looks like.

BUTTERFLIES

BY: CLIFTON LEE GIBSON

Next in line, I waited my turn to punch the heavy bag hanging on a yard filled with pinch-faced killers. I shuffled my feet in place, "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"; through my head, this singsong cadence bobbed and weaved.

Nineteen ninety-seven, B-Yard, Corcoran's maximum security state prison was the setting of the debut of my anticipated impersonation of the greatest fighter of all time. Sentenced to life without parole, condemned to die in prison and I was only twenty years old. Razor wire, electric fences, and gun barrels surrounded me, all put in place to ensure that society's sentences stuck. There were over 800 tattooed laden thugs milling about, pushing forward an aura of anger and violence, and secretly dragging around fear and pain. To say I was scared and naïve would be an understatement.

Preparation for the Mohammed Ali impersonation was shattered when a Hispanic tattooed blur brushed past me. Clutched in his retribution-delivering hand were razor blades melted into plastic. Without warning or notice, he viciously slashed the throat of another wanna-be boxer, punching the heavy bag of past regrets. I stood frozen in place, wide-eyed and dumbfounded as the assailant calmly walked away. As he watched his attacker retreat into the swarm of hardened prisoners, oozing blood blanketed the life map of tattoos littering his body. He struggled out of his boxing gloves, peeled off a sock, and wrapped it around his wounded neck. Tossing me the gloves, he said "You're next, youngster," and walked towards the nurse's office.

I dropped the gloves and any idea of being a bee. Instead, I floated like a butterfly away from the scene as an alarm announced with a shrill for everyone to freeze and prone out, face down. Lying there, head resembling a cobra, eyes bugging

out, I surveyed the pitiless pit of people joking, laughing, or squirming in place seemingly annoyed at the inconvenience. Meanwhile my heart sounded like thunder in my chest and rumbling in my rib cage. With a swarm of thoughts the one stinging the most was how did I get to a place in my life where this was my new normal?

My name is Clifton Lee Gibson, 39 years old, born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and birthed to a poverty-stricken, dysfunctional, violent family of seven. With a younger sister not far behind, we made nine. We solved our disagreements through arguments or fistfights-- to the victor goes the truth. We lived in a wooded area just outside my birthplace. I would turn gullies and ditches into castles and forts. I ruled lizards, snakes, frogs, and other creepy crawlies with an iron fist; after all, might was right. I fantasized about winning my arguments while mentally re-writing history. A bored sibling often invaded my refuge and delusions and fragile truces would ensue. We played a lot and found a precarious balance between beat downs and buddies.

Life took a tragic and drastic change when our sole breadwinner, my father, was murdered. Devastated, destitute and with the soul of our family gone, life took on a new meaning and any semblance of safety became a fantasy. As if the murder of my father was not enough, a tornado ripped through our small town, destroying our house. Punch drunk and reeling, we stuffed our feelings, packed up our belongings and moved to California.

Looking, speaking, and dressing, differently than the other kids, instead of distinguishing me, my differences' became my self-deprecating downfall. I felt unloved, worthless, and less than. Arguments and fights were my salve, whereas the suppression of my painful emotions became my salvation. Being under rule at home by bully brothers and ostracized at school by classmates, I felt awkward, angry, and socially stunted. Playgrounds became mosh pits, the merry-go-round would come down with cooties when I used it and my teeter-totter rarely left the ground. Free lunch was embarrassingly anything but free. I often sat alone and felt every fit of background laughter was directed towards me. Wanting others to share in

my misery, I developed a sarcastic wit and shocking behavior. Eventually, other trauma-bearing children were attracted to me and we gained a pseudo-silver of self-esteem. However, as I moved from town to town, seemingly every year or so, my buddies became painful memories. Developing into a hurt, angry, impulsive, violent, drug-addicted criminal, I smoked cigarettes and weed from the age of seven to seventeen, selfishly stealing stuff in order to buy weed or abate the jealousy of not having things that the other kids had. I felt material things would bring me love and acceptance. The emotional numbing marijuana suppressed healthy mental growth. I lived a life outside the norm and the law, choosing to stay in a cycle of negativity. My feelings churned, thoughts spun and beliefs swirled into words and actions cementing a tragic destiny filled with tragedy. With an inner cauldron bubbling, I became morally broke with corrupted principles spearheading my choices. My life and choices spiraled out of control until one night; senselessly I shot and killed an innocent man.

Nothing could have prepared me for the guilt and shame that I experienced for my evil deeds. My soul was soiled, my spirit stained, and I hated myself for causing so much suffering and pain. Knowing I was responsible for the death of another human, I felt like the lowest creature on earth. I sat huddled in a garage when I learned definitively that Armen was dead. Regret and remorse erupted from my heart and poured from my eyes. In that moment, every bad deed and awful choice littered my face with tears as my conscience became conscious.

From the ages of 17 to 20, I went from juvenile hall, to county jail, to a level four maximum-security prison. Reality sank in. I challenged my negative beliefs. The process of re-establishing contact with my inner-child and core-self began. My stained spirit and soiled soul began emitting a beacon, beckoning in and taking hold of kindness, compassion, and love. I found new role models in books and principles in paperbacks. I was restructuring my life and reforming myself. I stopped subscribing to negative thoughts and hanging with negative people, in a prison world of outlaws. Still fragile in my new stance of a positive self-image, needing to mature and develop courage,

I immersed myself in education and avoided ignorant-minded people.

However, violence cannot be escaped in prison; it is swarming all around us. So as I laid in the grass, watching the c/o's failed attempts to discover the culprit that slashed the wanna-be boxer my body shook with fear. Having heard "leave no witness behind" during my incarceration, I searched for the face of the tattooed blur through blurry eye's, but one bee looked like the next in the swarm of hardened convicts. From that day forward, I looked at everyone as a potential assailant and rarely let others get close to me. Friendship etiquette was tough to learn, like a bee in a hive I needed to learn how to live within a colony. This is a tale for another day but I will say my flight through friendships has been turbulent and I have made several bad choices along the way.

Eleven years into my sentence, I ended up at the state prison in Lancaster. The Honor Yard and inmates on the 'honor roll' replaced eleven years of witnessing institutional violence and the constant threat of riots. The comparisons between California's normal prisons and the Honor Yard should not be underscored. I was accustomed to guys wearing mean mugs and snarls, daring me to say something, but the anger and venom changed to smiles and handshakes, asking me if I needed anything. It was a bizarro world from what I was accustomed. I went from avoiding eye contact by bowing my head, to tears tumbling down my face in rooms full of men. Self-help classes and books became my conduit to insight and transformation. They lit the darkness within so I could sift through the muck in which I was stuck. I tackled the un-resolved traumas that were perpetuating my feelings of depression. A big help was openly talking to groups of honorable men who also made bad choices that they openly regretted. I learned, grew, and developed my inner child into a kind, caring, and helpful man. I turned my negative mindset over to positivity. I wanted to make this world a better place and it began with me not subscribing to 'stinging like a bee.' I now talk the talk of positivity and walk the walk of productivity.

This led me to having the confidence to

pursue a higher education. I enrolled in college seeking a degree in Behavioral Sciences in hopes that it would assist me in reaching at-risk youth. Voraciously, my seemingly awakened insatiable appetite for higher learning devoured my timeless flight, semester after semester. My comprehension and understanding of the world and myself grew even more. Believing in the power of education, Professor Bidhan Roy and California State University Los Angeles stepped up and took a chance. Together they doggedly pushed policy and made it possible for a class of Lifers to earn a Bachelor's degree. I am proud to be currently sharing the road to transformation with others. A road that continues to get more and more crowded with butterflies. The connections I have made during my transformation have solidified my purpose in life of being the change I wish to see in the world.

Lastly, on 11-16-2012, within Lancaster's education department and four days before his birthday, I met Joel. Atrocious choices, Senate Bill 9 and a love for education brought us together in this prison concrete cocoon. Eventually, over the next three years, we became inseparable. We worked out, walked in circles, and floated effortlessly in and out of superficial or deep philosophical conversations. Kind caring and patient, Joel would ask thought provoking questions testing my stance on life's issues. Lap after lap, as if two tethered caterpillars suspended in animation we spun in unity. A comfort and strength grew between us. Often times we would just stroll, not saying a word, time stretching before us dreaming of things to come; Vin Scully regaling me in my ear buds while Joel had Muse or some top forty, inspiring his next writing. We were around each other so much people would tease that we were married. Joel, never one to let an opportunity pass, affectionately started calling me Lil Mama. He would laugh as my crimson cheeks, lit up my mirthful eyes, filled with love.

When he paroled, it was one of the best and worst days of my adult life. Suddenly, my friend and confidant was gone but not forgotten. For days after, I would walk laps by myself pushing aside my sadness while wishing him well. I imagined his paroling was like releasing a butterfly from a concrete cocoon. Fluttering about, seeking his path,

and allowing the world to see the beauty that lived within. Maybe I will start calling him 'Butterfly' and watch his rose-colored cheeks light up deep, soulful brown pits that sparkle with life's second chance. I still get a little melancholy when I think of our separation. There are nights that I need a friend, his image comes to mind, mentally I walk those laps once again, and my eyes fill with tears. Thoughts of chasing lizards, being bullied, and losing connection to my core self are often revealed on my sad face that streams with tears on lonely nights. I want some of the life that Joel has, working, advocating, helping others, and a rare jewel to travel this life with. Over the last year we have grown apart, him flying through life, making up for lost time. Meanwhile, I have continued to stay trapped in my concrete cocoon, spinning my silky dreams into goals.

For me, it is important to have healthy minded people in my life. They helped me through the mire that I wallowed in and encouraged positivity. My change attracted many supporters: From Elizabeth, Loyola's JIFS clinic, Efty, Sean, Elisa, Chris, Michael, Will, Jarrett, Allen, Dortell, Jamal, Julie, family, and many more now and in between. The kindness, patience, and encouragement to be better and do better have completed my personal aura of love. I believe everyone in prison would benefit from positive reinforcements. I personally needed someone positive to believe in me. Life became worth living again and I owe that to those who believe in me. Now I live in honor of those I harmed, love and those who need someone to believe in them. I feel that everyone who has succumbed to a stupor of negative thoughts or behavior is a caterpillar trapped in a cocoon. They need a little help with chipping away the inner muck that has them stuck so they may emerge as the beautiful butterfly that lives within them.

MY DAUGHTER, THE SURVIVOR

BY: KENNETH E. HARTMAN

Her life began on the grounds of a maximum-security prison nestled in a mountain range at the junction between southern and central California. She is the product of an unlikely pairing of a thug and an outsider girl who met in the wake of a violent attack. She is, no less, the product of a titanic love affair conducted in the most unwelcoming of places.

By the time she entered middle-school she'd lived in too many different places, endured too many rugs pulled out from under her feet, and suffered more than her fair share of the unfairnesses of life.

Early in her journey, living across from a man-made lake filled with legions of ducks, she was forced to weather the horror of watching her mother decline into a madwoman assuring her that the Virgin Mary was in the television and hostile entities lurked outside.

I remember speaking to her on the phone just before her disappearance into the foster care system. She lied to me and assured me that her mother was okay, even as I heard a slight tremulous tone in her voice betraying her terror. When, finally, she reappeared at an uncle's house, and I spoke with her she asked me, "Daddy, why do you sound so sad?" My heart was broken for her; it still is.

My own mother was unhinged, had lost her grip on things, too. In those days, before the advent of the confessional society, we didn't talk about it as directly. Walking up to the house my brothers and sister would ask, "How's mom?" That meant which mom was she today. Was she the cool, funny, loud mom who liked to laugh and couldn't help but tousle your hair when you walked by, or was she the violent, accusatory mom who always knew exactly what to say to leave as deep a mark as possible on your psyche while she chased you around the house raining blows down on your head?

The last time I saw my mother we got into an argument

over something, the specifics of which elude me or perhaps they've just melded into the overstuffed filing cabinet in my memory labeled "Arguments With Mom." Regardless, I was 18 years old, fresh out of jail, again, and I was determined not to have it out with her any more. All of my possessions were thrown into a couple of green trash bags. She was firing shots at me as I walked toward the front door, trying to get around her, when something she said stuck and hurt.

Somewhere from deep inside of me, from within the years of rage and love, because I so desperately loved my mother, and I desperately wanted her to love me in spite of the fact that my conception ruined her life and forced her to marry my father, I made the switch into the fury that my experiences in the streets and the juvenile jails had taught me in order to survive.

While what she said I don't remember, I do remember what I did next. And I remember how frightened she looked, and how much I enjoyed seeing her terrified for a change. "Fuck you and fuck your house, too!" I then tore the front door off the hinges in one enraged tug and threw it down onto the carpet in front of my father's plaques and U.S. Navy symbols, and I stomped that door into a pile of splinters. When I was done, I bellowed out a roar of triumph colored with primal pain that pushed her backwards.

A couple of months later, I killed a man in a brutal beating over some misspoken words; it was this terrible act of savagery that led to my daughter's life. And while the burden of her mother's madness must surely be hard to carry, the existential burden of her life arising from the loss of another's life has to be orders of magnitude heavier.

The love I still feel for my daughter's mother rescued me from a lonely and heartless existence. Even though I resent much of what came later, particularly the events that hurt my daughter, I prefer to remember the early days when I felt freed from my pain inside of her love. But, sadly, the storms of her life left her mother broken and less than a shadow of her former self.

What will become of this young woman created out of so much turmoil and loss is a question that weighs on me. I cannot but feel the lash of culpability for bringing her into this life of mine.

Years ago, in a conversation with a deeply spiritual woman, I voiced this sense of guilty responsibility for the act of creation. This woman who radiated holiness hard won out of a life of both privation and service pulled her chair close to me and looked deep into my eyes. "You gave her the gift of life," she said with compassion. I felt the weight of those words settle down on my heart like a warm blanket.

Many times when my daughter and I talk on the phone, the music of my youth plays in the background - Pink Floyd, Hendrix, the more psychedelic stuff. We've talked when she was tripping in the forest with her friends, when she was at concerts, what I also did at her age. Thankfully, no one ever lies bleeding at her feet, and her dreams are filled with more peaceful vistas than the tortured nightmares of the days when "The Dark Side of the Moon" played in my backgrounds.

I believe that the gift of life really is a two-way street. She brought life to me, too. The scales of eternity aren't balanced out; it's not that straightforward. But out of the cacophony and dissonance of my life, a sense of harmony slipped in, a sense of unity in the field of being we all float upon.

That's enough for me. I hope it's enough for her.

MY FATHER, THE THUG

BY: ALIA HARTMAN

My father the thug, my father the racist, my father's one-two knockout bam you're dead punch, my father the cowering child clenching his fists at the sight of his father's brown navy issued leather belt. My father many years later holding my mother close and tight loving, promising me he'll never lie.

I held his birth certificate in my hands and read:
"Born: December 28, 1960. Boston, MA"

The eldest of three: laughing and saying, stern voice still carrying that hint of lightness that betrays the inner character behind the hardened gaze, "Thank god my dad gave me a different middle name. I'm sure glad I never had to called Junior."

He gets nicknamed "Bear" because he grows to be 6'3". He takes up smoking far before he should and his dad gives him one of those classic father-son talks while puffing on his old tobacco pipes. Days later his mother asks "what's your favorite brand?" and fresh packs appear among freshly folded laundry. He never thanks her for it because then she'd have to admit to it.

He gets along with his little brother for a while. They play together and get dressed in matching striped t-shirts. Take smiling photographs together with their baby sister and her fluffy ragged stuffed bear.

On the first day of middle school, he runs across a gang of kids. They offer him a joint and at this point his own brain has misinterpreted the strict teachings of his youth. He accepts and perhaps this is the pinprick miniscule tack in his timeline that splinters his course off into a vague uncertainty that continues and continues.

His crowd of friends changes. The politics of the seventies are well in place and he grows his hair long and his dad calls him a fag, shouts slurs that I'm not comfortable saying or writing at the music he plays. They smoke pot and

listen to Black Sabbath 8tracks in stolen Volkswagens. They take too much acid at concerts, wear makeup and idolize Bowie. They snort coke when fucked up on tequila and get into fistfights that stain his knuckle's with blood and crisscross cuts that scar.

("8tracks were terrible. Too many plays and they'd explode. Vomit strings and strings of black film all over the place. / Bugs were always the easiest to steal. You could unlock them by shoving a thin piece of metal down between the driver's window and the car's door.")

He lives like this for a little while - selling Thai sticks and turning that money into PCP. It doesn't really last that long, it never could. On a cold night, he kills a man. Learns his name the day after - Thomas Allen Fellowes, my reason for existing, and my tangible proof of life exchanged for life.

Only one thing can happen now. He gets arrested, goes to trial, and gets Life. He's nineteen now, maybe nineteen forever. Violence is the code of conduct on the yard, he's young, has a lot to learn, and luckily he's a fast learner.

On turning 21 in prison, he writes about an old man called Cowboy singing "Mama Tried" by Merle Haggard. "I turned 21 in prison doing life without parole." "I should sober up at this chilling line, but I sing it out loud with the raucous chorus of drunken thugs around me".

He meets my mother over the phone. She's a secretary at a law office he's phoning for a friend who doesn't get phone calls. She's surprised and intrigued by him, asks him what being in prison is like: "It's all one long day that never ends." Somehow he convinces her to write to him, to let him call her more, to come see him, and finally to marry him. She loves him so much change doesn't feel hard. He gives up drugs and violence because getting caught for either means he might scare her away. And me, I come 14 Christmases later. A wriggling screaming creature that fits into his palm.

He says holding his child the first time feels like dancing around a campfire singing songs in dead languages,

feeling heat clipping at your calves, and bowing to the moon.

I grow up with the stories, and it's the stories I hear that compel me to write my own.

I go camping with two of my closest friends in the forest. We set a seven person tent down over the course of three hours with triumphant confusion. Sleep in shivers because we don't pack enough blankets and over the night huddle into a small pile.

When day breaks we each eat two tabs and cross a river. Sit in the middle of it and watch the stream erupt, erupt into our own chorus of laughter, no violence here to dispel. We sit under great old trees and watch them transfigure into giants reaching down to hold our hands and dance with us.

My father phones me and we talk. At first breath he laughs too, knowingly asks, "What have you been doing today?" "I'm not really too sure. We dropped - some time ago."

I can see him smiling into his phone, wearing his same old blue on blues, face inching into the line more and more until he's standing in front of me like one of those old giant trees telling me to dance while I can.

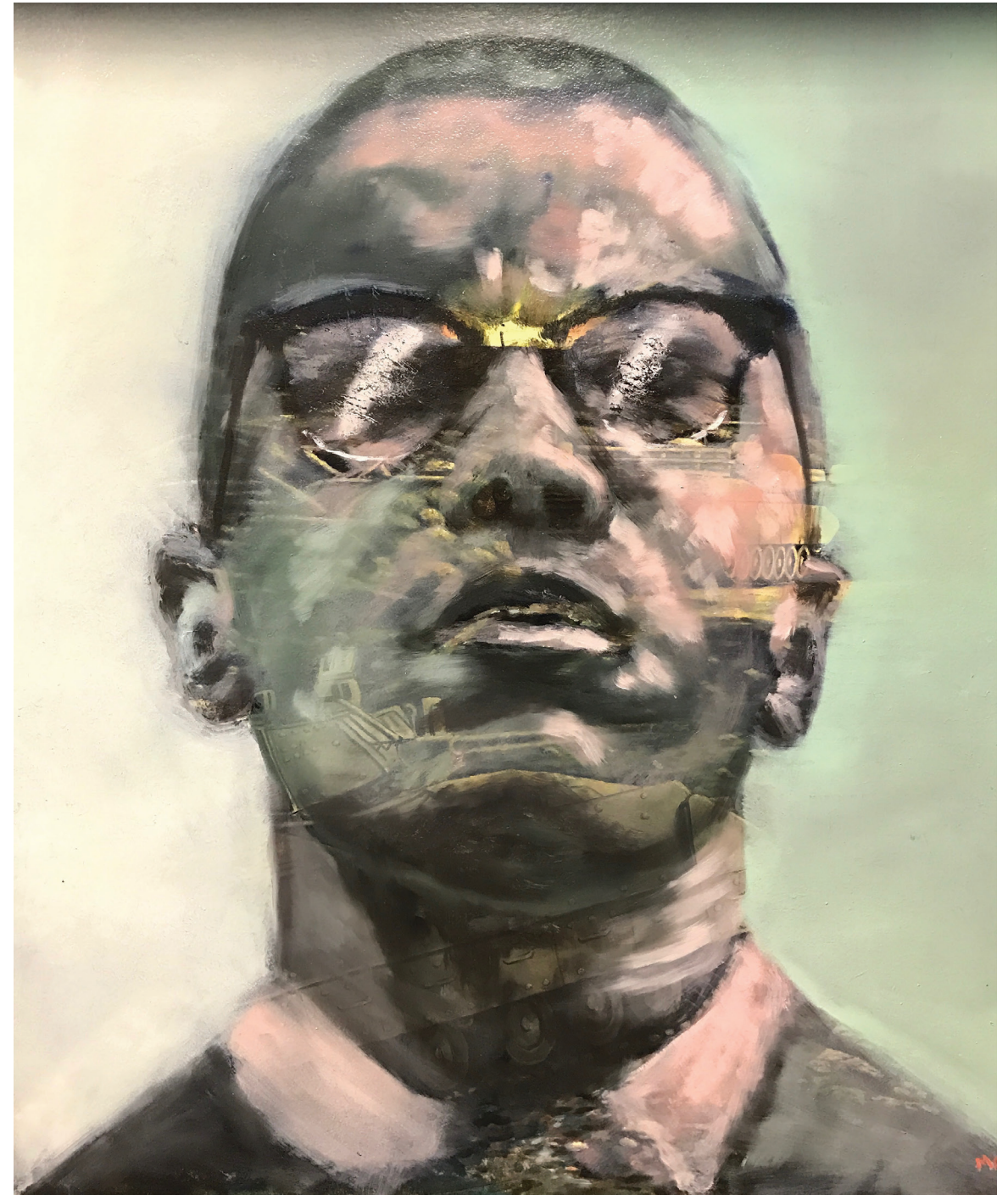
"I never would've imagined it." He says, "Me being here. Me talking to you, my daughter, doing something I've done," A happy sigh, "You'll probably know this feeling."

We trek back across that river. A speaker singing old Syd Barret's bluesy tunes. Stare at the river at it's numerous little streams feeding this one great big thing rushing so quickly past us we can't count them. Syd sings about Jenny Gentle and his mind meets ours and we crawl through the rocks like the cats that haunt him.

We eat peanut butter sandwiches and smack our teeth against our gums. We listen to the same music my father did doing some of the same things my father did, only more gently. We grow and cease to continue the unnatural parts of the cycle. We dance more. We sit in our tent and smile.

MUSING FIVE. ACT!

I am Human
 I am Life Without Parole, P-66842
 I am; I exist.
 I am learning, growing, and leading.
 I can be your neighbour and friend.
 I am changing.
 I am his daddy, their brother, her granddaddy,
 their nephew, their uncle, their, grand uncle.
 I am their inspiration, motivation, example and
 advisor.
 I am African American, descendent of the
 slavery project of America.
 I am suffering and remorseful.
 I am without liberty.
 I am curious.
 I am inquisitive.
 I am critical in both thought and action.
 I am observant.
 I am Robert M. Mosley IV.
 I am in need of your help.



"State of Mind" by Sadiq Saibu

CRITICAL PEDAGOGUE ONE

BY: TOBIAS ALFONSO TUBBS

Greetings of peace, love, and critical resistance

My name is Tobias Tubbs, and my introduction to the California Department of Corrections came at the immature age of 20 years old. Scientifically, twenty is older than what is considered a juvenile, but not old enough, neurologically, to be viewed as an adult-or capable of making mature decisions. Nevertheless, I am condemned to the other death penalty in the form of Life Without the Possibility of Parole (L.W.O.P.). My sentence came during a political climate where inner city youth were actively labeled as "super predators" and deemed incorrigible.

At that point in my life, I did not know what incorrigible meant. However, it did not take decades locked up in a tiny, stone cage for me to figure out I needed to expand my education. From day one, that is exactly what I did. It began with looking up the term incorrigible to discover the future they had in store for me.

When I found out what incorrigible meant-that I am not worthy of redemption, that I am incapable of change-it sickened my stomach. I felt disrespected and ashamed. These feelings quickly turned to anger. That anger quickly turned into an uncompromising passion for learning and advocating on the behalf of my fellow inmates. This was before there were chronos to be had, recognition to be sought, and a governor's board to recognize my path of rehabilitation.

Prior to my incarceration, my life reflected that of a productive law-abiding citizen. I was not gang-affiliated, nor did I have a criminal record. I wore many hats: I was a youth mentor working with a police basketball league, a co-business owner with my father (electrical construction), a coach, a social activist, a junior mentor at my church, high school graduate, a loved son, big brother, stepdad, and pillar of my community.

Hidden amongst those admirable qualities, was a young man that exercised inexplicably poor judgment. Misguided

trust put me on the path of destruction. Innocent lives, like candlelight, were extinguished in an appalling wave of devastation, shattering countless lives in its wake. Twenty-six years of relentless remorse and pain have driven me to better myself, to prove I am worthy of redemption. This is when Critical Pedagogue One, or CP¹, was born.

Many of the incarcerated students, advocates, and artists that contributed to Words Uncaged previously suffered from a serious addiction to crime and violence. However, what you have read, viewed, and felt in this journal proves we are beyond the notion of incorrigible. **We are human beings with talents, skills, and special gifts.** We are also college students, advocates, artists, musicians, and poets-dog trainers, facilitators, teachers, and mentors. More so, look at us as sons, fathers, husbands, servants of God and agents of change worthy of redemption.

Dr. Roy introduced me to Critical Pedagogy as a power and paradigm shifter. He clearly explained our rehabilitation as proof of the importance of a higher education. Through education, we must speak our narrative in our unique voice. Dr. Roy further explains it is a privilege for California State University, Los Angeles to give us a platform. It is our obligation to put in the work of humanizing ourselves and dispelling all stigmas, stereotypes, and misinformation clouding our journeys of transformation.

When I tell Dr. Roy, "my entire penal experience has been pedagogical," he smiles and says he likes my name, CP¹, acknowledging how appropriate it is for Words Uncaged. He encourages me with great enthusiasm to speak from the heart so I can touch hearts. He assures me that power and paradigms shift when the hearts and minds of grassroots citizens are enlightened. Dr. Roy adds, **"Your lives and journeys are beacons of light."**

That conversation reminds me that pedagogy finds its etymological roots in the Greek term paidogogos. Paidogogos is a slave or prisoner who leads the youth to school. As an African-American man, raised in the segregation of the dirty south, I understand the adverse effects of slavery and the

influence Jim Crow had on the collective soul and consciousness of my people, and Americans in general. The 13th Amendment is the extension of this dark time in American history. Critical pedagogy empowers the incarcerated student transforming us into student-advocates. We are now equipped to lead millennial students in the abolition of all demoralizing institutions of enslavement and imprisonment. At its essence, this is what pedagogical power-shifts is about-taking negative social forums and transforming them into powerful mediums of social awareness and change.

Through the spirit and application of critical pedagogy, we have something special to offer America's youth. We can guide them through the valuable life lessons that ended our own so prematurely. This is what a critical pedagogue is about: connecting students, incarcerated and free, for the sole purpose of shifting power. California's incarcerated students are an untapped resource-America's best kept secret. We are future educators, administrators, innovators of health and science, and the driving force for making amends and breaking the cycle of poverty and violence.

Moreover, anger is no longer my driving force. For decades, love has been the fuel driving my educational and political pursuits. Love is the power and paradigm shifter. Love only speaks through truth-the truth will set all of us free. The producers of Words Uncaged are calling you to join us in spreading our truth. We are calling you to help us take our message to California and the world.

Our message is simple, scientifically verifiable, and obtainable in California's political climate: Juveniles and young adults, just as any human being, can change. We are not incorrigible. To be incorrigible is not a part of the human DNA. Redemption is possible when you invest in it. All we need is a chance, a safe place, access to a higher education, and resources to empower us to lead this positive social movement. Come stand with us, brothers and sisters, in abolishing the inhumane sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole, and set the standard for forward-thinking prison reform.

In the spirit of love, truth and redemption,

WE

BY: DORTELL WILLIAMS, DAVID SHIPKO, AND ALFREDO ROMAN-RODRIGUEZ

We are the people on the inside. We believe the colorful pages within these covers offer a glimpse of our long-standing efforts at personal transformation. As wards of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, we readily admit we were defective and therefore believe in "corrections". We have done, and will continue to do, everything that encompasses these concepts of transformation.

We believe this is what society wants. This is why we agree with practical states such as Oregon and Oklahoma, who reward rehabilitative efforts for those serving sentences of Life Without the Possibility of Parole (L.W.O.P.) with some hope for eventual release. We also agree with governors such as Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, who, in 2010, commuted the sentences of nearly 200 people with L.W.O.P. We believe these examples reveal that personal transformation is possible.

In fact, we agree with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, declaring that the primary purpose of prisons is "reformation and social rehabilitation." In Europe, the idea is not to "institutionalize" its wards, but rather to re-socialize them as fast as possible. This approach has been tremendously successful; their recidivism rate is five times lower than is America.

We also agree with the European Court of Human Rights, who recognizes L.W.O.P. violates the prohibition of inhumane punishment. We agree with these ideals and recognize the success of the European model, as utilized in Austria, Germany, Norway, and others. Perhaps this is why U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy lamented, "U.S. sentences are eight times longer than issued by European courts."

We believe the sentence of L.W.O.P., a punishment that prohibits people from demonstrating reformation to a parole board, and provides no meaningful mechanism for eventual release, is draconian and inhumane. We, the people on the inside, join the people on the outside in asking your help to balance the scales of justice with practical, reasoned judgment.

We are the people on the Inside we call 'society.' We are complex and irreducible, of course. This is the meaning of our suffering, of course. This is the essence of our art, of course. And we are all equal, of course. Until, we step out of line; then we are naught. Of course. Disagree? Perhaps you do, but here is what *we as a society* have done.

We have placed our collective sins and ills on our prisoners and driven them Outside into the waste, believing their desert exile returns us to our garden. We have scapegoated them. We have placed them out, forgotten they came from within, ignored that the demons which haunted and corrupted and possessed them are here, still, inside, with us, haunting and corrupting and possessing us. Some prisoners are innocent, most are guilty of something, but we blame them all for everything, punish them all for everything. We punish and punish and punish and punish. We are talented punishers. Dante would be so proud (no, horrified). And in the punishment of our prisoners we convince ourselves we have healed our body, when, in fact, we have only pacified ourselves into false satisfaction by punishing our (sometimes innocent, sometimes guilty, but never fully guilty) selves. We believe we are healed, but we are still ill, and, worse, now we are bleeding from our freshly self-inflicted wounds. Our condition is fatal. We need help. How?

This journal. Do not misunderstand. This journal is not the solution. This journal does many things, but not the thing that most needs doing. This journal returns to the men of Lancaster the authority called *voice* that is afforded to every other complex and irreducible being--no; it disrupts the theft of voice we have mistakenly called 'justice.' This journal speaks the reality we have attempted to silence--no; it *inscribes* that reality on our own. This journal humanizes our prisoners--no; it intervenes in our incessant, dehumanizing violence against them. This journal does not, *does not*, condone or overshadow or revise or justify the past. One who has stolen is a thief, one who has killed is a killer, and one wrongfully convicted condemns us all. But that is not all they are. No being's being is exhausted by a single event, a single act, a single identity. This journal does not, *does not*, do the thing that most needs doing, a double stroke that at once (1) transforms

prisons from pits of punishment into sites of rehabilitation and (2) heals the social ills that create the opportunities, motives, desires, and drives toward crime. Without both, neither is sufficient. What ills? No list here could be as thorough as that found between the lines and signs of every story and essay and poem in these pages. We will not attempt to reduce their lives as we have reduced them. Read their stories, re-read them, close read them as though your life and the future of your society depends on it. Because it does. We pledge ourselves to justice for all, and until we have justice for all, we have justice for none. Our justice is yet to come. Unless we act, it will remain always entirely so. This journal does not do the thing that most needs doing; it cannot; you must.

AFTERWORD

BY CLIFTON LEE GIBSON

These pages are filled with pain, healing, change, and hope. We have poured our souls out through pens or painted what is in our hearts. We are sincere in our remorse, in taking responsibility for our choices, and making amends.

What if the worst choice each of us ever made became the defining moment in our lives, that we could never improve from that moment? That is what LWOP means.

There are over 300 sons, brothers, uncles, fathers, writers, or artists on this yard that are sentenced to die in the cell's in which we sleep.

Do you believe in second chances? Do you believe in redemption? LWOP does not. As long as we are condemned to an LWOP sentence, we will die in prison.

Despite this sentence, like the author Bryan Stevenson believes, "Each of us are better than the worst choice we ever made." We are leaders for change in a punitive, depression-filled environment. Despite knowing that we have no possibility of ever being paroled, we dedicate our lives to helping others, in honor of those that we have harmed.

Every week hundreds of the men here on the PPF attend chapel services or the education department. Within those confines, we are traversing through inner wounds, traveling towards rehabilitation, and seeking a path to redemption. Also, over the years, through the art room (P.A.P. or Healing Through Arts), Men For Honor, H.E.A.R.T., Paws 4 Life, the college program, all of the chapel attendees or a plethora of other self-help groups, tens of thousands of dollars have been raised for local charities.

True rehabilitation is capable of healing the ills within us that cause cancerous behavior. Rotting away in prison does not have to be the end for us.

If you believe in forgiveness, growth, rehabilitation, and community, join the movement to hold offenders of justice responsible in a responsible way. Inner reformation and higher education are the solution to safer streets, not LWOP. Ending LWOP would create a mechanism for us, and thousands of others like us to earn the trust of society again. All of us would then have to dig deep, correct our defected characteristics, and give back to the communities that we took away from. Through the CDCR's parole boards and rigorous scrutiny, we may one day return to our neighborhoods and directly make amends for our crimes. After all, we are better than the worse choice we have ever made.

To join the movement, please contact your senator and be a voice for change. To determine the representative in your district go to:

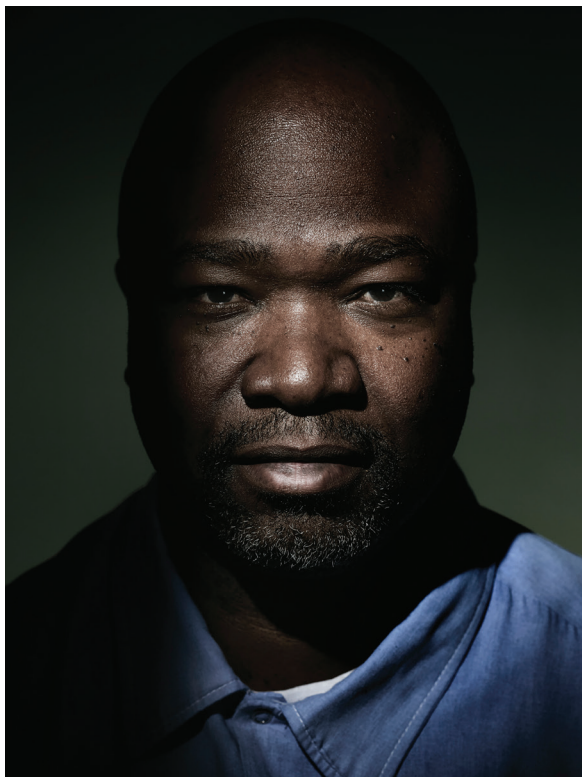
www.legislature.ca.gov/legislatorsanddistricts1legislators/yourlegislator

WRITE OR CALL THE GOVERNOR:

The Honorable Edmund G. Brown, Jr.
Governor of the State of California
State Capitol #1173
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 445-2841

Lieutenant Governor of the
State of California
Gavin Newsome
State Capitol #1114
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 445-8994

Tell your representative you a constituent and want to end Life Without Parole sentencing and mass incarceration in California. Know that your voice matters. **Let it be heard!**



"Removed" by Chris Branscombe



"Foti's 56 Hotrod" by Kitiona Paepole