

Open Line

SAN QUENTIN, CALIFORNIA

2013

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Dear Reader:

Welcome to the 2013 issue of *OpenLine*. Between these covers unfolds an array of visual and literary artwork by the students and alumni of the Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison.

Pioneer educator John Henry Newman stated in “The Idea of a University” that “the training of the intellect, which is best for the individual himself, best enables him to discharge his duties to society.” The Prison University Project is committed to educate, not by indoctrination, but through examination of all situations in both academic and creative realms.

Artistic expression is a means by which life’s meanings have full impact. These creations span the breadth of the human narrative by mining the depths of life’s truths.

Feel a young offender’s “First Day In.” Learn about a popular prison pastime in “A Brief Treatise on the History of Chess.” Experience the dynamics of a biracial family in “A Long Time Coming.” Plumb deep despair in “Soul Survivor.”

With these and many others, prepare to be challenged, enlightened, disturbed, and even entertained by our contributors’ unique insights into their own reality and that of the world around them.

Join us in celebrating humanity’s potential.

Sincerely,

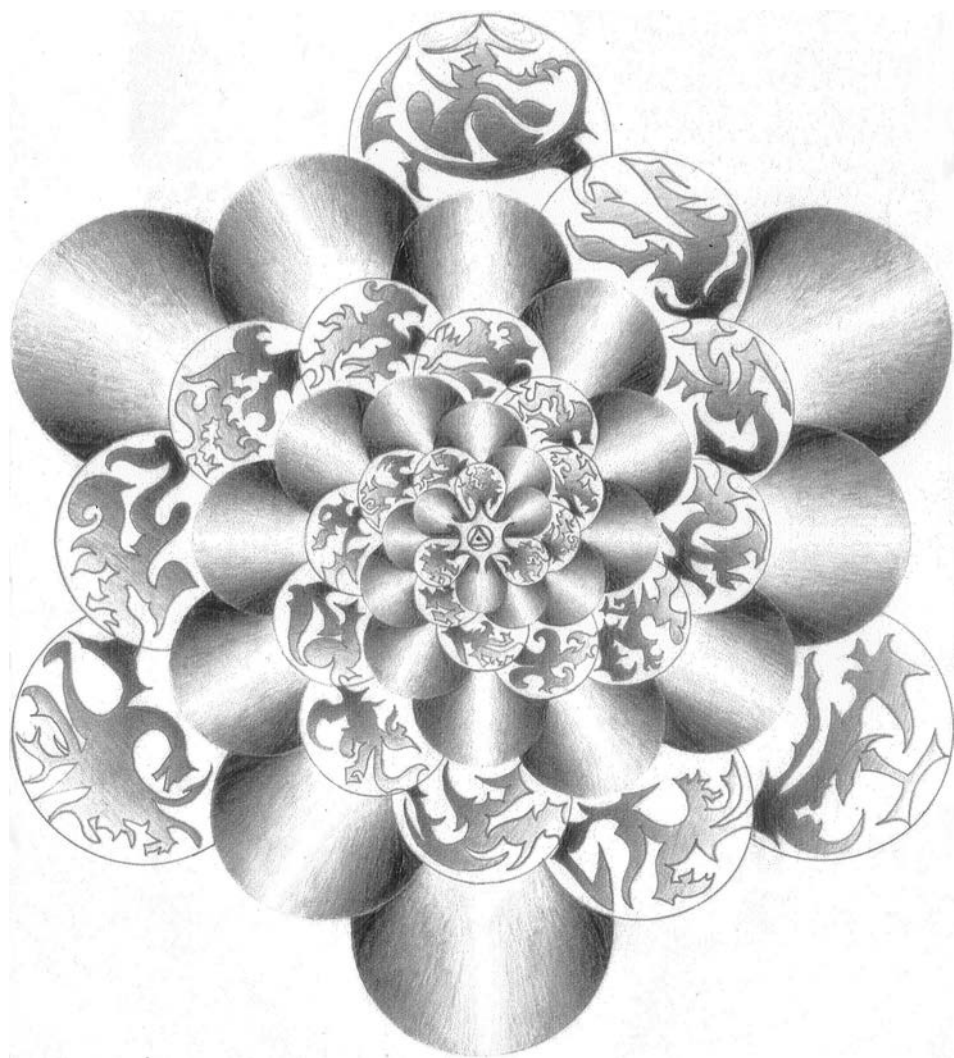
Randall S. Maluenda
Editor

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Transcendental Topology
HŌSHŪ CHŌKŪ MALIS

A Long Time Coming

LENNART ROSENIUS

“INMATE ROSENIUS! GET UP, GET DRESSED! YOU HAVE A VISIT! IN-MATE RO-SEN-IUS, VISIT!” blares the all-knowing voice on the unit’s intercom.

I’m ready.

I’ve been ready.

As a matter of fact, I’m already outside of my cell attempting to alleviate the frustration of having to wait for the turnkey to let me out. This morning I’m a little more expectant than usual. Today, not only do I get to spend time with my family, but I get the opportunity to try to right a wrong that has weighed heavily on my heart for twenty-one years now.

I step into the visiting room, a long corridor with chairs and tables on each side and an additional row running down the center. I immediately begin to scan the faces and sounds for someone familiar, a movement or voice that I can single out. It’s useless, though; the commotion is overpowering. There are people laughing, babies crying, the unspoken energy of emotions; my senses are instantly overloaded. It is only when I reach the middle of the corridor that I spot my kids: five-year-old Jerome, Jr, and Ariana, age seven. As if he can sense my presence, Jerome is the first to turn around. He looks directly at me and begins to sprint in my direction.

My heart breaks a little.

In a blink, Ariana sees me, too, and runs after her brother.

Throughout my incarceration, and since Ariana has been able to walk, it has always been her who is first to race and jump into my arms to greet me. But today her brother has one-upped her by taking the lead. As I scoop Jerome up into my arms, Ariana is coming towards me, smiling, obviously excited to see me. As she gets closer, the smile becomes strained, and the look in her eyes goes from assessing the situation to one of outright disappointment. By the time she reaches me her hands are tight to her

chest and her body language is screaming, *'But, Daddy, that's our thing!'*, or maybe, *'You Assholes, that's my thing!'* Some irrational energy within has me feeling as if I have truly betrayed her. But what was I to do, fling her brother off to the side? My children are my heart and soul; I've never wanted to contribute to their pain.

Will either of my kids do anything to disappoint me, unintentional or otherwise? It's likely. The question is, rather, how and when? I can't help but think of the pain I have caused my parents throughout the course of my life: bad decisions, drug abuse, incarceration. Although I'm still locked up, my people know I'm no longer a slave to the monkey on my back (he's still there, I just don't feed him). But still, all of the pain and turmoil I have caused. How do my elders really see me?

With Jerome already in my arms, I pick up Ariana just the same and squeeze them both together, as if to make them one. They giggle, gasping for air, and with well-being seemingly restored, I kneel to place them on the ground. As I look up and beyond my kids' faces I see my parents. They're engaged in small talk while hovering over an old Swedish woman in her mid-eighties seated in a chair, her hands daintily resting in her lap. I know she's Swedish because she is my mom's mom; my *mormor*, as the Swedes say. Besides her gray hair and apparent fragility, she is as I have always remembered her: beautiful.

Today is the day I've been waiting for. Today is the day I can look my grandma in the eyes, finally sober, and express to her how sorry I am for what I had done all those years ago. I had my chance when she came to the States many years back. However, at the time, I was moving so fast from the dope that I couldn't even appreciate her presence, let alone apologize to her. She had come all the way from Sweden, stayed in the same house I was in, and I had hardly seen her.

~

Apologia. Apology. Apologetic. To apologize.

The ancient Greeks created the word apology to express defense and justification for one's actions. How did it ever come to mean the exact opposite? Either way, there is no justification or defense for my behavior twenty-one years ago.

~

In November of '91, my mom sent me to Sweden to visit her side of the family. I was to do a circuit of visits with aunts and uncles, lasting days at a time, but I mostly stayed with Grandma in her flat. She lived in a nice district called *Hökarängen*, twenty minutes outside of Stockholm by subway. I ate a lot, made friends fast, and witnessed the daily routines of my Swedish culture—routines I was already so accustomed to seeing at home with my mom, only now, being played out on a societal scale. Here, I wasn't the only kid on the block that grew up dipping cheese sandwiches in creamed coffee while watching episodes of *Pippi Longstocking*.

Maybe I should have kept that part to myself. Then again, it's of some importance, because in spite of my visibly obvious differences—my Black heritage, the way I wore my clothes, my overall American flavor—I felt at *home* in my mom's country. And make myself at home, I did.

Looking back, it's likely that my mom sent me to Sweden not only to visit my family, but in an attempt to halt my trajectory towards felonhood. Now don't get me wrong, at this time, I wasn't a complete and utter screw-up. I was merely flirting with the potentiality of it. Let's just say I was being pulled in by the magnetism of the streets; what grownups refer to as going down the wrong path.

So, as I was saying, I made myself at home...

I ended up crashing my friend's motor scooter by hauling ass down a wet grassy hill, bending one of the handlebars back badly enough to render it unrideable. I aided in almost catching my bud Mattias's kitchen table on fire. There was smoke still dancing in the air when his dad came home from a long day at work. *Hej pappa, välkommen hem!* In one of my better moments, I wound up drunk at some random stranger's flat with all my new buds. Somehow I ended up hanging out of a second story window daring everyone that I would jump. The only part of my body still inside of that window was my bony ass cheeks teetering on the ledge. Of course, I wasn't really going to jump. It was all in fun, only I was the only one laughing. Then one morning, maybe a week before I was to go back home, I was skimming through some of Grandma's books and old photo albums, and there it was in one of the pages. There

it was: the proverbial apple, crispy and sweet with temptation, that Eve had snapped off the tree for Adam to bite into. Only it wasn't a piece of fruit staring out at me; it was a hundred-dollar bill. I lifted the bill out of the crease, folded it in half, and put it in my pocket.

When I go back to that day, I'm almost certain (or at least I would like to think) that I took some time wrestling with the morality of taking something that didn't belong to me – especially from my grandma. Did I think about the embarrassment and shame it would cause me and my parents throughout the years? No. I didn't consider that. I do remember having the juvenile rationalization of telling myself that Grandma wouldn't have much use for US currency, anyway, since she lived in another country. Childish justifications. Will I ever know who I was in that moment of my life? Well, I know who I am today, and that helps me with what I have – want – to say to my grandma.

~

My kids run ahead to inform my parents that the Dad-meister has arrived. I follow their lead. I hug and kiss my mom, then my dad. My grandma is still seated, but she has acknowledged my presence with warm eyes and puckered lips. I'm still her grandson, her *lila gouban*.

Hey, mormor, hur mår du?

Jag är bra.

Jag saknade dig mycket!

Jag har saknat dig också...I've missed you too, grandma.

I've missed you too.

I'm Lost

WILLIAM D. BLACKWELL

Where is home,
from where did I spring forth?
Where began my life force?
If I am but fruit, where is the tree,
where is the root?

Does every life have a plan?
A preordained destiny?
Am I locked in with no chance to be free?

Is what we call free will really that?
Or am I a fool with a conditioning tool,
controlling the way that I act

I want to go home, but which road do I take?
I got this ominous feeling, it's
sacrifice, suffering, pain and heartache

Maybe it's philosophy, religion, politics or science
Without ever knowing the odds I'm against
No benefits, just consequence

I've been ravaged by a savage mentality
It rages and rattles its cage inside of me
Termed a human being but
through the eyes of an animal I'm seeing

Guided by instinct
Reactionary and unable to think
With each breath I know that I'm dying

If my destiny is pre-written
Why am I even trying?

I want to go back to whence I came,
to that omnipotent fountain from where I sprang

Tired of taking up space
Frustrated and running in place
Window of opportunity closed in my face

Horrible things seen through these eyes
caused me to desensitize
Impervious to pain not my own

I'm lost
I want to go home

Mom's Little Bastard

JEFFREY SCOTT LONG

Mom didn't recall much of my early years, she said she was too wasted. But she remembered where we were when Kennedy was killed. We were on I-25 going to visit Dad in Canyon City prison. Maybe that's where I'd been conceived, Mom would never confirm or deny.

I was born on August 24, 1963, in a little town that sits at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. This is the same town in which I'd watch my dad die just after I turned nine. But for my first years of life I was dumped on Great Grandma, who ruled the world with chocolate in one hand and a fly swatter in the other. I remember her chasing me around the dining room table with the fly swatter, me giggling and thinking it was a game. She was already so old that she couldn't bend enough to cut her own toenails, which left that chore for me. I always cut them too close which made her yell, but I knew I was loved by her as surely as Sunday mornings meant bacon and eggs before church.

I was around five or six when I went to live with Mom and Dad. It probably had something to do with my starting school. I don't know when Dad had got out of prison. My sister was born in '67, another possible product of Canyon City. We moved around a lot, me from school to school, which eliminated any chance of friendships or learning social skills. My world was my so-called family and it was constantly shifting and changing, often violently.

Dad was an "alki," but didn't need drink to erupt into violence. He expressed his rage with swift acts of destruction. Once he ripped off a chunk of kitchen counter and another time he rammed Mom's square blue clunker into the front of the house. The only thing that stopped the car from coming into the living room was a brick flowerbed that stood about three feet high. The one time he really scared me was when he beat a man's face with a motorcycle helmet. I called the cops. The man had provoked jealousy by being nice to Mom. Dad considered Mom

“his” even though they weren’t together. They were always fighting and separating. Chaos was the norm.

Sis was dumped off on a woman named Anne for most of her early years. Being with Anne, she was spared a lot of the violence and crap. Still, she, too, was later diagnosed with PTSD, which explains some of our problems, especially with memory. My relationship with Sis was and is sporadic. She has no memory of Dad, not even the night he died. I remember how he used to whip us both with the same viciousness, once for eating dog food in the backyard.

I have wondered how I was conceived, how Dad surpassed Mom’s abhorrence to the male gender. But she solved that mystery through her self-proclaimed history of being wasted for years. I always saw her as the bitch who bore me because, past that, I only received mothering long distance and anonymous.

Just because I didn’t get affection didn’t mean Mom never showed any. She liked critters, ranging from dogs, to sheep, and other odd ones. In 1972, we lived in an old farmhouse, Mom and Sis and me. The sheep were used as lawn mowers, and the “odd one” was a skunk, spray sack clipped, who eventually caught rabies and ran off to die. Mom’s all-time favorite was a full-grown female German shepherd whose name came from the Avon lady who gave her to us. Avon was a kindred spirit to Mom. She cringed anytime someone of the male gender walked into the room. She would put her ears back, tuck her tail way under her belly, slouch real low and slither out of the room. Quite a feat for a full-grown German shepherd. It took me a long time to figure out that Mom felt this same way about men, including me.

That November, it got cold living in the farmhouse; there was no heating. Sis and I would jump at the chance to take a bath, just to get warm. And at night we slept in the same bed, sometimes with a couple of dogs. We ate a lot of toast from free bread and a lot of potato soup. The dogs got the better deal, with broth made from free soup bones poured on their food, and that smell was good.

One night me and Sis were asleep upstairs and were awakened by loud angry voices. As we followed the sound downstairs it all became too familiar. We found them in Mom's bedroom, standing toe to toe, screaming at each other. They didn't even notice us. Dad shoved Mom and she went flying onto the bed. She kicked at him with both feet until he grabbed one, twisting her leg hard. She screamed.

Sis was crying and yelled, "Stop daddy, stop!"

He said, "Don't call me daddy. I'm not your father."

He dropped Mom's foot and stormed over to the dresser where he pawed through Mom's things until he found a pistol, and he asked, "Where's the other one?"

Mom reached under the mattress and pulled out a pistol. She said, "Right here, you son-of-a-bitch," and pointed and pulled the trigger, again and again.

Watching my parents' last dance, I never heard the gunshots, nor smelled the gunpowder. I don't know if Dad even pointed his pistol at Mom, not that it would have done him any good, cause it was broke. But I saw Mom's face, a grimace, with her tongue sticking part way out, eyes scrunched, as she struggled to keep the pistol pointed, pulling the trigger as fast as she could.

Dad had backed up against the wall, hands held out in front as if to ward off the bullets. He yelled, "No more momma, no more," as Mom unloaded everything the gun had until the pistol clicked and clicked, empty. He turned and ran out of the room. Mom grabbed a box of shells from somewhere, started to reload with shaking hands, spilling spent shells on the bed. After reloading, she herded us kids out of the bedroom and into the dark living room with a flashlight in one hand and the pistol in the other. I remember her pointing the flashlight down, and seeing a trail of blood drops. Then I heard the steady blaring of a car horn.

We made our way out the front door and around the side of the house. I saw Dad's car, driver's door open and lights on, him slumped against the steering wheel, his head holding the horn down.

Mom yelled, "I'm going to get help, Les, you hear me?"

There was no response. Later it was stated in a report that he should have died instantly. How he made it to the car is anybody's guess.

Mom drove us to the nearest pay phone, and I heard her explain to the cops, "I just shot my husband," then crying. I don't remember how we ended up at the police station. Once there, we were stuck in an office with a big desk, and Mom paced on one side while me and Sis sat in chairs on the other. Mom was really bawling and talking about how us kids were going to hate her. I did end up hating her, but not for killing Dad.

For the killing, Mom became a bit of a hero, even to the exonerating judge. In a closed session in his chambers, with only Mom and her brother present, he stated, "Somebody had to do it, sorry it had to be you."

Dad was a bad man with a long history in a small town. For a long time I wished I had been the one who killed him. Instead I ended up killing someone else a decade later.

As wrathful as my dad was, I remember him hugging me at least once. His whiskers were rough on my face, the smell of his sweat was pungent and the strength of his arms was godlike. But he ruled with fear, intimidation and lightning-fast acts of violence. Did he love me? I don't know. Did he love me the only way he knew how? Probably. His father was known as a violent drunk, too. He died young and reckless, speeding over mountain highways on a motorcycle and hitting a horse. Generations of crap passed from fathers to sons.

Unlike my dad, Mom is someone I never knew by smell or touch, only by her wicked backhand. I've seen blood on my sister's lips and teeth, tasted my own. Even in my adult years Mom could never bring herself to hug me, not even if I was already hugging her. She was the bitch I ended up hating, not for what she did, but for what she didn't do.

After Dad died, Mom kept Sis around whereas I was dumped off on different relatives and other people, some in different states. One uncle in Washington used a two by four across my back and fists on my head. One man in a religious commune where I was forced to live used electric cords across my back and legs. It was apparent that Mom didn't want me

around, made official when she relinquished total custody to the state of Colorado around '74 or '75.

That moment in court hurt me worse than anything in my entire life. It was the rubber stamp declaring a child's unworthiness of his mother's love.

My mom died in May of 2001 while I was in prison for the third time. I cried and cried. She'd ended up a vastly different woman, a proud lesbian in her own right. She had gotten her master's degree in psychology, I think in order to try and understand herself and her family. Though she always had trouble maintaining sobriety, at one time she had over ten years clean. Her newest pet was a big green Macaw who went everywhere with her, giving her the nickname "Bird Lady" around town, with photos in the local paper. I don't know if she ever found any answers, understanding, but I think she found some peace. You can't get blood from a stone, but sometimes the stone does have something to give. I will always hate the mother of my childhood. I will always mourn the loss of the woman she became.

I've spent most of my life enraged with feelings of being worthless. If I had no value then nobody and nothing else did either. And as a child with this outlook, whether right or wrong, it's easy to understand why people beat and whipped me. That's the language my dad taught me.

I remember one uncle who slugged me on the side of my head then asked, "Now do you understand me?" and I nodded and said, "Yes."

A big admission for a child with little concept.

I turned eighteen in the Colorado juvenile system and before I turned nineteen, I was in a California jail facing charges of murder, arson, burglary, and auto theft. A killer like Mom, a thief like Dad, my own twist on everything else. I used to joke about how I did burglaries just to look at other people's photo albums, to see how real people lived. Even the sentencing judge stated how my parents could not have created more of a menace to society if they had actually tried. Psychologically I was a mess. My nightmares were fueled by my Dad's death, but warped so

I was the one who died, over and over. My mental make-up was more than the sum of abuse. It was also the lack of love, caring and nurturing. I was Mom's "little bastard" incarnate.

It has taken me over four decades, most of that locked up, to realize that my value is not in my past, but in the value I give to myself. I equate the me of today to the child I should have been, learning to laugh, to feel, to realize, finding out what it is like just to be me. It is the idea I heard somewhere that no child is ever born bad, and that damage done can be undone. Without that bit of knowledge and that belief, gained from whatever source possible, I would be a lost cause.

Pain, the universal kind with its own language that reaches deep inside you and rips everything out again and again, year after year, never goes away. This pain is the scarring of the psyche, which often makes a person a mental and emotional cripple. Having to live a life that is ruled by a mind traumatically altered, this is someone who is a breed apart from society, someone who knows hell intimately. One of the worst afflictions of this malady is the inability to connect with other people. Yet, the need, want, longing, is still there.

In the late '90s in New Folsom Prison, I went to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting and met a man whose face I will never forget, even though I saw him only once. He was a Vietnam veteran who had lived with his own brand of hell for decades. He was the first person who ever talked to me about living with rage, dealing with nightmares and being all alone in a room full of people. He was a light that illuminated a part of my darkness. Because of this man, and people like him who live the spiritual paradox – the getting is in the giving – I and others like me are thriving. I live each day as it comes, striving to be a part of humanity, choosing to be a positive influence, learning what it means to be on the other end of the spiritual paradox.

Later in her life, my mother changed in many ways, showing me by example a different path. Shortly before she died she opened herself

to me, knowing all the rage I had in me. She was willing to accept my rage and pain, wanting me to lash out at her. I could not. Not because I did not feel what I have always felt, but because she was no longer the person of my childhood. Making amends, the process of forgiveness, hers to herself, mine to myself; in the end the goal is to find peace of mind. And that is something we can only give ourselves. It is a battle waged on a daily basis, with victory only gained through humbleness and humility. But I find sleep easy to come by now and my days are filled with positive endeavors.

Nobody can change what was, yet everyone can change what is to be. I may never get out of prison, but that doesn't change how I live my life today. And in living my life I change everything. No longer does my life live me.

Peace...

Language of Metaphors

RON G. SELF



Luke and I were inseparable. Ever since he was born, there was not a day that the two of us were not together. Between our shared love for the beach and our experience in the military, there was nothing that could keep us from one another. When I was shot, it was Luke who helped me get through the emotional struggle of learning to walk again. It wasn't until my incarceration that the relationship between Luke and I would forever change. You see, Luke was not only my best friend, my companion, and my partner—he was also my pet dog.

In the poem “Walking the Dog” by Howard Nemerov, the author speaks of a relationship between a master and his pet dog. He begins with these lines: “Two universes mosey down the street/Connected by love and a leash and nothing else.” Later in the poem, he writes: “for our relationship/Is patience.” By using words such as “love” and “relationship,” Nemerov conveys to his reader that the relationship between human and animal may not be so different than one between two people. Like a human relationship, the author compares this unity with being “connected,” one that requires patience and one that teaches us something about ourselves.

Love is a key element in any relationship, often accompanied by forces that bond two together. According to Nemerov, the dynamics between a dog and his master are much more complex than the simple roles accepted by our society. The two are, he writes, “connected by love and a leash and nothing else.” Here Nemerov uses the word “love,” a word that is commonly associated with a feeling shared between two people. He then uses the word “leash” as a metaphor, representing the ties that connect two individuals in a relationship. Finally, when Nemerov writes, “and nothing else,” he suggests that with love and the ties that connect two beings, there is no room for anything else.

Among many attributes, patience is a virtue in a loving relationship. Again, Nemerov relies on emotions associated with human beings. This device conveys the depth of the feelings between a man and his dog: “for our relationship/Is patience balancing this side tug/And that side drag.” These lines reflect how when one is in a loving relationship, there is the need for a little give and take. The importance of this type of balancing act is crucial in a successful human relationship, and in this case, a successful human-dog relationship. When Nemerov uses the word “our,” there is no hint of any separation between the master (a human) and his pet dog (an animal). This word choice clearly represents the equality in this particular relationship.

Being in a relationship can teach us lessons about ourselves and about life in general. When a human allows himself to love and be connected with his canine companion, he learns from it, even though he restricts himself from the lessons that his dog can teach him. “What else we have in common’s what he taught,/Our interest in shit.” This emphasizes how a dog can be referred to and thought of as no different than a human. Nemerov continues to use words such as “we” and “our” to even the playing field. When he says, “what he taught,” he doesn’t use the word “it.” He chooses to represent his dog as a friend, not as a subordinate.

Throughout “Walking the Dog,” Nemerov creates an image of walking his dog, while using the specific language of metaphors, the theme of love, and humanistic physical characteristics. Nemerov successfully paints the picture of a relationship that is no different than that between two people. It isn’t until his last line that he makes any distinction between his relationship with his dog and the roles that they play as human and animal: “And just to show who’s master I write the poem.” These words are not meant to say that Nemerov thinks of himself as being any different than his dog; they are meant to show that there’s really no difference at all.

Soul Bees

HŌSHŪ CHŌKŪ MALIS

Tattoo my soul with black
branded curves, sharp and live,
squirming echoes, wartime flack,
ink bees in a madhouse hive.
Hear their voice, honeyed poise in
swirling circles, drift and sift
lazy quick smoke – DAMN REASON –
cathartic, narcotic, calming rift
‘tween madness (stark raving Zen
dervish without hands to do)
and mindful grounded droning, then
a line of toeprints, two by two.

By buzz-buzz crazy ways
I live this life, these days
without you, but I will
pass by and still
thrive on forgetfulness:
Nothing’s flawed and empty fullness
never knowing Never’s mate,
Ever after Never’s fate.

Frenzied wishes by and by
don’t find justice by the lie,
and black ink bees must die
before my tattooed soul can cry.

Dear Son

ELI LAVATAI SALA

Dear Son,

There is a quote a friend of mine shared after he heard about a quarrel between your mother and me: "Time heals all wounds." It was the first time I heard the quote, but I realized later it was said quite often after emotional conflicts in a relationship. When I was young, I did not understand the concept of patching things up. I left the wound open for infection and now I am in an urgent need of an antibiotic if I am to reacquaint myself with you.

Maturity is built through experience over time. My purpose for this letter is to explain to you that as much as I regret my past decisions, during my incarceration I have learned to cherish the most valuable thing in life: family first!

I don't blame your mother for her decision to keep you away. I blame myself, because had I done right, I would never have left you. On the other hand, she keeps me informed of your well-being. She wrote, "If you want to be a father, then you can be one when you get out." This letter is the beginning of my reintroduction to your life.

I met your mother while we were in school in 1992. We built a good friendship, in part because of us being two minorities at a mostly white school, St. Phillips in San Francisco. Our phone conversations ran through the nights, and even when there was nothing left to say, we'd stay quiet listening to each other breathing. On a few occasions we'd fall asleep with the phones glued to our ears, subconsciously falling in love with each other. My shyness prevented me from expressing how I felt. I had never had a girlfriend and this was a new experience for me.

On April 7, 1993, nervously preparing for a school dance, I challenged myself to overcome the shyness. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I was psyching myself up to ask her to be mine. I entered the dance dressed

in a Guess outfit, sprayed with my older brother's Drakkar, mentally prepared to face the challenge. Adrenaline pumping out of my pores, I knew I was wasting time. I told myself I was going to ask her to dance to the next song, which happened to be "Dedicated to My Favorite Girl" by R. Kelly. We were dancing, holding hands, sweaty hands, the heat confirming our attraction to one another. At that moment I asked her, "Ww-w-wi-wil yo-o-you be my girl-girlfriend?"

Fast-forward three years, to the night of August 6, 1996. Your mother, who was on the brink of giving birth, woke me up in the middle of the night. "Babe, I'm ready!"

We arrived at Kaiser Hospital in San Francisco and were told she still needed to dilate a little more. Your mother was in so much pain she didn't hesitate to accept the medication the doctor offered to ease the pain. There was a couch inside the room, and with a pull of a lever, it turned into a bed. I slept on the couch beside your mother's bed, not once leaving her side.

We woke up on the morning of August 7, 1996, and I asked her how she was feeling: obviously not too well. I was anticipating the delivery and she just wanted to get it over with. At 3 pm she was in the delivery position doing everything we'd learned in Lamaze class. I was cheering her along: "Push, push baby! I see his head!" Oh yeah, she cussed me out.

That's when you entered the world – your beginning.

Son, there is going to be a point in time when you will want to identify with your roots. It is something everyone goes through in order to feel complete. But to do so you will discover a hidden conflict within people of different ethnicities who were born on American soil.

My mom was born on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. She is a part of the Oglala tribe, which is a branch of the Sioux Nation. How does the American government classify the Oglala Indians? Lo and behold, they are classified as "Native American." I asked my mom about this and she said, "Common sense can tell you the truth beneath the lies. How can they force a belief onto a culture that was already established on this land? They're foreigners and should be required to qualify for

a green card. If we were to adopt their way of thinking, then we could knock on any door, tell the residents to pack up and leave because we live here now. That's what Columbus did!" It was not only the words, but also the way she said them that revealed the core of her frustration. She had a stern look with penetrating eyes, as if hammering her thoughts into my soul. I recognized the pain, hurt, and felt the struggle of the millions of Indians who fought so hard to keep their identity.

My dad was born in Samoa. When he came to America, in the 1950s, there were only a handful of Samoans, and society thought he was black. Is black really an ethnicity or is it a derogatory reference towards a group of people who were stripped of their culture?

When I approached my father with the question about the origin of Samoan culture, he turned menacing and said, "Some people say we came from Asia... and some people say we came from Africa. But you know what? All those motherfuckers came from Samoa!" He left it at that. I did too. You see, he was brought up during the civil rights movement and participated in protests around the Bay Area. He shares an outlook similar to my mom's with regards to America's way of categorizing cultures.

My outlook about the world is the earth belongs to everyone. People killing people for land never made sense to me. Until people set aside their material desires, they will never appreciate the true beauty of the world.

As I sit here, in my assigned bed area, writing this letter, I can't help thinking about the day I treated both you and your mother to the California Academy of Sciences. You were a two-year old, full of energy, examining the world like children often do while the mind has not yet grasped the reality of life. You were enjoying yourself, which made the trip worth the time, and the reptile exhibit excited you the most. You began poking at the window, teasing the snakes. Somehow you understood the snakes' incarceration assured your security, and you took full advantage of it – a tough little fellow with no fear in your heart.

After the reptile exhibit, we moved on to explore the rest of the museum. You ran down the hall, then all of a sudden stopped, turned around, and ran to your mother. I was a bit perturbed; I couldn't quite

understand what caused your abrupt change of attitude. Then the light bulb flashed inside my head: Ah, fright! Something had you spooked, and you knew I would taunt you if you ran to me instead of your mother. In search of the culprit, I recognized the exhibit as a replica of an ancient animal, currently extinct. I can't recall the name of the animal, so I'll refer to it as a wild beast.

You had such a firm grip on your mother's leg that I had to pry you off, almost amputating her leg in the process. Once I had you in my arms I carried you to the wild beast. In zero point two seconds, you went from being the toughest little rascal to a scaredy-cat. You were crying hysterically as I ignored the dividers that separated the viewers from the exhibit and sat you on the wild beast. I was nineteen, a teenage father, immature myself while trying to teach you how to be a man. Maybe I was too harsh, but you stopped crying and stared at me as if to convince me you were no longer scared – a sad face with drooping eyes, still teary and red from crying. You were wearing a Kobe Bryant outfit I had purchased to match the Shaquille O'Neal jersey I wore. The clothes represented our unity: teammates. I was the big fellow and you were my little man.

Sitting you on the beast, I asked, "Are you scared?" You answered by vigorously shaking your head. I said, "OK. I believe you." I took you off and you immediately ran straight to your mother.

I'll never forget that day.

At times like these, reflections of memories past, I wish I were able to go to a place of refuge where I would relax my mind, body and soul. One place where I could find solace was Skyline College in San Bruno. A part of the parking lot sits on a cliff overlooking the city of Pacifica and the beach. On a clear day I could see all the houses, the community enclosed in a mountainous region full of trees where wildlife roam, the occasional sighting of deer prancing along a trail, or the hawks soaring in the sky hunting for rodents. I would sit along the cliff in a Zen-like state, focusing on the view of the horizon, where it seemed as if the ocean and the sky connect as one. It was my place of solitude, alone with my thoughts, journeying into different realms of the imagination,

all the while thinking about life. I concentrated on the wonderful things life has to offer and used this energy to escape the confines of my own frustration. Breathing in the freshness of the atmosphere, absorbing the scent of wilderness that hasn't been completely destroyed by a concrete jungle, I cleansed my mind and spirit.

Son, it's good to have a place of solitude because it's a place where we can release pent-up negative energy and cleanse our spirit. Every once in awhile we humans need to vent or something similar to spontaneous combustion will occur. I didn't use my place of solitude in time to prevent myself from making the mistake that landed me in prison. But I wish I had.

Before I end, I want you to know that I will be picking you up when I get out, regardless of what your mother might say. I vow to make up for lost time. These are only a few memories I have shared with you – there is more to come. This letter is the first half of my antibiotic to cure an old wound.

Yours truly,
Me

First Day Inside

MICHAEL TYLER

I cannot believe this is happening! I'm going to state prison for what seems like will be the rest of my life. That is the first thought I had when they put chains on my waist, my ankles, and my wrists. They chained them together and put me on the county jail bus.

As the bus pulled away from the jail, my mind went back to being a kid. It didn't have far to go – I was still a kid. I looked out the window on my way to the state prison, remembering all the other times that I had looked out of a car window. I realized this was different because I knew this could very well be the last time I looked out a window. Even with that feeling inside me, I still had my head on a swivel trying to see all the new sights.

Will these be the last sights that I see for a long time? Forever?

The bus drove along with a wide river on one side and a field on the other. The field reminded me of when I was much younger, playing in Farmer John's field until he chased us out. It seemed so long ago, but it really wasn't.

As we pulled up to the state prison, I noticed a beautiful pasture with a pleasant-looking sign that read: Deuel Vocational Institute. As we drove closer towards the place I was to spend the first nights of my future journey, I noticed something else: nicely mowed lawns, painted houses, and smooth paved roads. *Wow, I can do this* played in my head like a song.

That thought was quickly overwhelmed by fear of the actual sight of the prison. Every prison movie I'd seen, all the stories I'd heard, and the sight of the prison – it intruded my body like I was falling into a pool and sinking to the bottom.

At the sight of the gates of Deuel Vocational Institute, I saw men in towers that seemed to reach the highest part of the sky. They were armed with shotguns, guarding this prison. I didn't understand who they

guarded, but a decade and a half later, I found out they were supposed to be guarding us. Before, I was the one in control. They were the ones in control now. Their authority was made clear by all the guns and the orders being barked from their positions in the sky.

As the huge iron gates opened, a new frightening world pulled me in. Every one of the guards took notice, as though it was an event nobody had seen before. But this was an event that happened many times a day, many days a week, every week of the year. The bus drove around the prison to what they called Receiving and Releasing (R&R), the place where people go who are coming to prison or leaving prison.

Off drove the bus, and then there were more people around, even besides the ones who shared the ride with me. There was a door leading into a space I was unable to fully see into, but I could see there were many people in the door leading into R&R.

A Correctional Officer stood at the door yelling orders in what seemed to be a different language. He was telling people who arrived at the prison, like me, how to strip naked and what garbage can they could put their clothes in. I only realized what the officer was saying when I saw him walk up to a person and hit him in the stomach. After that, he bent over and whispered in the man's ear: "When I say bend over, I mean bend over!" That was all; the officer hit the man. I decided I needed to memorize everything the officer said.

Now it was my turn to stand in front of the same officer. As he began to bark his orders, he realized I was doing everything he wanted before it came out of his mouth. I did that because I was barely 100 pounds and truly unable to take a hit in the stomach for doing something wrong. I was scared; I felt like I was watching myself go through the ordeal. When I was done, he walked up to me in the same way I saw him walk up to the other guy. I braced myself in a manner that I thought would help. "How old are you?" is what he said when he got close. "I'm eighteen years old," I whispered. He shook his head and told me to go get clothes at the other end of R&R.

As I walked among the many people being put in prison that day,

it truly felt like I was alone. Those people being put into prison gave me notice, not because of race, size, or curiosity, but because of my appearance and age. I was told I looked like I was twelve. I guess I looked like everyone's little brother or son.

Once the R&R experience was over, the officers put me in a small fenced area with grass, called a holding yard. They call it that because it is smaller than the other yards. I stood in this small yard, used to hold people who just came to prison, until the officers found me a cell to stay in. It must have been over three hours that I sat in that yard, but it felt like three days. Many thoughts went through my mind as I sat there trying to look tough and not like somebody's little brother or son. Sad to say this now, I was trying to look like I belonged in this environment. It's been over 15 years since that day, yet I still remember it like it was yesterday.

Frozen Shutter: A Son of Ours

KAMAL SEFELDEEN

After being granted permission¹ to photograph kids behind bars who lost their freedom and were deemed by society as most unwanted, I overflowed with joy. I found myself collecting lenses and cameras, not recognizing that some were not applicable for my project. I debated how to approach capturing the images of prison inmates.

Standing at 6' – a height exceeding his 15 years on earth – he helped me decide. I wanted his picture to reflect his personality, and how he wants the world to see him.

Before my finger unleashed a blink of my camera's shutter stealing that image, I hesitated. Unusually, my own feeling froze time. I don't know why images of my childhood popped into my memory like a slideshow. My Chinese father and my Australian mother were there for me, encouraged me to show others glimpses of their world through my third eye – the lens of my camera.

The miniature African-Monolith stands there with a mixed look of shyness and a dismayed self-esteem. His shoulders curved downward due to mountains of weariness, burdens heavy enough to tilt his head to the right. That weight must be overwhelming.

Distracted by the EXIT sign behind him, I wondered: what were his chances of surviving this heart-wrenching experience? For a boy his age, and with that look windowing his troubled heart, his mind trampled by lonesome isolation.

I gave him several names: Kevin, Derek, John, Sam, Bill, Lamont, Leroy, Meng-Lee, George, Barry, Gomez, Mohammed, and Patrick. Yet, I called him none of them.

1 | Fiona Tan was granted permission and access to state prisons to photograph and interview selected inmates. This story began as a class assignment and is a fictional narrative based on an image from Tan's *Correction* series.

I took my first snapshot. I hesitated again before the next one. I was interrupted by an invading image of him lying down on his bunk bed at night, belly down, head still tilted over a yellow writing pad as he consults the paperback dictionary his aunt sent him in a quarterly-care package. That package brought a smile to his face, dusting off the sadness and isolation, moments of happiness that lasted as long as the candy bars and the junk food.

He writes:

Dear Auntie, thank you for the wrest watch, the candy and food. I miss you a bunch. I'm sorry to disappoint you. My YA counsel is trying to get my grades and transcripts from the high school. He says that I have to enroll in the school here and keep my nose clean. Auntie, don't be worry about me, there are some boys here trying to get me mad. They want to be players so bad. They ain't no different from the Hood, just different faces. They ain't no different than me, they got no fathers, uncles or grandfathers. The only difference between them and me, I got you auntie and I got grandma.

I want to tell you that I had my picture taken today. Some nice lady photographer came in and choose some of the boys for portraits. She said she's going to send you one of me. She is very nice, she reminds me of Mrs. Nugyn, my high school social studies teacher. She says she is Asian. She ain't looking Asian to me. If you heard from my Mom, please do not tell her I'm here. Both of us in the slammer is enough.

Please, bring grandma with you next visit. XOXO.

His head turned upward. Everything is quiet. His cellmate is asleep. He yawns. He would finish the letter tomorrow. His eyes started to mimic the shutter of my camera like a slow-speed negative. I felt like covering him up.

"Good night, my son," I almost said.

My finger became free. I pressed the snap button. My camera shutter responded: Cliiick!—Cliiick!—Cliiick!

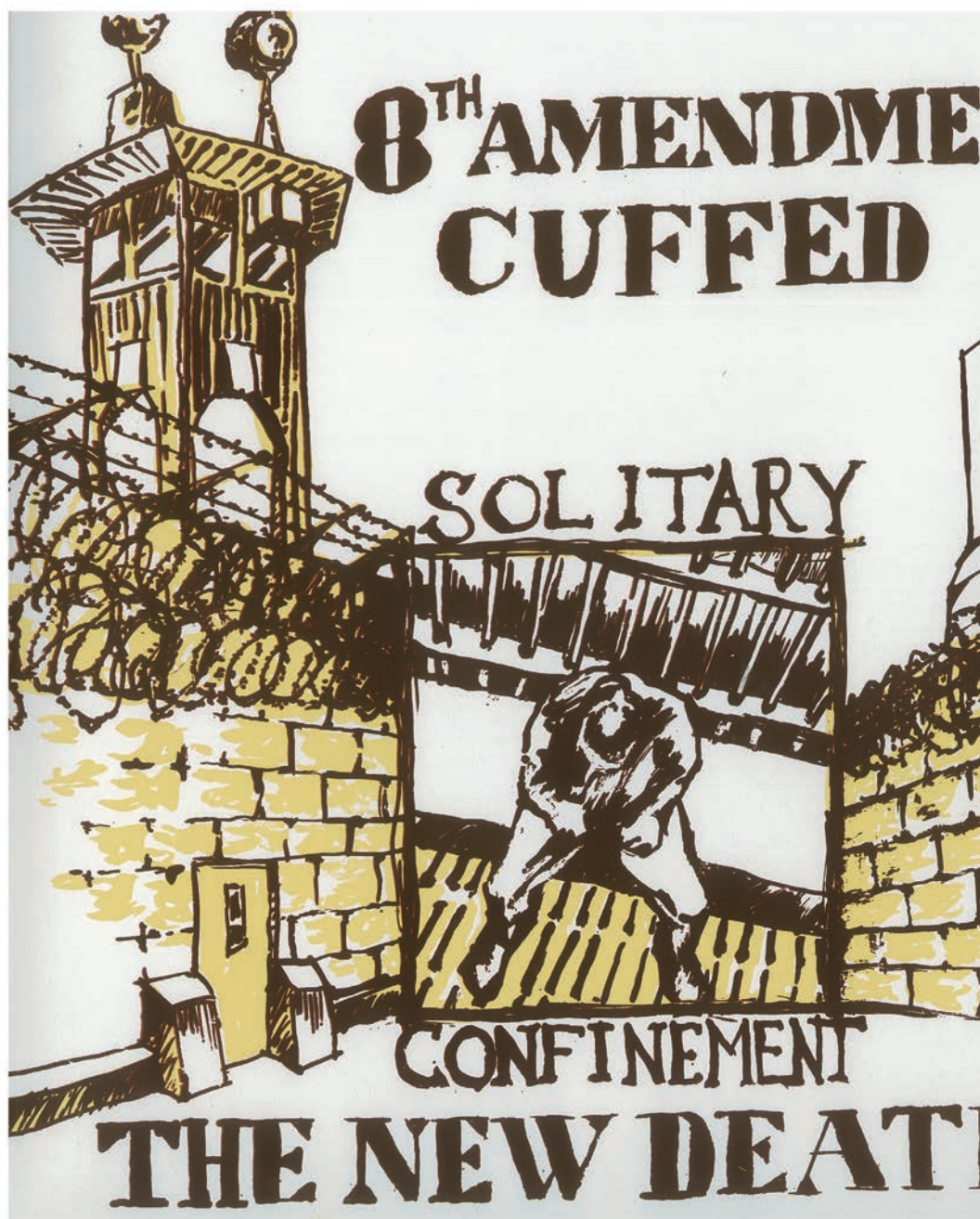


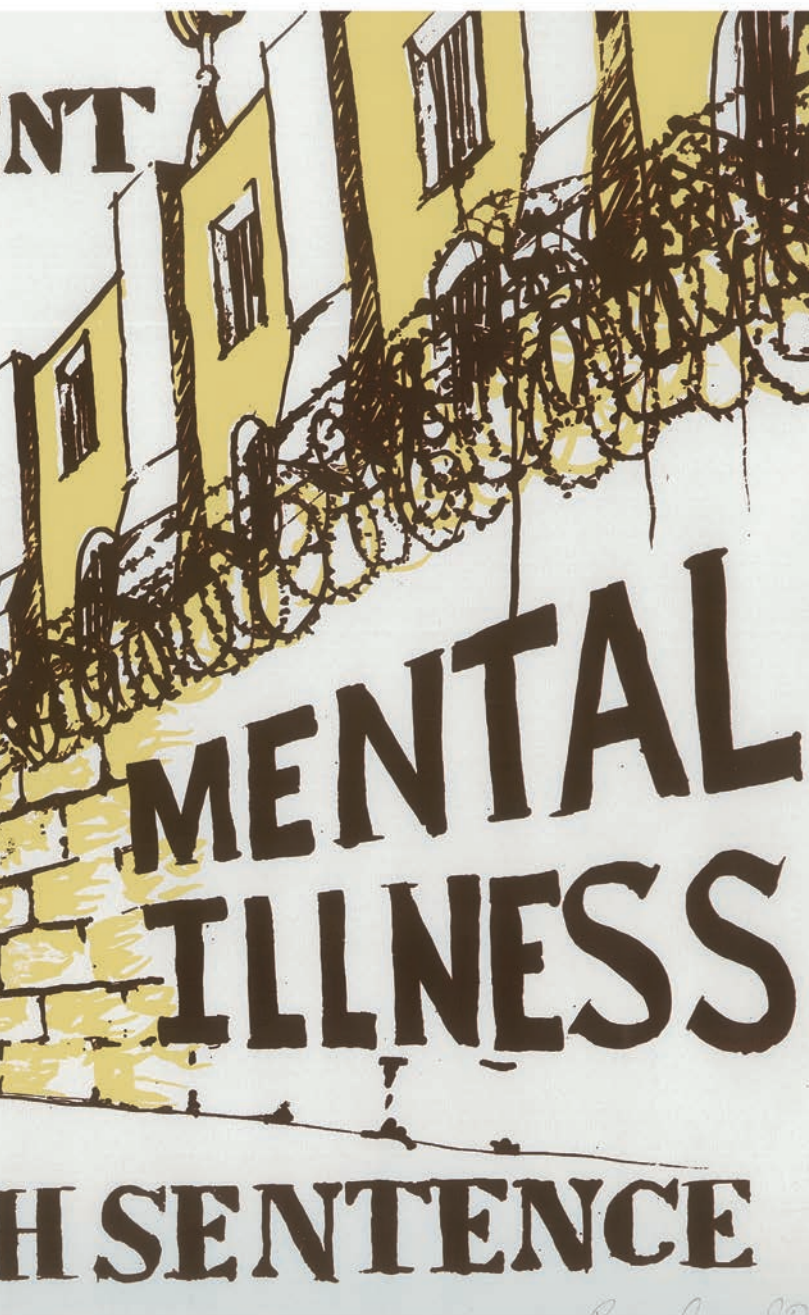
FIONA TAN

Correction, 2004

video installation

Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London





Solitary

BRENDAN MURDOCK

Convict Calculus

JOHN O. NEBLETT

Calculating prophets
manipulate equations,
suborning reason
for greedy imbeciles;

panderers who pimp
phobic philosophies
transmute all meanings
to confuse the consumed,

mean inheritors
of liberty's martyrs
crunch on the carcass
of america's poor.

A Brief Treatise on the History of Chess

PETER M. BERGNE

Chess is a classic game of feints, escapes, sacrifices, attack batteries and cool finesse. Often, great concentration is required to resolve complex situations. There are a broad range of possibilities for moves, strategies, opening sequences, lines of attack, mid-game and end game tactics. One or two moves or a single feint can completely change the strength of one's position. On a board where the mathematical possibilities for different positions is an astronomical ten to the fortieth power, incremental changes have exponential reverberations. Checkmating an opponent usually involves the tightening of a 'mating net' consisting of two, three, or four pieces. For example, the king may be mated with a queen-knight combination; with rooks, a pair of bishops and a knight; or with a pair of knights, a rook, and a supporting pawn.

Archaeological evidence has indicated that chess has roots in seventh-century Persia and Central Asia. This was long before 'castling' and 'en passant' became important parts of the game in Renaissance-era France. The early Persian term for chess was *chatrang*, and the basic components of the game were modeled around the Indian and Persian Army units of infantry, cavalry, elephants, mangonels (a type of catapult), and chariots. The king was called a *fazin* and a rook a *rukh*.

In Arabic the game is called *shatranj*. Between 700 CE and 770 CE, chess spread westward from what is now Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, through North Africa and the Berber region of Morocco to Castile and Spain. As trade routes and religious missions traveled the 'Silk Road' to China, Southwest Asia, Malaysia, and India between 760 and 850 CE, *shatranj* grew in popularity among the literati and the elites. Chinese ivory chess pieces were found from the Tang Dynasty of China which closely resembled *chatrang*-style sets used by the Persians. The chess set discovered consisted of horses, armored warriors, castles, wagons, and commanders.

Going further into the geographical history of chess, one prominent city in particular must be mentioned. Baghdad, founded in 750 CE as the capital of the Abbassid Caliphate, soon became a sophisticated cultural and social center, much like Delhi, Constantinople, Beijing and Athens. In Baghdad, chess flourished amongst the intelligentsia and was played in the bazaars, libraries, hotel terraces, and palaces. Muhhamad bin Sirin, the son of an eminent Qadi (Islamic judge), was one of the first masters to play in tournaments. Then came Caliph Hisham bin Urwa, who had two granddaughters who also become strong players. From 796 to 820 CE, several caliphs of Baghdad, including Al-Amin, played in numerous matches with the masters al-Adli and al-Suli as well as the Byzantine Emperor, Nicephorus, himself.

Islamic masters were called aliyats. The Italians called the game scacchi; the Germans schachspiel; the Serbians Shkak. The French term was échecs. François André Philidor, a renowned writer, composer and grandmaster of chess in eighteenth-century France, coined the phrase “pawns are the soul of chess.”

Chess became popular in Russia by the mid-eleventh century and in Scandinavia just before the beginning of the twelfth. By the early fifteenth century, chess had spread throughout Europe. Ruy Lopez was a leading chess master in Spain, who created the Ruy Lopez opening, circa 1560 to 1570. This is the Ruy Lopez opening:

White	Black
1. e4	e5
2. Nf3	Nc6
3. Bb5	Nge7
4. 0 – 0	g6
5. c3	Bg7

The game of chess had also spread to Asia and Mongolia in the twelfth century. Babur, the great military tactician and conqueror who founded the Mughal Empire of Northern India, was a renowned chess player. Kublai Khan and Mongke Khan, descendants of Genghis Khan, were also masters of chess during the Yuan Dynasty.

Many of the most prized manuscripts and relics of the past in the chess world, dating from the time of Muhammad in 630 CE to Alexander Alekhine, Edward Lasker, and José Capablanca in 1930, can be found in a marvelous collection at the Cleveland Public Library. The collection contains more than 30,000 books, articles, treatises, and biographies. It also contains nearly 2000 newspapers columns, dozens of chess manuals, and published records of international and individual matches and tournaments. In addition, more than 1500 handmade chess pieces from around the world are on view in protective steel and glass cases. Other important collections are located at the Dutch Royal Library, in The Hague, and in the Willing Collection at the Philadelphia Free Library.

As the writer of this work and an inmate of San Quentin State Prison, I would recommend chess to anyone as a constructive pursuit for intellectual challenge and enrichment. Both men and women compete in chess tournaments and matches all around the world. A brief sampling of some of the greatest players includes Emanuel Lasker, world chess champion from 1894 to 1921; José Capablanca, world chess champion from 1921 to 1927; and Alexander Alekhine, world champion from 1927 to 1946 (except for Max Euwe's 1935-1937 reign). More recently, Bobby Fischer was world champion from 1972 to 1975, having defeated Boris Spassky of the USSR in Reykjavik, Iceland. The internationally renowned grandmaster Emanuel Lasker once aptly commented, "Chess can be, and often is, as diverse as life itself. It is full of opportunities, imperfections, disorder, blunders, feints, fortuitous happenings, missed chances and unforeseen consequences."

A well-educated, vivacious young lady from the former USSR, Miss Vera Menchik, defeated Alexander Alekhine in several individual matches from 1936 to 1938. Then came Susan Polger of Hungary, who, at age eleven, won the Budapest Girls Championship, 10-0. Before she reached the age of 18, she had won the Women's World Championships of Blitz, Rapid, and Classical divisions. Polger received the coveted award of 'Grandmaster of the Year' in 2003, was ranked the No. 1 woman chess player of the world at age 15, and remained in the top three for 25 years.

Also, amazingly, she won 309 games in 16 ½ hours! She participated in and achieved 31 wins, 25 draws, and 0 losses in four chess Olympiads from 1988 to 2004. Her sister, Judit Polgar, is also a grandmaster.

More recent grandmasters in the ladies' divisions of world chess include Irina Krush, Hou Yifan, Humpy Koneru, and Katerina Rohonyan. The most recent world champions in the men's division were Anatoly Karpov, Garry Kasparov, Viswanathan Anand, and Magnus Carlsen.

The greatest American classical chess icon was Paul Morphy, who won more than 95 percent of the matches he participated in. He was born to an Irish family in New Orleans in 1837 and died in 1884.

In San Quentin, there are at least ten top-flight chess players, some as good or much better than this writer. Good players always play 'touch-move' and observe the rules of chess etiquette, good sportsmanship, and a desire to improve one's game.

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There Are Those Among Us

TRISTAN JONES

There are those among us who have built walls around ourselves and carry scars that run deep. As children we are told, "Whatever we put our minds to we can achieve." Sadly few of us believe this. So, we live blind to that potential. As a result, we journey through life with the world lashing at us. We build walls around ourselves in defense, but even so the damage is done. We carry the scars with us as we egress to adulthood and are at a loss for that arcane potential. The walls have arrested our progress, and the scars have made us fear our future. We thrust blame of our failure and point fingers at those around us. We accuse our childhood, our family, our friends, even our Gods for our shortcomings. We say we have done nothing with our lives, and can do nothing because of them. Our reflection haunts us as we make our way through the world. We see it in mirrors, in panes of glass, pools of water, and turn away, unable to stomach what we have become. We can only see that lost potential, that every failure, all we were destined to be, but are not. We wander aimlessly seeking any relief from the pain of our scars, any escape from the crushing loneliness of these walls. We endeavor to find love and peace, yet even contentment evades us. We settle for the distraction of intoxicants or find our only escape in pain itself. We pursue these distractions acting less like the men we are and more like dogs begging for treats. Help!!! We have no hope, nor salvation. We cannot free ourselves from these walls. We do not know how to rid ourselves of these scars. Are we to be forever damned, deemed to wander this everlasting hell of our own making?

If I Could Speak to You Again

RICHARD D. LATHAN

First, I would say thank you
for bringing me into this world. Then,
I would give you a big hug and tell you
how much I love you.

If I could speak to you again,
I would tell you about the man that
I've become.
I would hold your hands and speak to you
with the utmost respect
while I stare
into your eyes.

If I could speak to you again,
I would be so happy. Just to have
you here to guide me through
this atmosphere.

If I could speak to you again,
I would show you that I truly
took heed to the last words you wrote me,

*Keep your head up
and be strong,
don't let no one
tell you different.*

The Crossroads

TOMMY WINFREY

I find myself at another crossroads. It is as if my life has gone in a big circle, and here I am five years later staring at what was my bane for so long. Hidden within that pool's murky depths is my salvation and my destruction. It pulls me into its center like a Siren singing her song. The seduction of anesthesia, luring me to just pull the plunger and let life go.

Holding on for the past five years has been rough, but the last six months have been the best and the worst times of my life. I have been lost in a fake promise. A promise that I knew never existed for me, but I became deluded by her presence. I should have known that love is not for me. Everyone I have ever truly cared about leaves me at some point. Even my beloved mother has left me in some ways. She moved across the nation to better my brothers' lives, leaving me to fend for myself in a world of my own making. Still, the pain of her departure has left me feeling alone for so long, a condition of my mere existence.

I long for the bite of the point of departure. Departure from this misery they call life. Inside that murky pool, I see my reflection. I see the destiny that I tried to fight for five long years. At this moment, I know that the struggle has been in vain. I don't think the universe holds any promise for this miserable soul. The pool promises relief from my troubles. Dive in, take a swim, you will love it. Finally, a love that I know won't abandon me. A love where I can drown all my feelings, knowing they will disappear.

I need the salvation that the pool promises. I need the relief from the misery of my existence. I need her, but she won't have me. She sent me to the edge of this pool. Her and my own desire to have her love. I knew better than to expect anything from her. I had given up on expectations from others, but I set myself up on this one. I must admit, I deluded myself into believing it would work. That someone could actually love me. Me, the one who is and will always be alone. What a ridiculous thought.

So why fight the urge anymore? This is the question I keep pondering. Draw up your salvation and administer the medicine that will free you from your misery, I tell myself. No one really cares anyway. So why fight it? Why pretend it matters. Dive into the pool and let the misery melt away. Become hidden in the pool's murky depths once again.

Yet there is something deep within me that resists the urge to commit my fate to the pool's embrace. A piece of me that holds out hope for the future. A piece of me that says she is just a part of this world that I don't belong to anyway, so let her go. Let it go. Love is not for me, but that does not mean that I need to belong to that world. My struggle continues, but, for today, I don't take the plunge. I put away the needle and see what tomorrow brings.

Heard Through Hospital Walls

JOHN O. NEBLETT

AHHH!!!

repeating all day long... AHHHH!!!

repeatingtingalldaylong ----- AHHHH!!!

r>e>v>e>r>b>e>r>a>t>i>n>g>

AHHH!!!!

repeating, repeating, repeating,

AHHHH!!!

endlessly repeating

AHHHH!!!

with this listener
in another part of the structure
amassing a karmic burden
knowing another human's suffering
goes unanswered

defining hopelessness.

October's Sin

YAHYA COOKE

THE PAIR OF THEM CAME LURCHING DOWN THE STREET STREAMING BLOOD.

No one paid any attention to them. Anybody with common sense knew enough to stay out of the way. This was the hood.

The taller of the two wore a bloodstained blue bathrobe. Blood appeared to be oozing from half a dozen cross-hacked wounds on his face. His hands were covered with blood. The striped pajama bottoms that showed beneath the hem of the robe were splattered with blood that seemed to have dripped from an open wound in his belly, where a dagger was plunged to the hilt.

The shorter person, a girl – although it was difficult to tell from the contorted mask of her face – wore only a paisley-patterned nightgown and pink bunny-eared bedroom slippers. Her garments screamed blood to the unusually mild October night. An ice pick was stuck into her chest, the handle smeared with gore. Blood was matted in her long stringy hair and stained her legs, her ankles, and the backs of her hands. Bright red blood soaked her narrow chest where it showed above the top of her yoke-necked nightgown.

She couldn't have been older than ten.

The boy with her was perhaps a few years older.

They were both carrying shopping bags stained with blood that seemed as fresh as that of their wounds. There could have been something recently severed from a human body inside each of those bags. Maybe a hand. Or a head. Then again, maybe the bag became blood-soaked only from proximity to their own bodies.

They came running up the street as though propelled by the urgency of their wounds.

"Let's try here," the boy said.

Several teeth appeared to be missing from his mouth. The black gaps

were visible when he spoke. A thin line of red painted a trail from his lower lip to his chin. The flesh around his right eye was discolored red and black and blue and purple. He looked as if someone had beaten him severely before plunging the dagger into his belly.

“This one?” asked the girl.

They stopped before a street-level door. They knocked frantically. It opened.

“Trick or treat!” they shouted in unison.

REAL WORDS

STEPHEN YAIR LIEBB

Nona, our grandmother, always had a big glass jar and metal tins full of *roskitas*, hard, vanilla-tinged cookies twisted into double-braids or circles. Her house, a duplex where my cousins also lived, was always brimming with the smell of *fijones*, beans, and *buyikos*, fresh spinach baked inside golden crisp flaky dough. Every Thursday she would bake loaves of round *challah*, egg bread glazed with honey. My mom would drive us to her house where we could watch TV and play with our cousins, and Nona would give us a shopping bag full of *challahs*, each wrapped in a thin cloth towel. On the ride home to our parents' house, my brother and I would devour one, the warm crust and hot bread burning the roofs of our mouths.

My mom, her two sisters, Buena and Melia, and her three brothers had emigrated from Turkey with their parents and brought the foods, language, and music of their town, Izmir. My mom and her sisters and brothers spoke in Ladino, which I later learned was a dialect of Spanish but written in Hebrew letters. It was their secret language, used when they wanted to talk in front of us kids without us understanding. I spent every weekend at Nona's house, taking a tin full of *roskitas* home with us, along with words and feelings that, even now, no other language can express for me.

My father emigrated from Lithuania and spoke to his family in Yiddish, a mix of Hebrew and German, which is lovingly called "mama leshon" – the mother tongue. I could curse in Yiddish and greet my relatives but that language belonged to my father and his world. My cousins from his brothers and sisters spoke Yiddish fluently. I never spent much time with them and had no desire or need to learn a language that made me feel inferior. For me it was cold and distant. My father's mom was suffering from what we now understand as Alzheimer's, and visits to her were obligatory and uncomfortable. She did not speak English and

my father acted as a translator. I listened, hoping to understand a word or phrase that expressed how sad, uncomfortable, and lost I felt in her presence. Now, with my father gone, I hear words in Yiddish and they echo in that empty space inside my chest. As long as I can hear those words, a part of my father still lives.

My mom went to college and became an English teacher in public schools. I would go with her to the college library and read magazines while she wrote papers for her Masters in Education. I felt that I did not understand the real meaning of English words because they had no names for the foods, rituals, and feelings that were part of my family. I was a stranger speaking in English, imitating a world and culture that was foreign and uncomfortable. Familiar objects in our home, like a *banquito* (shelf), had no real equivalency for us in English. If one of my sisters or cousins had a *mootra*, we knew it was like being in a bad mood but not exactly. If one of us was hurting, an aunt would say *pikathoo*, which has only a semblance to the English “you poor thing.” We did not have to translate words that were a part of us into English. The sounds of Ladino were comforting, along with the rhythm of the Turkish belly-dancing records my grandparents listened to.

My sisters and cousins had lived in Israel, and even when we were in the States, we had to learn Hebrew. For me, Hebrew was a language for studying ancient texts and boring poems by Bialik. When I was sixteen, I went back to Israel. Seeing store signs and movie posters in Hebrew and hearing the words used to ask for directions and order food made all the study of *didduk*, grammar, and *otzar hamelim*, vocabulary, worthwhile. Hebrew became the language that I spoke with my brother and sisters. Even today, I speak to my sisters in Hebrew. It connects us to a time before I came to prison and to when we were teenagers watching the tourists every Saturday night on *Rechov Hamelech George*, King George Street, in Jerusalem. We would be up until one in the morning and smell the pita bread in the hot air of Jerusalem. My sisters would run to the bakery and come back with the warm disks that we tried to save for breakfast. We felt safe and never lost because we could speak *evrit*, Hebrew. We

gave directions to tourists, knew which Egged Bus to take anywhere. The whole country was as familiar as our neighborhood in the States.

I was never secure with English. It was a puzzle with extra pieces. I tried to read the dictionary one summer and then felt I had to make a decision about which words I would never have to learn and which ones I would never say because they felt like a shirt that was too itchy. I was estranged from English, unsure if I was pronouncing words properly or using them correctly. I adopted silence as a way of masking my insecurity. English is the language that makes my grandparents foreigners and tries to wash away the sounds, the rhythm, and the laughter of being in their home. English is the language of the British turning away boats of refugees from Europe. English expresses things that do not really matter, for it has no connection to my past. How can it ever be the language of my heart?



A Thousand Ships
HÔSHŪ CHŌKŪ MALIS

Things That I Was Told

SYYEN HONG

I was born in war-torn Cambodia with the taste of gunpowder in my mouth. My parents separated when I was an infant so I never knew my biological father. As a child, I was struck by severe illnesses and almost died from starvation. My eyes were sunken and I looked like a skeleton with a bloated belly – at least this was what my mother told me.

I was first introduced to hamburgers, basketball, and Jesus Christ at the age of three. My family was fortunate enough to have made it across the Pacific and began a new life in a new world. We came to a land where the people spoke a different language and everyone had brown or blond hair, pale skin, and they all looked alike to me.

At the age of five, I learned to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and quickly assimilated to my new environment. Food was plentiful and I never had to worry about starving again. America was growing up in me. I was a smart young man and had a bright future ahead of me—at least this was what my first-grade teacher told me.

The first five years of my life in America were spent in Salt Lake City, Utah. Winter was a wonderful season. At school, I enjoyed sledding with the other kids during recess. I didn't see myself as being different from any of them. We ate the same food and communicated in the same language. One day, I was standing in the lunch line, salivating at the image of hot corn dogs and green bean soup. A boy who was twice my size cut in front of me.

“Move outta the way, dirty knees!” he sneered, then stuck his tongue out at me.

I was completely baffled by what he had called me. What did he mean by that? Was it because my pants were a little worn out and torn at the knees? It wasn't until years later that I discovered that the term ‘dirty knees’ was used to refer to Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese or any other nationalities that ended with a ‘nese.’ At least this was what my sister told me.

I had become accustomed to the kids at school and could finally tell the difference between my friends, Keith and James. Keith had curly brown hair and green eyes and James had straight blond hair and blue eyes. Then, when I turned eight, we moved 900 miles away to the city of Long Beach, California. Although it was still America, Long Beach was a totally different place from Salt Lake City. Instead of walking to school, I had to take a bus that was filled with kids who had a problem keeping their mouths shut. I thought their language sounded like something that belonged in the toilet. They had names like Duane, Keisha, and Dante. Although they spoke English, it was hard for me to understand them. I couldn't tell the difference between these kids. I thought they were obnoxious and rude. I had a hard time fitting in with them.

One morning, I boarded the school bus and sat in the first available seat. Then, a few minutes later, a girl walked over, pushed me hard on the shoulders, and said, "Move the hell outta my seat, Wang Chung!" Everyone on the bus heard it and erupted in a chorus of laughter. I was embarrassed and wanted to smack her face. Instead, I got up and moved to another seat.

I met Delbert Richardson in PE and he became my friend. For some reason he kept thinking that I was the Asian kid who played in the movie *Red Sonja*. During recess, he would pick me for his basketball team because he always made team captain. In order to become a team captain, you had to take shots. Delbert Richardson was a good shooter and always made the bucket. It took me a while but I was finally able to tell the difference between Delbert Richardson and Dante Jones. Delbert had shorter hair and it was less frizzy than Dante's.

One day, while the teacher was showing us how to draw by connecting the dots, I felt my stomach rumbling. I'd had too much milk and too many eggs for breakfast. As soon as I heard the recess bell ring, I dashed out of the classroom and headed for the boys' restroom and into the toilet stall. I took a seat and let nature handle the rest. Then, I heard snickers coming from above. I looked up and saw kids holding their noses and pointing.

"Look! He's taking a doo doo!"

I started to curse and tried to spit at them.

That was one of the most humiliating moments of my life.

When I returned to class, everyone knew about the new kid in school, who made a mud pie. That day, I learned the number one rule: 'Never take a poo at school.' At least this was what Delbert Richardson told me.

By the time I turned fourteen, music began to shape and mold me. Although I enjoyed a variety of music, I gravitated towards Rap music. I enjoyed the bass booming from the loudspeakers and paid close attention to every word that the rappers spat. Rap artists like Easy E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre were some of my favorites. I memorized every verse. Hip Hop was a form of expression so I expressed myself by ditching class to smoke weed, and afterwards, to knock off some free hot dogs at the 7-Eleven. It didn't take long for me to distrust the police and view women negatively or as sex objects.

I liked staying at my grandparents' house because we lived in a cramped two-bedroom apartment where I had to share a room with a younger brother and an older sister. My grandparents' house had a garage attached to it. This was where I slept when I spent the night. One night, I was in the living room, watching cable from an illegal unscrambling box. Everyone in the house was asleep. I heard the phone ring. It was my mother calling to check up on me and asking me to relay a message to my grandmother. The moment I put the phone down, I heard shots and shattering glass. I immediately hit the floor as bullets riddled the entire house. They even tried to burn the house down by launching a couple of lit, gasoline-filled bottles. Fortunately, no one in the house was harmed.

When the cops came to make a report, one of the officers kept glaring at me then said, "What gang are you from? I know that this is a gang-related shooting."

"I'm not from no gang," I told him, feeling a little agitated by his interrogation. He didn't even bother to get his facts straight. The shooting was indeed gang-related as a result of what one of my uncles had done. He was a gang member. Not me. I was thirteen at the time. The first thought that came to mind was: 'F**k the police.' At least this was what N.W.A told me.

I never felt accepted by any particular group at school. Although I joined the freshman football team, I spent the entire season warming up the bench. I only got to play in two games and this was because we were already winning by a lot. I only joined because my best friend from junior high, Chip, had talked me into it. After that season, I never returned. Chip and I also parted ways. I started to hang out with kids who were into the same things I was: rap music, smoking weed, money, and toting guns. I liked girls but didn't know how to talk to them.

The first girl I went out with was Linda. I was at a birthday party and met a guy named Sonny, who was a few years older. He told me that his car had been stolen that day and he was pissed off. We immediately clicked and exchanged deep conversation about the moon, ancient ruins in Cambodia, and what he was going to do when he found the S.O.B. who stole his car. After over an hour of conversing, he began to convulse and was foaming at the mouth. At first, I thought that he was playing a joke on me and told him, "Nice try." Five minutes later, he was on the ground, flopping like a fish out of water. I started to shout, "Somebody help!" This pretty girl came rushing and said, "Hurry up! Go and get my purse!"

I got her purse and she took out some gauze and stuffed it into his mouth. Together, we tended to Sonny's seizure. Her name was Linda and she was Sonny's little sister. When the party was over, she slipped me her number. We spent hours on the telephone, laughing about life and love. She was born in Massachusetts and Sonny was her only sibling. We went on a few dates. She lived far away so Sonny would drive us on these occasional dates.

Then, summer break was over and it was time to return to school. Linda was enrolled at Lakewood High School and I was at Poly High School. On the first day of school, I walked into the main office to pick up my class schedule. The lady at the front desk couldn't find my transcript. After asking several questions and making some phone calls, she said to me, "Sorry, Mr. Hong. Apparently, there has been a terrible mistake. My record says that your file has been sent to Lakewood High School and as of right now, you are a Lakewood student – not a Poly student."

Hearing this, I became excited. When I got home, I tried to call Linda but her line was busy. I stayed up all night, thinking about how surprised she was going to be when she saw me at her school. My first day at Lakewood High, I stayed on the lookout for her. I didn't know what her class schedule was or my way around school. Then, lunchtime rolled around and I saw her walking down the hallway, holding hands with another guy. I was devastated and immediately left the campus. That day, I began to develop a resentment towards women. 'Never trust a b***h'; at least this was what one of my favorite rappers, Snoop Dogg, told me.

Huey was the kid I went to for quality merchandise at a discount price. From him, I purchased three pairs of Nikes, a pair of Levis, a Sega Genesis, a video game controller, a Super Nintendo, game cartridges, and porno videos. I became a regular customer and he began to trust me. One day, he said to me, "You wanna make some cash?"

"Heck yeah!" I told him.

We went to the mall and he showed me how to remove the alarm setters from the compact discs, video games, and other electronics. I became good at it and earned the right to be called "Sticky Fingers." Everything was at my fingertips. I would get an adrenaline rush when I walked out of a store with 500 dollars worth of goods attached to my body. I even became bold enough to walk out of a K-mart carrying a BB gun and 9 millimeter bullets still in the box.

My career quickly came to a halt when I attempted to steal a Super Nintendo console at a K-mart store. I usually pilfered small items because they were easy to conceal, but this time I was going for the big yellow bass. I took the product from the shelf and moved to an area out of the security camera's view. Many department stores had cameras hidden inside tinted glass bubbles that hung from the ceilings. I was also on the lookout for undercover rubber cops. When I first walked into the store, I noticed a gentleman wearing a pair of crisp slacks and a button-up shirt. I watched him for a few minutes and became convinced that he was an undercover cop.

When I found a spot that was out of the camera's view, I made sure

that no one was watching before taking the video game set out, slipping it into my pants, and hanging my oversized shirt over it. I had sewn a large compartment on the inside of my jeans and wore a large jacket to cover up the protruding bulge.

Just as I was about to make my way out the door, I felt someone grab my arm who said, "K-mart security. Come with me."

He was dressed in shorts, tank top, and sneakers. Nothing I had expected. I tried to struggle loose from his hold, but he was too strong. I thought about kicking him in the groin, but reconsidered. He was muscularly built and if I was unsuccessful, it would only get him angry and he would probably kick my ass.

He led me into a room that was located in the back of the store, sat me down in a chair, and handcuffed me to it. There were at least twenty monitors in the room. He patted me down and placed everything that he found onto a desk.

"You see," he pointed to one of the monitors and I saw myself committing the crime. "There are cameras hidden between the shelves," he said with a smirk and added, "You didn't know that, did ya?" He flipped through my wallet and found 80 dollars and shook his head. "I don't understand why you didn't just buy it." He put down the wallet then picked up the telephone. "Now, I'm going to call the police. They are going to arrest you and charge you with theft. You could be facing up to six months to a year in prison."

"No! Please don't take me to jail! I'm sorry! I won't ever steal again!" I sobbed and began to rock back and forth in the chair. "I didn't have enough money. That's why!"

He looked at the stolen merchandise and did a price check. "One hundred and fifty dollars. This game set costs one hundred and fifty dollars." He nodded as if he understood then added, "But still, that's no excuse to steal. Even if you couldn't afford it. You broke the law and it is my job to report you."

I began to wail, "I'm sorry! Please don't take me to jail!"

Tears were running down my face and snot oozing from my nose.

Something must have moved him to compassion. His expression changed. “Okay,” he said in a soft tone. “It’s almost Christmas and since you don’t have a record, I’m going to cut you loose. Wouldn’t want you to spend Christmas in jail. But don’t let me catch you in here again because if I do, I’m taking you to jail.” He got up from his seat and un-cuffed me from the chair. “Now get outta here before I change my mind.” That day, I learned a valuable lesson. ‘Always look for the hidden cameras in between the shelves’. At least this was what the security guard and Hewey told me.

Looking back, I wish that the security guard had indeed hauled me to jail. It’s sad to say that instead of learning my lesson, I became worse. I was living a destructive lifestyle. Like a plant that was uprooted from its natural soil, I was trying to assimilate into foreign ground. Along the way, I somehow lost my roots. I became absorbed in a culture of self-indulgence and never gave a second thought to where I came from or the hardship that my mother had endured just to make it to this privileged nation. Instead of growing up in America, America was growing up in me.

As I sit here in my cell, writing this piece, I can see how blessed I am to be in this country. I am not sick. I am not starving. I have running water with a toilet that works. I get to shower. I get to go to the canteen and receive quarterly packages from loved ones. And get this: a free college education! Those college students don’t have to raise the roof every time the tuition goes up. All they have to do is commit a crime. America is a land of opportunities and second chances. ‘Be wise and take advantage of it.’ At least this is what I tell myself everyday.

The Rock, The River, and The Tree

MESRO COLES-EL

I stand on the rock, leaning against the tree,
watching the river rush past, glad to be free.
The rock is the United States
United on tectonic plates, deep and wide
The tree is rooted in the rock,
the star spangled banner in the sky,
and the river is the movement of the people I see.

My life consists of standing firm through the ages
I represent the rock and its various stable stages.
The river rushes around my foundation, causing commotion
Its motion thins my stature by public erosion
Yet, like the tree, I stand
Firm, brave, and courageous

Also, the tree is me.
I'm deeply rooted in the rock
I drink from the river along with the birds and livestock.
My branches stretch tall as if to tap on the clouds
and my trunk is wide, so my age makes me proud.
The growth of me will never stop,
I'll never drop.

So, of course, I am also the river
Flowing to and fro, fast and slow
I suppose I make the tree in the rock grow.

I worry that the rock will eventually lose its place
Push itself and the tree as if trying to win a race
to be the first in a new world for the river to flow.

All three are who I am in the world:
the rock is the land, the river the people, the tree a flag unfurled.
We all stand tall and strong, united as far as eyes can see,
ready to take on all comers

Don't tread on me...

Eric Hofstadter

JUAN M. HAINES

It was finally over. Relief. Comfort. Rest. The end wasn't overly dramatic – it was somewhat sad, but, in its own peculiar way – it was gratifying.

The Eastern Front had collapsed long ago. Soldiers were deserting, surrendering, and dying by the tens of thousands. It was a madhouse.

During this time, Berlin had become desperate. “Defend the Homeland!” dispatched propaganda over radios, in newspapers, and plastered on all the public buildings. And oh, how the Germans responded so vigorously to the call of duty. The innocent young pups were ignorant, not knowing what they were getting into. The old were just foolish enough to believe that their bodies could do what their minds believed in, while in truth they were much beyond their prime. The crippled wishing to contribute to the cause merely got in the way of this so-called advance. The crazy—oh, God...what can I say, except they were a part of this madness too. Nevertheless, they all loved their Motherland.

Eric Hofstadter's fifty-four years weren't telling. He was in good shape, a fine sharpshooter, and, after the terror bombing of his hometown, Strasbourg, just as eager to join the fight as anyone else. Strasbourg, famous for its ball-bearing facilities, kept Germany's trains, planes, and automobiles in the state of blitzkrieg for what seemed an eternity until, finally, Allied forces penetrated its marshalling yards and the decimation of thousands of trains began a slow collapse, crumbling Germany's heartland into bits and pieces. When Eric's home was obliterated during one of these bombing raids, he felt lucky to survive. On that day, Eric raised his fists to the sky and cursed the invaders. It was difficult to grasp the blatant transgression of his inheritance, handed down from the second son of the third son of his great-grandfather. His life's work, invisible to the rest of the world, rose up in a sooty cloud, reeking – now a part of history. His reddened eyes fought back tears as the blustery weather struck a chord in him. Unseen forces could relentlessly inflict

misery upon him. He thought about his options. The egging, twisting influences of Goebbel's sophistry had sunk into his psyche years ago. No fault. No blame. Eric believed. He unabatedly drank in the government's story. The bane of faithfulness had sacrificed him well before that day he reported for duty and was issued a rifle with twenty-three bullets.

Eric, along with thirty-six men and boys, was packed onto a two and a half-ton truck. Strangely, Eric thought, "It's unmarked." They jumped into the back of the truck, in the order dictated to them. As Eric shuffled to take his place, he noticed the tarp was tightly held in place by oversized hooks. He squinted his eyes, staring at a hook and silently mouthed, "Hakengroesse-529." In his seat, he adjusted his backpack, whirled his body around, and slunk heavily into place. Content. Ready. Willing. Across from him was a boy whose thin whiskers of a mustache rose into an oblivious, child-like smile.

The driver wasted no time. They headed east into the harsh winter wind. The truck recoiled from the dips, rocks, and debris without slowing – rushing to be damned as grim-faced bodies ricocheted off each other. Gusts of crisp air snapped the truck's tarp – pop, pop, popping it as they sped into impending doom. For hours, they traveled this road. Voiceless. Wide-eyed. Determined to find their destiny in silence.

Rapidly fired bullets sprayed bits of gravel helter-skelter. Screams. Bombs exploded close, closer, closer, right on target. Moans. Death forced a pause in this brutality. The truck slowed as the tires squealed to a halt. The few survivors were ordered out. They scrambled for a ditch – too far. They were strafed from an unseen pilot who executed a high everlasting loop that ended right over the trench they thought safe as a 500-pound bomb's whistle prolonged their brutality. The Mustang P-51 banked left and headed back to his base. Mission accomplished – 'killed more of 'em', the pilot thought. The soldiers clung to the trench-bottom, mortified by the wind's deceptive howl – obscuring the pilot's retreat. They lay there, teeth chattering, reddened ears, eyes hurting, frostbitten air being forced into dreading lungs.

Eric made it. He still had all twenty-three bullets, clutching them

in hopes of killing the enemy. He hated that pilot. He hated the Americans. He hated the Russians. The hate exhausted him. He was drifting mindlessly...almost asleep. It was too cold to think clearly in these unfamiliar surroundings so far away from home. This detachment brought an anguish he'd never felt before. His eyes fluttered. He relaxed and began to drift back in time, easing away from this war to his daughter, his grandson, his seed. The Homeland. Many years ago he'd taken his family to Rome. They explored the Vatican. He reached to touch God's hand – finger extended – God.

The cold crept into Eric's bones. His canteen of water, now ice, was useless. The winter was ruthless. The blizzard winds of '45 punished the last of them with such a fury. A slow crawling deadness rode the howling gust, angling into their bodies until they were frozen solid. Eric's last thoughts were of his daughter's wedding. He smiled. He died.

Soul Survivor

RON G. SELF

His war was over, that's what they said.
But not for the soul survivor, the living dead.

He came back to the world, like he was never gone.
He pretended to be normal, but there was something wrong.

He tried to carry on, learning to cope.
Fighting anger and rage, alcohol and dope.

His war was still raging deep down inside.
The horrors and killing, the dark human side.

There were no outward signs, no one had a clue.
That he was hurting so bad, and what he would do.

He went to his cell and locked the door.
He put the rope around his neck, his pain was no more.

His war was over, that's what they said.
Only now is it complete for the walking dead...

One Con's Tale

CLARENCE R. BAILEY

Thanksgiving morning, 1980, I shot and killed a man. Ironically, at the time I was an Emergency Medical Technician, working for a private ambulance company, sworn to save lives. How could a man sworn to save lives end up taking one instead? How did I become a murderer? Well, here's what I've learned about myself after serving 33 years in prison.

I now know that I committed this horrific crime because I had the character flaw of being apathetic: the one greatest hindrance to expressing empathy, sympathy, compassion, and remorse. So, you're wondering, how could a man function as an EMT and be as impassive as I was. Well, I have come to this conclusion with the assistance of many self-help groups and therapy: I chose that particular part of the medical field not because I cared about helping anyone, but because I wanted the excitement that came with it. It was fun flying down the street with the siren wailing, red lights flashing, and wearing the fancy jumpsuits. I was addicted to meeting all the girls that loved a man in uniform. And of course, there were the drugs that were available to me. I thought I had the perfect job.

Now I realize that I was able to live my life and do the things I did because I had a faulty male-role belief system. My values were non-existent and my self-concept was unhealthy. Of course my self-esteem was low, so I was inclined toward self-destructive or counterproductive behaviors such as drug abuse and failed relationships. Sure, at the time I tried to blame, minimize and justify my way out of taking responsibility for my actions. This denial technique was a common one, but this strategy was disempowering to me because it relieved me of the responsibility for my actions. Without responsibility, there can be no remorse, and without the two, there can be no making amends.

I'm older and wiser now. I follow a ritual of principles set forth for me in the Bible. These principles enable me to work on my mind, body and soul. I have the wisdom required to gain insight into my past behavior,

and I can now make the distinction between surface-level motivations and the underlying causes behind my actions. I've also been able to increase my personal control, and accept the fact that there are no real justifications for all of the negative things I did in my past. My life is more appropriate now, and guidance in the right direction is what I need everyday, not just here in prison, but when I return to society. This guidance can only come from praying that God will direct my steps, and having the faith that He will.

My life and my happiness are still in progress even at 60 years old. I will not wait for my release date to be happy. I feel good and I'm motivated to face any obstacles that come my way. My self-concept today is healthy, and by questioning my false beliefs I've been able to become more self-defining. I have healthy self-esteem and I engage in activities that honor and affirm my worth. I've accepted full responsibility for my horrific crime. I know I can't change the past, but when I do reflect back on the kind of man I was then, I thank God that I'm not him anymore.

Naturally

HÔSHÛ CHÔKÛ MALIS

Beauty has nothing to do with the depth of skin. Beauty is life, and Life is Nature. Nature is a living being, like a human or a bird or an amoeba. Or the planet. Only “pretty” is skin deep; true Beauty knows no measure of depth like Spirit knows no limit in connectedness.

Beauty is embracing Change, being Change, while being the unchanging joyous constant of Self. Life is Change: Change is the phenomena of life and death, of form and emptiness, of being and oblivion, of Divine Paradox, sharing the same space and time simultaneously, infinitely connected.

Nothing is separate; no one is alone. Everything is dying to live, and by living dying. Beauty is Us...Living as One, Dying as One, Being as One in Mind and Spirit in every moment and never before or after. Nothing ever begins or ends; everything IS. Nature is always only right now, forever, and

We are beautiful within its ever-changing elegance and humor. Nature knows no good or evil; nothing is created without destruction, nothing is destroyed without creation, and Beauty honors the connection of Life in every Change.

Transcending the fleeting nature of beginnings and endings, We see the Beauty of Infinite Being in Nature, and become it by embracing it.

The Good Earth

WALTER C. KILER

We're the caretakers of this place,
a blue-green orb floating in space.

We must stop the greed, all the hate,
or what will be our deadly fate?

So clean the seas, oceans and lakes.
Protect all creatures. Make them safe.

Keep trees from disease and the woodsman's ax.
In this pursuit we cannot be lax.

We now know better. We can stop the waste.
Let's save the planet to keep in God's good grace.

We all must care about this place,
Or we'll be gone without a trace.



Uninvited Guest
WALTER C. KILER



Midsummer

TOMMY WINFREY



Trouble

TOMMY WINFREY

Call Sign Scorpion

ANTONIO GENOVESE

It was the summer of '69. A Montagnard native named Y-Dak, Chief of the Bru tribe, delivered some intelligence on NVA activities in the area of his village, and our commanding officer sent our Deep Reconnaissance Patrol Team (call sign Scorpion) to investigate. We would fly our Huey helicopter, or slick, to Firebase Tennessee and then hump it across the rice paddies that lay between the firebase and the foot of the mountain that Y-Dak's village set atop of. We never flew into our objective due to the noise of a chopper.

We took off from our base in Danang, leveled out at 1000 feet, and headed southwest. We saw beautiful landscape all the way: rice paddies with green and mauve stalks swaying in the light breeze, a few Vietnamese walking along the two-foot berms herding water buffalo, slow lagging rivers that glittered in the sun, ripples covered by the lazily eddying current.

I was admiring the teakwood and mahogany trees on the banks because I'd built so many boats from this strong, reddish wood, when Jimmy said, "I just saw the stock of an AK-47 sticking out of a basket on that black *sampan* we just passed."

Jeff put the slick into a diving turn and put us 50 feet above the occupant of the boat. At first he tried to ignore us. Then, leaning out the door and looking down, Jimmy told Jeff to put us in front of the boat. A little lower, Jeff swung left, rolled, and brought the Huey to a hover broadside the craft so Jimmy could man the M-60 hanging in the door. Eagle-eye Jimmy fired a ten-round burst into the water about ten feet ahead of the sampan. Then the man in the boat did the most ignorant thing he could have done: he grabbed his AK and tried to swing it up. Jimmy blew him out of his boat with a burst of 7.62 mm rounds. It was like seeing a puppet jerked around by its strings – his body leaped and jumped four different ways as the bullets struck him. His hat flew off his head and was tossed down river by the maelstrom of wind from the choppers' blades. His black shirt turned red as the shells ripped him apart.

Then Jimmy told Jeff to get some altitude because he didn't think there were any fish in those baskets. We leveled out at 1000 feet again and Jimmy fired into the first basket. Sure enough, it exploded with a mighty blast that lifted the sampan out of the water, followed a second later by several secondary explosions that blew the craft to bits.

As we flew back toward the firebase, praise was heaped on Jimmy by the rest of the team. Then I said, "God damn, Jimmy, I can't take you anywhere. What kind of example of American civilization was that back there to Y-Dak?" We all laughed even more.

In flight, we received a call over the radio from our base: "Scorpion, we've received a report from the 'Kingsman' squadron about a suspicious raft or boat being pulled out of the Song Bo river and hauled northward up a trail in the A Shau Valley five thousand feet below Y-Dak's village."

We landed at Firebase Tennessee, picked up a pilot, and had him drop us on a level shelf on the eastern side of the mountain. After crossing over the peak, we spotted the cart on the trail below. We chose an intercept point ahead of the cart and planned an ambush tactic.

As the cart rounded a bend, the man pulling it was leaning into his burden and looking down at the ground. Carlos just stepped out and waited with his tomahawk in hand. The first thing the puller saw was a pair of moccasins. When he looked up to see who was wearing them, Carlos cut his throat. Frenchy and I stepped out from behind the two men pushing the cart and we took them both out with our KA-BARS.

What we didn't realize was that Charlie had installed a two-way radio in the cart that was being monitored by a regimental command post a few miles north. Both Jimmy and Jeff had hung back to watch our back-trail, while Y-Dak went on up the mountain to return home. After we inventoried the ordinance in the cart and demolished it, we proceeded to get out of dodge. We hadn't gone a mile before we saw a large contingent of NVA coming our way. We reversed directions and started heading south. The point men hadn't seen us.

Rounding a curve we saw another unit of NVA. This time we were spotted and exchanged fire. Remembering the way we had been flanked on our last mission, we went east up the mountainside instead of heading deeper into the valley.

The mountain topped out around 5,000 feet, but we just needed to get around the unit to the south and reach the river. Therefore we climbed about 200 feet up, found a trail skirting the mountain and took it. We were almost past them when we were seen and the running fight was on. Some of them tried to come up the hill, but we pulled up and blew them away. We had better cover and from just 200 feet it was a turkey shoot.

They knew they had an American Recon team trapped and they wanted us badly. It would be a huge feather in their commander's cap if he could capture one of our elite units. It would probably mean a promotion. They just weren't sure how they would be able to close in on us without dying themselves.

Both sides ran south—us up on the hillside, them on the trail. Whenever we came across good cover, we'd pull up and waste some more of them. Unbeknownst to us, though, the element north of us had climbed the hill and was coming up behind us. Whenever we stopped to fire, that element was getting closer.

Suddenly we came to a cliff, a straight drop. We could see the Song Bo River about 125 feet below us. We looked down while standing near the edge and none of us liked that option. We looked back the way we'd come and Charlie was just watching. That told me they wanted us alive. Well, that would never happen. If we climbed any higher, the mountain just became sheerer. It was then that the unit from the north opened fire from behind us.

Nobody was hit, so we took what little cover we had and returned fire, completely exhausting our ammo. The height above the river wasn't what scared us—the jump towers at Fort Benning were higher. Hell, we jumped out of aircraft at a minimum of 1,200 feet! In the end, it was our knowledge that we would drop at 120 MPH that led us to the decision to go for it, death before dishonor. But how deep was that river?

We started throwing all our equipment except for our medical kits off the cliff. Each of us stuffed our med kits inside our undershirts in case the impact tore off our outer shirts. Jeff put the PRC-77 radio in his 782-pack, which would protect it from the water, so if we lived through this, we'd have a way to call for an extraction. When Charlie saw us toss

our guns over and stand up empty-handed, they must have thought we were surrendering. I imagine their elation turned to disbelief when we each turned and dove off the cliff.

Each of us went off that mountain like we were jumping out of an airplane: back arched, head up, arms and legs spread. We sliced through the air looking at the rippling, surging water of the river below. I didn't see any whitewater from objects such as boulders or logs, so I was hopeful that this would turn out well. Two seconds before impact I went vertical and plunged into the river's depths. Ooh Rah! Semper Fi...

When I touched bottom it was only with my hands. As I began to stroke eastward I saw bubbles piping downward near me and realized I'd be shot at by a hundred shooters until I rounded a bend in the river, about a hundred yards away. By the time I got there I'd been nicked twice: once in the right heel that only made my foot go numb, then a flesh wound that stung my right hip. I looked to the right bank and saw Jeff wrestling with something in the brush. As I got closer I could see he was trying to free his 782-pack. The radio was still inside, so now we could call for an extraction.

Surviving the plunge, and then finding the radio, had revived my optimism. However, a moment later, I heard a soft splash, turned, and saw Carlos towing something. It was the expression on Carlos's face that sent a chill through me and killed any joy that I'd begun to feel. He was towing Frenchy's lifeless body.

We were all near the end of our second tour and had announced our intentions to Major Wright to re-up as a unit for a third. *We are the best, we're ghosts in the bush, we're Charlie's worst nightmare.* That was our mindset. We believed we were invincible. But now a Scorpion was dead. We were vulnerable. I heard Carlos, who was kneeling next to Frenchy, as he raised his head and let out that bloodcurdling Apache war cry. Only now there was grief in it. I would not have wanted to be an NVA soldier or VC at that moment.

As I sat there awaiting extraction, thoughts I'd refused to dwell on started to resurface. *Why are we here? What did Frenchy just die for?* We all knew that our country had turned their backs on us. They didn't

give a damn if we lived or died. Did that crap Jane Fonda said have any validity? Suddenly I felt like the bad guy in a bad movie. I needed to change the channel on the TV in my head.

The final straw was on our next mission, six weeks later. The four of us had just been cleared and released from “Charlie-Med” in Danang and we were chomping at the bit to get some payback for our lost brother. We were heading right back into the oven to see if we could find some flame.

Once again we stopped at Firebase Tennessee. After setting down we saw a familiar sight: a Huey with a picture of a chess piece – a King – on its side, and under that, the name “Wild Bill.” The ship belonged to none other than the chopper pilot who had extracted us six weeks before. We found him in the command bunker. He was trying to get the boys at Firebase Tennessee to do something about the snipers who were opening up on his squadron every time they flew near the Song Bo. We told him that if he could show us the spot on the map, we’d take care of the problem. It wasn’t just a spot, it was a village, and we flew straight to it.

The village had one dirt street with bamboo hooches on each side. We walked into the center and ordered everyone to muster up. I approached the first elder I came to, put my sidearm to his head and asked, “Who VC?” He didn’t answer, so I pressed the barrel harder against his temple and repeated my question. I counted to three and pulled the trigger.

I stood there and looked down at the mess I’d made of that man’s head, heard the screams and sobs coming from the rest of the villagers, closed my eyes and heard a scream in my own head. Then I put the gun back into its holster and started walking towards our chopper with tears running down my face. I had become the man I’d swore I’d never let Vietnam turn me into.

That night after we returned to the base, I went into town and bought a hooker. Then I told her to go buy some China White – that shit sure switched the channel in my head.

That was 1969 and mainly due to that crap, I’ve spent 37 of the 43 years since my discharge in prison. A second-degree murder (I shot a man who spit on me in SF), and then a long string of armed robberies...

Thief

YAHYA COOKE

People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is starving.

(Proverbs 6:30)

After two straight weeks of binge smoking crack cocaine, I was floating without feeling. I was desperate to cop some more blow and money was running short. I drove into the Bank of the West's parking lot in San Lorenzo and looked for a space close to the exit: I wanted to put a few obstacles between myself and any potential witnesses asked to give a description of my getaway car. I also wanted to avoid getting blocked in by anyone using the drive-thru teller machine. I found a space alongside a low row of hedges at the end of the lot. When I exited the car, I left the doors unlocked with the windows rolled up.

Upon entering the bank, I slumped a little to distort my height of six feet two. Most bank robbers don't know it but some banks mark their doorframes with strips. This allows a teller to give the approximate height of the robber to the police after he leaves the bank.

I stood in line, waiting my turn to approach the teller's window. I reached into my jacket pocket and caressed the gun resting there. My fingers reassuringly clenched the cold steel.

"Next!" someone was calling.

Impatient sighs behind me briefly cleared my coke-addled brain. Then, as if in a sequence of slow-motion film, I felt myself take a step toward a harassed-looking young Asian woman, standing behind the teller's window. I was committed now.

"Can I help you?" she politely asked, giving me a wary smile.

I looked directly into her beautiful, almond-shaped, black eyes and mumbled in a drug-ravaged sotto voce, "G-Gimme all your money." I hoped my quavering voice wouldn't attract the attention of the other tellers and bank customers.

"Excuse me, sir?" she asked uncomprehendingly.

“I said, gimme all your fuckin’ money, stupid bitch,” I rasped. She flinched as if I had physically slapped her. “This is a robbery. I’ve got a gun in my pocket. Just give me the money out of the cash drawer. Don’t give me any dye packs or GPS.” I knew exactly what to say. It was my nineteenth bank robbery. Specific threats of physical violence or brandishing a weapon can significantly increase a federal prison sentence. I knew this because I had already spent five years in prison for bank robbery at the Federal Correctional Institution near Phoenix, Arizona.

The teller stood in stunned silence, as if trying to figure out whether I was joking or not. If she had simply turned and walked away from the counter there wouldn’t have been a damn thing I could have done to stop her. That act alone would probably thwart over half the bank robberies committed in the United States. I think I understand why she didn’t. I imagine she figured anyone crazy enough to rob a bank in broad daylight had to be psychotic or desperate or both, making them capable of just about anything. Facing me in my coke-fueled psychosis, she probably would have been right to think that way. Her brief hesitation, however, seemed to last an eternity. I shoved my hand deeper into my coat pocket. That seemed to compel her to move. She said nothing, taking a half step back from the counter. I was ready to turn, right then and there, and bolt from the bank.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she said through trembling lips.

“Just gimme the money...now!” I ordered in a harsh whisper, trying to control my impulse to run. When she reached down, I assumed it was to push the silent alarm. I had given myself 90 seconds from the moment I made my demand for the cash to pull off the heist and get out of there. I had already used up 45 seconds. Unless a patrol car just happened to be driving by right at the moment I left the bank, I had a small window to get away clean.

Ordinarily, I would case a bank for as long as necessary before robbing it. To gauge police response times, I would use a BB gun to shoot through a window of the prospective bank or a nearby business the night before. This set off the silent alarm, allowing me to time how long it took the cops

to get there. I also carried a portable police scanner with an earpiece to listen for police activity in the area. It would be just my luck to pull off a heist only to run smack-dab into a bunch of cops chasing some other idiot. There was good reason to make sure I knew the exact location of the local police station and the distance it was from the bank. I didn't know it at the time, but the first bank I'd robbed was literally right across the street from a police department. The cops could have walked outside their building and watched me drive away. I learned to analyze Thomas street guides the way a theology student studies the scriptures. I plotted routes to the nearest freeway ingresses and exits. I familiarized myself with side streets, blind alleys, dead-ends, and one-way thoroughfares to facilitate my escape and, hopefully, elude capture.

The teller finally pulled open the cash drawer and began to stack bills on the counter in front of her. For a moment or two, I stood transfixed, staring at the small pile of cash.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But that's all I have."

It struck me as odd that she would be apologizing to me when I was the one robbing her. My hand reached out on its own volition, scooping up the loot. It turned out to be \$6,300 and change.

I felt people glancing my way. My stomach churned and rumbled. I wanted desperately to get high. The reality of what I had done surged through me like an electric current, almost loosening my bowels.

Moving toward the exit, I didn't panic and run, as my impulse urged me to do. I just sauntered out of the bank like I was there on legitimate business. It wasn't until I got outside the entrance and into the parking lot that my leisurely gait metamorphosed into a frantic sprint.

My getaway vehicle was a green '99 Dodge Neon coupe I had ripped off a few hours earlier from the carport next door to my apartment complex. The interior smelled of stale French fries and peanut butter. I assumed the car's owner was a parent. A few toys littered the backseat and floorboards. One toy especially caught my attention. It was a miniature, dark blue, '69 Chevrolet Camaro by Hot Wheels. It seemed apt because hot wheels were what I needed. I'd use the vehicle for the initial getaway and then

dump it after a short distance for my own car, if I could.

Two men ran into the bank's parking lot just as I slid into the driver's seat. One of them, a bald, middle-aged white man, was screaming into a cell phone. A few seconds later the police scanner on the seat beside me squawked out the robbery at my location. I turned the screwdriver I had used to jimmy the ignition switch and the little motor growled to life. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I drove out of the lot and eased into traffic.

Now I was on the run. Turned from predator to prey.

What Soul Was I

RICHARD D. LATHAN

What soul was I
when I was out there in
society misusing my mind and
being intrigued by the
trinkets of illusion

What soul was I
when I did not contribute
to the solution, instead I
gave my all to confusion.

What soul am I
if I continue to allow
my soul to be devoured by
negative influence

What soul am I
now that I know who
I can become. A black
man is president. I can
be anything I want.

Waiting in Silence

STEPHEN YAIR LIEBB

I made crude calendars when I was bored in a class or a self-help program, lines for the days of the week, numbers showing the day of the month, counting the months, weeks, and days until I would go back to the parole board. I had last gone to the board in September 2009. That hearing did not start until seven in the evening, even though the sky-blue ducat that the tier cop had handed me through the slit in the metal grating covering the cell bars, the night before, said my hearing was at 1300 hours.

I walked into the boardroom fatigued and drained from doubt. The calm and lightness of the yoga I had done at six that morning had left my body and mind hours ago. I tried to convince myself I had a real chance to receive a parole date, even though my friend Hector, who had a better prison record than me, and a less serious crime, had been denied two days earlier. The two commissioners sitting in front of microphones and the taping system that would record the hearing looked like they wished they could be in bed. The air conditioning was not working and they turned off the fans so that the microphones would pick up my testimony. The fetid air created a gloom that made the boardroom seem like a tomb. I knew that the hearings before mine had gone long. At 9:30 pm, after my housing unit had final lock-up for count, they asked if I would agree to continue the hearing until 8 the next morning. I was struggling to remain interested in my own hearing and needed a break as much as they did.

That night, I tried to recall the answers I had given to questions about the murder I committed and my understanding of why I had acted so violently. I tried to will myself to focus and dig deeper for new insight that I could give to the board, but mostly I wanted to try to fall asleep. The next morning, after more questions from the panel and the district attorney, and following deliberations, the panel told me I still posed a risk to public safety. The board denied me parole for three years.

Back in my cell, I changed out of the creased state denim jeans and

button-down shirt. I put them back on a plastic hanger, covered them inside a big plastic trash bag, and went out to the yard. Wind blew orange dust and grit off the baseball field into my eyes and nostrils. I went to my spot near the horseshoe pits, took off my tennis shoes and socks and started to practice yoga on the cement, afraid that if I gave in to the hollow loneliness trying to spread inside my chest, I would not be able to endure another three years in prison. In the self-help groups they tell you to surrender, to be vulnerable. If I surrendered I was afraid I would never get up every morning at five and go to the yard in the cold or the rain; I would stop proving to myself that the wet wind can't stop me from running or practicing yoga.

Yoga, running, doing pull-ups and dips, helped me not to feel that bit by bit everything in my life was decaying and falling away like leaves and limbs off a rotting tree. If I could focus on each inhale and exhale, on the pain of running intervals, or doing another rep of pull-ups, I would not think about my father passing away before he could see me free. Maybe it would not have mattered to him because most of his memory was gone. Still, he recognized me on visits, when once or twice a year he would fly out with my mom and my brother and sisters and some other relatives who made the trip to California to see me. I knew he did not have long to live. He had been here to visit in 2006 when he had a heart problem and had to be taken to Marin General. They botched the surgery and he was never the same. After he died and after sitting Shiva, my mom came to visit with my brother and sisters and their children. She looked so shrunken and frail. I remember her swimming laps and jumping rope when I was a kid. Now it seemed it took an effort for her to stand, and when I looked at her I saw my grandmother. My mom had retired from teaching and I told her to volunteer because she had been married to my father for over sixty years and I did not think she would survive without him. Six months later, she had a heart attack while driving. I heard she was in an accident while talking to my brother Allen in a phone call. The police came to the door. His twin sister, Rose, was with him. They both screamed. The phone went dead. I went to sleep not knowing if my mother

was still alive, and all I could pray for was that she was not suffering.

The next morning, my friend Yoav visited and told me she had died. The Catholic priest, Father Barber, spent a week consoling me. He even brought me the Kaddish, transliterated into English, and a Yahrzeit, or memorial candle. He let me call my family and I was comforted because they were not crying. I held back my tears with long pauses in our conversation. I was afraid that if I let myself cry, twenty years of choked back tears would come out. Later, I would go into the darkness of my cell and let out spasms of tears but I could not keep my body from shaking. If I could drain all the poison out maybe I would not think about doubting my parents' love for me, for stealing their pride in me and making them visit me in prison. Anyone so cruel deserved to be in prison. The Board had said that my crime was particularly "cruel and callous" and I had no answer. The self-help programs said, "You are not your crime," and yoga taught that your true self is not your personality, but I did not believe it.

Before that hearing in 2009, I had learned about family, about twenty cousins, I had never met or heard about. I had grown up with cousins descended from our Turkish grandmother and did not have much contact with my father's family. I felt the disapproval of his brothers because I was not religious enough. These new cousins were all the grandchildren of his brothers. They lived in Israel and by accident found out about me. I imagine that their parents did not talk about their cousin, in San Quentin for murder. I learned that my cousin Menucha had taken a book that her father was mailing me to the post office. She asked, "Who is this cousin of mine I never heard about?" She and her sisters found a website run by my friend Eddy Zheng. He had served a lived sentence for a kidnapping he committed at age sixteen. Now free, Eddy mentioned me in his website. Menucha emailed him and found out how to write to me. She and her sisters sent letters supporting my parole. I received a dozen support letters from addresses in Ramat Hagolan.

After my 2009 hearing and my three-year denial, I got close to some of my cousins through letters and pictures. They called me their brother and

I looked at them as my little sisters. When I read how they had prayed for me and stayed up all night waiting for a phone call from the States with news of the board's decision, I did not want the burden of them caring for me so much. I could feel them being crushed in a way I would never allow myself to be. Their tears, their anguish, would paralyze me if I let it penetrate my heart. Their love for me and their wailing disappointment did seep in, and made me desperate to be free in a way I had never felt before. I wanted to embrace them and no longer be a cause for their sadness. I could not tell them how their love brought me a vision of a new future and how that made every moment in prison more difficult.

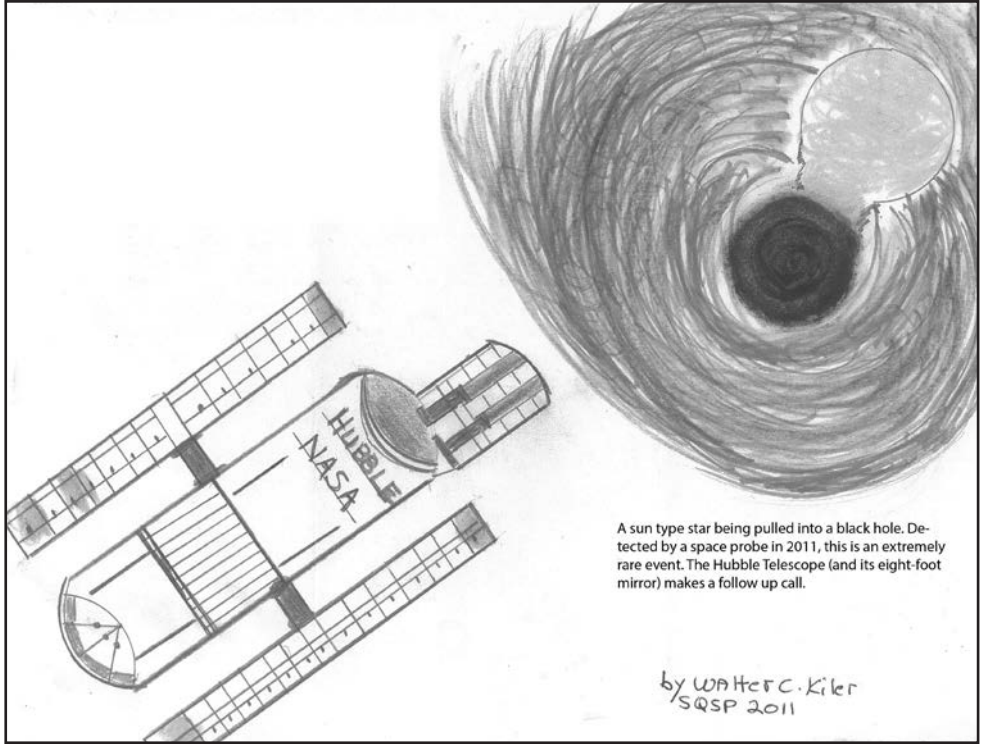
I had gotten close to Chaili. She was twenty-one and had a two-year-old daughter, Aliza. I had written warning that if she invited me to stay with her and her family, she should know I wasn't religious. She wrote, "That doesn't matter. I love you for who you are." I don't remember anyone else ever saying that to me. I had pictures of her in a Gan, or park, with plush green soccer fields breaking up the monotony of the white Jerusalem stone of the apartment complexes. Freedom meant spending time with her, her husband Chaim, and Aliza. I could see myself running across the soccer field with Aliza, running somewhere besides the track on the lower yard of San Quentin, infested with rocks and goose crap. She and her sisters wrote letters supporting me at my next hearing in August 2012.

I walked out of that hearing with my head down. I was not happy; I felt no joy, just relief. I was relieved that I would not have to share bad news with my family. I woke up at 3 am and looked at the paper the board gave me saying that I was found suitable, but was not to be released until the governor reviewed the decision. I waited five months for the governor to decide. Weeks after my hearing, I got a letter from Chaili with copies of emails from her and Eddy and some of my friends who had been lifers but were now free. She wrote about breathlessly crying tears of joy. I felt some of the happiness of getting a parole date. I let myself believe that I would be free soon and that my family's wait would be over. My wait would be over too. I looked at the lower yard, the basketball courts, the tennis

court, workout areas, and Mount Tamalpais rising above the red tiled roof of the old laundry building. I wondered if I would miss any of this.

On January 7, 2013, I was called on the speaker while I was on the yard. I was told to report to my counselor's office. I tried to breathe and prepare myself for knowing if I would leave prison in a few days or remain here indefinitely. I ran up the brick stairs from the lower yard to North Block. I entered my counselor's office. I could see the letter on her desk. She was not smiling. She gave me the letter from the governor, saying he had reversed the board's decision. Now, I am waiting with my family for my next hearing.

I still do not have the words to tell them how hard it is to count the months, the weeks, and days, until my next hearing and not know if it will bring me any closer to them. I think if I told them that I am determined to survive, just to see them outside, it would press them down with a weight they should not have to carry. I wonder if I spoke my life's desire to them, and were denied parole, could I face my next day in prison.



Black Hole

WALTER C. KILER

God Lives at Disneyland
(My Existence in Ten Chapters)

ALY TAMBOURA

1

The recollections start for me at about four years old, but nothing really solidifies until I was five. There was no stress at five because no one taught me what it was – thank God. Sissy, my white German shepherd, liked to steal my food, but there was no stress, just a sense of wonder at my absent food – and some underlying hunger, too. Since my grandmother would replace the food, it was no big deal, no stress. I think that someone should have taught me how to be angry because a five-year-old should not feel stress, but he should definitely know how to be angry. Perhaps my grandmother should have taught me. She taught me how to pray and she told me that if I misbehaved, God would be angry with me. I knew what misbehaving was because my mom rewarded me with her rigid right hand when I was doing wrong. But I did not understand that my misbehaving made her angry, so I continued not understanding anger. Likewise, no one taught me who God was. When my little brother held an old coke bottle up to the sun, red ants spilt out onto him and he screamed. My mom told me that the furious red bumps all over his body were from “angry ants.” But did God make the ants angry or did my brother? No one told me. I remember looking at the glass-magnified ants trapped in the bottle. If that was what anger looked like I didn’t want to be angry. Angry is ugly.

2

Grandmother went to God’s house and she never came back. Everyone came to our house dressed in their nice clothes. I could hear the adults in their whispered voices. “Shhh, he doesn’t understand that she is dead, don’t tell him.” Liars, all of them! I knew exactly what death was. Hingy – my frog and best friend – had died when Mom fed him a gigantic horsefly.

Mom told me that the fly had poisonous blood. When Hingy died we put him in the toilet, but grandmother could not fit in the toilet, and she did not eat poisonous flies. Why didn't they just tell me she was dead and tell me about God? Only Grandmother taught me about God and now she was gone. She had told me she was going to God's house, but she'd lied, too; they put her in a grave in the dirt. After all the people left my grandmother's funeral reception, I got to go with my aunt. She took my cousin and me to Disneyland. It was the first time I had visited a magical kingdom. Maybe God lived at Disneyland? After all, my grandmother had told me that God was like magic. I went on an astonishing submarine dive, drove a smoke-puffing, gas-powered racecar and watched in awe as breathtaking fireworks exploded over an enchanted castle. But the magic memories begin to fade when I think of "It's a Small World," the ride that made me realize, for the first time, that I was not like most other people. I was different. I was a little brown boy in a world full of non-browns. Even Snow White and all of the seven diverse dwarves did not look like me. However, even this revelation did not make me angry.

3

I finally learned what pure anger was while attending grade school. First, though, I must concede that I was a slow learner on the emotional front, and that I learned what it was to be angry incrementally. Nevertheless, school is where my memory bank vomits up the first feeling of unadulterated anger. School kids, white school kids, called me and the handful of other kids that had the same brown skin: niggers. Of course, the first time I heard the word, I didn't know what it meant, but by the vicious way the boy spat it out, I knew it was bad. And because it was said out of the presence of grownups, and mixed with other "bad words," it sparked my interest to understand its meaning. When my mother told me that 'nigger' is a fetid word used to debase me and my heritage because of the color of my skin, I was beyond angry; I was enraged. From that point on, when I was verbally abused with that word, the abuser got verbally abused in return. When the exchange of foul words turned physical, I

punched and punched and punched in return. Ringing in my ears, a burning fire under my skin, clenched fists, and blood, someone else's blood – this was how I learned and felt anger. The white boys learned that the word 'nigger' made me ugly, and my fists made their faces repulsive. The revelation that I was an African American didn't make me ugly; anger made me ugly. Ugly like the furious little red ants that inflicted burning pain on their victims.

4

As an adolescent, I watched all my victims through the blue steel sight of my Daisy Red Rider BB gun. The fields that surrounded our house were full of birds and squirrels waiting to run from me and my troop of BB-gun-laden friends. Adventures to the Coyote Creek were a summer rite for all of us. Unlike at school, these boys, all of them white, never used the N-word; we treated each other as equals no matter our differences. Though I am sure that there were bad times, I cannot recall any. A motocross bicycle and the BB gun were my second best friends after Mike, a kid who ran with me. Things like getting my finger stuck in my bicycle's chain sprocket are remembered as experiences, not awful events. This time of my life was blissfully happy. Eating tree-ripened cherries or picking walnuts or apricots, then getting chased by the farmers whose fields my friends and I raided, was life to the fullest. Swimming to an island in the middle of the lake and swinging from a tree into the frigid waters flood my recollections of what it was to be a kid in my rural neighborhood.

5

When high school started, my family began a moving spree. We, being my mother, my brother, and I, were semi-nomadic, never staying in a rented home for more than need be. When I turned fourteen, we wandered like a group of gypsies. Our first stop was the home of the Pettuses. Peculiar Lou Pettus, the divorced matriarch, and her three weird children took us in. I set up camp in their garage, a dusty, spidery lair, which I transformed into a makeshift bedroom and boy cave. I spent

all my time in my room, staying as far as I could from the weirdness of the Pettuses. Our second stop was the home of Elka, a neurotic nurse who worked in the psychiatric ward of the state hospital. She was a thick-accented German immigrant who, to my knowledge, was the first person to attempt to reduce her carbon footprint. Elka roamed her home unplugging everything plugged into an electrical outlet, whether it was using power or not. Our third stop was the home of my mother's Italian friend, Eleanor. Miss Ellie's three kids, plus my brother and me, made five boys in a three-bedroom condominium. They yelled, so we learned to yell too; the house sounded like an Italian opera. Our last stop was Gail Parker's two-bedroom apartment on the south side of town. There, a kindhearted Korean girl made me her boyfriend, and we ate macaroni and cheese everyday after school. By the time high school was over, my family had their own apartment and an overweight cat named Homie.

6

After high school, I entered the workforce. I worked for a man who had little patience for people who thought outside the box. I was supposed to be a robot. The problem with this was that in my field as a utility surveyor, no two jobs were the same; I had to be independent-minded to solve the problems that arose in my wide-ranging job tasks. The same white boys who had once questioned my abilities because of the color of my skin, now grown themselves, thanked me for my skills as an able brown-skinned adult. I was able to solve monumental problems for others, giving me a sense of self-worth for the first time in my life. There is nothing in the world like working at a facility that builds nuclear weapons or working on a telescope that will orbit the earth for decades, sending back pictures of the cosmos. Many projects required me to travel and be free from the limited tethers of my childhood. Each new place, each new task, took on a life within my life. If I set the feelings of significance and accomplishment side by side with the happiness of my childhood, my job would fall short; but second place is not too bad. Thinking for myself did not afford the boss the right, in my mind, anyway, to stand in the way of my progress. If I could not have his job, I had to start my own business.

Working for yourself is like slowly squeezing the life out of yourself with your own hands. I'd learned what stress was long before I started an engineering consulting firm, but trying to make payroll for my drove of workers formed a mass of nervous tension that not even tequila could obscure. I was not prepared to be the boss, father figure, priest and therapist that my employees figured was part of my job description. Nevertheless, as when I was an employee, I enjoyed servicing customers' needs while building prosperity. Also, running a company gave me a certain amount of prestige with my peers. I reveled in it. The most significant advantage of owning a corporation came only after years of being in business: freedom. As the years went by, I was able to come and go as I pleased. I traveled. Furthermore, I was able to run the company in combination with the pressures of being a father and a husband.

My wedding was more of an event than a celebration. I did not know on that happy day that the people present (guests, to be polite) would be called as character witnesses for me in court, years later. I also had no idea that our "special day" was the precursor to ten-plus years of war negotiations. Things were not too contentious in the beginning. Three children came quickly, and fatherhood became a second job for me. Marital skirmishes broke out, but, during the lulls in fighting, the five of us managed a remarkably good life. Then, seven years in, all-out war broke loose, and there was no hope of negotiating a peace treaty. I found the perfect balance in what it took to be a content, yet heckled, partner with countless tequila bottles and a troop of disposable mistresses. This, of course, forced me to perfect the art of passive deception. And as lies piled on top of lies, the marriage bowed under their weight. Passivity, and never passing on a business trip, launched me into the final throes of the union. When I did come home – mostly just to sleep – there was only a tinge of the love that had so blinded me a decade and a half earlier. My wife and I traveled through our days like two lonely icebergs slowly melting into a dark unforgiving ocean of regret. It only took an unfaithful

wife to light the fire in me again. It was, however, a different type of fire; it was an angry fire that forged the confining bars of a prison cell.

9

Criminal court – though a significant part of my life – I choose not to experience again in thought or on paper. The most I am willing to do is offer one word: unjust.

10

The first 101 days of my detention were intended to break my spirit and almost did. I spent this time mostly alone, although at times I was given a cellmate. There was some consolation in having another human being in the cramped prison cell, but the oppressive atmosphere did not lend for any consequential dialogue. Instead, my cellmates and I marinated in the depths of misery created from our thoughts. My mind turned over dreary inquiries: *What will happen to my children? Will I ever see my family again? What will happen to my home and belongings?* And the whopper of them all: *God, can I endure fifteen years of this horrible isolation?* After 101 days at the reception center, I was sent to a maximum-security prison. A nightmare come true: the level IV prison yard, and the violent men who live on it, collectively create what can only be described as hell on earth. It is a bloody chaotic place, infused with sexual assaults, stabbings, murder and every variation of violent act imaginable. There, I learned not only to survive, but also to hide all of the emotions that make me human. I learned to be more like the man the criminal court had said I was. Moreover, I learned that there is indeed evil in this world; it is not just a concept that you read about in a holy book. Nevertheless, underneath all of the brutality, isolation, and loneliness, I learned that love, compassion, and patience are things that cannot be taken away from me and that I will never lose. These are traits that even the most hardened men of the penitentiary harbor under their callused hearts. Finally, after forty years, I found that the God of mercy and forgiveness does not live at Disneyland; he lives in prison.

Human Evolution

VAUGHN LAMONT MILES

Slippin' in and out of consciousness as I
wrestle with my subconscious
Fighting my way out of forgetfulness as I
bring forth remembrance from the hemispheres of my brain
Operating on both right and left,
he who has ears let him hear.

I'm dominated by the right hemisphere
This overwhelming enlightenment
with full consciousness of my infinite potential
I struggle to remain calm, with my realization
of both my subjective and objective realm

Recognition of my oneness in the midst of my many differences
Ten manifestations called the tree of life,
zero through ten spheres

In my completion of my evolution I reached my Ausar
I exercise my ability to influence events in the atmosphere
with the use of words of power
I intuitively overstand all of life's situations
For this I am omnipotent

My indwelling intelligence comes from within
I disregard all religion
I'm spiritually cultivated
No longer do I dwell on my past sins, cuz I
learned to recreate
I reside in my highest state, so in meditation I hyperconcentrate
to strongly impress the spirit

I took a look into my heart and found GOD, chillin'

Understanding Life (While Serving It)

JOHNNY “J.B.” TARVER

Feels like yesterday I began this journey that is my life. I am young. My entire life is ahead of me. Typical? Planned? Not even close! I thought I could pick my future, but there are those rare exceptions when decisions we make choose our futures for us. That does not make those futures any less valuable. Our futures are precious—there for each of us to be shaped and molded into someone we can be proud of. I feel this is especially true for the journeys that most people deem hopeless. The constant, daily struggle to build a meaningful existence from all my pain and misery instills value and self worth where once there was none.

In the beginning, as I stared into the mirror, I saw a boy. Not knowing who I was or what I was meant to become. I did not have any idea as to what the meaning of life entailed. Suddenly I was thrust into a world unknown to me. This environment of chaos and violence had me in shock. Nothing I knew or had been taught could prepare me for what lay ahead. A feeling of uncertainty and fear coursed through my mind. Reality overwhelmed me, I was forced to grow up or face the inevitable consequences. My life feels like it has passed in the blink of an eye. My mind and body find it difficult to comprehend the many, many years that have eluded me.

Today, as I stare into that mirror, a moment of sadness passes through me for that young boy who is no longer there. Instead I see an aged man, with too much gray hair, too many wrinkles, and a multitude of life's scars. Those who notice me staring at my reflection may think I'm crazy. I find myself smiling with a glint of pride in my eyes for the man looking back at me. The 23 years spent locked up inside some of California's most notorious penitentiaries (Folsom, San Quentin) are not reflected by the mirror. Instead a mature, secure man is reflected; proud of all of his personal accomplishments and constantly overcoming the endless obstacles and negativities every man is forced to negotiate here on the inside.

First and foremost, I thank God for giving me the strength to endure such a hardship. I fully believe my ability to recognize my addictions and my commitment to overcome those shortcomings have allowed me to be here today. Ten years into my life sentence, I received yet another 115¹ for manufacturing alcohol. It was my fifth one within a six-month period. At that moment, my eyes seemed to pop wide open. I have not looked back since. Once I became aware of the person I was, and the person I wanted to be, I truly felt alive. Then all the hard work – soul searching and a deep desire for a change – began. I knew that, alone, I was incapable of the dramatic turn my life needed. So, swallowing my pride, I began to reach out for help.

The amount of people willing and eager to lend me the support I sought was heartwarming and inspiring. I was soon pointed in the direction of the many self-help programs – courses and classes – available at San Quentin. I spent the next several years participating in the programs I felt best served my weaknesses. I wish I had words for the pure joy I derived from the knowledge, coping skills, and endlessly valuable tools I gained through opening my mind and allowing the amazing people who volunteer inside these walls to teach me a better way of life. Choosing to accept my fate of incarceration and serve the 23 wasted years has allowed me to become a man my daughter, my family, and my friends can be proud of.

Having no ulterior motives other than wanting to be a better, upstanding individual has proved it is never too late to do the right thing. Gone are the early years I spent refusing to accept that my life was out of control. I had lived with denial for so many years that it was difficult to recognize its hold on me. As I reflect on who I was or who I pretended to be, it's clear to see how denial influenced my actions and decisions during the important, impressionable years of my life.

It has taken me many years of hard, soul-searching work to arrive at this place. Although I still strive to improve myself, I am extremely proud

1 | Editor's note: A 115 is a rules violation report that can lead to loss of privileges and/or loss of good time credits.

of the gains I have achieved thus far. Regrets are another aspect of life but used properly they can become a valuable asset. My life experiences have taught me a great deal. No matter what, when I trip, slip, or fall, I will never let it destroy me or any of the hard work I have invested in the most important thing ever—me. That is important – why? Because no one is perfect...

Life happens in front of us, and, God willing, I will continue to push forward. Prison is no longer that place where as a lifer I would call home, where I would live and die.

Contributors' Notes

CLARENCE R. BAILEY, a prisoner in San Quentin State Prison, was born in 1935 in Chicago, but raised in Los Angeles. He graduated high school and enrolled in the Los Angeles Trade Technical School, obtaining certification as an Emergency Medical Technician. In February 1980, he enrolled in the Daniel Freeman Hospital Paramedic School, hoping to eventually work for the Los Angeles City Fire Department as a paramedic. Nine months later he committed the horrific crime of murder in the first degree.

PETER M. BERGNE is a 71-year-old college-educated writer and experienced draftsman and tool designer. Mr. Bergne has worked for companies including Hughes Aircraft, Litton Industries, and Rockwell International. An eclectic, widely-travelled individual, he is a member of the US Chess Federation and a staunch advocate of environmental protection, renewable energy, and the 'Tikkun Olam' doctrine. He is also a dual citizen of the USA and the UK, with an American mother and a British father, who served as a Lt. Commander in the Second World War.

WILLIAM D. BLACKWELL: "I'm Lost" was written in 2001-2. I was in the jungle of my mind reflecting on my incarceration, prison politics, SHU programs, and my criminal choices, from the time I was sixteen years old, tried as an adult, to then. It was written as the genesis to my autobiography: "Caught up, Chronicles of a Gangsta Crip," which is reflective of my life's wrong choices. This poem expresses my life decisions. "I'm lost, I want to go home."

GEORGE COLES-EL, better known as Mesro, Moorish American Moslem: Three strikes find me in a place hard to let go, but very blessed. I've been vocalizing stanzas by pen since I was nine. I live life by principles, the highest five: love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice unfurled. I

appreciate the chance to come alive and write to spread the message to the world. Thank you...

YAHYA COOKE: "Thief" began as a Patten University English 99B homework assignment. It has evolved into a full memoir with each successive English class I was fortunate enough to complete, with the patient help of my English instructors, to whom I'm eternally grateful for the gift of education.

ANTONIO GENOVESE: I was born in Brooklyn, NY. My parents were killed when I was six, so I grew up in the Lincoln Hall orphanage. When I turned 18, I left the orphanage and received draft papers in the mail. I had three choices: military, jail, or Canada. I was too much of a man to make any choice but the first one. Two weeks later, Parris Island, and the rest is history...

SYYEN HONG: Due to my negative actions, I have felt the destruction caused upon myself and others. Writing is therapeutic and helps the healing process. I gain an understanding of who I am and where I am going. I dedicate this piece to my brother John who served and risked his life to protect and preserve the liberty that I sometimes take for granted. Thank you, bro. You are my true American hero. God bless America!

TRISTAN JONES: I was raised a Jehovah's Witness in Sacramento. Despite this strict upbringing, I still ended up in prison. A result of my dissolution and rebellion. Now I channel this inner turmoil through the arts. I've found my passion in theater. I've performed *Hamlet*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Because I Said So*, my own play about redemption that began with a physical transformation. From there I turn inward ever reaching for self-actualization.

WALTER C. KILER: I am 73 years old and was born in Oakland, California. I graduated from Castlemont High School in 1958 and

attended Oakland City College, where I received a liberal arts education. I transferred to Armstrong College in Berkeley and received a BBA degree in 1964, then worked on a MBA in International Business at San Francisco State University. I spent 35 years working in finance and commercial business.

RICHARD D. LATHAN: I was born the second of five kids and raised by my mother in the city of Los Angeles. As a kid I always used violence to get my point across, to be acknowledged, and to show my status as a man. As I got older, I had to face the reality of my ways in order to express myself without violence. Writing became my refuge to learning about myself as well as showing others words from my heart.

STEPHEN YAIR LIEBB paroled in November 2013.

JEFFREY SCOTT LONG: I was born in Loveland, Colorado. I enjoy reading, writing, and the company of people who make me laugh at myself. I will forever be grateful to the members of PUP for giving me this voice and for teaching with their patience, as much as their curriculum.

HŌSHŪ CHŌKŪ MALIS: I dedicate all my works to those I've harmed; whatever little good I've done in this world belongs to you. I finally discovered Beauty in life, but She found me too late. Life is precious for those She loves; find Beauty within each other. Practice forgiveness and compassion, with selfless generosity make time for those in need of kindness, and fearlessly, humbly Love one another – you're each a Light at the end of someone's tunnel.

VAUGHN LAMONT MILES: I am currently serving a life sentence for taking another human being's life, which I accept full responsibility for. I have been incarcerated now for 19 years in which I have done a lot of soul-searching and reflecting. During this time, I began to process everything that has happened to me in my life. At the end of it all, I discovered my

true potential and made a conscious decision to operate only from my highest state of my indwelling intelligence. This self-discovery is what inspired me to write this poem.

BRENDAN MURDOCK is a Bay Area artist, writer, and community activist. The affordable, portable routine of linocut and silkscreen reproduction allows for a kind of guerrilla theater and political image-posting. His work functions equally in the gallery and on the streets. He currently uses image and word to pry at subjects such as prisoner rights, the church of pharmacology, and the massive fissures in our mental health systems. He still uses a skateboard to staple and paste this form of civic dissonance along the alley corridors of San Francisco.

JOHN O. NEBLETT: I was born in New York City in 1963. This year, my poetical pursuits included memorizing the part of Antonio for Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, five sonnet-length works by John Donne, and Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge." My father passed away November 21, 2012, and I wrote "For My Father" to honor his memory. It can be viewed at marinshakespeare.org in spring or summer 2014.

LENNART ROSENIUS is the pen name of a San Quentin prisoner who wishes to dedicate this story to his grandfather, the late Lennart Rosenius, whom he never had the chance to meet, but looks up to all the same. This prisoner has experienced the continuing gift of personal transformation which, he believes, is a process that involves self-forgiveness. He thanks PUP, The Last Mile, and his family for being a positive force in his life.

ELI LAVATAI SALA: I wrote "Dear Son" for English 101B. The assignment was to mimic the style of a story about a father who was not going to be around to see his son grow up. His biggest fear was that his son was not going to understand who he was as a person, so he decided to write an autobiography for his son. My ideas came to me easily because of my similarities to the man in the story. I have been away from my

son for fifteen years, and I felt like dedicating this assignment to him.

KAMAL SEFELDEEN: A native Alexandrian of U.A.R., politically cultured as a Nasserist, attended the *Institut d'études politiques* at the *Université d'Alger*. With a BA in business from UA, Sefeldeen was commissioned as an editor for UA's newspaper, The Dialogue "Al-Hewar," then freelanced for the oldest Egyptian magazine, *Rosa-El-Yuouseff*, and other periodicals. In the US, he acquired an Associate of Science degree and worked as a programmer analyst for an environmental engineering firm. He is a contributor to SQ News.

RON G. SELF: I am a combat veteran of the Marine Corps. I spent ten years on active duty, eight years of which were sustained combat operations. "Soul Survivor" is a reflection of what combat leaves a veteran feeling emotionally, and I believe many combat veterans can identify with this piece.

JUAN M. HAINES: Born June 14, 1957, in Charleston, South Carolina, Juan Moreno Haines is the son of a career Navy man, Roland Randolph Haines, Sr. His mother, Dorothy Mae Brown, was raised in Jacksonville, Florida. He has five brothers and two sisters. His criminal career began in 1974 when he and a high school friend broke into the friend's neighbor's house. His last criminal act occurred in 1996, when he robbed a bank across the street from where he lived.

JOHNNY "J.B." TARVER is a 44-year-old first term. My strength and courage to endure such a life, I attribute to my amazing mother. My sister has been my most loyal supporter and my rock. However, it is my daughter Jordan who has given me the inspiration to give serious thought about my life. And Patten University offered me the opportunity to think beyond these walls. It is my wish that more men and women will see the significance an education can make in their lives.

ALY TAMBOURA is a 47-year-old African American Muslim prisoner who was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. He enjoys reading, writing, and scuba diving. Aly's writing is inspired by the comical aspects of growing up in a liberal and hectic family in California.

MICHAEL TYLER: I was born in a small town called Los Banos. I earned a GED in 1998 and graduated from Patten University with a AA degree in 2008. I've taken a few classes towards my BSS degree from Ohio University. I have a huge family that I can't wait to enjoy time with. I truly enjoy working with kids and other adults who are continuing to better their lives.

TOMMY WINFREY: I believe in the power of the written word. I have seen the change that takes place as our stories are told. My healing has paralleled my ability to write. I will strive to continue to make a positive change in my environment. For too long, I was held in the grips of negativity. Through intensive self-reflection and work, I have started to find myself. I hope my story can give someone the wisdom to not make the same mistakes I made.

