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Prisoner Express Newsletter Summer 16

Prisoner Express provides rehabilitation by providing information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression to incarcerated individuals throughout the United States. Subscription is free to prisoners.

The Durland Alternatives Library which sponsors PE is a project partner of the the Center for Transformative Action. Additional support comes from the Cornell Public Service center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives (OADI).



Art by Leroy Sodorff

Prisoner Express News Summer 2016

Welcome to the Summer 16 PE news. We want to update you on all of the statuses of programs offered in the last cycle as well as offer a chance for you to sign up for the new programs we will be mailing out in Fall 2016. My name is Gary, and I, along with a team of student workers and volunteers, create opportunities for learning and creative self-expression for men and women who are incarcerated. Prisoner Express is a project of the Durland Alternatives Library. I am a staff member at the library, and I launched the PE project as a result of my correspondence with Danny Harris who is a lifer in Texas. I often mention it in the newsletter because it points to the power you have as writers and communicators. You all have a story about your lives, and in sharing all or part of the story with others, you have a means to engage with other people and extend your influence and experience outside of the prison environment. If Danny had not written me, I would not have thought to begin this project. At last count we have enrolled 18,000 men and women in one or more of our programs over the past 15 years. Currently we have about 3400 active members. We must hear from you every 6 months for your membership to remain active. If we receive any mail from you, you stay active. People get moved around so much and their mail often does not follow, so if you do get moved be sure to write and let us know your new contact information.

We get so much mail that it is near impossible both financially and time-wise to answer individual requests. Many of you send us unsolicited essays on a variety of topics. We are always happy to read them, and sometimes you might get a response, but often after they are read, there is not much we can do with them. We do not have extensive contacts in the publishing world and we do not have a trained team of editors to help those of you trying to write a book. What we do have is a series of programs that we offer every six months. Most all of them are free and everyone is welcome to participate. Over the years, we have developed the most cost effective methods for delivering the programs and it often involves mailing out our programs by United States Postal Service bulk rate program. I will explain all of that in the newsletter when I describe the new programs, but I write it now in the introduction so that all of you who wrote us for the first time during the past 6 months understand why you are getting this Summer 16 newsletter now.

Typically, if you write and request a program after the bulk mailing has already been sent out, you have to wait until the next cycle to begin participating. Somewhere in the past you or a friend of yours on the outside sent us a request for you to participate in the PE program. Receiving this newsletter marks the beginning of a new cycle, so roll up your sleeves and get ready to have some fun.

Please note that our offerings are meant to provide self-improvement opportunities for you all. We know that for many of you, life inside does not present many situations that help you develop new skills. One participant, David French, said it so well years ago. I am paraphrasing, but he wrote that he came to prison not knowing how to take responsibility or make good decisions and had too little information, and in prison, without the opportunity to make decisions, take responsibility, or gain new information, he wondered how he was going to change his ways under this system.

Our eclectic mix of programming tries to provide something for everyone. We can't change the fact that you are

locked up, but perhaps we can provide some things to do that can take you deeper into yourself and open up new worlds for you to explore.

Summer is fully here in upstate NY. For those geographically inclined, the library is located on the Cornell University Campus which is in Ithaca, NY. We are about 220 miles west and north of NYC. It is in the Finger Lakes region; The Finger Lakes are long deep lakes that were carved out by the glaciers. It's hard to believe that 20,000 years ago there was 10,000 feet of ice on top of this land. The good news is that everything is changing and always will be. This year, our weather has been very odd. Our winters are generally cold and snowy, and our spring and summer seasons are very wet. However, we had the warmest winter I can remember in the last 30 years with next to no snow. In the spring, we went from very warm days [unusual] to below zero temps a few days later. Many of the fruit buds were destroyed. Now, it is mid-July, and we are facing drought conditions. The ground is baked; water almost bounces off of it. Usually, this area is rich with water, and everyone complains about how wet it is. This year, water is at a premium. We take what we have for granted and often have to lose it to realize it's value. I love to garden and have been shuttling to my various garden sites to water most every day. My latest scheme is to start a garlic farm. I planted 4500 garlics this year and hope to jump it to 16,000 this fall. Garlic can get by with minimal water and no mammals other than humans seem to eat it. The pressure deer, groundhogs, raccoons, and bunnies put on gardens here make sturdy fences a must, but with garlic, none are needed. Many farmers in this area depend on rain to keep their crops growing, and I imagine they spend their time fretting and staring at the sky. I know many southern and western states have been experiencing droughts for a while, but now that it has spread to this area, I can feel the harshness of too much sun and not enough water. Climate instability is the new norm, and I wonder down what road the changing climate will lead us. If you are interested in this topic, this next cycle we will offer a science based lesson on climate change, which will teach principles of chemistry in that context.

Prisoner Express exists for you, and we are glad to be useful in providing you with packets that inform, educate and inspire you to create. We are always trying to figure out how to do more with the resources we have and hope to gather more information about all of you through an informal survey that is at the beginning of the newsletter. Please mail it to us with your new program requests. Learning more about the people we serve should help us become more effective in creating the programs that best help you expand your intellectual horizons, unleash your artistic energies, and help keep you balanced, sane, and connected to life outside of the prison environment. I look forward to learning more about you and how we can all work together to make a difference in all our lives.

During the last cycle of the Prisoner Express programming, we were able to mail out lessons on Russian History and another on Civil Rights. Right now, students are reading through the responses that participants sent back to us and will create compilation documents of the most interesting material and mail it back to those who have responded.

We had two public shows for the art and poetry programs. With your artwork, we held an art show on campus, featuring the

animated film created by Treacy and Jack. If you sent in a drawing for the "Moth in the Light," you can view the film here: <https://vimeo.com/15233461>. Tell your family! We also had a public poetry reading to highlight the publication of PE Poetry Vol. 15. You can see and hear some of the poetry being read on the videos posted on youtube. One link is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkSAr6oMPHw>. If you search "Words Set Free Prisoner Express," there are 10 videos to watch.

Mia published our first science journal Plasmodemata and Tara created a lesson in spirituality and meditation. I gathered from your many responses that those packets were well received and appreciated. Mia 's working to create another edition of Plasmodemata which we will offer in our Winter 17 newsletter. Jack, who has been leading our chess club, graduated, so we are actively looking to find someone on the Cornell campus who will continue creating a chess newsletter.

We were unfortunately unable to mail out the book club selection "Slaughterhouse Five." I still have the 500 new copies of the book but was not able to raise the \$1500 it would take to cover the postage cost. I am still looking for funds, but once I find it, I will make the book available again to you. Fundraising for the projects takes up more of my time as the project and the number of participants continues to grow. We need to improve our ability to generate funds if we want to continue to send out programs. I await your fundraising suggestions. We are working on redoing our website and hopefully we can find new ways to fundraise.

I know prison life provides many challenges and hardships, and that it is not easy physically and emotionally for many of you. Life is and continues to be hard for all of us, though I can see how being incarcerated certainly adds to the burden. Finding meaningful activities is one solution that helps to take our mind off our troubles. I hope some of the programs we offer this upcoming cycle can engage and inspire you. We are all in this together. We can make it better for one another or we can continue to sow seeds of anger and discontent. Joining in and becoming a part of the PE experience is a step in the direction of creating connection, communication, exploration, and a bit of fun.

"The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity."

-Amelia Earheart, American Aviation pioneer

"The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."

-Mark Twain, acclaimed American writer

"An unexamined life is not worth living."

-Socrates, Ancient Greek philosopher

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

-Alice Walker, Pulitzer Prize for Fiction recipient

Upcoming Programs

Expedited Books-- We have a room full of donated books and a team of volunteers that will read your requests and make up a book packages for you based on your interests. We cannot guarantee that we have what you want so the more choices you give us, the better the chances are that we will find books you want to read. If we can't make a good match we hold your letter a little longer in hopes the books you want will be donated. After a while, we just make the best/closest match we can and send out your package. It usually takes 3 months for book requests to be processed and mailed, due to the number of requests, the amount of help we have to do the book packing, and our need to raise funds for postage. Currently we ask participants to help us defray the cost of the books by sending a check for \$4.00 to help with postage. A typical package costs about \$6 to mail. If your prison allows you to mail stamps you can send 8 stamps instead of the \$4 check to participate in this program. Check with your mailroom at your facility to know if you are allowed to mail stamps. I have been going through 100+ boxes of donated books this summer. I look for books I can sell online to raise money for the postage and photocopying needed to mail the programs. Then, I sort out the books to put in the book room to make your expedited book packages.

Journal Project - - The journal project is meant to encourage you to write and reflect on your hopes, memories and experiences. So many of you have let me know that writing is one of the few tools available to you while incarcerated. Many of you often get lost in your own spiraling thoughts, and find yourself confused by the rut your thought process can take, especially when living in an environment that limits your opportunities to engage in meaningful and creative work. Writing about your thoughts, activities and memories can be a great way to process your experiences. For this program, we ask you to send in your journals to us at PE. The volunteers will create a personal folder for you, read through your entries, and select passages that are scanned and uploaded onto our Prisoner Express blog. Volunteers often will write to journal participants letting them know their journals are being read. We no longer have a pen pal program, as the amount of people asking for pen pals far exceeds our ability to find people to write to you. By participating in the journal program, you have a better chance of receiving personalized correspondence from one of the students helping with this program. If you wish to join this program, we will send you a packet of writing prompts that make it easier to get started, but you can start anytime just by writing down the date on the top of the page and writing down your thoughts. There is no one right way to keep a journal. We welcome your thoughts and participation.



Art by Marcus Barnhardt

Poetry Project- Every 6 months, we publish an anthology of the poetry. This last cycle, Yvette has been reading all your poems and selecting them for PE Poetry Volume 16, which is done and ready to be sent to the printers. You will receive a copy if you sent in a poem for consideration. We received thousands of poems from hundreds of authors. Yvette read through them all and selected the poems for the Vol. 16 anthology. If yours was sent after she finished her selection, your poem is automatically entered into consideration for Volume 17. Yvette is away for the summer, but when she returns, she will begin reading the poetry again and creating yet another anthology. We often illustrate the anthology with drawings that are sent in through some of our art programming, but if you have a drawing you'd like to submit along with your poem please do. We post a copy of each anthology online on our PE website. Yvette has also created a guide to writing poetry that will be included with the mailing of the Volume 17 Poetry Anthology. If you wish to receive the anthology and the poetry writing guide, you must submit a poem to be considered for inclusion in Vol. 17. The deadline for poems is Dec. 1, 2016.



Art by Charles Patterson

Telling Your Story- This new program is being designed by Michelle who started working at the library last spring, editing the theme writing project. She is away for the summer, but just before she left, she asked if she could start a program that would help you hone your skills as storytellers. When she returns this fall, she will put together a packet that will help you write about your life. Learning to write well is a skill that can serve you throughout life, whether it be a love letter or a legal brief. Writing takes practice, but writing about what you know best, YOU, is a great way to start. Below is a short description of some of the areas she will cover in the storytelling curriculum. Please sign up for this if you want to improve your writing skills and learn to tell a good story.

In this new writing program, writers will develop a series of essays that will tell their story from their youth to today. Sticking with PE's vision of writing to heal, Telling Your Story aims to encourage incarcerated people's voices because people outside prison walls do care. Also, this program will have a 1000 word limit so as to encourage writers to have great "word economy": to carefully choose each word so the meaning is emphasized.

The topics are as follows:

- *What do you feel were the main stages of your childhood?*
- *What was being a teen like?*
- *What was it like when you got arrested?*
- *What was your relationship like with your parents or guardians as a child, then when you got arrested? How about now?*
- *How were your family and friends when you entered jail? How are they now?*
- *What was your perception of prison before you were arrested? How has that perception changed or stayed the same?*
- *What would you do if you weren't locked up?*

Grammar Studies -- When Michelle left for the summer, Clara took over the task of compiling theme essays. It is interesting to me that Michelle wanted to create a creative writing packet focused on storytelling, whereas Clara asked me if she could put together a grammar lesson for all of you. She has put together the last two theme essay compilations. Like Michelle, she would like to help you write better, but rather than focus on the creative aspect of opening up to your story, she wants to focus on the rules of grammar. Knowing correct grammar and expanding your vocabulary can be key to becoming an accomplished writer. Below is Clara's description of the packet she is creating:

The grammar packet will be like a grammar workbook. Before I get into the rules of grammar, I will be prepping you to the world of language as a whole, opening up some topics in linguistics to get your thinking started. I will first explain few very basic rules to always follow, from parts of speech to punctuation, which will instantly improve your grammar. Within these sections, I will have fun facts and critical thinking questions, to which the answers will be provided in the back of the packet. Even if you feel proficient in your grammar abilities, I would encourage you to follow along as the fun facts will be very educational and the critical thinking questions quite challenging. I will also be covering some homonyms, words that sound alike but have different meanings, especially the ones where the spelling is also different. An example of this would be "your" and "you're" or "accept" and "except." Afterwards, there will be a vocabulary section where I will provide some mid to high-level words. Finally, you will be given an opportunity to use the vocabulary and correct grammar in a short story or personal essay. If you send one as a response to the packet, I will edit and compile the responses, showing the corrections I make to even further help you with your writing. And of course, I will be happy to answer any questions regarding the material in the packet. With such diverse topics, I hope to reach people of all levels of education, to help those who are new to grammar and to challenge others to their knowledge of prescriptive grammar rules for "proper" English. Everyone will learn something new!

The Chemistry of Climate Change- Last cycle Mia created a science journal using articles written by students in a science writing class. The class will meet again this fall, and Mia will hopefully gather the articles at the end of the semester and create another science journal for you. Fortunately for us, Andrea has stepped up and has offered to create a science project for you based on chemistry and climate change. Below is an introduction to her project. Please consider expanding your awareness of the science of climate and learn more about how our environment works.

Greetings! My name is Andrea, and I am a science writer based in beautiful Danby, New York, just five miles from Cornell. I started volunteering with Prisoner Express about a year ago and have seen a couple of requests for more science-based projects. I decided to offer a project on climate change, both because the topic is important and because it is a great way to introduce some basic chemistry concepts. The project will be at an introductory level but if you do have a background in science I encourage you to participate so that you can offer feedback. Climate change is depressing but I will try to keep the tone upbeat and will focus on describing what an

amazing planet we live on. As a bonus, I've asked my yoga instructor to include a meditation exercise to help you feel at one with nature, even if you can't see a tree. The course will also include guided exercises to help you understand the science and prompts for writing an essay about nature.

Buddhist Study and Meditation Packet- Tara has been creating these packets for the past few cycles and I find them to be full of useful prompts for setting one's mind free. Your body can be trapped, but your mind is always your own. Tara's packets often include mental exercises you can do to set your mind at rest as well as testimonials and insights that you the participants share with her. Below is her invitation to this program.

Dear Friends,

If you've heard about meditation and wanted to give it a try...or if you're already meditating and want to go deeper...or if you're looking for a sangha - the sanskrit word for spiritual community, we'd love to have you join our Buddhist meditation group. The meditations are simple, yet powerful. They can ease our ways of dealing with anxiety, stress, anger, noise, and help us feel more centered and at peace.

You don't have to be a Buddhist to do these practices. Because the meditations bring us deeper into ourselves, and we become more comfortable with ourselves, and so are better Christians, Muslims, Jews...we become better human beings.

A newsletter is sent out a few times a year with meditation instructions, articles, inspirational quotes (many from participants), and pieces from group members who are experiencing good changes in their lives because of their practices. When I can, I will write back letters responding to your questions and experiences. You'll receive a mailing list of organizations that offer free books, magazines, correspondence courses and newsletters. I can send a White Tara card (female Buddha of peace and protection) to anyone who wants one. They were a gift from my teacher Garchen Rinpoche, who spent 20 years in hard labor prison when the Chinese were torturing and murdering Buddhist monks in their takeover of Tibet. Rinpoche used meditation to carry him through his imprisonment, and I share his teachings with you. Buddhists believe (solitary) retreats are a powerful opportunity to do meditation practice, and to better ourselves by using that time to dive into yourself and find out who you really are. I personally have experienced many different meditation techniques, and find the Buddhist practices practical and powerful, and so I'm happy to offer them.

As the Dalai Lama said: Kindness is my religion. "Upon receipt of the latest Buddhist newsletter, I stayed up late reading, digesting, contemplating, meditating, imbibing your wonderfully compiled and thoughtful gift to us in prison."— Rob B.

I look at the Tara card you sent and ask her to gather the light and help carry it into our place. I feel the energy flowing in waves and pulses...I feel 'peace' and a great stillness that rests upon my stomach...Her gentleness is a blessing and I am not afraid anymore...I am comforted and safe...I feel energy and warmth...We are blessed by Tara...we are blessed...I am practicing and practicing and I find this amazing place...this wave and essence. I never knew. I never knew.— Len W. With peaceful prayers, Tara



Art by Kenneth Keith

Artknows- This is our newsletter exploring art and creativity, created by Treacy who has been leading the PE art division for the past 5 years. Treacy has created some innovative projects these past years and I am always excited to include her thoughts in the newsletter. To receive a packet devoted to her ideas and art projects, sign up for Artknows. Please note the new program in songwriting Treacy's friend, Kathy, will be offering. I know so many of you write lyrics, so I believe this program can offer you tips and knowledge that will be most useful.

News from the art corner:

Mostly, we are told that art is an act of self-expression. But if I were intent on expressing myself it is likely my delivery would be more propaganda than expression, more thinking than experience, more hope than feelings; consisting of a visual running commentary of expectations from both myself and others. In other words, it is hard to know what is truly my individual expression from others' expectation of me.

This may become particularly true for you in prison where individual expression may make or break your parole hearing. I had a project with you a few years ago. When I asked how kindness works in prison – prompted by my observation that prisoners were supportive of one another - I received several examples. However, in exploring how hatred worked in prison, I received only one. This was from Logan who reminded me that no one would ever risk writing about violence and hatred for fear of who might see it. I thought of prison classes where sometimes I need to cut through the “party talk” when prisoner students answered questions based on what they think I wanted to hear; “yeah, but how do you really feel?” – Of course, why would anyone trust me? Who is the “self” in prison where one needs to present the best front in order to get out?

Perhaps self-expression in art is a trap – a means to develop propaganda or fantasy of who we think we are. The following is an essay I wrote for the *Broad Street Review*, an art journal, about the work of Richard Ranck, a fascinating artist, who works in ways to eliminate self in art.

In pursuit of the naïve – first printed in *Broad Street Review*, June, 2016

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* explores the relationship between space and imagination. I am fascinated by a sentence on the first page: “The poetic act has no past.” If “poetic act” includes art, I wonder, how does art exist without a past? Initially, I read “no past” to mean no causal history for creating art; the artist cannot depend upon the causal “if this, then that” relationship. If I gesso the panel, then I can paint a ground, outline a sketch, and so on. But eventually I must leave these comfortable steps to enter what I always experience as “fog”: creating with no clear route. If I don't, the painting dies. The artist cannot depend upon the past unless she is banking on what she knows to be commercially successful.

Does the phrase “no past” suggest art need not be informed by the past? In my art, a house on stilts often emerges. I never considered why until a viewer asked at an exhibition.

Looking at my painting, I suddenly realized it was a memory from early childhood, when my family of five lived over a brothel in Little Havana in Miami, after my father lost our upscale Philadelphia house in a series of poker games, my baby sister was stillborn, and my mom went temporarily crazy. But on a fun family daytrip to Key West, I discovered a house on stilts planted over the water. The ocean rushed beneath, creating a sense of magic, and I imagined us living in that house above the surf where my mother could be happy.

Looking back to the viewer's face at the exhibition, I thought, “Oops, too much information.” If the viewer needs to know my haphazard childhood, the painting is a failure. However, Bachelard is speaking poetics rather than literally referring to a phenomenon of the moment in which wonderment cancels everything — history and future — except that moment. What is wonderment and how does it speak directly to both artist and viewer?

In Friedrich Schiller's 1795 essay, “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry” (both words used very differently than today), he describes the naïve artist as directly connected to nature through art not modulated with self-reflection. In contrast, the sentimental artist's direct link is ruptured and self-reflection becomes the means to lament the loss. Does Bachelard's poetic act refer to the naïve artist? Shakespeare and Goethe created in the naïve, whereas the composer Mahler would later be considered sentimental. Today, the naïve is usually attributed to outsider art in the belief that untrained artists are best at capturing an immediate response to the world. However, I recall a conversation with Sheldon Bonovitz, who donated the outsider art collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He suggested outsider art is coming to an end, meaning the art world has become too self-aware to be naïve, and anything created in the genre of outsider art would be mere posturing. I wonder if any artist, trained or not, is capable of direct naïve response to the world.

Categorizing the Philadelphia artist Richard Ranck as Schiller's “naïve” would do injustice to the complexity of his art. But his work does have an immediacy — an unmediated response — suggesting there is no place in it for overthinking, though Ranck appears to be an intense thinker. How does a trained artist develop this immediacy?

Immediacy emerges from the way the self is situated in relationship to art. If self-reflection interferes with immediacy, lowering the self's profile in the process of creating does the

opposite. In John Thornton's short film *The Art of Dick Ranck*, Ranck describes how he works through divesting what he knows, that he doesn't edit, and follows cues from his materials. These acts intuitively lower the self's control over creativity.

By divesting knowledge, Ranck does two things to place him in a state of ignorance. On a trip to Australia, he immerses himself in aboriginal symbolism and art with its deep underground metaphysics, and he begins woodcarving. In the hands of a lesser artist, the influence of another culture could turn to parody; I recall American artists in Mexico overusing the skull motif. In Ranck's art, there is no parody. By divesting through a culture and medium he does not fully understand, Ranck creates without self-conscious control. His unknowing is consistent with the mystery of the forms, and his art addresses the impact of that mystery upon him.

A novice always brings abuse to a medium, doing things that trained artists would never do. But by doing so, Ranck introduces new ways of interpreting that medium. He cannot edit that which he does not assume to know. He disavows judgment, thus eliminating the strongest power of the self: its ability to annihilate through value. Likewise, he does not assign meaning to his art, knowing meaning takes care of itself. With power depleted from the self, the artist is left following the cues offered by imagery, color, form, texture, and so on, thus allowing the emergence of a "poetic act with no past."

Creating art as such is like following insanity down a dark alley. What may happen? It takes courage. The viewer is likewise challenged to experience without preconceived knowledge, without value judgment, and without desire for knowledge and understanding. When powers of self are removed, art can be experienced through the phenomenon of wonder. But, of course, I know for many, the self has been destroyed – by abuse, neglect, and so on. Must the self first be discovered before it can be given up?

Old projects:

Animation: The moth animation has been completed. It can be viewed by friends and family on the web at <https://vimeo.com/152334619>. The animation had its premier at the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira NY, on Friday, April 8 to great raves; and at the Big Red Barn on April 11 along with the 600 drawings that prisoners submitted for the animation. Posted on the web, the animation received many great comments including: "beautiful," "beautiful and moving," "I love it," "beautiful but I am sad that many who worked on it may not get to see it," "wonderful," "powerful."

I want to continue with animation projects. In winter 2016 newsletter I asked for stories of incarceration, but am revising my thinking. I think animation – like the moth one – works best based upon metaphors. Right now I am thinking of creating an animation based upon the dogs in prison. I'd love to hear stories about the dogs in prison if you have a dog program in your prison - even if you don't personally have a dog. Or perhaps, there are other animal creatures in prisons worthy of animation – butterflies, cats, etc. And since this is the art section of PE – you may draw pictures of the non-human creatures you see in prison.

Stationary and open-art project. I am a little behind on this. I need help from students to help organize the work before we can curate it for presentation. I will give you an update on this later....

ArtKnows: This is the art newsletter exploring themes or genres of art. In the first edition, I explored installation art. Quoting from the newsletter, I explained why I chose installation art for the first edition:

"Why an issue on installation art? For one thing, I think prisoners understand space very, very well. In fact, prisoners are defined by space. What do I mean by this?

We are all defined by how we move through space. When I am at home, I am defined as a mother, wife, artist, etc. When I go to Starbucks, I am defined as a customer; when I go to welding class, I am defined as student; and so on. When I ask prisoners if they ever think of themselves not as inmates, the most common answer I hear is, "when I am sleeping." You are prisoners 24-7; defined by the walls that surrounds you. Yes, I know on a more intimate level, you have greater definitions; you are still sons and daughters; still husbands and wives; still loving people or not loving people. But society only gives you one definition - the space you occupy.

In other words, you understand space in a way that others do not,...making me wonder: If prisoners were asked to create an art installation, what would it entail?

Maybe you can write or draw your understanding of space and how it defines you. How do you move through space by which you have so little control? What do doors mean to you? Where is your horizon? What about the night sky? I could share your thoughts in future newsletters.

To receive the next newsletter; you need to sign up for it again. I haven't decided upon a topic for this newsletter yet.

New project – Songwriting Instruction

I want to introduce Kathy Ziegler to you - no, not a relative of mine.

Kathy is a musician who I had the opportunity to hear perform in concerts, before she left the States to live in the Netherlands. I felt a sense of awe for her performance. That she was about to leave for a new life, that she was very pregnant, and that she immensely capable to write and perform music gave me the expansive quality of possibility.

Though it has only been through Facebook, I have become acquainted with Kathy beyond hearing her concerts and her songs on the radio. Kathy has responded several times to things I have posted about Prisoner Express and your art. Most recently, being moved by the moth animation that I posted on Facebook, Kathy asked to become involved with PE. Immediately, I thought of how great it would be if Kathy would create a songwriting curriculum for you. To this, I will let Kathy introduce herself and ideas about this project:

"Hello to everyone who reads the Prisoner Express newsletter. My name is Kathy Ziegler (no relation to Treacy, the visual artist...no relation that I know of). I am a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter currently living in the Netherlands, a very small country (about the size of New Jersey) on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean from the US. I was born and raised in New York State, but moved here 8 years ago. I make my living

fixing guitars and other string instruments for a company that distributes certain brands all over Europe. Over the past 30 years I have been making music in different shapes and forms. I have toured with bands and played on lots of recordings, including several albums of my own material. My success has been marginal, up and down, though a big part of the success for me has been sharing the stage with many of my childhood heroes. Music, to me, is a way to connect to others and to express my thoughts, feelings, and life observations. Songwriting in particular is a unique way to tap into my vulnerabilities and share them in an open way. This is an ongoing process as this kind of personal revealing is difficult for everyone, I think. Most of us live behind one mask or several. I can imagine that prison life adds to the building up of a certain kind of armor, a second skin that is used to protect and may be hard to peel away. But that could be one small goal for you through the process of learning to communicate with song!

I would like to offer a songwriting course to you and have some ideas as to how to go about that despite the walls that are literally separating us. What we can achieve will depend a bit on what resources each one of you has available in your particular prisons. If you would like to sign up for this course, please let me know if you have access to instruments, recording possibilities, and whether or not you can listen to mp3s and how that system works. I would also be curious to know if you have any experience with making music or writing songs, though this is NOT a requirement for participating. Ultimately, it would be great to use some of the results in a recording which could be shared with your friends and family members. I understand that some of your situations are more dire than others. Maybe you are even in solitary with very little to get you through the day. I will do my best to offer something that each of you can use to grow a tiny seed of creativity and accomplishment. Til soon perhaps! Kathy Z.

I had a chance to speak with Kathy via Skype and am excited about her ideas for this curriculum!

Thanks for all your letters and art and support and emotional involvement!!- Treacy

Quotes by World Renowned Artists:

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

-Pablo Picasso

"Creativity takes courage."

-Henry Matisse

"A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art."

-Paul Cezanne



Art by Julie Spencer

Chess Club-Jack who has been creating the chess club packets for close to 3 years has graduated and left the area. I have my feelers creeping around campus hoping to uncover the next chess lover to take over where he left off. Our chess newsletter typically focuses on strategies, puzzles and the history of some great chess masters. Jack was playing a games by mail with some of you, and I think they have been cut short by his return to NYC. I am confident that by fall, we will have our next chess wizard on board.

Exploring the Ocean- Laura, a PE student worker has volunteered to create a packet on the Ocean. Here is what she has to say:

The Big Blue packet is about the ocean. We have yet to explore 95% of the ocean. That means we know very little about the ocean, but what we do know is incredible. We know of about 230,000 species that live in the ocean and counting. The ocean is home to beautiful wildlife, and contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy, but human impact on the ocean is taking its toll. Thousands of animals are on the verge of extinction, giant patches of trash float through the seas, and global warming is slowly affecting the temperatures of the seas. Unfortunately, the oceans are in serious danger if we continue abusing the world's greatest natural resource the way we do. This packet aims to educate the participants about the ocean and the life that lives there. It will explain the many problems the ocean faces, and what humans can do to save the seas!

Theme Writing-The origin of this newsletter and our expansion into the various programs we offer is due to the theme writing project. Initially, when we began sending books out to you all 15 years ago, we received many heart felt letters thanking us, as well as describing the lives you as individuals were leading in prison. The sentiment often shared was how difficult it was to express emotions and vulnerabilities inside of prison and especially how alone everyone felt. It was eye opening that people could share in words on paper what they couldn't say out loud. It was also interesting that so many people expressed these same sentiments. We started the theme writing program as a way to offer opportunities to get more mail. If you send in an essay, you get a copy of all the themes sent on that topic. Early on, it was evident how therapeutic reading each others writing was for all of you. So many folks found themselves thinking they were going crazy while incarcerated. Reading what others wrote helped normalize the experience. It wasn't that you were going crazy, but that the environment you lived in was challenging and your thought processes were going awry. Once that is realized, you can bring your best most heroic self forward to take some control of what you are thinking and how you adapt to the changing conditions. Reading each others stories lets you know you are not alone in making adjustments to stay balanced and whole. I so wanted to share the writing with all the program participants, and thus the PE Newsletter was born. I have include a few selections from the past 6 months of themes with the hopes of inspiring more writing as well as helping you understand your incarceration experience as seen by others.

Holidays

by Brian Lowe

What is a holiday? I have heard of that; it is a put together form of "Holy Day(s)." It sounds close enough to real that I believe it. Most of our biggest holidays are religious or based off of religious celebrations. Valentine's Day after the death of Saint Valentine; Easter after the fertility gods of our pagan forebearers, rabbits and eggs, but stolen by Christians; Christmas, the biggest holiday of all, originally celebrating the birth of the sun god also stolen by Christians but which is now just a commercial exploitation day.

Then there are the other holidays that are a bringing together of our countrymen. Independence Day, where we shrugged out from our domineering parent's thumb; Mother's and Father's Day, where we show our love for our parents; Veteran's Day where we show our gratitude and appreciation to those who have served our country through military service; just to name a few.

There are so many holidays in this day and age that you can pick and choose your own set of days to honor or celebrate. And each religious and ethnic group has its own set as well, different from the mainstream.

My very own favorite and most supreme holiday is not recognized or celebrated by anyone except for me. Can you guess what it is? My birthday! It only really matters to me. It is the day that through whatever paths and variances, I came into being. And even though this momentous occasion is nothing special to most, it is my very own "king for a day," at least in my own little world! Plus it just plain feels good to be special, even if it is only one day of the year. I guess I could say I am thankful I wasn't born on Leap Day.

My next favorite holiday is really a category of holidays, the ones that my children and family love: Christmas for presents, Easter for egg hunts and candy, Valentine's Day for cards and chocolate, and Halloween for costumes and candy. And you cannot forget Thanksgiving as a time of great food and family bonding.

I believe that holidays are mainly a source of unity for a group of people. It brings them together and gives them a sense of identity as a nation, country, religious or ethnic group. And this unity promotes all manners of attitudes and beliefs that help them form a cohesive whole as a distinct group. This provides them with a shared cultural background rich in what they believe is the right way.

Today, in this matter, as people have more access to knowledge and other cultures, it is possible to take what you see are the good parts of many different systems and create the right one for you. This has already happened in the past to create every social system and religion, except that they absorbed this knowledge and practices over centuries and millennia. Now it is at a much faster rate of decades or year years.

Why wouldn't you take the best, disregard the worst, and generalize or specialize the rest to get an eclectic system that works better and has better results, and with the advance of science and technology, we have so much more to learn and pass on and actually have proof of its veracity. You no longer have to blindly follow superstitions, myths, and legends, but have historical and archeological accounts, histories we can now translate, and a better understanding of how life and nature work.

All of this we express through the choice of what holidays we promote and partake in celebration of; most people do so without consciously realizing it and by raising their children with it, they pass it on to future generations where it will be built upon even more to fit new times and needs, all with its primary purpose of holding together and unifying a group left intact.

So pretty much what I am saying is that holidays are a social tool, which no matter how much they change, they still have the same purpose and that as such are a major part of social fabric, no matter the culture or religion. That is why many people celebrate holidays they do not understand or even believe in and why commercial exploitation of these holidays only binds people together more.

Holidays are fun and sometimes stressful, but the meaning behind them, no matter how lost in obscurity, will still work under unification and will be perpetuated until even our modern descriptions are no more. They are a part of human nature we cannot give up.

Now if I can just get my birthday its own spotlight on the calendar, I would be set. Too bad there is already another holiday on its day, Columbus Day.

My Plate by Richard Smith

Holidays were always a grand event at my grandparents' house. My greatest memories revolve around dozens of kids swarming the place like fire ants on a dead beetle. One might discover a mischievous cousin hiding beneath your bed while another cousin would absently whittle away the day in Paw-Paw's backyard hammock.

Some of my cousins relished the peaceful atmosphere of the ladies knitting room while the most rambunctious of the brood loved the blood, sweat, and tears that came from hunting in the East Texas

woods. Nevertheless, the most fabulous memory remains the family's holiday meals.

Every person in the family owned their own special plate. At five, I was presented my own off-white colored plate. Many, many times I got lost in the mesmerizing golden swirls around its edges. Around and around I traced the design with my finger, but I always failed to discover the pattern's beginning or end. I'm uncertain of the family's "plate getting age," but it seems like almost everyone received their plate around the age of five. Weird, I know, but that's just how it is in my family.

These special plates were closely guarded by Maw-Maw. They were only used for Thanksgiving and Christmas. The rest of the year they would be lovingly wrapped in plastic and safely tucked away in Maw-Maw's corner cabinet. I always enjoyed watching the plates come out one at a time and Maw-Maw delicately remove the protective plastic wrapping. That plastic would be neatly folded into tiny squares and tucked out of sight beneath the double porcelain kitchen sinks.

Although I was a wild boy, I always volunteered to dry the plates after Maw-Maw and one of my aunts washed them. I loved studying all the different designs and colors covering each plate. It was like each plate took on its personality based on the personality of its owner. An angry red design went to an uptight uncle while a soft pink plate went to a gentle girl cousin. A golden swirl belonged to an inquisitive soul like me, while a plain white China plate went to my silent and studious grandfather. It was cool to see when the plate and its owner's personality matched, but more importantly, the quicker the plates were washed and dried, the sooner we would eat!

I loved my plate almost as much as I loved my super happy Irish Setter. While the dog and I were inseparable companions, the plate and I shared many a spectacular holiday meal together. Still, a bad memory occurred every now and then. I remember one year I bumped my plate against the marble countertop and chipped the edge. When I saw the damage done, I sat down on the white tile floor and cried.

Maw-Maw came over and quickly assessed the situation. "Don't worry," she said, "We'll get you another plate."

"No," I stubbornly said, "This one's mine." I hugged the chipped plate against my chest and thought of how some friends at school made fun of me because I had trouble writing words. I spelled well in my head, but on paper my letters always seemed to end up in the wrong place. Nobody knew what was wrong, so my friends just called me dumb.

"This plate's broken just like me," I told Maw-Maw.

"No sweetie." She pulled me into her arms. "You're not broken. You're absolutely perfect just the way you are."

The years passed and I proved that I wasn't so perfect after all. In 1989, at the age of 16, I was on my way to prison. Still, even in my absence, every major holiday Maw-Maw unwrapped my plate, washed it clean, and sat it on the table in remembrance of me.

"I'll always make your plate as if you're there," she told me at a prison visit before she got sick.

"But I'm not there," I argued. "Just toss it in the garbage. They way it looks, I'll never make it home anyway."

"Yes, you will," she soothed. "When God wills it, the doors will open."

It's now twenty-six years later. Maw-Maw has passed away, and the prison doors remain tightly closed. Still, come the holidays, I know I am loved because my mom carefully pulls the family's plates

from her corner cabinet and folds the plastic wrapping into neat little squares. Once washed, the plates are set on the table and piled high with delicious turkey and smoked ham.

"Mom," I said a few years ago, "why don't you just break my plate?" "You've got to learn to understand love," she told me. "If I break your plate then it's like I'm giving up and saying that it's all over. I don't believe that for a second. Your life is far from over. On the other hand, when I make your plate, I'm declaring to God and the whole world that I know one day soon, my son is coming home. So, I will never break your plate. I will always make your plate, knowing that one day you will sit at my table and eat from it."

Family Reunion

Lost Reunion by Edward Walsh

I used to think that people went to prison, did their time, and got out. Nothing more. Just a temporary loss of freedom. Or maybe they had life or the death sentence and we never heard from them again. My idea of prison life was taken from the different television prison shows I watched. It wasn't until I was actually sent to prison that I learned from experience that there is actually so much more than just doing time then getting out.

For instance, I never knew to what extent of losses that a prisoner suffer until I actually experienced it myself. I've lost all of my money, I had a top of the line car, a beach house, all the luxury furnishings to make living comfortable, and I had nice clothes. It's all gone now. But all of this is just material stuff. Stuff that someday when I get out I can always replace.

When I first got into the prison system what I looked forward to the most was reuniting with my family and friends. And I was really looking forward to reuniting with my dog Fred. I couldn't wait to go on our long walks along the beach. Or taking him to the neighborhood dog park to play. Then reality hit. My friends left me. Cut all ties with the criminal, the bad guy. The man they thought they knew and trusted but now despised. Family, forget about it. Everybody except my mother and her husband shut the door in my face. My two brothers, both younger than me, won't even acknowledge my existence. My father and his wife disowned me. I never again heard from any of the other relatives that use to tell me that they loved me. The family reunion that I was looking forward to when I get out of prison burst like a balloon.

But I always had hope. I always stayed open to the possibility that they would have a change of heart. I wrote off my friends. They're not good friends if they are not there when I need them the most. I always kept faith that someday I would reunite with my family though. I always wrote them letters. I send them birthday and holiday cards. I've even sent them drawings that I drew. I never expected anything in return. Although a letter from them would be nice.

I was in prison for about three years when one day I got called to the Chaplin's office. He informed me that my brother had passed away. How could that be? He was four years younger than me. He was healthy and fit. After all he was a fireman and a paramedic. How could he be dead? Cancer; I didn't even know he was sick. I never got to say goodbye. I never got to personally say, "Brother, I'm sorry, I love you." There will be no reunion with my brother when I get out. I feel such a loss. We use to be so close. I never thought he would die. But there it is, part of prison life.

Four years into my incarceration I got called into the Captain's office. My mom didn't have much time to live. I was allowed one call to say goodbye. The last time I saw my mom was close to two years ago. I use to call her every week, and I knew she was sick with cancer. A few days after I said goodbye, she passed away. There will be no reunion between mother and son when I get out. My heart aches and now her husband is slowly closing the door on our relationship. Just like the others.

The only family I have left is my youngest brother. He won't write me, and I can't write him. He told my family never to give me his address. About a year ago my aging father decided to rebuild our relationship. And I am thrilled that now his wife is starting to write me. I thank God. Deep down I think we realize that we may not have too much time left. I love them both and pray that someday they can visit me.

Then there's my dog Fred. He's getting on in age. I got him as a puppy 12 years ago. He's an old dog. I guess he's 84 dog years old now. I guess I won't be taking him for long walks along the beach; no dog parks.

Damn! I hate prison. I hate the losses. I hate the pain I have in my heart. This is the worst punishment man can set upon another man. To take him away from his family, his loved ones, their life. But it's my fault. I brought this onto myself.

So I'm lying in my bunk trying to come to terms with all my losses. And the losses to come. The material stuff I can deal with. I've lost stuff before. But losing brothers, mothers, fathers, and my dog; I can't get them back. There won't be a grand family reunion when I get out of prison. No party. Just me alone.

But then I think, "Yes, someday there will be a family reunion." When I'm older. When it's my turn to die. My soul will leave my body and go to wherever souls tend to wander off to. And then we'll have our reunion. My soul will be greeted by my brother, my mom, my dad, and yes, even Fred will be there. We will bask in the never ending love we share, and we will be reunited once again.

by Marlon Arturo Melendez

When I was a kid in the eighties, family reunions were the best. Every kid's birthday was celebrated and almost every holiday. Any opportunity was taken to come together.

Adults would wear their nicest clothes and finest jewelry. Their kids bore the same appearance, to a lesser extent, but were flashy nonetheless.

The stereo would loudly play music that reminded us of our home country. Salsa, cumbias, and merengue the night away. The food was also a reminder of home. Most times it was tamales, turkey or chicken dinner or the Salvadoran favorite, pupusas.

Sometimes a DJ would be hired, everyone danced and laughed and had so much fun. Love reigned in all our hearts and happiness was in all our faces. Unity as well. Family reunions were almost like celebrations of survival.

Back in the home country, people were being massacred daily by the hundred. Families hid or fled in fear from blood thirst death squads, military bombings, and oligarch-created right wing paramilitaries.

As time went on, at the end of the eighties and early nineties, the love and unity in my family remained unchanged. However, family reunions were less common. The family had also grown in numbers. Birthday parties and baby showers allowed for some reunions.

In El Salvador the carnage continued. Tens of thousands were indiscriminately being murdered. Women, children, and the elderly; whole families wiped out in seconds. Community leaders and the religious, even foreigners, suffered the same fate. Death was no longer feared; it had become expected. But the people united.

My family kept growing in the U.S. Growing in numbers and growing apart. Family reunions became rare.

Thankfully, by the mid-nineties, the Civil War came to an end. A peace accord was signed. Those that survived the horror made their way back to the towns and villages they had fled and found them completely destroyed. Amid the rubble, they found the remains of their loved ones. There was a haunting smell of death and smoke in the air. Dead or alive, people felt a sense of comfort with reuniting with their family members. It was a new opportunity to recreate their family. They didn't ask for it, but they were glad to be alive to do it.

By the late nineties, there was perhaps one family reunion comparable to the ones we had when we first arrived in the U.S. from El Salvador. Personal feuds, resentment, unkept promises, unaccomplished expectations, lack of unity when situations got bad were some of the factors that dissolved the tradition of family reunions.

While the situation in the home country began normalizing, my family split apart. Where the dust settled and families rebuilt their lives in El Salvador, my family moved far away from each other. Two or three cities over.

At the end of the nineties, the new generation of my family was in full bloom. As kids, they grew up around each other, as time went on they casually spoke to each other and by chance would sometimes meet up. The home country was nothing but a detail of their parents' past and the Civil War simply something that occurred of little importance today.

Family reunions? Never again, not the kind that we had when we first got to the U.S. My family became sort of "cliquish" and apathetic to one another. It's almost as if when we sought refuge from civil war, we were celebrating the survival of our family. Survival and unity away from the horror of war. But as the Civil War ended so did my family's spirit of inseparability. The survival of our entire family, the oneness amongst us, the love and joy that embraced us all at family reunions ended with the Civil War in El Salvador. But we were in the U.S.



Art by Corey Higgins

Reunited by Cody Papple

Heart racing, palms sweaty, clammy. "What time is it?" again I ask myself knowing it's only been at most 30 seconds. A whole hour to go after five and a half years. "Will they know it's me? Will they trust me?" I ask myself again. "Of course they will, I'm their father." But still there's that doubt, that panic, that maybe I'm not good enough that fear, they won't love me. I pray again but still it has only been a few minutes. "How can this be taking so long? What will my wife think? Have I really changed or am I doomed to repeat this cycle, to be a part of 'their business.' What will it be like to be home?" A million questions, ideas, doubts, and insecurities racing through my head, facing freedom. I'm nervous, scared. "How did I come to this?" It's like stepping from one world into another. I hear something, it's my name, and it's really time to go, finally. I say my goodbyes and shake hands, thanking god I finally made it.

Walking towards the outside gates I finally see them. Which will be a memory I'll never forget. Standing there holding hands, pointing, smiling and waving. My wife holding them back, my daughter six and son eight. "How did I even create such wonder and say." I can't resist but to smile and feel overcome with love and gratitude. "Why would I even give them up?" I ask myself all over again, as I try to hold the tears back and make it throughout this last ordeal. My name, my number, date of birth, the Captain asked one last time. I'm now officially a free man he also informed me or something to that effect. I'm froze unsure of exactly how to take that first step. "Is this another dream?" I find myself terrified, glued in spot the real time has now begun, the real challenge being a father. "How do I explain myself?" I see them both now released running towards me from their mother my beautiful wife. "Why the heck am I still standing in this spot?" As I myself rush forward into the embraces and laughter. I feel joy, my wife shyly smiles at me walking up and I pull her into our group hug. It occurs to me then, I've been scared of this, to face the people that love me the most. Why? My own guilt. They forgave me, I have to forgive myself and now move forward with my life.

Reading

by Satchel Denis

Reading... Would I be considered a nerd if I said the following: I love the smell of pages from an old book. I've read over maybe 7,000 books before I hit high school.

I just love to read. Understand how my love for reading manifested: I grew up in a household where reading was the only allowed source of entertainment: no going outside, no TV, no playing on the computer. Just reading. Reading was my upbringing, my childhood, and it was inevitable for a love affair to ensue. That love has gifted me in so many ways: a way to escape this world when it became too much or too grim, a vernacular that always belied my age and school grade, a basic knowledge on a variety of subjects which allowed me to jump into any conversation and rarely be lost on what was being talked about (at least up to a point).

I'm now 22 years old with 15 years in prison, and my love for reading has only strengthened. In an environment where negativity pervades the air so thickly it's suffocating, I've found the only sure fire way to not allow that negativity to overpower is by reading. I don't care what kind of book it is sci-fi, espionage, biography, fiction, non-fiction; I enjoy them all. I don't believe in the idea of a bad book because to me, there are no bad books -- a weak plot, a lackluster cast, a bad concept, maybe, but never a bad

book. I will always find something enjoyable in a book: Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" book was a long and tedious read with an over the top focus on the smallest details, but the concept and philosophy that Ayn Rand conveys in the book is genius and awe-inspiring. Her objectivism philosophy enraptured me, and her characters were beautifully made, but her story was too detailed too often. No matter what, I found Atlas shrugged an enjoyable read (I'm not a book critic, and this is my opinion). A book as a whole cannot be bad.

My favorite genre is fantasy fiction, things that are beyond the norm. To read a fantasy book is to escape a world where there seems to be nothing but deceit, conceit, hate, malice... Escape to worlds where people do selfless things, where the hero is a person who desires to do good and help ("Eragon"), worlds where the world is alive ("Percy Jackson and the Olympians"). One of the greatest gift of reading: I escape when I read.

"My name is Satchel Denis, I am addicted to reading, have been for well over a decade. Reading has taken over and affected all aspects of my life.

"I am a reading addict and couldn't be any more happier!"

by Chad Frank

My mom bought me my first book when I was two, *Bobo and His Blue Jacket*. Bobo's a baby elephant whose mom buys him a new blue jacket, which he accidentally rips while playing and has to get repaired before his mom finds out. I loved that story so much, I had my mom read it to me over and over again. Eventually, she got tired of doing so and started skipping pages. Of course, since I'd heard the story so often, I caught on to what she was doing.

This made me wonder: what else was my mom trying to pull on me? Not wanting to miss out on anything else, I made it my mission to teach myself how to read, which I did before I enrolled in kindergarten.

Learning how to read so young gave me a distinct advantage not only over other kids, but also adults. Other kids had to depend on adults to read to them; adults couldn't conceal information by spelling out words the way they could with other kids.

Growing up, other kids teased me because they thought I was weird because I always had my nose buried in a book. But I didn't care. The way I saw it, they were the ones who were missing out. While they were squabbling over toys and TV remotes, I was perfectly content to sit quietly in a corner with nothing but a book.

While they whined about being bored, I was in Neverland battling Captain Hook and his pirates, slaying dragons with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table or blasting off to faraway galaxies.

As I got older, I realized that I could find the answers to questions adults were unwilling or unable to share.



By simply strolling into the public library, I gained access to information about sex, murder, mayhem and other forbidden topics and pretty much whatever else I wanted to know about. This only made me love reading even more.

As an awkward teenager, I found kindred spirits in Holden Caulfield and other flawed protagonists. Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and the rest of the Beat writers appealed to my nonconformist sensibilities.

As a young adult, I discovered Transgressive authors like Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk. I loved their gritty style and could strongly relate to their dark and debauched novels because they so closely resembled my own life.

I now prefer confessional memoirs because I enjoy their voyeuristic nature and empathize with the authors' struggles with addictions, mental illness and other obstacles.

I find myself reading more voraciously than ever... Pretty much from the time I open my eyes each morning until I pass out with a book in my hand, often long after midnight. Book are such an essential part of my existence, I ask for them as my birthday and Christmas gifts in lieu of money. I love books because they keep my mind off my lengthy sentence by allowing me to escape the concrete and razor wire of my cold, harsh reality. They also provide me with everything I most desire: knowledge, acceptance, and above all, fre

by Colin VanBilliard

When I got convicted I couldn't read my court papers. I only had gotten to third grade so how was I competent to stand trial for robbery if I couldn't read?

I started getting my stuff and the Old Timer in Elmira told me to get a dictionary-thesaurus. Every word you asked me to spell, so I worked in the gym and got put down for library. I stole my first hardcover thesaurus, put it in my bag and brought it back to my cell.

I asked the Old Timer to show me how to use the book. As he showed me my level of reading climbed little by little. In 2009 my friend that writes gave me a pen and book for writers. I learned to write poems and I wrote four movie songs with this book. It teaches me to read but I never really learned to read but I love to read about writing. When I read my name in the Prisoner Express for the first time I stood on my bed and made a speech. I was so happy that I almost cried. Just to make the magazine of Prisoner Express is an honor as it's handled by college people. I'm still working on my reading and I use it with my poems. I love words!

Practical Jokes

When the Laughter's Over by Bobby Bunderson

A practical joke is a prank intended to embarrass someone or cause physical discomfort. Practical jokes are something of an enigma. Humor me (pun intended) while I break this term down into separate components. *Practical*: adj, of, relating to, or shown in practice. *Jokes*: verb, something said or done to provoke laughter; a prank, a playful or mildly mischievous act. So, we can surmise from these definitions that practical jokes could be defined as: to practice or carry out a playful prank for a laugh. However, because I see things in a more sinister light. I just believe it is wrong to get my kicks at someone else's expense.

Growing up I, like many folks, used laughter to mask pain. I was that annoying, little prankster that people navigated around very cautiously, lest they 'get-got'. However, slowly, almost

imperceptibly, my good natured amusement turned increasingly mischievous to the point of cruelty. Sad part? I still laughed...

I used to cruise the novelty store searching for a new gag: fake barf, rubber dog doody, a hand buzzer, fake ice cubes with insects, cans of snakes, and of course the always popular whoope cushion. Ah, good times! When these low budget gadgets lost their zest, it was time to up the ante, you know, turn it up a notch. I busied myself learning all types of new tricks: tacks on chairs, replacing sugar with salt, adding tabasco to ketchup, opening a package of limberger cheese and hiding it behind the cereal boxes at the grocery store. Stop it, I'm killing myself here. How about the old timeless saran wrap over the toilet bowl? Rubbing pencil lead on a quarter's edge and then betting some poor shmuck that they couldn't roll it down the center of their face without the coin leaving their skin!

I grew older, and my practical jokes grew increasingly sophisticated. I used to bring a roll of toilet paper with me to parties. No, not to "t.p." someone's house, how petty, ha ha! No, I would find myself a suitable mark, and bet him/her that they could not repeat my demonstrated feat. I placed the roll of toilet paper in my pants so that the cardboard center ran vertical with my body. Next, I leaned my head backward, placed a quarter on my head and then attempted to straighten my head allowing the quarter to fall forward and into the roll of toilet paper. I became very good at making it on my first try. I gave my marks three attempts, but little did they know that they would only need one! As soon as they tilted their head back, I would pour a cup of beer down their pants, creating a wet-spot as if they'd had a little accident. What a hoot! Practical jokes had become like a new drug to my already sizeable repertoire. I simply couldn't get enough, and I needed bigger doses to satiate my cravings. Then I discovered a deliciously naughty practical joke: the fine art of spook 'em! My ultimate joy had become scaring the bejesus outta people. Sadly, I still inwardly laugh when I see these types of gags on certain television programs.

Pranking becomes tiresome to victims quickly, yet I remained steadfast and unrelenting. My first wife Patti had paid dearly for my newest cruel addiction. What had started off as harmless merriment, soon turned into a constant stream of irresponsible and unsavory chicanery. I had become a Class A obnoxious jerk. One night my wife had announced that she wanted to go visit a neighbor and that she would be gone for no longer than half an hour. Ten minutes after she left I followed her. I crouched behind a stand of bushes like a predator waiting for my unsuspecting prey to happen along. I watched as she walked down the sidewalk toward me, laughter bubbling up from my gut. Just as she passed, I grabbed her from behind, placing my hand over her mouth. I thought this was going to be my *pièce de resistance*, it was not. Her response scared me! She went stiff, then limp as if she'd fainted. I had frightened her to the core. I instantly realized my faux pas. Until this moment, I'd never stopped long enough to consider the consequences of my cruel sense of humor.

Patti later told me (much later since she didn't speak to me for a week after that), the first thing that went through her mind was that she was going to be raped and killed, and she was worried about leaving me and our one-year-old daughter alone. I was dumbfounded. How could she ever forgive me? Well, I'm not sure that she ever has... We were divorced three years later. The joke was on me, and the laughter was over...

Laughter

by Shawn Blake

What an entrenched animal laughter is, Especially in the excitement of the spectator! Is there something so delicious as another's disasters? But there are also people with the gift of speech who've learned to control and convert the spectator with comic wit. This power to delight and flatter has stopped many of riots because the instigator has been guided into gales of laughter that overcomes all opposition. If a funny story won't work, self depreciation usually will.

Comedy is a singular power, leveling all other distinctions. There is no defence, no learning, no rational that will stand against it. It's like stepping into quicksand--the more on fights against it, the more entrenched one becomes. The vision of the comedians is what keeps him sane and protects him from the influences of drab pessimism and blatant hostility.

Living so closely with each other in prison, it's easy to be caught up in the distorted perspectives that rule life here. The halls are filled with vitriol being expressed through profanity and violence against each other, in place of the people that are to blame for the loss of freedoms. Including themselves! Nevertheless, there are some who have learned to cope with this crazy life, surviving with humor and wit alone. Laughter rivals the vitriol in prisons if one listens a little closer. It might be suppressed but it's always present. The comic doesn't have the capacity for hostility toward other inmates or the harassing guards. They face any ridicule or violence with humor, with laughter. In the hopeless world of hatred and violence, the comedian will stand in the face of death and tell jokes about herself, the environment, the ridiculous situation, even the "killer," and survive for no other apparent reason than she created laughter.

A friend of mine (I'll call him Melvin) is a death defier. The sort of comedian who can't let a good opportunity for a joke to pass. He started out in prison a little timidly, not thinking he could use his talents for protection. Not in a prison! But he couldn't contain his inner jester. He finally found his balance and used his skills--a mixture of verbal sparring, physical clumsiness and a face that can express any emotion he desires no matter his real feelings. I have done a lot of time and am still amazed at the magic-like ability Melvin has to resolve a situation with the power of laughter. How he makes the most serious things seem funny. One time, I saw Melvin in one of his many elements. We were in the day room area of our section where he was playing cards while I watched TV. A dispute began over some perceived slight on Melvin's behalf toward one of the more hardened convicts (I'll call him JJ). I didn't see how it started, but when I looked over, I saw Melvin on the floor with JJ looming over him. The section became silent. I felt despair creep over me like a smothering blanket. "Whatya gotta say bout that?" J.J. shouts down at Melvin. "You little f___! Get up and let's handle it!" Melvin sits there a moment longer, scoots back away from J.J., and slowly stands up. Fixing himself, he steps back another couple steps, watching J.J. from under his slightly bowed head. He looks up and smiles one of his best smiles and softly says to J.J., "If we came here for any other reason than our crimes, it certainly wasn't to enjoy ourselves with violence and grovelling. But I'm pretty good at grovelling when the situation calls for it." Silence. J.J. stands there unsure how to handle this unknown reaction. I notice his lips quiver slightly, like two worms having sex.

Someone in the crowd snickers, which sets everyone to laugh. J.J.'s body relaxes and a smile appears on his face--ending the illicit sex--and he steps forward, slapping Melvin on the shoulder and says, "I'll take care of the violence then, you little f___." Melvin grabs his arm in mock pain. Grimacing dramatically with his expressive face, "That's a relief. I'm terrible at violence!" Very funny! I feared he was a dead man, but it was him that did the killing. Time's easier to bear for those live around Melvin. Laughter eases the anxiety that is implicit with life inside. Our overall situations aren't comical, but to be able to laugh at everyday things, and at oneself, with others, life becomes a little easier.

by Curtis Colvin

Laughter. What is laughter? Where does it originate in the body? Why does it happen? Is it the same for everybody? Can it be cured?

It seems like every time you want to frown and have lousy day, someone comes along and ruins it for you. They have this cheery face and happiness overflowing from them. As soon as they near you, you can feel your mood changing, like passing the flu off to others instantaneously. It starts with the eyes, whether it's caused by reading a story-book, hearing a joke, watching a movie or sitcom, or even a person dancing funny. That's where it starts. Then it's the brain's turn, the leader of the body. It processes the stupid stuff your eyes see and then decides to put a smile on your face. But sometimes, it gets carried away. The mouth opens, and your lungs produce guffaws of air to form into sounds coming out called laughter. Isn't that disgusting?

So why isn't everyone's laugh the same? Some squeak. Some are mellow. But some bray like horses or mules, very disruptive. What can we do about it? How does one stop the disease that causes others to change their whole outlook on the day? Well, here's the secret...Beat them to the punch. Smile before they do. Tell a joke, make a comment, or act like me and dance a funny jig for a second (it always works for me!) That's why it's you who gets to change their bad day. It's like mom says...Laughter is the best medicine.

by James Bauhaus

I've got to laugh every time I surf past one of these new "Dukes of Hazzard" shows. We've got "Dukes of Ducks", "Dukes of Alligator", "Dukes of Alaska" and "Dukes of Chopping Down the Forest." We have some minor Dukes, too: Car-Dukes, Junk-Yard Dukes, Pawn Dukes and "Eating Garbage from Foreign Lands Dukes." These shows are like the daytime soap Operas: they have a drama, slapstick, suspense; everything you need to ride the TV's emotional roller coaster. My personal favorite is when the tree-chopper dukes or the Gold Digger Dukes stage a heavy machinery disaster. Nothing is more funny than some poor sap running from a rolling log, or sliding a huge dozer sideways into a mudpit. Even more laughter can be found in watching the Republican presidential office-seekers. What a bunch of clowns! Most recently, Ted "self-righteousness" Cruz actually prostituted his children out, like bait, trying to land some votes: "Look at me! Vote for me! I read to my two cute little toddler girls!" Soon as the Washington post saw this for what it was, they put out a hilarious cartoon of him using them as organ grinder monkeys. "Self-righteous" cried, "Foul! Our children are supposed to be safe from political exploitation!" The amusing part is trying to figure out if this guy is simply blind to the double standard that he is trying to impose, or is he so arrogant that he thinks that we are too stupid to spot it? Either way, it's not the

corporate, commercial media who corrects. This numbskull, it is the "social" (public people's) media who puts him in his place. The Washington Post caved in the very second that Cruz complained. They took down their cartoon, apologized, then hid under the porch, whimpering until people got distracted toward the next bit of national non-news chosen for construction.

Can you imagine one of these gold-plated Buffoons curling his itchy trigger finger around the nuclear switch? If Sanders takes enough votes away from Hillary, we could wind up with another president as arrogant and as stupid as Sonny Bush, the crackpot numbskull who caused most of this insanity we see today!

We are in for some pretty hilarious times if the Democrats manage to screw off a sure thing. There is no end to the mass-murder mischief that our Rabid Republican Rascals can concoct. Get ready for a future full of their lethal laughter!

by Jonathan McGeogh

Sometimes all that is left, the one thing that we can grasp and hold onto for just a little bit of hope when the light at the other end is dimming... Laughter. Lo, laughter has prevented countless suicides. The best medicine, they say, and perhaps there is much truth to that. Some days I find little to laugh about, yet always I try. Getting lost in a good book, listening to a nerdy NPR talk show, dreaming in the day, of the days of yore. If I place laughter in my path at every chance that I get, it helps my perspective on all other aspects of life, and to maintain a proper balance. Pay it forward. What do I do to encourage others to find laughter in their lives? Having a unique sense of humor, my jokes often fall on deaf ears, but this evening, I made a twenty second appearance at a table full of acquaintances and left them all in stitches with some good natured ribbing. In prison, some humor is often dangerous. It can be viewed as disrespectful, so we must know how others will take it especially in the presence of their homies, but a little bit of laughter goes a long way.

"Reach deep within, and reconnect with the essence of your being."

-Bryant McGill, Nobel Peace Prize nominee

"Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value."

-Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize for Physics recipient

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

-Robert Frost, Pulitzer Prize for Poetry recipient

"The mind is everything. What you think is what you become."

-Buddha, Spiritual Leader

"For every minute you're angry, you lose 60 seconds of happiness."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the Transcendentalist movement

Haircuts

by Raymond Swanson

When I was young, my mother would take me to a friend of her's who had a small boutique in a small town not too far from our home in northwestern Pennsylvania. I remember it was a two story brick building with a covered porch balcony that reached the curbside. Also, an 18-inch wide gap between the brick buildings creeped me out a little.

When the shop closed, we began going to another friend of my mother, and she would trim my hair and give my mom a perm. Eventually, the shop closed, and my grandfather would buzz my hair.

My grandfather was in the Army in the mid 1950s and started a family soon after. He had an admirable work ethic and loved his family, which I only realized as I became older. He was also an avid woodsman and fisherman, and he would compare my thick hair to that of a sheepdog when he was trimming it down in his backyard, cellar, or kitchen. I didn't always want to get a haircut, though just sitting in that chair always brought a lesson. These are memories I now treasure.

I didn't think much about my grandfather's haircuts when I was younger since I thought I had better things to do, but as others started to trim my hair, I began to miss that crispy old towel over my shoulders and around my neck. What I wouldn't give to have one more haircut at the hands of my grandfather.

The Lewinsky Connection by John Naylor

We vacationed quite a bit as a family. One year, we were looking for a decent barber in Abilene, Texas, an old cattle town, because my brother would soon be attending Abilene Christian University. We went to an older white guy's shop downtown, and I wondered how long this old shop had been cutting hair. Who knows, maybe it was a barber shop even before the barber was alive. My brother Andy and I wanted flat tops. Sure, it was the late 90's, but it's a timeless haircut if you like Americana. The barber said he wasn't sure if he could keep doing them since he had a bad back and may not be able to work at all much longer. His haircut was unique because at the end, he used a large vibrator on my Dad's neck, head, and shoulders. Definitely old timey! Once, when we were halfway through casual haircut conversation, he revealed that not only is his last name Starr, but he's the brother of Ken Starr, the guy who blew the whistle on President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky's sex scandal. What are the odds of this man cutting our hair so soon after the scandal? Clinton was recently impeached, and now Ken Starr's brother was using a vibrator on my neck and shoulders. It was a little odd yet surreal.

Little did I know how many more strange tales that town would give me in my high school and college years. Some may see Abilene as an old cattle town, a good place for BBQ, and the birthplace of Jessica Simpson. For me, it becomes a place of learning and a second home where I made friends and memories.



Art by Catherine Lafleur

Lost

by Tommy Hightower

We have all been lost in one form or another, at some time in our lives. It's a good bet that other prisoners can relate to this: when I first entered these cold, concrete walls, how very lost was I. Like a naked new born, was I, every eye must be able to see how scared I was on the inside. With my outer self, chest out, head up, did I exude a confidence? Not real, but surreal.

Where did I go? Who will be my cellmate? Are those guards really that cold-hearted? Man, these guys look like they want to kill me--why? What a facade every newly incarcerated must display. Like a peacock with tail feather spread, or the puffer fish, making up physical displays.

All lies to hide that scared child inside. Truly insecure yet unwilling to admit.

"I sure could use a friend at this time." We are all lost sometimes.

by Andrew M. Van Vleet

Who am I? What have I become? I hardly remember what brought me this. Every decision and moral compromise I made changed me further from myself. I'm lost in this man I've become. Can I find my way back? Remembering every twist and turn that brought me here was like a metamorphosis. Can a butterfly change into a caterpillar? Maybe I can't go backwards, but hopefully, I come full circle. Maybe I'm not so lost after all.

by Juan Hernandez

Everyone's been lost, right? Whether it's something insignificant like a pen (which my cellmate is always losing in a 6x10 cell--incredible, right?) or something meaningful like your wedding ring. Others have lost relationships. Some have lost their jobs, their savings, their beliefs, and even their minds! While some lost things are lost forever, others appear unexpectedly. My first sense of the word "lost" came in the first grade with my the death of my father who was beyond the reach of attainment; he was lost forever. The second time this word altered my life was at age 16 when another family lost their father by my actions and I, in turn, lost my freedom. This weighed heavy in my heart because I knew what this family felt like having had lost my own father at an early age. There are no words God could've told me at the time he took my father that would've made me feel any better, so what words could I have said at the time that would've made a difference? When the judge asked me if I had anything to say for my actions, I responded no. I immediately regretted my response and knew that I lost my opportunity to ask for their forgiveness and to tell his family how remorseful I felt for their lost. I still feel remorse for what occurred that day, and I apologize dearly to the family of the man who lost his life. I feel like my words would be lost to their ears. I know not where they are or who they are, and so only God knows if my plea for their forgiveness is something that I'll be able to find an answer to, or if my cry is beyond reach and forever lost.

by Alfred McGlory, Jr.

I grew up in Marksville, Louisiana to Alfred McGlory, Sr. and Emma Lou Williams, and they gave birth to six girls before finally having me. We stayed in a wooded area with our closest neighbors being a half a mile away. I played in the woods a lot, exploring nature and learning about and looking for bugs and turtles.

Being the baby in the family, I grew up in crap, and having six sisters but no brother wasn't fun. I had no one to play with or talk with but Moma. My sisters played dolls, house, and jacks, and I wanted to play jacks with them, but they never let me play.

My daddy never really talked to or taught me anything. He would leave us home and come back drunk and fight with Moma, like for his food being too cold. I loved him anyway; he would always buy me airplanes, and I still love airplanes. Even so, Dad and I never talked about anything, but he would take me fishing with him sometimes. As I got older, Dad seemed to be lost in his thoughts, and Moma was doing her best to keep me out of trouble. I knew she really cared about and loved me.

My dad was sentenced to 108 years and sent to Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana. I lost my mom in 2009 and haven't shook back since. Now that I'm in prison, I understand what my lost really means to me. I'm not in contact with most of my sisters, and I don't hear from or write my dad. We're both in prison, and we're both lost. I really want to reach out to him and let him know how I feel about him and ask him why he never talked with me as a child. I'm 40, and he's 72 years old: time has been hard on the both of us. We are in different prisons, and truth is, I don't really know who he is. I want him to know my child, his grandson, Xavier, so that he won't be lost.

by Shannon Guess Richardson

What does it mean to be lost? According to Webster Dictionary, it means, "no longer possessed or retained or no longer to be found." Both definitions are quite accurate and hit home with men, but Webster is referring to being lost physically. I'm not. Physically, I know that I am in prison, sitting in my cell on my hard metal bed as I write this. It's the rest of me that's lost.

Prison is supposed to be about change and reform. It is supposed to take a supposedly broken person and shape them into someone who is ready to be released back into the world. That's what it's supposed to be, but for me, it is backwards.

I am a mother to six wonderful sons who are my entire heart and soul. Before my arrest, I had never been away from them for more than a couple of days. They were my world. I had never been in trouble before then I was arrested and put in prison.

My ex-husband refuses to let me contact my children. Although I write them often, I never receive a response. I have not spoken to my babies in three years. I don't know anything about them anymore, or even if they are okay.

I was pregnant with my sixth son when I was arrested. I was twenty-two weeks pregnant. When I started bleeding, hurting, and crying, I was laughed at by guards while pads were thrown at me. My son was born at almost twenty-four weeks (four months early). I never got to hold him, see his sweet face, or tell him mommy loves him. I have a lawsuit against them now, but I am realistic in my expectations. I was served papers a while ago informing me he had been adopted.

My family have all abandoned me. Only one of my friends have contacted me. The rest have abandoned me.

Everything I had is gone. I have been left with nothing to my name, not even a scrap of clothing.

I have been broken. I'm not the woman I was. I don't know who she is anymore. The fire I once had within me has sizzled out. That woman is nothing more than distant memory.

I feel left behind and forgotten by absolutely everyone, including God Himself. Yes, I know exactly what it means to be lost. I just wonder if I will ever be found.

by J. Bauhaus

Lost is what Jimmie Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, looked like when he delivered his annual terror scare today. "North Korea has a missile!" he shrieks. "They got a bomb. Run for your lives!" His real message was, "This is our excuse to pick America's pockets for a few more billions of dollars to bloat up the Pentagon some more and make you buy us an anti-ballistic missile system to protect us politicians and bureaucrats. We've terrified ourselves by making so many enemies!"

Another reason for the terror scare is to distract thinking men from reasoning: "Korea isn't going to shoot a bomb at us because our politicians have at least 20,000 bombs to shoot at Korea. No rich, privileged leader wants to commit suicide or have his tax-herd and country destroyed."

So they all got together to punish Korea with unspecified, nebulous "sanctions." Amusingly, it was revealed that South Korea has a factory over the border where it takes advantage of almost free North Korean labor by paying poverty wages for cheap manufactured goods that can sell at a fantastic profit. The amusing part occurs when they describe this flagrant exploitation as a humanitarian effort.

Lost is what Hillary Clinton feels when she learns that many young women and men are voting for old man Sanders. She thought all she had to do was smile and wait to be crowned.

Lost is the feeling Obama has at the outrage that the Supreme Court pulled on him. They decided to butt in, unasked, and stop the EPA from making coal-fired power plants that put pollution-scavengers on their chimney pipes. Looks like Scalia, Thomas, Alito, Roberts, and Kennedy have all the clean air that they need, and the rest of us can take a flying bite out of a rolling donut.

To avoid this type of nonsense, we need to find replacements who are altruists, and we can find them by giving them personality and ethics test to uncover the crazies and crooks. Without applying quality controls to our privileged leaders, we are the ones who are lost.

Freedom by Curtis Colvin

Freedom is what I lost and want the most. I lost my job, truck, family, friends, and all my possessions. I lost my freedom to move, do, eat, sleep, drive, even walk when and where I want to. My whole way of thinking had to change to deal with this environment. So you can say I lost my thoughts also.

Freedom to drive where I want, visit whom I please, and to taste wonderful foods again would make me very happy. My own bed (with a pillow) would put me in heaven. A dip in a pool or bath would be a blessing.

Fly a kite, play a video game, walk a dog, climb a tree, play frisbee, ride a go-cart, walk a beach, catch a fish, go to a dance, I could go on and on about all the freedoms I lost. But soon I'm up for parole and if it's God's will, freedom will taste so great!

First Job

The Station by William Andrews

The bell dinged twice. A customer waiting at the pumps, again. I blew the smoke out the bathroom window, rinsed my hands in the old sink, and opened the door. Stoned again. I put on my shades and faced the chilly air blowing alongside the station. It was my first job that took taxes from my weekly check, not counting the job I had in reform school cutting grass around the institution which paid too. I was 16, almost 17, working at "The Station" as everyone who had any doings with it referred to it. Pumping gas and fixing tires was the main reason I was hired, but so much else filled my time there, leaving a lifelong impression on me. It was once an ESSO in the early '60s, and maybe even the '50s. It seemed to be ancient even in the '80s when it was a Texaco with two service bays, with inground lifts, a glass walled front office to the left, with the bathrooms around the side. The station sat a few blocks away from the Maryland/DC line on the Maryland side on what was once called Palmer Highway but is now another MLK Boulevard. A high crime area where in the '80s, crack was making its debut in full glory. Even the Mayor of DC partook in inhaling while spending time with a paid whore in a motel room and eventually getting stung. The murder rate was soaring above 500 per year in the smallest of cities. All said and done, I believe he was sitting on City Council some years ago--go figure.

My boss was named Woody, Woody Peacock, owner of the place, and he did most of the towing for the police department in that area. It held the highest police brutality rate for a while.

When my day was done pumping gas, there was not much a white 16 year old had to do, not in that area, especially since I had not yet bought a car. I'd hang out at the station many nights, and as the night fell upon the streets, the accidents and wreckage would mount. I'd ride along with the night shift tow truck drivers, helping them hook up chain, hook, and sling to the cars, cleaning up around the wreck scenes with flares burning. We had a police scanner that squelched out the nightly mayhem. Our ears perked to catch the call by the P.D. dispatcher and cop on the scene. "Call Palmers," we'd hear, and by the time they did, we'd already be en route, as Woody would say into the phone as soon as it rang. Upon getting on the scene so quickly, we'd sometimes even beat the ambulance and see the carnage and/or removal of victims, or whatever remained of them. My first exposure to death, au natural.

We'd also tow crime scene vehicles left by prey, some by predator, and so we'd not touch anything unneedingly, honoring the tape yet climbing over it. We saw realities that Hollywood learned to pretty up and glamorize on TV. I learned how ugly real death can be at an early age.

A fairly rotund and stationary figure, Woody basically lived there, and night or day, he would be found horizontal on an old bench seat out of a board converted into a piece of office furniture. He may be asleep, or he may be playing opossum: you'd never know since he'd listen to the scanner and the chatter around him. He'd wear a pea green Texaco uniform, though everyone else usually wore jeans and work shirts. Woody would also puff a cloud from his pipe, saturating the area with the scent of pipe tobacco and looking like a Captain of a Whaler ship about to embark. Though he was usually planted, he was still able to move like a bear when he meant business, all 400 pounds of him would become a wrecking ball, if needed, with some unruly straggler who'd happen upon his kingdom or even with hired hands. He kept a .357 snub nose near by, though I never saw him need it or use it, but I heard stories about him back in the day. I think things were mostly understood by those in the area and in his circles: don't start any and there won't be any. There was always some underlying drama, and I never figured some of them out. Lots of history and secrets were stored there, never to be told.

My dad used to work for Woody in the '60s before I was born, then on and off. He got too lost in the bottle and never got himself back together. Woody and a detective friend of his broke the bad news of my dad's death to my mom and me one hot June evening. I felt numb, never expecting that. It changed how I saw life and maybe changed how those at the station saw me. Things were different after that.

by Colin VanBilliard

Funny as it sounds, but Department of Correctional Services programs were my first job. I worked in the mess hall where I served food. Then I went to yard porter and had to sweep and keep weights on the mats. Then I took school (physical education) and learned about working out and safety. Then I worked in the gym, cleaning showers and hallways. Food service, washed pans and learned about food. Porter in a block. Custodial maintenance and learned about floors. Printing I loved the most because we had a computer we could type with, and I would type my poems and stories. This is when I first started writing, and it was so much fun. It kept me hungry to learn and write more. Guess I took a bad predicament and turned it into something good. My job

now is staying alive. I'm on my job, writing and thinking about papers. D.O.C.S. saved me my first job.

by Diane Spencer

The sun stretched its long, hot rays over 90 million miles down to Earth to perch itself on my forehead. I swiped at the glistening sweat with a dusty hand as I knelt in the dirt. The average 12-year-old would find themselves put off, or even distraught to find themselves in my circumstances, but not me. Through the heat, dust, and dripping sweat, I smiled brilliantly back at the sun. My very first REAL job! I felt such true pride and joy as I crawled on my knees, row by incredibly long row, to weed the beautifully green cucumbers. Weeding cucumbers today, maybe picking lettuce tomorrow; washing long stalks of fresh celery upon harvest. The farmer I spent the summer working for liked to switch things up on a seemingly daily basis. Looking back, I realize that habit was more to sooth the short attention span of the adolescents that worked for him than the needs of the many vegetables before us. I found so much in that dirt beyond the occasional weeds, bugs and worms; I found what it meant to care for and tend to something outside of myself. All of the hours spent in blissful, silent thought became my great escape. Days were free from the noise and turmoil that would inevitably have to bike back home to every evening. Sometimes, I would wish that the \$5.00 per day pay that the kind farmer placed in my small, dirty hands were sufficient to carry me far away, as far as my precious daydreams carried me each day. I recall digging my hands deep into the soil, cool beneath its scorching surface, wishing that I could simply bury all of my troubles into the Earth...

For now, for this moment, I would just focus on the row ahead. I was learning more without even realizing, namely the patience and perseverance it took to accomplish each task I was given. I also learned discipline as I biked to work every day in the early morning dusk instead of sleeping or spending the long summer days playing. And oh, how it was to finally meet pride, to feel it from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head as I studied my accomplishments each day. To look pride in its face and shake its hand for the first time brought me joy. I wasn't worthless. I wasn't "an idiot!" or a failure. Those words often slammed from my step-father's lips and into my ears, and to my sensitive heart, those words were not true. The sincere, fatherly farmer I worked for that summer told me otherwise. At the end of each day, he'd look into my eyes and simply say, "You are a good worker... You did so well today... You work harder than anyone else." I beamed as his kind words eased the heartaches and filled me with a sense of pride and worth that I had not yet been introduced to. No matter the long hours, or the rain that beat the dirt into pools of mud all around, or the worms that terrified me, I earned so much more than \$5.00 a day in those fields. I earned a true sense of self worth and pride.

Upcoming Theme Topics-

Limit essays to no more than 1000 words

Nicknames due 9/1/16

Facing Fear due 10/1/16

Leap of Faith due 11/1/16

Winning due 12/1/16

Found due 1/1/17

Stars due 2/1/17

Bargains due 3/1/17

Birthdays due 4/1/17

Picture Theme Project-Some people find it more inviting to respond to a picture rather than a word cue. Later in this issue you will find the upcoming pictures and the deadlines for your submissions. Currently, we create a packet of all the writings submitted on an individual picture theme and mail a copy of it to all who submit essays. The essays can be fact or fancy. Your imagination or your memory can be your guide in exploring each picture. As I cannot reproduce the many entries received I have selected a few for your consideration. If you wish to receive a complete packet of writings, then send in a submission of your own. Please limit stories to less than 1000 words. If the story you have to tell is much longer, perhaps you want to join some of the other writing programs we are offering this cycle. Writing crystallizes thought and can help with effective communication. Let's take this time to enhance all of our communication skills.

While your bodies are locked up, your minds and imaginations are free. Please use this writing exercise to explore your inner thoughts and feelings. There is no right or wrong responses, only your self-expression and your truth

Past Picture Themes



Tears of War by Gilbert Vasquez

In times of war, many things are shed. Blood is shed on both sides. Bullets are shed from the machines, which cause blood to shed forth in immense amounts. Despite the carnage these machines cause, companies and countries continue to shed forth these machine of mass destruction.

Above all that is shed in times of war is the tears. Tears of pain. Tears of loss. Tears of helplessness. Tears of hunger. The tears shed from war are infinite. Even years after wars are over, tears are shed by many on all sides.

The tears of war are lost to those who wage the wars of senseless motives. Greed, hate and power are only a few of the motives for war. Many are blinded by these motives, while many more are blinded by the tears of war.

I pray that one day we can shed forth tears of compassion, tears of love, tears of empathy, and tears of happiness. I pray the tears of war can come to an end and that they be replaced with tears of peace.

by Brian Lowe

All the men are gone. Forced into one army or another. The rest killed. All the women beaten and raped from the old to the young. These were horrible times in Cambodia. Why must the Chinese attempt to conquer us? Why must the French and the Americans battle them in our fields? What gives them the right to kill us in our own country--why don't they fight each other in their own countries? Why don't they fight somewhere else and leave us alone?

I am the little boy in this picture. My grandma is the older woman with the little girl behind her (my big sister) and my mom is in the back holding me. We are taking cover from gunfire and mortars. I was mostly used to it, being born in these times, but my sister is really freaked out. Not long after this, grandma got sick and died. The bad thing, or rather the good thing--depending on how you look at it, is that I don't remember any of this.

After grandmother passed on, we fled to the south where we lived in refugee settlements. Many of our people died during these times. Eventually we fled across the border and were allowed to emigrate to the U.S. If we would have stayed behind we would have been killed. Only a pitifully small number of our people survived and are now scattered throughout the U.S.

I found this picture in my mother's belongings after she passed away. My sister and I were going through what she had left behind and found it among several other items saved from our homeland: this photograph, a small clay Buddha and rosary, and a scroll of bamboo slats rolled up tight. It was in a language neither my sister nor I could read. We barely knew a few words of our birth tongue. We are only fluent in English, our new country's language.

I wanted to learn more about my ethnic heritage, so I began talking to the older members of the community. I am learning about what our lives were like before. I am even learning to speak and read my own language. The scroll is in a Tibetan script, so I am learning to read that as well.

I grew up empty of culture and religion. I am learning them now. I am doing this for the future of our people and particularly my children. Maybe even some day we can go back, although considering that they killed all of our people who stayed behind, we probably won't. We have a good life and freedom here; no one is trying to kill us because of our religion or ethnicity. We are happy here. Yes, I do believe we will stay.

Even so, it would be nice to visit our ancestral farm to work the soil and smell the scents of the land. How can I be so homesick when I do not even remember anything at all about my homeland from personal experience--just secondhand knowledge? My sister and mother knew. Mother would never talk about it and my sister only remembers the soldiers and guns. To this day she

freezes up and shakes with terror when she hears someone speaking in Chinese. She won't speak of it to me, but I think it has something to do with when the soldiers took her and mother. Those were bad days.

We don't have to worry about starving or clean water. We don't have to worry about them killing us or worse. We are safe and protected here. Yet is it not the human condition to want what one cannot have?

A homeland, freedom to live in the place of our ancestors without fear. It is good that we came to the U.S., for here we have learned the meaning of freedom. It is bad that we came because we left our people behind to die, and now we are all that remain. Should we have stayed and died with the rest? Or are we doing the right thing by trying to piece back together our culture? Perhaps it would be best if we just started over--would that be a better choice? Whatever I choose, what if I am wrong? What if I make the wrong choice and deprive my children of the life they deserve?

Even so, whatever I choose, I will do my best to the extent of my ability to teach my children where they come from and that they can choose to live however they want. At least they have that choice.

Wartime by Daniel Easter

The devastation of the battlefield was heart-wrenching. Bodies of both the dead and the dying were strewn about like a child's broken toys. It was the monsoon season and the field was deep with mud. The stink of blood and feces, mixed with sweat, was worse than any hog farm or slaughterhouse I've ever been in.

The women and children were the worst. They had the eyes of the old, the wise, as they watched us trudge through the mud of the field. They'd clearly lost the will to fight. But they weren't afraid of us. Never afraid.

I'd seen my share of women and children used as booby traps; grenades clenched in fists, dynamite taped around waists with short fuses, standing atop mines, waiting for a soldier to come close enough, then stepping off. Yeah, I'd seen my share of blood in my year in the hell of wartime.

Another week, and I'd be in the world. I won't have to look in those eyes again. I know I'm fooling myself. I know I'll see those women and children in my nightmares for the rest of my life.

I wonder what they see in my own eyes. Do they see a cold-blooded killer? Do they see the devil in my gaze? Or do they see a victim, like them?

No, I'll never forget these women and children, or their vacant eyes. I can only hope they forget mine.

Fear by Darnell Ballard

I sit here and look at the picture of people running from the terror in their country. The fear of the smallest noise giving away their position. It reminds me of the fear of my childhood. The fear when the next beating would come from a drunken father. The fear that if I did something wrong it would make it worse.

One day my window was broken in the middle of the night by a beer bottle thrown through it by an unknown vigilante. After that day, whenever my father came home drunk I would slowly pull the nailed board from the window. Every time a nail made a noise, I nearly passed out in fright. The worst fear was that when I finished crawling through the hole in the window that my father would be waiting there for me to beat my face in for running.

When I turned seven, I was saved by my aunt and uncle...or I thought I was. For the next five years I would face abuse from them and eight different foster homes before being adopted by the family I have now in 2012.

How does one overcome such fear? It is unknown to me. I look at such idols as Oprah and Dave Pelzer and wonder how they were able to let such fear and hatred go. How were they able to turn it into what they have today?

I sit in a prison cell trying to contemplate the physical and mental determination it must have taken and I am lost. I am 25 years old and I try everyday to forgive those that hurt me. I try to forgive those that left external and internal scars on my body and just can't.

Now my life is scarred by: PTSD, antisocial disorder, bipolar and split personality disorder. All for living with that fear and not learning how to forgive and trust again.

Fear is the ultimate abuse. It does more damage than any human could do.



The Big Review by Catherine LaFleur

Baker acted strangely on Tuesdays; his customers knew not to complain if they ordered something different than what the barista decided to push across the counter. The noise from the service counter, even the canned café music, set Dr. Peter Guzmann's teeth on edge this morning. Everyone at CuppaJoe seemed capable only of shouting their orders at Baker, who stoically mixed up order after order, indifferent to the rising volume. Peter impatiently tapped his Patek Phillipe, which showed twenty minutes to nine.

"Late, late," he muttered. A woman's voice oozed into his ear. "I'm sorry to be calling so early but haven't been able to schedule you for an interview until now."

"What do you mean, Miss?" Peter gritted out. "I've been waiting for your book reviewer at this shop for almost an hour. I'm an important man, a respected scholar, and I haven't time for interviewers who can't be bothered to keep an appointment."

"Dr. Guzmann, I do apologize. I'm sending someone out from the office right now, they should be with you at any moment. Reviewing your new book 'Now is all You've Got' is very important to us."

"I hope it's one of your senior people, not some intern who hasn't a clue as to how to get about the business?"

"I'm sure your interview will go smoothly, Doctor." The woman hung up.

Peter sat still for a moment. So they thought he was over the hill, too old to play the game, did they? He might be pushing eighty-five but he was still a player. He felt the lining of his jacket pocket for the tiny notebook containing quotes he wanted to mention to the reviewer. Good, it was still there. Picking up the newspaper on the table he opened it and disappeared into the details of city hall's latest scandal.

She cleared her throat, a real phlegm rattler. That's what woke the old man. His head had fallen forward over his chest. He blinked, disoriented, at the young woman sitting at his table. She wore an elegant black suit with a long sheer scarf tied loosely at the shoulder.

"Dr. Guzmann?" she inquired. "Dr. Peter Guzmann?"

"Yes," he mumbled, sitting up straighter. He felt refreshed and the feeling of impatience he had wrestled with disappeared. He wondered how long she had been sitting there.

"I'm Miranda, I'll be taking you upstairs for your review. Would you like something to drink? Can I freshen up your coffee before we leave?"

Peter looked at the thick yellow cup in front of him. He couldn't remember finishing it. "No need, no need at all. I'd rather just get down to the reason for our meeting today, Miss. I hope you read my new book."

"Yes, I have. Please, call me Miranda."

Dr. Guzmann and Miranda entered an old fashioned elevator. The cage was constructed of ornate ironwork with gold filigreed designs etched in the metal. The door slid open and the two stepped into a reception area decorated in gold Louis the XIV furnishings and blue Persian rugs.

"Is it possible for Dr. Guzmann to be reviewed now?" Miranda asked the receptionist, a golden-haired young man in an impossibly loud and gaudy plaid suit. The suit was so garish Peter had to squint just to make out the man's bright outline.

"Let me ask if everything is ready," the man rose smoothly and departed through a chased silver door.

Soon he returned. "Everything is set up, fifth door on the right."

"Oh," Miranda sighed, "that's a good room." She proceeded down the hall and opened the door on the right.

They entered and Miranda walked over to the rosewood casket. The top portion lay open to reveal the head and shoulders of the deceased. Peter vaguely recognized the man reposing in the satin lined interior. The head was balding, wrinkles pouched under the eyes. On his lips was a hint of a smile. Peter stood looking down on the man but feeling neither sad nor frightened. He wondered if he was there to identify him.

The door to the room opened again and a woman resembling a younger version of his first wife Claire glided in. "Impossible! It must be my wife's niece," Peter whispered. He stepped to the side as the woman approached the casket. He reached into a pocket for the clean handkerchief he always carried. She stood over the casket looking down. No special emotion showed on her face. Then she turned to Peter regarding him for a moment with an expression of faint surprise.

After a few seconds she turned to Miranda, "Yes, it's him."

"Are you alright my dear," Peter asked. He wasn't sure if she would recognize him. "My name is Peter, was married to your aunt Claire. Were you close to this gentleman?"

The woman regarded him seeming to think for a minute. Then she said, "You've made a mistake."

"A mistake, don't you know who this gentleman is?"

Her eyebrow slowly rose, "Don't you know this is Peter Guzmann? He died just yesterday."

Peter tried to smile. "Don't be ridiculous. It's probably another man who looks like me. Maybe it's another Peter Guzmann entirely," but the second he said the words he knew it was true. He was dead. Oddly, he felt nothing. The woman speaking to him was his wife, Claire, deceased for two years. He'd realized if he were alive he would be feeling something, happiness at seeing her, shock at his own death. Only someone who was beyond feeling could remain so detached at seeing his own body, a lifeless shell, lying before him. He tried to laugh but failed. The body and casket faded leaving Miranda and Claire standing on either side of him. Miranda unfurled her scarf and draped it over her dark hair and across her shoulders as a gentle mist filled the room.

"How did this happen? I was sitting in the CuppaJoe perfectly fit this morning waiting to meet the reviewer about my new book!"

"It wasn't this morning," Miranda replied gently, "and you weren't very fit." She tapped him on the breast pocket of his jacket. "Too many bacon burgers."

"I had a heart attack?"

"Probably," Miranda nodded.

In the cemetery, it was still and peaceful. A man with a long light-brown ponytail and a crisp collared shirt gave a brief review of Peter's life. "He was an intellectual in the best sense of the word. When Peter Guzmann came to America, he worked all day and night while attending college, graduating with the highest honors. True, he had some difficulties and both professional and personal disappointments. Almost every theory he had about God and life and death caused controversy, but he remained a scholar of the deepest integrity."

"Those are quotes from my notebook," Peter exclaimed as he patted his jacket pocket. Of course the little notebook had been removed much earlier. "I've never even met this man," he grumbled, "and I'm not protestant, I'm an atheist! Is this all they've got to say about me? Who arranged this funeral anyway?"

"Your children hired him and gave him some of your books," Miranda said.

Peter looked behind himself at the grieving faces of Peter, Jr. Sonja and Helena, sitting on the first row.

"Who's the woman with the blonde hair on the third bench?" Claire asked.

"Oh, aham..... my second wife, Gladys."

"Gladys, your secretary? I always thought something was going on!" Claire wrenched her hand from Peter's.

"I've had enough, let's get out of here," muttered Peter.

Miranda pulled the gauzy black scarf across her pale face making the sheer fabric into a sort of veil. "Where would you liked to go?" The preacher finished his eulogy and the scattered mourners sang a half-hearted rendition of Amazing Grace. Miranda lightly touched Peter and Claire on the shoulders. They floated out of the cemetery to the street. Miranda lit next to a gleaming white marble bench engraved with the words bus stop.

Peter sat down and looked at the pedestrians passing by a row of shops. Cars honked loudly as they whizzed past on the street. "Is this what death is like? Same city, same streets, same stores? Even I seem the same."

"Yep, but without a body," Claire held up a transparent hand as she looked through her palm at him.

"So what are we supposed to do now?" asked Peter.

"Really, I don't know what to tell you," responded Miranda as she peered over the edge of her veil. "Are you hungry, thirsty, or tired?" Claire and Peter looked at each other. "No, nothing."

"This is unbelievable! Crazy! Insane! The most ridiculous superstitions mankind has about dying are true," said Peter.

"Maybe there is a hell or a heaven?" Claire asked uncertainly.

"Should we expect an appearance from the Grim Reaper?" She glanced around the busy sidewalk.

"Anything is possible at this point," Peter sighed. "What's your role in all of this, Miranda?"

A blue and silver bus circled down from the sky and settled next to the bus stop. Miranda smiled, "I think your connection is here."

"Yes, what are you here for?" Claire asked.

Miranda stood up with the couple and pushed them gently toward the bus door. Peter and Claire turned back briefly. Miranda extended her slim hands to each of them and solemnly shook their hands. "I'm the Grim Greeter, I don't reap anymore, but I do stop by and say to everyone who has ever lived, 'nice try'.

"After you my dear," Peter said gallantly, taking Claire's astral arm as they climbed aboard the bus that had no destination listed on its message board.

"Where do you think we're going?" she asked in a worried voice.

They took seats in the middle and looked out the window at the tiny city below them, the earth and all its rivers, oceans and continents spread underneath them. They could see the whole universe, then everything became completely clear.

"Did you say something?" Claire asked.

Peter answered; "I'm glad I have been wrong my whole life."



by Norman Theriot

In looking back on my life I often wonder where the time has gone. Exactly where did I go wrong? I have lived all of these years, yet it seems that I have accomplished nothing. I have not succeeded, I have regressed, I have fallen into the charm of a broken heart, bridled by dreams that were just that--dreams.

Oh, I can remember setting goals in life--some attainable, some unrealistic. Some of these goals I achieved only to end up throwing away all that I had accomplished. Other goals I gave up on prematurely when I should have trudged on, seeking victory and the satisfaction of accomplishment.

I never really paid attention to the big picture. Instead, I lived for the moment, not giving any thought to where the future might head. Drugs will do that to you. I've taken everything for

granted, and never did I realize that everything could be lost within the blink of an eye. I had failed to realize that I always took the simple things in life for granted; they require maintenance or they will fade away. These simple things are what I miss the most since they are no longer available to me. Things like the love of one's spouse and children, friendships, the ability to take a simple bath, walks in the park. Or just laying around at night looking at the stars, contemplating the beginning and end of space.

Now I look at where I am today--locked away for a crime that I committed, paying my debt to society. But even here, life goes on. I have options and am still left with choices to make which will ultimately decide how I live my life tomorrow and after I am released. I could sit here and feel sorry for myself and let the days go of their own accord doing nothing to better myself. Looking like these boys in the picture living to be high, delinquent from society, I can do all of the things that are detrimental to my regaining then maintaining my freedom.

Or I can choose to change the way that I think and act. I can enroll and actively participate in the programs that the system offers. I can further my education. Knowledge equates power and is mandatory in the world outside these walls of concrete and steel. I can work hard to not add to the grim statistics on recidivism.

I now realize I have control over my life; all is not lost. Today is the day for change since tomorrow may be too late. New beginnings must not be put off. Procrastination breeds failure which I can no longer endure. I am not designed to be in a cage, and so I strive to overcome, to succeed where so many others have failed, to break the chains that have for so long held me back in life. It is up to me to take the first step to change my life. I must incorporate the tools needed to change the direction of my life and be what the Creator meant for me to be. I now realize that there is hope no matter how dismal the situation, no matter what the circumstances. I can overcome if I think before I act.

It is true that life is what you make it. With this in mind, I strive to live life to the fullest, to enjoy what I have and to seek peace and happiness in all that I do.

by Tommy Hightower

The photo of the three boys, around 12 to 13 years old, reminds me of an exact picture of my buddies and me in 1970. We were together all the time. Every day we were trying to be more adult than our years. Yet, because we were all poor white trash from the wrong side of the tracks quite literally: our neighborhood was divided from lower middle class West Sacramento, California. We were Broderick Boys. Not the Broderick Boys of today's Hispanic street gang either. We were the kids so poor we all had to work after school, weekends, all summer long. This was just to have decent clothes for school, and food to eat. No time for sports for none of us. It was just not available in school. Nor was it a social necessity when not in school.

The one vice we did indulge in was our "cigs." A throwback expression from the 50's that matched the state of things in "Old Broderick" California. There were a dozen of us total. But the main ones I am thinking of from this picture are Dale, Eugene, and me. We did everything together from 1st grade on to 10th grade in continuation High School. The last formal year of schooling for any of us. I returned to school later in life, and college. But as young boys, it was not in the cards or plans of parents or students at our alumni "Washington Elementary" (grades 6 thru 8). "Yolo High Continuation" was our high school. Not many ever graduated.

Life was good though. We lived in a large tract of land where the Sacramento River wrapped around three sides of the community. The Port of Sacramento with deep water channel cut the last side and made it literally an island town. 3,500 souls total. Old Broderick was about 500 souls. Each one was transplanted from the Dust Bowl midwest. Every home made of scrap lumber and used nails. Talk about personality in designs. No two homes were alike. New Broderick was about 1960 tract homes for military families at the 5 military bases surrounding Sacramento. We could see the State Capital's gold dome at night. The center of money and power for the state. Yet, we were not fit company for the inhabitants of Sacramento's elite. No matter we loved our life of fishing, hunting, camping and shooting guns every single day of childhood. There was a 1 mile wide by many miles long green belt that ran beside the river. Giant Cottonwood trees were everywhere. The smell of country. The sounds of the uneducated laborers were commonplace. I cannot remember many who were depressed or unhappy about life. We stuck together, all of us, no matter what. Fire burned down a home. No one was homeless or without support. We did not depend on the government. We depended on each other.

Fast track to today. I am the one who stayed out of prison the longest. Got the college education. Made the most money. Yet I am the only one who has a life sentence and a 21-years in custody straight time. Dale and Eugene, both drug addicts. Both have done dozens of short terms. Both died early on in life. Few of us are left alive. Funny how life throws you curve balls. Thank you though, for a nice trip down memory lane. I think I have never been happy as long since the days of childhood that picture brought back to me. God Bless the Country Boys of Old Broderick. May God Bless our souls.



The Rain Wash Away by Jason Gonzalez

It was raining the last time I saw you. I ran sixteen blocks through the downpour because I couldn't stand it anymore. I cut through every shortcut and back alley I could remember. I dodged oncoming traffic and angry old ladies smoking Virginia Slims

outside a bar. I ran through a street fight and slipped on the corner near the Chinese place where we used to get takeout. I ran because there was a hole in my heart where there should have been none. I ran because I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't. I ran because I had to try.

I kept thinking of everything we had been through. The early mornings when you would wake me up so you could spend time with me before you left. The late nights on the back porch with the breeze in our face and the stars over our heads. I remembered our New Year's trip to Chicago. Climbing the beached paddle wheel ship and watching the fireworks from the balcony. Huddling close to fight off the chill wind from the lake, and then you shivering so hard that you wrapped yourself in my coat, and my shivering so hard that you wrapped me in your arms.

I kept thinking how you could make me laugh. Your deadpan face as I asked you what kind of person on the face of the Earth could not like ice cream, and your telling me someone who's lactose intolerant. My threatening to throw you in an oven and burn you in a horrible, fiery death, and you telling me good luck because it will take a while to pre-heat.

I closed my eyes and heard the sound of your voice. The wind blew, and I felt the touch of your hair against my face. I thought about you from the moment I woke until the moment I slept.

You were there through the hard times. You lifted me through the pain and the hurt and the loneliness. You were my strength, and I was your loyal bandman.

I looked in the mirror and saw your eyes reflected back at me. That small smile when you were happy--that smile that seemed to say, I know you love me. I love you too, but I'll never tell. That look on your face when you were worried about me--the look that let me know you would protect me from every harm. A fire burned inside me as I thought about the day I told you I had to leave. You didn't understand that it wasn't your fault. I didn't know how to tell you how damaged I was. That I had lost the ability to love. That I had been through every hell imaginable and had nothing left to give.

I didn't know how I would explain to you that you were the only thing on my mind from that day to this one. Didn't know how I would explain that all I wanted to do was brush your hair behind your ears and see your face. To have you lay your head on my shoulder. To hold you. To kiss you. To feel you. To love you again.

So I ran. Through rain and puddles and traffic. I ran until my muscles burned and my body ached. I ran until my heart beat hard enough to tear a hole in the universe. I ran until my body shuddered and my soul cried out for mercy.

Then I ran some more.

When I rounded the corner, you were there. I stopped, not sure what to do next. You were standing in the rain with the umbrella creating a halo of untouched space in a world washed away. You were as beautiful as I remembered. More than I remembered. Your dark hair blowing gently with the breeze. Your eyes bright. That small smile on your face.

I wish I had realized at the time. I would have walked away. I would have gone before you saw me. Before you slowly turned your head and our eyes met across the time and distance that had separated us for so long.

Your eyes told the story. Hiding your emotions was always easy for you, but your eyes give it all away. At that moment I knew that smile on your face wasn't for me.

I was soaked to the bone and nearly hypothermic. The cold didn't make me shiver; it was the concerned look in your eyes. The one that told me you knew how much I was hurting. The one that let me know that all you wanted to do was run to me, hold me, and protect me.

As the rain ran down my face, and my fingers turned to ice, I knew I had made another mistake. I had complicated your life again, but this time I had a chance to stop it before it went too far. This time I had a chance to make it right.

I like to think that in that moment, our eyes said everything we never could to each other. I like to think that you heard me say the words I love you even though I never did. That you knew that I thought you were the best person I had ever met in my life. That all I ever wanted was to see you smile. That I wanted nothing more than for you to be happy, even if that wasn't with me. That's why, when he came down the driveway, put his hand on your face and kissed you, all I could do was offer you a small smile of my own as I walked away.

Those sixteen blocks back were the longest walk of my life. I wanted to hold onto your face. I wanted to remember the way you looked then, but I couldn't. It became distorted and hazy, blown away by the new pain that crept into my being. The pain and the hurt and the heartache: the only things left that I could feel.

I passed the Chinese place. The ice cream stand where the cone melted down my arm in the 95 degree heat that one summer day, making you laugh harder than I've ever heard you laugh before. The park where we would lay in the grass and you would ask me any crazy question that popped into your head. The flower shop where I bought you the bouquet after you graduated. The candy store where I bought you the chocolate you love and left it on your pillow on Valentine's Day.

Memories everywhere. Everything. All around me. Invading every sense, every corner of my mind. But the only thing I wanted to remember was you.

I made it home and stood in front of the door. I was numb. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I felt the weight of the water coming down on my face. I looked to the sky for answers. I demanded them from God, from the universe, from someone, from anyone. I stood and let the rain wash over me, the world's tears mingled with mine.

The next day the rain still fell. The world outside and my world inside were still broken. I cleaned up, dressed, and ate mechanically, without feeling, without care. I grabbed my bag and an umbrella and headed for the door.

As I stepped out onto the sidewalk, I popped open the umbrella. The halo of unwashed space surrounded me. I closed my eyes and took a breath, letting the rain wash away everything I couldn't seem to let go of. I turned down the street and started to go.

That's when I saw you standing in the rain.

Parole by D.J. Forbes

It was a cold and drizzly morning the day I was to parole.

I'd been awake for some time before they came to escort me to R&R for processing. Laying there, I contemplated my past.

The fact is that I screwed up my life and the lives of some others. While there was only one direct victim to my crime, indirect victims abounded. I had hurt so many people through my selfish actions, many of whom I love, that I deserve this prison term.

But you know what? That was then, and this is now. I am no longer the person I used to be.

I'd spent the last 15 years sifting through the wreckage of my life, salvaging what little good there was and discarding the rest. The funny part is that doing so turned out to be the easiest part of my transformation process. The hardest part was developing the traits of strength, integrity, and honesty in an environment as negative as prison.

I had though! Otherwise, the board wouldn't have found me suitable for parole.

Now that the day arrived, I found my excitement mixed with trepidation. For fifteen years, my life has been on hold while the world continued on without me. This new world of advanced digital devices and social media was alien to me, and I wasn't exactly sure what to expect.

It wasn't like I had anyone to guide me through this time. Both my parents had passed away, I'd lost contact with all my friends over the years, and neither of my ex-wives wanted anything to do with me. In fact, my first ex-wife denied me contact with my only daughter on the grounds that I'd broken too many of the commandments.

But if there's one thing prison has shown me, it's that with the proper mental attitude, you can adapt and overcome anything. So while some people might feel hopeless in my situation, I saw it simply as an opportunity to achieve, not that it would be easy!

When my escort came to get me, I grabbed the clear trash bag containing the few possessions I was taking with me, took one last look around, and headed out. The drizzle of the early morning had since turned into a downpour.

Walking through the rain on my last day in prison, I couldn't besmirch my time here. The way I see it, prison probably saved my life and kept me from hurting more innocent people. It gave me the opportunity to take a close look at my life and to then transform myself into the person I've always wanted to be.

Arriving at R&R, I was put into a holding cell all by myself. I guess I was the only one lucky enough to be paroling today. The R&R sergeant took pity on me and let me change into my dress outs right away instead of making me sit there soaked. I thanked him for his kindness.

My processing went quickly enough, and I soon found myself back in the holding cell. While I had encountered the "hurry up and wait" phenomenon over 30 years ago in the army, time didn't lessen the levels of frustration that accompanied it.

After two hours, I asked what the delay was. I was told they had received a call informing them that my ride was delayed by the weather. Ride? I was under the impression I'd just be loaded on a Greyhound and sent on my way.

As time continued to slowly crawl by, I sat there trying to stay relaxed and keep my thoughts calm. Truth be told, I had this paranoid thought that this was all a joke, that shortly they would come up to the bars of the holding cell and yell, "Psych!" They would then change me back into my blues and escort me back to my yard while laughing at my naiveté of thinking they'd actually let me out after what I did.

Knowing that I was my own worst enemy at times like this, I breathed and let things go and focused instead on my dreams and hopes for the future. On top of that list was finding my daughter to discover whether or not she wanted me back in her life. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to start, and I didn't know what her mom may have told her. Part of my motivation for change was

the desire to become someone she could be proud of, and until I knew otherwise, I would continue under the assumption she might want me back in her life; I had to keep a positive mentality.

After what seemed an eternity, I was informed that my ride arrived and that it was time to go. Standing up straight, I grabbed my things and headed out to begin a new chapter in my life.

My escort walked me in silence to the salle port. He pointed to a car outside the fences, identifying it as my ride. I could dimly see someone sitting in the driver's seat, obviously staying out of the rain.

Passing through the final gate, I made my way toward the parked car. As I approached, the driver's side door opened and an umbrella popped open sheltering the driver from the chill rain. I stopped a respectful distance away. When the driver stood, I stared in shock at a face I hadn't seen in 15 years. Luckily, the pouring rain hid the tears now streaming down my face as I heard the words I longed to hear: "Hello Daddy."



Contact by Steven P. Arthur

On a remote farm just south of Topeka, Kansas, Jared Blankenship was feeding his dairy cows when he noticed, in the sky, the first of many odd occurrences that were to come.

"What the hell are they doin'," Jared asked, one hand tucked in his overalls, and the other pointing into the sky.

Beyond his arthritic pointed finger, high in the sky, a murder of crows flew in a figure eight pattern.

"I reckon they lost their bearin's; never seen 'em do that," said Jannie with her hand shading her big blue eyes. Her flower print dress was tinted a deep orange by the dusk light and flapped in the light breeze by the flat prairie lands. "Come on, Jared. Let's get inside. I don't like the look of that."

At the expected speed of octogenarians, they moved toward the two-bedroom farm home that they had both occupied for nearly five decades.

After walking around the house to ensure all of the storm windows were properly closed, Jannie went into the spartan living room. Devoid of the most common of furniture and family photos, the only exception to amenities was where she found Jared, sitting in his over-stuffed recliner. Despite the plentiful space, an aging TV with a very modern satellite attachment which afforded them 200 premium channels from around the world sat in front of him, nearly touching his knees.

Jared sat motionless with the TV remote in his outstretched hand, pointed at the news channel that repeatedly

showed a short, amateur video of wild geese flying in a perfect circle across the screen.

"Well, would you look at that," he said.

"What'd reckon it means?" she asked.

"Dear, it could be a sign of the times." He turned to look at her. "We knew it would come without warning."

"Come on then, husband. Let's go downstairs." She kicked off her shoes and began to move toward the kitchen. He followed close behind, just in time to see her easily slide the kitchen table into the corner. Underneath was a small hole with a latch that she depressed. It popped back up, and she pulled it to her. The square door opened quietly on hidden hinges. She stood back.

"You first, husband. I will seal it behind us."

He moved over to the door that had covered a stairwell leading down into the darkness. With familiarity and the dexterity of a much younger man, Jared climbed down. She followed close behind, sealing the door.

When she was halfway down, bright lights flickered on, but she expected them and didn't so much as pause in her descent 20 feet below. When her bare foot touched down on the cold metal floor, there was no sound. She looked around at the monitors, control panels and multi-colored switches that covered 3 walls. Jared was turning on the panel in front of him. He turned to her with a look of excitement and began to undress. He hastily stripped his clothes off while his loose, weathered skin simultaneously began to draw tight. The wisp of white hair on his head came off with a swipe of his hand as easily as wiping off water. With his clothes off, he stood in front of her, his arms up as if putting himself on display. His skin was smooth, tight, and ashen grey, and he had no visible genitalia. His head, much larger than it should have been for his body size, was set above two large, slanted, ebony orbs.

"I like this look much better," she said, having removed her clothing as well. She appeared just as he did, with no distinguishing features to tell them apart, except the ice blue contact lenses that she was removing.

After Jared sat and stared at the console, he began moving levers and typing; his arthritic hands were gone and replaced with three thick fingers that moved swiftly over the keyboard. "I'll let them know we are ready for contact."



The Failed Messiah by D.L. Poe

The failed messiah stood waist deep in the salty sea, shame burning across his features as plainly as if it had been written across his face. "How could this be," he asked himself. He

threw up his hands and screamed at the heavens, "Why hast thou forsaken me?!"

Amir bowed his head in defeat, seemingly against his will. The visions had been so plain, so real. Night after night, the Lord had come to him in his dreams with promises of supernatural abilities in exchange for leading His lost flock back to Him. It happened each night for a week. Amir had woken each morning soaked in sweat, with the sounds and smells from his visions lingering delicately upon his senses.

So Amir had donned a cloak and done his best to make them listen. He preached in the subways, on the sidewalks, even in the public restroom. All the while, he was ridiculed, spit upon, and even assaulted. This flock of people didn't realize that he was trying to save them; they thought he was crazy.

Amir walked from the water--not on the water--and fell to his knees on the sandy shore. Shells dug into his knees and broke his skin, yet Amir felt nothing. He bowed his head and sobbed because he was too broken to care about the shame of an old man weeping in public like a scolded child.

A boy and girl of about 16 walked past, holding hands. Amir considered speaking to them, but crushing disappointment stole the words from his lips before he could speak them aloud. He looked at his trembling hands in disbelief.

Each night, the Lord came to Amir in his dreams, and each night, He made the same request. "Lead my flock back into my loving embrace. Amir, my son," the Lord instructed him. Each night, in those dreams, Amir received a different reward for his unquestioning servitude.

The first night he'd flown, soaring through the heavens above the vast city. It was wonderful--exhilarating. With each breath and dive through the swirling air currents, he felt the Lord in every pore, elevating him.

The second night, he was granted future sight when he saw his grandchildren, and their grandchildren. He swelled with pride, and never before had he felt so grounded in his own existence.

The third night, he was a spirit able to intrude upon anything and anyone without being seen. He visited the home of his ex-wife and watched her dine with his son and daughter. He wept then, too, and the love closed over him like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night.

The fourth night, he found himself with a super strength. He went to different parts of the world where he was needed and saved people from the rubble after an earthquake. He torn a pregnant woman from the wreckage of her car after a drunk driver ran her off the road.

The fifth and final night, he had clairaudience, the ability to focus on hearing any sound, no matter the distance. He listened as good men planned and evil men plotted. He heard things that made him sure there'd never been a more important task than the one he was given in his dreams. He became convinced that it was up to him to save mankind.

Each morning, Amir awoke feeling like a new man. Knowing mankind would depend on him and that he was chosen by the Lord, he had quite a weight upon his shoulders. He was determined not to fail in this most sanctimonious task.

Returning his thoughts to the present, Amir thought of his dismal failure of the last four days. He tried with all his might, and how he was giving up. He knew he was wrong; they were just dreams, like all men have. Amir was left with no choice but to accept his normalcy. He trudged home to change his dripping cloak and maybe grab a bite to eat. As he walked, he thought to himself, "Let the Lord find another sucker."

Leaving the sand, Amir looked down to see a dead bluejay on the side of the road. It was the most beautiful blue with white highlights and a black feather on its wings. Surely, only the Lord could make something so flawless and perfect.

Amir couldn't bring himself to leave the bird to rot in the gutter, and so he decided to put it in his pocket and bury it when he got home. With cupped hands, Amir gently lifted it and looked closely with awe and wonder. Its feathers were riddled with dirt, and so he began to blow upon the bird. As he blew, his warm breath over the bird, he felt a sudden, heavenly surge upon his chest. Tears began to flow from his eyes as his breath continued to flow--surely his longest exhale.

Suddenly, the Jay began to pulse in his hand, and Amir continued blowing as it twitched and stirred. His breath began to run out, yet the Jay sprang to its feet in his hands before spreading its perfect wings into flight.

Amir watched the miracle bird until it disappeared from his sight. Then he fell to his knees and wept for the second time.

"Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content."

-Helen Keller, American author, political activist

"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."

-Anais Nin, essayist and memoirist

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

-Maya Angelou, civil rights activist

"Forgiveness is the final form of love."

-Reinhold Niebur, Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient

"Either you run the day or the day runs you."

-Emanuel "Jim" Rohn, American author, motivational speaker

"I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

-Martin Luther King Jr., African-American civil rights activist

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

-Aesop, Ancient Greek author, fabulist

"When you cease to dream, you cease to live."

-Malcom Forbes, American entrepreneur

Upcoming Picture Writing Cues



Due: 9/1/16



Due: 12/1/16



Due: 10/1/16



Due: 1/1/17



Due: 11/1/16



Due: 2/1/17



Due: 3/1/17



Due: 4/1/17

Final Notes- Everything these days takes longer to do than I plan for in my mind. I know that with any construction project I undertake, I should double the money and time the project will need in my head before I start, but I sometimes forget to do just that with other projects. I had hoped to have this newsletter out in the early summer, but here I am, still writing in late July. With some perseverance, this will be in the mail by early to mid August 2016. I am interested to see when you all will receive the newsletter. Please mail in your sign up sheets and surveys by mid October, as that is when I hope to begin mailing out the new programs. You must sign up before the mailing happens if you hope to get the requested packet. An upside to packets taking longer to mail is that by good fortune, if you happen to sign up late, a particular packet may not have been mailed out so you will still be able to receive it. We will probably be mailing packets out through until mid Dec., but sign up by mid Oct. to make sure you receive the packets you want. Please use additional paper if need be to complete the survey.

For those of you who received the Winter 16 newsletter, I reported that I was still recovering from the broken hip I experienced after falling off my son's skateboard. It is a little better,

but by no means healed. It can really start to hurt, especially after gardening activity or walking. I am considering a hip replacement, but something about sawing of my femur gives me pause. I figure I'll give it another 6 months or so and see what happens. I may elect to have the screws pulled out of my hip now that the bone has healed and see if that helps. The surgeons suggest replacement, but I understand they don't get paid and hospitals don't earn if they don't operate. It is eye opening to see how the capitalist for-profit system can corrupt almost anything given enough time.

Meanwhile, I am still keeping very busy while hobbling. I am starting a garlic farm. Quality garlic is a desired commodity. I started a few years ago, planting back the harvest from each year. This year, I am harvesting 4000 garlics and hope to plant 16,000 in the fall (late Oct). I am rototilling up new beds whenever I can. I have enlisted my godson at the rate of \$10 an hour to help me. Using a big troybuilt tiller or any heavy duty brush cutter messes with my hip and leaves me hobbling and in pain, but I can't seem to stop. I am hardwired to garden. I actually have trouble understanding why everyone doesn't want to spend their time digging and planting, but I see just from my friends and family that it is a low priority for most people. I am in the middle of a garlic harvest now and hope to have them all out by August 1st. I have plenty of other vegetables growing and hope to begin freezing and drying them for winter use soon.

I am going camping with my family for a week this summer at 1000 Islands, an area on the St Lawrence river on the US Canadian border. It is beautiful there in the summer and we kayak, swim, eat, and bike away the week.

I don't have crystal ball to see inside your prison, but as I walk [hobble] around the free-world I see lots of stress and anxiety in the actions and words of those I meet. These are troubling times. Perhaps, all times have been troubling, and those of us living today think it is only now that things have gotten so bad. It's very hard to tell. Growing up in the 50's, we were on alert for nuclear weapons from Russia that would destroy all life, and before that, there was WWII. It's hard to know how to gage the severity of our times and the unsettling effect it has. It seems that more and more people take medication for mental health, but perhaps in the past more people were leading quiet lives of desperation. It is our intent to create programs that connect you to a deeper part of yourself as well as with the community of people in prison and in the free world. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are all connected. We all share common ancestors if you go back far enough.

As a species we leave a big and destructive foot print with all the disposable, non recyclable products we make, with all the habitat destruction we cause, with all the fossil fuel we take out of the earth and spew out into the atmosphere. We are living through a time of human-caused mass extinctions of many plant and animal species. We as one single species have expanded our ability to shape the environment around us in ways unheard of in the known past, and we don't understand the repercussion of what we have created until the results bite us in the backside. The stress and anxiety running through society reflects the deep imbalances we are creating through our lifestyles and what we describe as progress. As much as we think modern culture is smart and sophisticated, it seems to me that our current culture is more barbaric and dumbed down. A society that offers Hillary or Donald as the best leadership leaves many of us wanting for something better.

I would like to hear your thoughts on so many subjects and hope you will put some thought and time in answering the survey questions. Knowing who we all are and what we think will help PE become more responsive and effective in creating programs that make a difference in your lives. Again, please use a separate sheet of paper to answer some of the survey questions. You can remove the cover sheet which includes the survey and the registration form and mail it back to us to get registered for the next program. If you have friends who are not a part of PE and wish to join, they can send in their answers to the survey as well, and we can register them for our programs. Be strong, be easy with one another. Show kindness and channel light and good will.
Best to you,
Gary

Here's a preview of some poems from the upcoming PE Poetry Anthology:

Open Doors by Lonnie Gavaldon

They say your closet can hold many things
Not just clothes...
Sometimes skeletons pop out and become
Exposed...
Some would rather keep that door closed
As for me...
The more I open up the more I seem
To grow...
Some hangers hold hurt and a little pain
Others resentments towards family and friends...
Tried to break the hinges
but they wouldn't bend...
So I kicked the door open that's when
I felt release from within...
Not sure if I should make amends cause
Some things broken can't always be fixed...
All I'm left with is mixed emotions so
I hide my feeling don't wanna risk exposure...
But with closure brings hope after forgiveness
Brings growth...

Desert Storm by Carl Branson

Orange clad competitors curse the darkening sky
It's ominous rumbling likely foretells
An early return to stuffy hot cells

Joggers, bodybuilders and ball players alike listen
As the hot breath or summer howls from distant hills
Razorwire responding humbly in somber trills

At the base of the chain link fence
A captive sports page flaps rat-a-tat-tat
It's rattle mocking the last crack of a baseball bat

The field's parched mouth sings praise
Dust rising like smoke from a burnt offering
Multiplying many a prisoner's suffering

When at long last
The sky decides without favor or malice
To empty glistening pearls from its chalice

Dismay turns to joy
When each adult-boy plays in the mud
Slippery and slick during this sudden flood

Revolutionize by Maurice Stokes

I'm all for a revolution for the right cause
But black America needs to wake up because this is bigger than a law
Bigger than Trayvon Martin no disrespect to his life
But Zimmerman's incarceration wouldn't stop the deaths overnight
Nor would it ease the pain or take away the tears
Of the 7000 black mothers that lose a child every year
To the senseless violence happening in the inner city streets
Fighting amongst ourselves over the ground we put our feet
Our problem's deeper than racism in this day and time
As 91% of black murders are black on black crime
That's sixty three hundred seventy black lives
Attributed every year to our self inflicted genocide
Yes, it was tragic and truly a shame
But how can we scream about it when we're doing the same?
Gunning down our own brothers over skittles and tea
It's impossible not to be angry because Trayvon could have been me
But what's the difference when we die from the bullet of each other
Does it make it not wrong because he's killed by a brother?
This is truly an issue I don't understand
A death is still a death why does it matter whose hand
Pulled the trigger, to rob him of life
Race shouldn't matter cause a life is a life
So if we going to start a revolution we need the right goal in sight
And start in our own communities teaching ourselves to value life...

Sign up Sheet

REGISTRATION FORM

Please Note: If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list through March 2017 This form or a letter should be returned in

a timely manner if you want to sign up for new programs. If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us . If we do not hear from you in 6 months you are removed from our "Active" mailing list.

For those of you who can you can email us at prisonerexpress@gmail.com. Our website is www.prisonerexpress.org

Programs – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.. Funds are low so only join that which you will do.

Expedited Book Mailings –to be eligible to be part of the expedited book program, please check be sure to check with the

administration at the prison you are housed, to learn if you are allowed to send 8 stamps or a check for \$4.00 to cover postage.

Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. We have a good selection of donated used books. Send us a list of the types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

_____ Number of books allowed

_____ Soft cover only

_____ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

Poetry Project – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 16. I understand that to receive the anthology I have to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

Telling Your Story – Please send me Michelle's instruction packet on writing about my life.

Grammar Studies- Please send me the packet that will help me learn to use the English language more effectively when I write

Journal Project – I will keep a Journal for a year, and may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

Chemistry of Climate Change – Please send me a packet that helps explain ongoing climate instability and the science behind it.

Chess Club – Yes, I want to receive mailings on how to improve my chess game.

ARTknow--Come explore the world of art with Treacy with her art newsletter. Treacy has a lot to offer those who want to explore the artist within, as well as practical tips for improving your art skills. She shares her passion for art and artistic expression in the pages of ARTknow.

Buddhist Studies and Meditation Newsletter-Read Tara's latest edition on the practice of mindfulness through breath and Contemplation

Songwriting Instruction-Please send Kathy's packet on the art of songwriting

Do you you have access to instruments? _____

Do you have recording possibilities? _____,

Can listen to mp3s? _____

_____ /

Do you have any experience with making music or writing songs? _____

Exploring the Ocean- The oceans make up the vast majority of the surface area of the earth. Come explore this frontier and learn of the importance of this vast connect waterway.

You do not need to sign up for the Theme and Picture Writing programs. By submitting your writings and art, you are automatically included on all future mailings regarding that specific art or writing project.

NAME: (PLEASE PRINT)

ADDRESS and ID #

I give the Alternatives Library permission to post my writings and artwork on the web

SIGNATURE:

Prisoner Express Arts Culture Enrichment Survey

PE has been flowing along for the past fifteen years. Now as a more mature organization, it is time for PE to become a bit more self-aware. PE is comprised of all the active participants at any one moment. Some of you writing have been here for a good part of these 15 years and others of you are brand new to this partnership. You bring a wealth of knowledge about what is needed to help prisoners improve their skills and mindset while doing time. PE wants to hear from you so we can better digest who we all are as a collective group. Prison has a way of isolating individuals, and that isolation often has a negative impact on one's mind. Participating in the PE programs is one small way to realize you are not alone and that others feel the same way you do. We want to focus on creating meaningful activities for the incarcerated, and so we are holding the first ever survey. Please send in the completed PEACE survey with your request to join other programs or your writing submissions. I am excited to read your responses- Gary

Survey for PE

1. I have been incarcerated for this current sentence for _____ years. Total years incarcerated: _____

2. Release date: M____/ D____/ Y_____ .

3. (Circle One) Security: High | Medium | Low

4. (Circle One) Beds: Single cell | Bunkmate | Dormitory Setting

If you circled "Dormitory Setting," how many beds are there? _____ beds.

5. How many hours a day are you allowed out of your cell? _____ hours.

6. (Circle One) Are you in some form of administrative segregation? YES NO

7. (Circle One) How many years have you have been a part of PE? New | 1 | 2 | 3-5 | 5-8 | 9-15

8. Are you taking regular medications while incarcerated? YES NO

If yes, please list the medications you take: _____

9. PE currently offers different programs each cycle. Please rate each of the programs using the evaluation scale below, labeling either 1, 2, or 3 for each:

- 1: I am very interested and want more on the topics already offered.
- 2: I am moderately interested in these topics and curious to learn more.
- 3: I only participate because I am bored and something is better than nothing.

- _____ Writing (Theme Essays, Creative Writing workshops, etc.)
- _____ History (Russian, Civil Rights, etc.)
- _____ Poetry Anthology
- _____ Science & Ecology
- _____ Spirituality and Meditation Packets
- _____ Self Reliance [Homesteading] Packets
- _____ Psychology
- _____ Chess
- _____ Math
- _____ Art
- _____ Journal Program

11. This cycle, on top of the ongoing writing programs, we will offer a song writing packet, a telling your story packet, and a grammar packet to further develop your writing skills. If you are currently participating in a writing program, please list which programs and what benefits you have gained from them.

12. Please list, if any, suggestions for new writing projects: _____

What do you hope to gain from this packet? _____

13. PE wants to have a diverse and interesting assortment of programs each cycle. As we are currently limited by the funds available, typical programs can be no longer than 28 pages and mailed every 6 months. Please suggest up to five programs you would like to see further developed (and why, if you have a reason).

Personal Survey Part I — Please circle YES or NO for the following questions:

- | | | | |
|---|-----|--|----|
| 1. Do you have friends or family outside who support you during your incarceration? | YES | | NO |
| 2. Have you witnessed episode of prejudice based on racial or ethnic difference? | YES | | NO |
| 3. Would you be interested in study packets that explore the underlying issues of prejudice and offer perspectives for improving relationships among people with different backgrounds? | YES | | NO |
| 4. Do you feel safe? | YES | | NO |
| 5. Do you have children? | YES | | NO |
| If yes, would you like to join either of these programs? | | | |
| 1. A project focused on parenting issues. | YES | | NO |
| 2. A project where you can create something for your child. | YES | | NO |
| 6. Do you have internet access? | YES | | NO |
| 7. Would you mind our using your name when writing about the contents of our survey to other prisoners? | YES | | NO |
| What about online? | YES | | NO |

Personal Survey Part II – Please elaborate on a separate sheet of paper if possible:

1. What would you like your friends and family to know about how you are?
2. What do you miss most while being incarcerated?
3. What are you most thankful for?
4. If you had to describe yourself in five words, what would they be? Are any of these words something you wish to change? Which words do you pride yourself in being?
5. How would you describe the relationships between prisoners of different ethnic and racial backgrounds?
6. If any, tell us about a corrections officer who did right by you and helped you in a difficult situation.
7. What is your favorite commissary item and why?
8. When and what do you share with others? When do you refuse to share?
9. If you could create one reform to improve the prison system what would it be? How would your reform affect people's lives?
10. What hobbies do you have? Were they hobbies you enjoyed before your incarceration?
11. Have you learnt any new skills while incarcerated? What skills would you like to learn?
12. Are there any craft instruction topics for which you would like to see a packet?
13. How do you get your reading material?
14. Please share a recipe, if any, you look forward to making when you can. (We will create a pamphlet called "Cell Block Cooking" with a sampling of recipes.)
15. Do you have a skill/resource you use to barter in prison (ex. making cards, art, paralegal work)? If yes, please share a favorite barter you have made with someone where you both felt you got what you needed.
16. Is minding your own business the best policy? Please explain. What if your friends are in danger?
17. What kind of support do you seek from your fellow prisoners?
18. Given our limitations, what is the best thing you could receive from PE?
19. What do you want to do when you are released? What do you need to learn for that to happen?
20. How has prison life changed since you have been incarcerated? Let us know the span of years you are covering in your answer?
21. What does it feel like when you get a PE program in the mail?
22. What benefits do you think PE brings you and other incarcerated individuals?
23. What do you think of people who write stories in PE News revealing their vulnerabilities?
24. What question(s) do you wish we asked in this survey and what is the answer to that?