



Writers Bloc

Fall 2014

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On behalf of all the editors involved with producing this publication, I would like to thank all the contributors, authors, and artists from Auburn Correctional Facility, as well as the students at Cornell. Writer's Bloc went through some major organizational changes this past semester, and there have been multiple challenges that could have negatively affected the quality of this publication. However, thanks to all the support from the inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility, Cornell Prison Education Program and its TA's, and our devoted Writer's Bloc members involved with the editing process, we have successfully compiled the best Writer's Bloc publication in its history. Serving as one of the best ways to bridge the gap between those inside and outside the prison, Writer's Bloc has allowed many individuals to demonstrate their literary and artistic talents and creativity to countless number of people in the area and around the world through its online version. The theme for this publication was *Firsts: Times, Tries and Triumphs*. Enjoy!

—Owen Lee-Park, HBHS '15, *President*

Note: During the editing process, submissions were organized under the three categories of the theme, *First Times*, *First Tries*, and *First Triumphs*. These categorizations were made by the editors based on the contents of each submission, and they do not necessarily reflect the decisions the authors themselves may have made.

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Every experience is a once in a lifetime experience,
because no matter how hard we try, **nothing's**
ever exactly the same as it was the first time.

Jolene Perry

first times

First Day *by* Min Kyu Kim

A screaming pink newborn with little tufts of black hair,
Mouth in a surprised 'o' and closed eyes against the bright fluorescents.
The doctor hands you over to a sweaty, yet beaming woman,
"A healthy baby boy!"
This was the first day of your life.

A little toddler with cute overalls with the straps falling off the shoulders,
As sticky ice cream trails sticky rivulets down your chubby fingers.
Adults coo at squishy cheeks and fix your clothes, neatening your hair.
This was the first memory of your mind.

An awkward elementary student; a backpack with your name printed on it slung low on your back,
Glasses that don't fit right are pushed up every two seconds and your brother's clothes almost
swallows you up,
Your eyes are bright and you're eager to answer the questions your classmates don't know.
You can rattle off facts of saints, ancient civilizations, biology.
This was the first day of your school.

An even awkwarder fledgling adolescent, still haven't grown out of the glasses quite yet,
Though you're counting the days until your mother relents and lets you get contacts,
Constantly pulling up your socks to your ankles, and kicking your scuffed Chuck Taylors,
You've started wishing for summer since December.
This is the first sign of your teenage years.

A nervous high schooler in a new school, where everyone has grown up with everyone else,
Shaky hands grasp the yellow paper schedule that's trembling in your sweaty hold,
You panic as the hallways seem to go on forever and you just can't find room A4,
This was your first day of unsureness.

An angry, and then resigned junior, who has given up,
You haven't seen anyone in days, the dark thoughts creep in your mind,
And you just,
Can't.
Your first depression.

A new graduate from a high school you've hated,
Clad in yellow robes, you take smiling pictures with people you know you'll never see again,
If you could help it.
You resent this, but you smile anyways.
Because....

This is your first day.
First day of your life.

The First Time is the Worst Time

by Jacob Russell

With a yawning stretch, Tommy lazily lifted his eyelids to see Darth Vader's blood red lightsaber. Blankets and bedsheets flew about as he kicked his way out of bed and rushed for the door in a panic. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the Sith Lord pointing to eight and seven. *8:35! I overslept. Already missed the Smurfs. This is the worst day ever!* He padded down the mauve carpeted hallway toward the kitchen. *Mommy and Dad went at it more than usual last night.* Their yelling woke him throughout the night, until finally the front door slammed and he heard his dad's truck roar off.

Four steps into the kitchen, his naked feet squeaked to a halt on the cold pink linoleum. A bare table greeted him. *Where's my Cap'N Crunch?* His cereal, bowl, and milk weren't there. They always awaited him on Saturday mornings. *Mommy musta overslept...* He rushed back down the hall to his parents' bedroom. The door was open, the bedroom empty. *She must be in the bathroom.* "Mommy!" Silence answered him. He saw the open door across the room. The bathroom was empty.

He trotted back through the kitchen and into the living room. Empty. The TV was off. The morning news was always on when he woke up. Confused, he wandered into the kitchen again, where he finally noticed something else missing: the smell of his mom's morning coffee. An aroma that had greeted him every morning of his six-year-old life. *Mommy's always here when I wake up -- just like she is when I go to sleep.* The unusually silent house suddenly felt chilly as a slight tremor shook his tiny body. *The garage-- she's gotta be in the garage.*

In the garage, he was met only by the smells of oily gas and fresh cut grass from the red mower against the wall. *Where's her car?* Panicked, he wrestled open the side door to the yard. The painful southern California sun seared his tender young eyes, momentarily blinding him. Squinting through tears as he stepped into the yard, he shivered in the 80° summer morning air. Desperation prodded him as he dashed barefooted across the dry, scratchy lawn all the way around the house wearing his orange Luke Skywalker X-Wing pilot Underoos-- the ones he'd begged her to buy him the week before. The yard, front and back, was as empty as the house and garage.

Back inside the house, he frantically wondered where she was. *She musta gone to the PX to get me more cereal, maybe even milk.* By eleven o'clock he'd searched every centimeter of the house, just in case she was hiding. Before noon arrived he'd broken down into hysterical fits of crying, worried about what happened to her. *Maybe bad guys broke in and took her.* Hours later, after he'd cried himself out, his shuddering body convulsed with spasmodic sobs and painful dry heaves. His ragged gasps echoed lightly throughout the lonely house as he hugged himself in a tight, shivering curl on the cold kitchen floor.

The sun had long since set when he finally saw his uniformed dad walk through the front door carrying flowers and a bottle of wine. The unexpected sight of him holding himself on the floor of the darkened house, still in his underwear, halted his dad midstep. "Tommy? What's wrong, kiddo? Where's Mommy?" He didn't answer; he couldn't answer. His dad set the flowers

and wine on the counter before gently scooping him off the floor. He cradled the fragile, fear-scented body with muscular arms. His dad opened the door to the garage and flipped the light switch, then kicked the door shut.

He was carried into his parents' room and lightly plopped onto their large, firm bed. He snuggled into the warmth of the light pink comforter which smelled of his mother's skin cream. He silently watched his dad check the closet, nearly ripping its door from the hinges. Then his dad moved to the dresser drawers, violently slamming each shut with a frightful crash. He was scared, scared he would be blamed for his mom being gone. He trembled on the bed as his dad snatched the paper taped to the mirror above the dresser. Bedsprings squeaked in loud protest as his dad collapsed onto the foot of the bed and unfolded the paper. Suddenly, his dad crushed the paper in his massive fist and hurled it at the wall, causing him to flinch with fear and flee further beneath the comforter.

He wasn't sure how long it took for his dad to finally look back at him. When he did, it was with tear-filled eyes. It was the first time, the only time, he ever saw his father cry. It was also the first time that he ever felt all alone in the world. He had finally realized that his mom was gone, that she wasn't coming back. For the first time, of countless times to come, he asked the agonizing question: *What did I do wrong to make mommy leave me?*

First Fall

by Lucas W. Whaley

In distant places initial pull is felt
Reaching crossed purposes;
Inertial no more.

Meteoric incidents atmosphere resistant
As fortune's force denies destiny;
Impossibility of reversal.

Flaming halo forms during descent
Festooning dust across far-flung expanses,
Illuminated briefly.

Pools fill with perceived fecundity
Delicate as butterflies by candlelight
Insinuated into dark spaces.

These dreams result from debris
of destruction absolute,
 And beauty,
Intertwined and pressed together
By minds desperate
 for meaning.

A Treatise on Love *by Sophie Allen*

I lugged the box to my car—filled to the brim with the classics, the must-reads, the can't-live-withouts. The box hunched my back and tore at my wrists. It took me over an hour of sifting through the dusty warehouse of towering shelves to find the twenty-three canonical texts jotted on my crumpled half-sheet of notebook paper.

The books in my box are meant to strum the harp of the human heart and pluck its most sensitive strings. Knowing the stories make people whole before they notice the gaping hole within. Me, not having read the books, could not understand.

Now, months later, the books sit at home on my shelf. Touched, but never opened. Dustier than the day I brought them home. They look at me. It is a pitiful, guilt-wrenching gaze, reminding me that I am empty. They shake their spines because I don't know the stories within their binding, which have given purpose to lives.

Keep looking at me like that. I don't read. I have other hobbies.

First Love *by* Heather Bianchi

Uncertainty. 16
Hesitation
Shyness
Smiles
Hope
Happiness
Trust
Love
Promises
Stability
Dependency
Worries
Hurt
Reassurance
Forgiveness
Second Chances
Third Chances
Chances
Chances
Weakness
Poison
Insecurity
Unhappiness
Hopelessness
Tears
Distrust
Broken Promises
Goodbyes
Uncertainty. 18

Sweaty Palms & Colliding Lips by Christopher-James Llego

It's every moment like this that my palms begin to sweat. Staring into his eyes, I can feel my palms getting stickier with the build up of moisture.

My eyes shift to the open window. The curtains wave as air breezes through the small crack, and I begin to wish that we were sitting closer to the window; I wish that the cold, winter breeze would penetrate my skin.

I look back at him and notice a smirk forming—the sides of his lips curl up in a devilish manner that makes me nervous. He notices my slight moment of panic. He probably knows that my hands are sweating. I wonder if his palms are sweating, too. Maybe I'm not alone.

I'm not.

He grabs my hands and I can feel the moisture on his palms. I crack a smile and hold back a giggle, maybe out of humor or maybe out of sheer terror for this moment.

My sister warned me that this might happen eventually. She told me that kissing would be inevitable if you date a boy. *It's only been two weeks*, I think to myself. *I'm only fourteen. Does kissing another boy make me gay?*

His eyes move downwards, hitting my lips. Even with the three layers of Chapstick that I'd applied prior to opening my bedroom door, my lips feel naked. I lick my lips and the smirk on his face morphs into a near-Grinch shape. My hands grow sweatier as I feel a surge rush down my body. I feel movement beneath the zipper of my blue jeans.

"Relax," he says as his hand settles on the side of my neck. I can feel his thumb twiddling my earlobe and I let out an unintentional moan. More movement occurs underneath my zipper. "Come here."

Before I can nod my head, our mouths have already collided. His grip on my neck grows tighter. Our lips meet, and meet again, and after a moment of breathing, they meet once more.

I am living in a world of euphoria.

The wind stops blowing through the window, but there is a rush of cold air that penetrates my skin. It isn't from the wind. It's from Charley.

Afterglow *by* Jennifer Lara

Losing you was like a night
after swimming in the ocean.
You'd lie in your bed and still feel
the push and pull of the sea.
You'd feel waves washing over you,
until you finally fell asleep.

Or like after spending a day on
a dozen roller coasters.
On the ride home
you'd still feel the rocky, jerky movements
and you'd think the highway
was going to drop at any moment.

Just like that I still felt you.
Your arm still using my head
as an arm rest.
Your hands pulling me at the waist.
Your breath at my neck
while we slept.

The first time my world fell apart
it was so beautiful I kept wanting to relive it.
But when that feeling faded away,
I couldn't even bring it back
by playing the songs you used to sing.

And now, aside from the few memories we share,
kiddo, we're just strangers now.

“My First Dear John Letter...” *by Darren Bossett*

December 21, 2004

I really don't know where to begin. It's been two years now, since you've been in. You'll be 24 in April, I'll be 23 in July. I can't see myself doing this at 25. Let alone 35, or 39. I mean 21 years is a long time. My brother told me I should hold you down, but I don't wanna hold you up... I'm sorry but, those visits every week are just too much... and at the same time... not hardly enough. I just got my degree and soon I wanna make babies. The thought of doing that on a trailer is crazy. I feel as though I'm wasting good years of my life, and I don't wanna be a prisoner's wife. You're not coming home until 2020, and by then I'll be a grown ass woman. With this letter there should be some money... a few hundred. I said I would visit for Christmas... But I ain't coming. I hope one day you meet somebody perfect, you deserve it. I know you're in that cell like, the nerves of this chick! But it's true, I really do want that for you. I hope you find someone who's loyal that adores you. I hope and pray I find somebody just like you... you probably think I'm lying, but then again, you never had a clue. Anyway I don't know what else to say. Stay healthy and safe. I pray you make it home one day. Love always.

P.S. Happy Holidays.

“my first dear john letter” by darren bossett

I have heard
Forlorn love is the only true love,
 it shatters like stainless glass so pretty,

& it must be so.
This feels like the first only-true poem I have ever written.

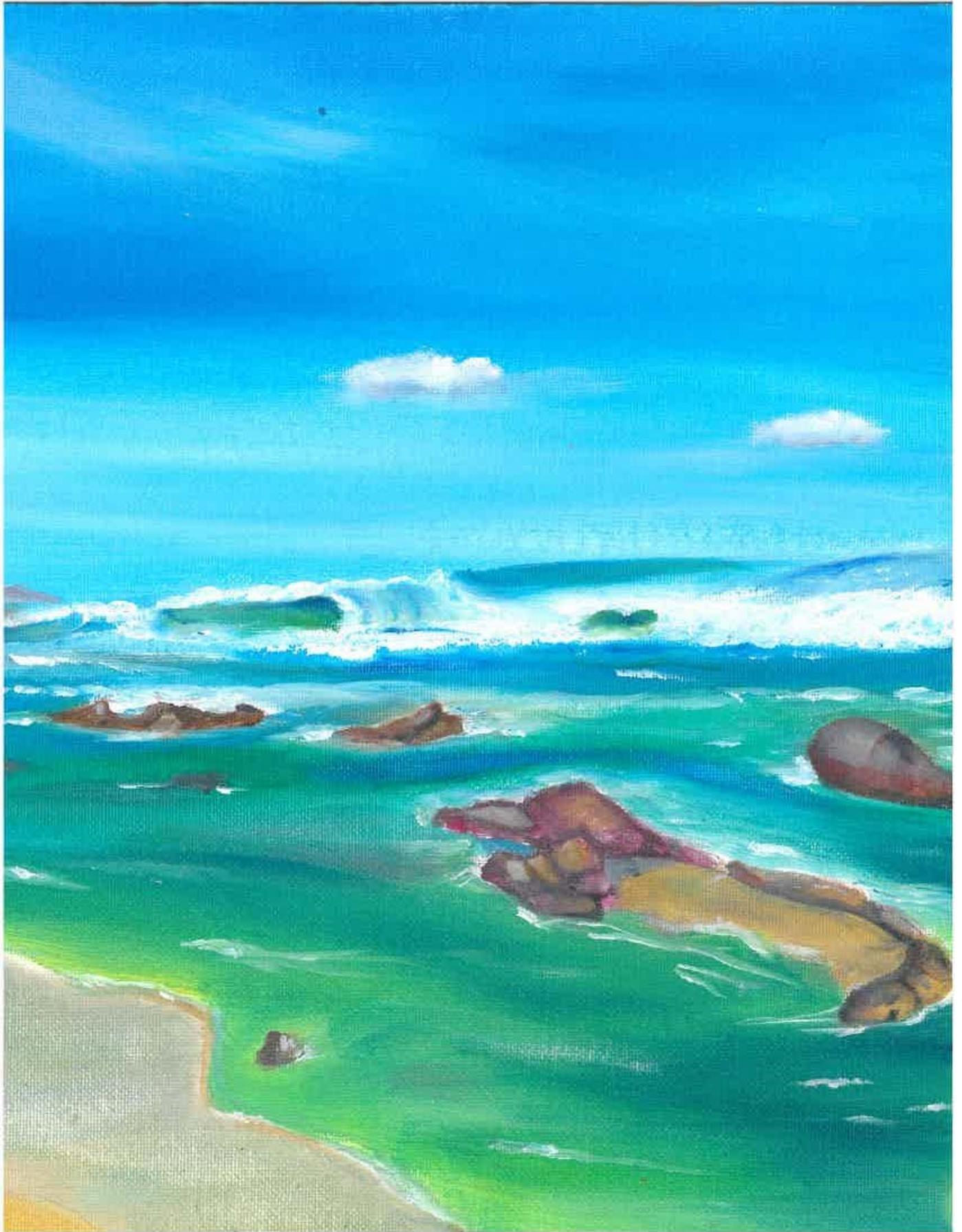
I care not if you know my quietest desires,
You need not admit them willingly into your being.

It is not I
It is only you

After all,
I have my movies and my dreams,
 No matter how far and few between they come,
To carry me

Meditate *by* Joseph DeLeyer

The warm gentle air caresses your skin
As if wisps of silk were embracing you.
The smell of salt fills your airways
Replenishing your soul.
The melody of the waves crashing
Serenade your ears.
The grains of sand slip between your bare toes
Descending as that of an hour glass.
Yet time stands still
Then you open your eyes to experience your first Love
All over again.



first love “meditate” by joseph deleyer

Stages of Felicity *by* Abdush Shaheed

So you've asked O writer's bloc,
about a significant first in my life,
what comes to mind--is the time
when I had first encountered my wife.
There I was steeped in chasin',
instant gratification,
animalistic action,
going going,
somehow not at all knowing,
that on the other side of midnight awaited this,
chemical reaction,
this magnetic attraction,
that far exceeds the boundaries of simply being
in hot pursuit of pure satisfaction.
This thang here had become more than just a notion,
or a stone's throw in the ocean,
more than being astonished by poetic motion,
more than fully adhering to that inherent need to touch,
accentuated breast and thighs, and lips and such,
or being caught in the clutch,
of the hypnotic effect of a sensuous soulful strut.
And there they were these feelings, living, settling, a love jones,
the sound of clickety clacking high heels
the sight of contrasting earth-tones,
became a prelude to a beautiful morning,
an intricate part of it like the light from the dawning,
like stretching and yawning.
Salutations and smiling eyes,
class and sophistication clearly dominated,
peppery hot and saucy and at times a lil' too much spunk,
all woman and by no means a punk and,
formally educated.
Far be it from me to have known
that a high elevation of understanding had become my friend,
there was me,
then there was she,
then there was us,
systematically becoming inextricably interwoven on daily journeys,
in the back of a cross-town Manhattan bus.

It was stimulating but light and breezy,
invigorating and flowing freely,
touching from a distance,
holistic consistent,
but nice, and eeeasy.
Mind detecting mind heightened the pleasure,
made the conversations clever,
it was the birth of the pillars that support our oneness,
the making of memories that we'll always treasure,
it was her saying, that I fully understand,
that you're a man,
and I wasn't a part of your plan
but what's happening is real and I like how it feels
so lets make time to spend together.
She was more than just a face,
and us sharing space,
had a way of making me feel nice and mellow,
I began to relax in the comfort of sincerity and trust--and
no question there existed a certain amount of lust--I mean
it was something truly tantalizing about seeing her dressed in pink, or blue, or yellow.
This thang here grew immensely in its velocity,
and I satisfied her innate curiosity,
in allowing her to get to know me better in every way,
I admired her diversified interests,
and inch by inch we slowly closed that distance,
and before long became a significant part of each other's everyday.
She liked what I liked,
and I liked the way the energy flowed
back and forth between us like currents of electricity--I mean,
it was natural like the formation of a rainbow
and like the sight of a single raindrop on the petal of a violet
it was magnificent in its simplicity,
traveling through stages of felicity.

October Mask

by Richard S. Hendricks Sr.

Can my impatience wait?
I'm impatient, but I'm patient
and my patience is impatient.
Am I patient?

Impatient in desiring expectation
I urge for winter to leave.
I dance through the spring breeze
in hopes of an expedient summer.
Yearning to hold the unborn
autumn leaf...

I escorted the beauty
of the seasons in masks.
Of disguise, charming
nature with a theatrical
theme. But this fall-
I will not be in a
disguise...

It's Halloween and my
eyes smile upon the newborn
colorful leaf...

Carefully I hold the fragile
cherished being and wish
that my patient, impatient
mask frightens not, what's
now a part of me...

I immediately
peel back the masks
that I treasured through
the seasons. Layers,
by layers I must let
go...

Now my framed soul
holds the picture of
whom I really am
externally...

The authority of the
leaf's smile assures
me that he recognizes
me. And he recognizes
a father not something
fiction or make-believe...

Obsessed with Her Notes *by* Maurice McDowell

I was obsessed with how she took notes
how the pen glided across the pad
whenever she heard something significant
the things that seemed minute to me
she jotted down meticulously—
made me wonder if it was something
that was useful

She carelessly left her notepad once
it stood out like a deserted island
I retrieved it like a castaway
but I remembered my observation of her—
taking notes and how intriguing it was to watch

I browsed through her notepad
I was impressed with her handwriting
very loopy partly cursive
I admired her organization—
significant people places events
referred authors quotations books
her thoughts and opinions

I realized by the way she took notes
it was a representation of her persona
attentive sophisticated assertive
with a tinge of imperfection—
yet still written with sophistication and clarity

It was how she took notes
that boasted the intellect of her thoughts
but how private the notes suddenly seemed—
the more I browsed
the more I remembered my observation of her
how the woman I don't even know
took notes

The Zen of Incarceration

by Sean O'Malley

It was a warm autumn day. I crossed the campus of the Broome Community College in my hometown of Binghamton, New York with my application in hand. Students loitered around benches. Sunlight glinted through the trees. Sparrows chirped. It was all too perfect and I seriously considered whether it was all just a dream and I was back in prison. I braced myself for the sound of a guard rapping his baton against the bars – barking at me to wake up for the morning count.

The dream did indeed come to an abrupt and jarring end, but not in the way I had anticipated. It ended a month later when I received a letter in the mail informing me that I had been denied entrance due to my criminal record; for the four convenience store robberies I had committed as a teenager. I appealed the decision and had a meeting with the Vice President and Dean of Admissions.

“Did you have a gun?” the Dean asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “But I didn’t use it. It wasn’t even loaded.”

“How long were you in prison for?” the Vice President asked.

“Fourteen years,” I said.

They were quiet. The Dean glanced at her watch.

I took a deep breath and launched into the speech I’d rehearsed. I told them that though I’d disliked school as a kid, I’d loved to read and would skip class just to hang out in the public library. Then I told them about the college program at Attica; about knowledge-hungry convicts devouring philosophy and Shakespeare; about how the professors encouraged me to hone my writing skills and express myself with greater clarity and precision; and how I would stay up all night painstakingly crafting and revising every essay, until, reading my paper out loud in the morning, I could hear, against the backdrop of an awakening cell-block, of toilets flushing and throats clearing, some faint echoes of my favorite authors. The I told them about how the state cut funding and the program shut down; how heartsick we all were, but how I was able to find solace in the notion of enrolling in college when I got out, of finishing my associates and transferring to a four year school; how I would close my eyes and fantasize about being in some university classroom – a snap brim leather hat cocked rakishly on my head – dazzling the faculty and other students with my hard-won erudition; how this image sustained me in that grim environment and how I would consciously summon it, whenever, like Rilke’s panther, it seemed to me, there were “a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.” And finally I told them how shocked I was to receive their letter denying my application; how I had assumed I would be applauded for my efforts to reinvent myself; and I asked them to reconsider; to allow me to use higher education as a vehicle for personal redemption.

(O.K., so maybe I wasn't *quite* so eloquent, and maybe I didn't quote Rilke, and maybe at one point I even blurted out, "What do think I am going to do, stick somebody up for their sociology textbook?" But this is the general drift of what I said.)

"Well, I am sure you could handle the classes here at B.C.C. on an academic level," the Vice President said, "but you've only been out of prison a couple of months and we feel that you need some more time to re-acclimate yourself to society."

I found a job doing asbestos removal, a field dominated by ex-cons, immigrants, and veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. One of my first work sites was at Cornell University in nearby Ithaca. The message was clear; I could be on a college campus as a laborer – the lowest kind of laborer, handling a noxious substance – but not as a student, not to get an education. My passion for books and learning notwithstanding, I saved up some money and went looking for an apartment (I had been paroled to my sister's house), but all the landlords did background checks and none of them would rent to me. I was part of the modern American caste system, where a felony conviction makes you an "untouchable."

I spent the last five years of my sentence on the boxing team at Green Haven (the last prison in New York state with a ring), sparring three or four times a week with a couple of ex-pros and some talented jailhouse fighters. Realizing that my ability to recite Whitman or explain Nietzsche's "Eternal Reoccurrence" wasn't going to get me very far, I decided, after a night spent smoking weed and watching YouTube clips of Diego Corrales (a fighter known for his dramatic, come-from-behind, "Hail Mary" knockouts who had just died in a motorcycle accident), to become a professional boxer.

The night before my pro-debut on a fight card in Albany, I sat lounging in a Jacuzzi in the "fitness center" of a Holiday Inn with an absurdly ostentatious silver chain and diamond-flecked crucifix dangling from my neck. My "bling" had cost me two paychecks but it had me swaggering around like Floyd Mayweather and I was reveling in what I thought was VIP treatment ("The fitness center is closed right now, Mr. O'Malley, but... Well, I guess I could open it up for you. I know you have to loosen up for your fight tomorrow"). In retrospect it was probably just standard service industry politeness and courtesy, but I was so inexperienced in the ways of the world and so accustomed to being shouted at by guards, to being ridiculed if I asked for so much as a roll of toilet paper ("use your fucking sleeve, scumbag") that any sort of civility or consideration felt lavish to me.

I stepped into the ring feeling confident. I had a trainer from the Boys Club and my father, a retired firefighter from the Bronx, in my corner. Sure, I'd never had an amateur fight and hadn't had any real training since I left prison (there was no competitive sparring for me in Binghamton); sure, I'd been smoking a lot of top-shelf weed and medicating my existential angst with MDMA. None of that mattered, because all I had to do was land one good shot; to knock him out à la Diego Corrales.

My opponent was a southpaw from Rochester with an extensive amateur background. I buckled his knees in the first round with a straight right hand. It was to be my only good punch of the fight. I ran out of gas and he started hitting me flush. I stayed on my feet but the ref stopped the fight in the last round.

When I got back to Binghamton I took the 700 dollars I'd earned for the fight and went out drinking. I ended up in a bar downtown doing vodka shots with some kids from the

state university. I told them I was a philosophy major. “How did you get that black eye?” one of them asked. “Studying Hobbes,” I told him.

Two months later I was arrested – with a girl from Brooklyn – for robbery. I sat in the county jail in a daze, in the coarse, scratchy fabric of a “clockwork” orange jumpsuit; scenes from my nine and a half month sojourn in early 21st century America flashing out of sequence in my punch-drunk brain like a bootleg DVD. It all suddenly seemed so compelling, so wondrous. I wanted to stop at the minimart and buy the Times and a lottery ticket from Abdullah; to cruise down the parkway in my “soccer mom” Dodge Caravan, listening to Jada Kiss or “Citizen Cope” or “Fresh Air” with Terry Gross; to tip toe through some spooky old building with a respirator strapped to my face; to drop in on my mother for a cup of tea and listen to her chatter away in her New England accent about the Waterford crystal rosary beads she’d picked up at the flea market, or the blue jay that had been visiting the birdfeeder; to watch Rashima (Brooklyn) saunter around some hotel room in her panties and “Stewie-from-Family-Guy” T-shirt, a lipstick-stained Newport in her hand. I finally understood what Proust meant when he said, “The only paradise is a paradise lost.”

The Broome Community College sits directly across from the county jail. I stared out at the campus through the thick Plexiglass of my cell window like a ghost, like some woe-be-gone spirit drawn to the place where it had died.

I was sentenced to seven and a half years and sent to Clinton Prison in the Adirondack Mountains. As part of my plea deal, the charges against Rashima were dismissed and she was released.

I whaled away at the punching bag in the yard; even in the winter when it turned into a solid block of ice and my hands swelled up like garbage bags of jailhouse hooch. In my roach-infested cell I sipped the tea my mother mailed me and thought about how fleeting life is; about Diego Corrales dead on a Nevada highway. In the prison library I discovered Basho and started writing free-form Haiku.

After the rain
coils of razor wire
glittering in the sun

Autumn –
everyone in the yard
looks up at the geese

Springtime –
sparrows flit in and out
the barred windows

Postscript

Now I am in Auburn, a 200 year old fortress-like prison in central New York, taking college courses offered by Cornell University.

Editor’s Note: The haiku in this essay was previously published under the title “Autumn,” in the journal, “Modern Haiku.”

Try *transitive verb* \ 'trī\
1. to examine or investigate judicially
2. a: to put to test or trial
b. **to subject to something (as undue strain or excessive hardship or provocation) that tests the powers of endurance**
3. to make an attempt at
noun
an effort to do or accomplish something

first tries

LIFE *by* Michael Shane Hale

Life. She scoffed at the word. How could such a generous word be applied to her miscarried fetus? Was her placenta sack so wonderful that it gave her fetus the luxury of life?

“Life AND death,” the minister counseled. His white collar pinched into the skin around his neck. She sighed at the appropriate times and kept her eyes posted on his shiny, cherry, chair leg digging into the brown carpet. His black shoes would bump along the carpet, hit the leg, and slide backwards. She found it hypnotizing. Normally, she would have found the chaplain’s tick endlessly fascinating as a telltale sign of his uncomfortableness. He was new to the parish, but at 6’4” his presence was immediately felt.

“Damn!” one precocious, six year old offered up when meeting Reverend Pat in the rectory. A soft chuckle moved the child on his way.

She couldn’t wait for this session to be over. She had gotten in the habit of running home and going straight into her bedroom. When her husband wasn’t around, which was a lot lately, she’d slide open the panty drawer and fish for the pink and white envelope. Contact with the paper brought pause. “No,” she’d tell herself as she took the photo of the sonogram out. The mirror reflects her lying prone and tracing the photo’s white edges.

She easily made out the head, the arms, the chest. She placed the photo to her ear and with her eyes closed made out the tiny thuds of a heartbeat.

“Maybe if he used the word unborn instead of life,” she rolled onto her stomach and gathered the patchwork quilt which her grandmother had made especially for her on the news of the first great-grandchild. The details of the hand stitching were interesting enough, but the scrap material that was shaped into circles and rectangles was endlessly fascinating. The bunched material was drawn up into a cleft. She’d deposit the picture there and lay her forehead at the foot of this makeshift, scrap-quilt mound.

“Unborn AND death,” she whispered. Her navy dress spilled around her full body like 10,000 pens leaking ink. The blot cascaded just to the edge of the bed. Her slip-on flats had long since fallen off showing her dry heels.

Her face buried, the heaves would start slowly. She hated herself because she felt she was too weak to grasp God’s plan in all of this.

“Please help me,” she’d gasp out, followed by a plaintive, “I’m sorry.”

She felt slimy and hot as she pushed her face deeper into the quilt.

She couldn’t say the words, “Forgive me.” She could only, slowly, think them.

21 December 2012

WINTER SOLSTICE

Weightless: The red balloon by Christopher-James Llego

It was a lovely red balloon, by her standards. She had never owned a balloon of her own, let alone one in her favorite color. As such, she had instantly fallen in love with it. It was just an ordinary balloon given for free at the entrance to the Faire, but it meant the world to her. “May I have the red one?” she asked the man in suspenders. “Why of course young lady,” he said as he tipped his hat and picked out the biggest red balloon in the cart for her. She smiled and returned to her friend, “Isn’t it beautiful?” She began coughing before he could respond. “Are you alright? Do you want to go back?” he asked, concerned. “I can take you back home before you get worse.” She hid her hand behind her back, “The Faire is only here today, and I’m fine.” She tied the balloon to her wrist.

—The two looked at every stall, but didn’t buy anything save for one dart. “If you pop the red balloon you win a fabulous trip for two!” the clown said as he took their sixpence. The girl shook her head and pointed to her own balloon, “I’d rather keep the red one safe. It’s like family to me.” “What would we get if I pop the blue one over there?” the boy said, pointing to a fairly large blue balloon in the upper right hand corner. “A free ride on the Ferris wheel,” the clown said, smiling even bigger than his painted on lips. The boy looked at the girl and she nodded. He threw the dart and hit the blue balloon; he always had good aim. The clown rewarded them with two golden tickets and pointed out the direction to the Ferris wheel.

—They made their way past the crowd and lined up for the ride. “When we reach the top I have something to tell you,” the girl said, a bit sadly. The boy thought nothing of it, he was too happy to notice, “I have something to tell you too!” They finally made their way to the front of the line when the ticket lady pointed to the red balloon, “I could hold that for you, if you’d like.” “No thank you, I’m rather fond of it,” she said as she sat down in the seat. The lady smiled and closed the door, and they began to move up.

—“Rose,” the boy began, he loved how her name reflected her favorite color, “ever since we were kids, I’ve loved you. Although you’re sick, I’m sure you’ll get better! We can live a happy life together!” She was lovelier than a flower, more precious than a jewel. The girl smiled, wiping tears from her eyes. “I love you too, but I’ve already borrowed enough time,” she said as she showed him her hand, *stained with her favorite color*. “No, you’ll make it!” he said in denial, “You should have told me. We could go straight back after this! We’ve always been together! Always!” She shook her head, “I’ve borrowed far too much time.” She looked at the sky and undid the loop of the balloon from her wrist, “You need to let me go.” The red balloon floated up towards the blue, blue sky, *and the girl closed her eyes and never opened them again*.

Just Listen to Them and Also Breathe by Madeline Jones

I woke up from the deep and disorienting kind of sleep that leaves you unable to remember the dream you were having but likewise unable to shake the emotion of it for several hours after waking. I couldn't quite identify the emotion I was stuck with at that moment, laying flat on my back under my heavy down comforter, but it felt unpleasant and disconcerting – like maybe in my dream the love of my life had left me and I didn't know why. I hadn't been able to identify very many of my emotions for the past few years, though, besides “anxious.” I'd be anxious more or less all the time. And today was the extreme, in that sense, but today would hopefully also be the beginning of the end. I wanted all that anxiety to melt off like layers of winter clothes that I didn't need because it wasn't cold out anymore, so that I could finally see myself again – whoever that might be.

The simple question, *why are you crying*, could leave me more stumped than my AP calculus exams used to. Same with *are you hungry* or *do you wanna go out tonight* or *do you like Chris?* No idea. I couldn't tell if I was hungry, it took me an hour of back and forth panicking to decide whether to attend any kind of social gathering, and feelings for other people? Jesus, I couldn't even tell if I had feelings at all, let alone any targeted at a specific person, whether I was sleeping with them or not. One of the doctors said that emotions and appetite were monitored by the hypothalamus in our brains, but that if you weren't eating enough, these functions were suspended, since giving the heart nutrients to pump blood and the lungs nutrients to breathe were more important jobs. My body had had scarce resources for a long time now, so it had had to prioritize. This made sense, was pretty fascinating actually, but it made me feel even more disconnected from myself. During my frequent panic attacks, I would scratch myself, having this strange urge to figuratively take the skin and fat off of my boney frame. I'd realized more recently though that I wasn't so much trying to eliminate the fat (if there was any left) but to see something underneath. I felt like maybe if I got to be small enough, bare enough, I could see my core, break through all the muck and confusion. But the smaller I got, and the more I scratched, the more lost and panicked I became. Now, if I held my arms above my head, I could actually see a pulsing through my skin in the center of my rib cage. A little bump – concave, convex, concave, convex. It was my heart beating. I could actually see in the mirror what was keeping me alive, but I still felt like the waking dead.

These thoughts, and how badly I wanted to reverse my barely-human existence, made it possible for me to lift the comforter, swing my legs around to my left, and plant my feet on the cold carpet. I looked through the slanted blinds at the dark, snowy roofs of houses across the street and dreaded going out in the cold almost as much as into the interior environment I was heading to later.

Mom asked whether I wanted breakfast when I came downstairs in leggings and a huge, cable knit sweater. I shook my head.

“I'm pretty sure they'll have food there, Mom. That's kind of the point.”

“You might not be on a regular schedule the first day, though. I don’t know that you’ll be eating with the other...people...first thing.”

“You can just call them girls, Mom. They’re all girls right now.”

“What?” She looked almost like she didn’t know what I was getting at, but you could always see through her innocent face if you’d lived with her as long as I had, i.e. forever, except for the one semester of college I’d managed to finish just a few days ago. I didn’t answer her, though. She’d be happier believing I didn’t hear her almost call the girls “patients,” and to thereby call me a patient, indirectly. It’s what I was, anyway. But me being okay with that word didn’t make her okay with it. Just like me knowing I was crazy didn’t translate to her accepting it.

I finally got her into the car and we drove for a half hour in silence. She knew better than to ask me anything or try to make me feel better. I’d just lash out at her or start crying. Or yell at her for running late even though she barely was – being the least bit late was just another thing that made me anxious.

Passing through the streets of Oakland was strange in these circumstances. I’d never been particularly aware of the huge, looming hospital’s presence on Forbes Avenue, since this was mostly a college campus. It was just where students my age lived, and a lot of my friends went to school, and where the art museum was. But it also displayed the university medical center on the crest of the hill, and that late 70s architecture enclosed the psychiatric ward, I now knew. I’d have to get used to that being my daily destination for who knew how long.

The parking garage was dank and uncrowded – not a lot of visitors on a Monday at 8AM. This augmented the sense that I was headed to boot camp. I’d joked with my friends (the three who I’d told) that I was going to fat camp, but the kind that made you fat rather than the other way around. The name frankly made more sense that way.

I wanted Mom to just drop me off and go, but she insisted on walking me in. We took the back entrance we’d been shown at my initial intake appointment, so that we didn’t have to pass through the lobby and intense security. Desperate bids for escape were probably common in this building.

On the eighth floor, I signed in and waited for Shana, my assigned social worker, to come get me from the waiting area. Mom commented lightly on the CNN broadcast on the opposite wall. I tried to stay awake. It was strange that I could be so freaked out and yet so tired at the same time. I had decided that perhaps that was my body’s way of dealing; it can’t calm down enough to do anything productive, so may as well nap to stop the worrying. I tried to focus on breathing. I knew that the more I breathed, the less chance there would be of me bursting into tears at uncomfortable and irrelevant moments throughout the day. And I had to be here until 7PM, so that was going to take a lot of breathing.

Shana’s sheet of swinging, straight red hair preceded her around the corner from the outpatient wing. I’d only missed assignment to the inpatient wing – a horror I couldn’t yet imagine – by a couple of pounds. I silently thanked the universe that my parents gave me an ultimatum last month (gain five pounds or we pull you out of school right now) as I followed Shana to the less intimidating side of the floor, my mother saying goodbye at least ten times as I tried to disengage. I wasn’t quite up to thanking my actual parents yet, since putting on

the three pounds I'd managed had been harder than any of my classes, and taken more time and energy than all of them combined. I'd still made Dean's List, though. Anxiety is a powerful motivator.

Shana led me through two sets of locked doors and into a carpeted hallway with peach-colored walls and light wood paneling. She pointed out the kitchen on the right, the dining room on the left, then the "group room" farther down, and several offices beyond that. In her office, there was a desk and swivel chair for her and a large, pilling armchair for me. A short table beside the armchair presented a tiny potted plant and a box of Kleenex. Beneath it was a small, wicker trash basket. I took it all in with more deep, heavy breaths.

"So how are you this morning?" Erin asked, clasping her hands together.

"Um, I'm okay, I guess. Considering."

"Is there anything I can talk you through right now that could make today easier? Are there things in particular that you're nervous about or wondering about?"

"Um...mostly I'm afraid I won't like the food...I mean I know I have to eat and obviously I have mixed feelings about that generally but I'm going to do it because I want to be able to go back to school. But I'm a really picky eater even when I do eat...so like what if I hate everything?"

"There are a lot of choices. I'm going to be honest with you – it's hospital food, so it's not exactly gourmet, but you can choose to have sandwiches, or a lot of the girls here like to get those hummus and pretzel cups. Trust me, there are options and we won't be force-feeding you, like, brussels sprouts if you don't like them," she laughed lightly, but not in a minimizing way.

"Okay, thank you..." I didn't know what to say from there. I had a million questions, but I didn't even know enough about what I'd gotten myself into to know what to ask. Shana seemed to sense this. Or perhaps that's how it was for everyone on their first day.

"Why don't I just walk you through what you'll typically do for a day here? So in a few minutes, all the girls will get here, and they'll bring their own breakfast, since it's a pretty simple meal. You eat in the dining hall together with one of the staff, and then when they mark off that you cleared your plate, you can stay at the table if you want or you can go back to group room and read or whatever you like. Then you'll have two different sessions, probably CBT – that stands for cognitive behavioral therapy – and nutrition. Then lunch you order through the hospital. Then if it's nice out everyone goes for a walk together, or if not there will be restorative yoga. Then DBT – dialectical behavioral therapy – and body image. There's also a snack time in there somewhere. And then dinner. After dinner there will be one more session and then you get to go home."

I swallowed.

"It sounds like a lot now, but you'll get used to it." Shana smiled. She was really nice, but I cried anyway. I didn't want to make her feel bad since it wasn't her fault I was emotional and terrified, but I couldn't help it. But the tissues and garbage were there for a reason, I supposed.

In the group room, I put my stuff down on the couch against the back wall. There were five couches around the room with bags or purses on each cushion – the other girls must have arrived, marked their spots, and gone to eat breakfast. I wandered cautiously to the kitchen, passing what appeared to be the bathroom. I had to pee about every 45 minutes lately – another symptom, I was told, of anorexia nervosa – but when I tried the door, it was locked. I guess we needed permission to use it. That could get frustrating.

In the dining room, an older woman with thick gray hair that almost reached the seat of her chair was waiting for all the girls to come in from the kitchen with their food. “You must be Kathleen!” she exclaimed when she saw me.

“Yes, hi,” I said tentatively, “Um, I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was supposed to bring breakfast.”

“Oh that’s quite all right, let me see what we have. You don’t have a personal meal plan yet anyway – you’ll meet with Megan later today sometime and get that worked out – so we’ll just get something basic. Do you like yogurt? Nuts? You ought to have protein, for sure.” My hands started to shake a bit. Mentioning two foods in one sentence? Asking me what I wanted to eat? I felt the panic setting in already. Shouldn’t they know not to ask such triggering questions at a professional rehabilitation facility? The part of my brain that insisted recovery was a farce and that the doctors were all lying to me and that I was completely healthy and fine immediately bubbled up, suspiciously pointing out this woman’s incompetence and lack of understanding.

“I’m Diane, by the way. I’m a milieu therapist – MT, so I’ll be the discussion leader for a lot of your sessions here.” I blinked the suspicious voice away for a moment long enough to say, “nice to meet you,” though I had no idea what a milieu therapist was. Again, how was she qualified to tell me what to eat or feel or do? But I’d told myself again and again over the last week that I needed to just listen to the people here. I couldn’t trust my own brain. Just turn it off and do as you’re told, Kathleen. I followed the grey waterfall of hair into the kitchen and tried not to flinch at all the smells. There were nine or ten girls crowded in there with paper plates and bowls, packets with plastic utensils and thin, scratchy napkins, and so many strange foods. It was already clear that I might have the least bizarre eating habits of anyone here. Did that mean I didn’t really need this? I probably wasn’t as bad as them. Was that person really mashing up their bananas? Diane proceeded to another girl and carefully, not unkindly, put her hand on the girl’s hand to stop her from cutting the crust off her bread with a plastic knife. The girl looked caught in the act of shoplifting or something and put the knife down quickly and apologetically. Diane turned back and saw my baffled face. “We don’t encourage things like that, since it’s probably about shaving off a few calories, not about disliking the taste of bread crust. We want you to break those habits.”

I choked back the urge to throw up. She showed me where all the different snacks and condiments and paperware were kept, and then led me to the fridge. I selected the only flavor of yogurt I could tolerate – raspberry – and tried to surreptitiously check the calories without Diane watching my eyes, since the label clearly said “low-fat” and not “non-fat.” I didn’t manage to. With her prompting and assistance I was sitting down at the table in no time with the ten other girls, and women, I noticed, and a plate with a toasted English muffin and the yogurt in front of me. This was a manageable breakfast. After all, I told myself, English muffins are 40 calories less than two slices of most bread, so at least there was that. And as I looked around me, I saw that I was eating so much less than anyone else. That was always good. I tried not to think about how my future required breakfasts might compare to theirs.

No one was eating yet, though. People were strangely quiet and looking evasively around the room, some even at the ceiling. Anywhere but at the food. Diane pulled out a large binder, flipped it open, and looked up at the table. “Christina...there you are. One meat, two starches, two fats, a fruit, and... a milk, great.” Christina, who looked about eleven, I realized with a wrench of the heart, finally made eye contact with her breakfast and picked up her fork to begin her morning chore. What could have fucked her up so badly so young?

Diane proceeded to check every girl’s plate with various combinations of this food group code, which I would learn later was actually a version of the diabetic exchange system – “exchanges” would be one of the most common words in my vocabulary for the next few months. I still did not touch my food, trained half from politeness, half from discomfort, not to eat until everyone else was. I was also confused as to whether there was a page for me in Diane’s exchange bible or not, and whether I had to be checked, too. Once everyone was eating, I figured I should join in, however, and the conversation picked up pretty immediately. The few girls around me smiled and introduced themselves, and then launched into a discussion of last night’s *Pretty Little Liars* episode. It almost felt like a normal high school cafeteria or something, but with an age range from 10-45 and a clear supervisor at the head of the table. Diane also ate breakfast, though, which made things more comfortable. On the other hand, Diane was definitely overweight, which caused the suspicious-of-recovery-and-doctors voice in my head to get pretty wound up. *She’s not healthy. You don’t want to listen to her or you’ll look like her. You’ll probably have a heart attack and die. She’s clearly not in control of herself.* I tried to listen to the girl across from me – a small, blonde, 14 year old with an energy that bubbled out of her shimmering skin. Hannah was her name. It was strange to see someone so bright and colorful – if way too skinny. Most of the other girls’ faces looked how I imagined mine did (though I didn’t trust my reflection in the mirror to actually tell me anything): wan, dry, papery, tired, sharp, boney. There were more dark-rimmed eyes here than in the library during finals week.

After breakfast, we all went to the group room. There were a few minutes to relax before our first group therapy session. Hannah turned out to be sitting next to me. Despite our significant age differential, I was glad. If I was going to be in this place for awhile, I didn’t want to be depressed the whole time – the two other college girls had looked nothing but pissed off the entire time. Hannah plopped down on the couch letting her arms swing up in the air and fly back down dramatically.

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

“Oh, um, yeah, I suppose I am,” I answered, surprised at the slightly personal question.

“Don’t be. It sucks the most the first week or so, but it goes pretty quickly because there’s so much to learn, and then all of a sudden you’re used to it.” I don’t think I fully understood the meaning of the word precocious until I met Hannah. I didn’t totally believe what she said, but the fact that she’d be here while whatever happened happened made me smile for the first time since...well, sometime.

I looked at the clock on the opposite wall. It was 9AM. Seven more hours. Seven more hours until the end of the *first day*. Hannah smiled back at me reassuringly, seeming to know exactly what I was thinking.

Even a Nightmare Can Dream *by Nathan Powell*

Battles fought beneath the surface of conscious awareness
leave dragon's wounds;
Huge, gaping psychic tears
the size of a beautiful
loving heart.

Solstice looms quiescent.
A rosebud shyly curves up
towards a sunrise in December;
A blossoming promise
exactly the color of love and pain.

A lacework of frost
abandons petals
anchored in agony.

Scars pressed bloodless
by passionate fingers,
pulse back as trace recedes.
Healing beyond hope
joy beyond pain
love beyond words

A magical moment-lived without fear,
above this dark trench of despair
the kites of our hopes
float on winds we cannot see
attached to razor blade strings
that scream at our hands;
just let go
just let go
No.

First Time *by* Min Kyu Kim

The day I realized,
That the “clouds” coming out of factories aren’t what creates cotton candies in the skies,
But instead is yesterday’s cupidity coating the atmosphere with a blanket of soot and dust;
That was the first time I stopped wishing upon the stars that blossom up the night sky,
Because sooner or later the greatness of starlight won’t be able to pierce the darkness,
and grow graceless.

The day I concluded
That schools conform us into brilliant training monkeys instead of a brilliant human being,
By only having time to teach facts and dates and data;
That was the first time I stopped caring what teachers taught me,
Because history provided us with more important instructors who left their brains
In the form of a book.

The day I found out
That I wasn’t the only one who thought that the sun during summer days...
And spring days...
And autumn days...
And even winter days...
Was acting up and giving off heat like an angry alcoholic;
That was the first time I worried about December dogs
Never tasting the cold frosting on their lips
Because the sons of Mother Nature created a fever that would ripen and devour her body.

The day I learned
That scientists will always believe that infinite is definite,
And continue to divide atoms into tinier pieces;
That was the first time I feared for the future,
Because if scientists fail to realize that their lust of knowledge will never break apart,
Then that will be the start of the world falling apart

The day I understood,
That the brains of the elders hasn’t collapsed under Alzheimers and aneurysms
But instead for them, tomorrow is a decade more ahead than today;
That was the first day I felt uncertain,
Because as the rapid “growth” of this dying world continues,
The sages’ wisdom will become moth-eaten and their minds maimed and weakened.
Now, I wait for the shifting day.
The first day when I can change everything
To exactly how it was supposed to be.

“Animal Cage” *by* Just

... Plexiglass, chickenwire, and a Feed up slot.
Maybe I am, More than likely I'm not
Am I?
When first I was thrown into the Animal Cage.
Should I bleed ... Not sure ... is this real ... Not sure ...
is this me ... Not sure.
So I left my body to examine my spirit,
and realized that ... My soul was ... crying,
in silence, with violence, No violins, I
wept, without tears, This particular wishing well has
been dry for years, My
soul was, trying, to find that special brand of peace
but cannot, except through fire ... or a special
brand of innovation, My
Soul is strong ... Yet the weight of oppression is
such that,
strength alone is not enough to carry me on
whatever will be done, will be done, **will** be done
but in life it is difficult to grow Flowers without
exposure to the sun
or to His son, whichever one, I
pray, that I do not become prey, to some
unfortunate beast
I must not allow my Animal Cage to categorize me
I am moreso, while being less so, until I can fully evolve
into being moreso
I need light, in my Fight, For liberation From this cage

Miseducation of the Miseducated

by Javarr Salley

From bird's & bee's to stop & freeze, yell & scream, beg & plead – hand's up, don't shoot!!
Why, because my race is B·L·A·C·K, you don't want to allow me to see day??
I see, okay?? – You got it, is it worth it?? ... The talk... Yes, I get it, a talk
After every shooting, a talk... "MOVE" bombing in PA, a talk... Lethal injection
injected in the sacred section, of a man who was wrongly convicted by his peers
who were never a statistic, with double digit's... covered in earth tone, pleading his case
in the face of a loved one on a deathrow visit... But yeah, a talk

The thought is genocidal, action is homicidal. Yet as the trigger squeeze & I bleed from
chest to knee's, can't breathe, spirit travelling, unravelling cross "death's sea,"
did I really become part of this martyr cycle?? P·R·A·Y just turned into P·R·E·Y –
Now I see why these guy's call this the jungle – Heartless trouble, mask in blue,
you bastard you stole my legacy from the slave ship beginning's with my ancestry!!
But God has blessed me with a righteous view, spew from the ovaries of greatness –

I am a man, hu-man, one you do not understand, but do you under-stand or do you
over-stand as you stand over a dead soldier where justice is under hand, under plan's
of demoralization of a colored man?? But color's know no boundaries because once you
color out of them, we create new one's!! Old trouble's for our new son's. Daughter's
impaired with fear, as tear's cover the face of one whose neck the noose wrung, a trial
amongst peer's with a jury that you hung, are you dumb?? The conviction's are based on
the drug's that who slung?? You slung!! "Reaganomics," taught us how to
flip "base" for profit – industrialization, took a race while racing, to such a troublesome
place in the eyes of the world, that we went from king's & queen's to uncivilized being's
infatuated with minerals that gleam!! But what is seen is contradicting to what is not seen...

Every time a kilogram molest the triple beam – the mother who sold her virtue for a hit of
crack – the child bending curfew for a drip from the "smack"...

Ahhhhh, I get it!! I really get it, this is what you see, this is the picture you've sketched
of me, this is the sight you've justified as right!! This is the pain, you've leaked in your
brain – it's your god-given right to execute this night & take my life?! I must have forgot...
I'm inferior to law enforcement superior's – whether Florida or Missouri, or Auburn & Attica
abusing me, desperately hoping they losing me... Breath... By breathe... By breath
until nothing is left except an echo in my left chest...

Yeah, I must have forgot!! I must have forgot that they left M.L.K. with a hole in his
dreams, and birth a nightmare of brutality that all black men might fear!! I must of
forgot about J. Edgar Hoover & COINTELPRO – I must of forgot about crosses burning
homes until the bone under ligament's shown – I must have forgot about Jonathan
Jackson clashing with passion against your hateful actions!!

I must have forgot that "41" bullets from Amadou Diallo & "50" from Sean Bell
equal "91"; the year the C.I.A. first heard of World Trade Center plot's but acted
"surprised" two years later when the act's were done!!

Am I done?? ... Almost!! Guess the truth is too much, did I get loose too much?? Was the
truth too rough?? I guess we'll know when the new's is shown:
"Live at "5"!! – A poor black kid was shot down, "30" rounds, because his shoe's, too scuffed"
Did I bruise you enough?? Probably not, because we as black's are immune to pain,
until it hit's close to home, & breaches our zone, just to be white-washed with the
media bleaching our dome...

Please forgive my truth, I've been miseducated –

Most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused not by people being fundamentally good or fundamentally evil, but by people being fundamentally people.

Terry Pratchett

first triumphs

The Seed, Wind, and Soil

by Troy Bullock

Introduction

In 1994, at the age of 14, I watched my mother's life go from bad to good. During my childhood, my mother was in an abusive relationship for years. The man she was with treated us like we were nothing to him.

Outside her abusive relationship, she had a male friend who had a crush on her, who treated her better, and who also treated me good.

He was always there for us, but in some way he didn't want to ruin the friendship they shared together.

Years later my mother soon realized that her friend was more than just a friend. He was the best thing possible for her life. So she finally got rid of the abusive man and became one with her male friend. Their relationship was the best thing that happened in my life.

Seeing this at a young age, and how intrigued I was about how my mother found happiness, I vowed to tell this story one day. So when they offered Creative Writing here at Auburn, I took the class to enhance my writing skills. Then I created a masterpiece called: The Seed, Wind, and Soil.

This story is dedicated to my mother, but also for other women who may be going through the same thing in their lives.

The Seed was a female and she traveled on the Wind's soft melody for so long that she began to forget her worth, how she was destined to be planted and become a flower. In the Wind's melody, the Wind told her to stay with him. His caress was all she knew, since being blown off the stem of that flower many hours ago (an eternity to a flower). As she drifted, she flew over this one patch of soil that was beautiful, rich, and healthy.

The Soil called out to her, saying in a low, whispering tone, "Come to me, Seed, that you may experience firsthand what you were destined to become. My soil will reveal the essence of your true nature in all its wonders of beauty." The Seed could not fully grasp what the Soil was talking to her about, so she hovered above him for a moment (still in the Wind's embrace), but she was amused and curious enough to respond to the Soil's words. "What is the true nature you speak of, Soil? I am no longer just a Seed; I am a Seed forever blowing on the Wind's current. He has taken care of me, pushing birds and bees to the side, so they cannot harm me. You know I enjoy the Wind, so much that I believe I should stay with him forever."

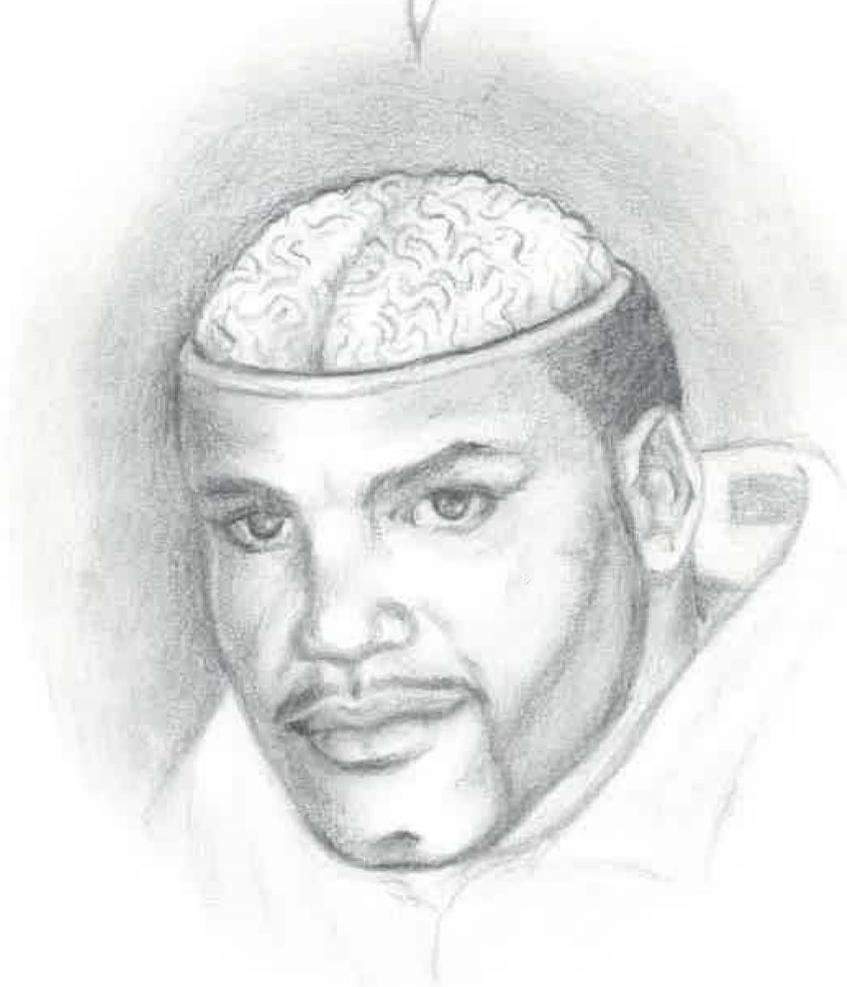
Soil frowned because only he knew that it was a matter of time before Wind's smoothing caress was no more, and she could land anywhere, on concrete, in water, or in a bird's or bee's grasp, never to be planted. But Soil did not tell her that because it was not his place in the grand design of nature. He did call out to the Seed again though, by saying, "Hear me, Seed, my last request, then I will bother you no more."

The Seed hovered in the Wind and said, “Well, go on if you must!” So the Soil said, “It is me who has recognized you for who you really are. I have never seen an actual Seed before, but dreamed of your purpose many nights, and I knew when I saw you drifting by, that you were the Seed. I have seen the beautiful flower you will turn out to be from being planted in my Soil, and I must have you understand, yes, there will be trials in your growth, such as too much rain, sleet, hail, snow, etc. But, please allow me to absorb all of these elements that wish to tarnish your worth and stunt your growth. I can plant you only so deep in me, because you will need sunlight, you will need air and water, but believe me, you will have all of that, as well as my nurturing soil. I need those substances too, but I’ll survive without either one. So please, land and enter my Soil, so that you may have a chance to continue your stages in life, and if mother nature is willing, you will send seeds off into the wind someday as well. Every time your season comes around to bloom, you will do just that and seeds will flow. I do hope you will consider all I have said.”

The Seed was startled that the Soil had so much to share in regards to her, and she became heavy with questions. Did the Soil really dream of her, as he had said? Why hadn’t the Wind ever shared such thoughts? Will I be better off in the Soil? Will the Wind always protect and nurture me as the Soil said he would?

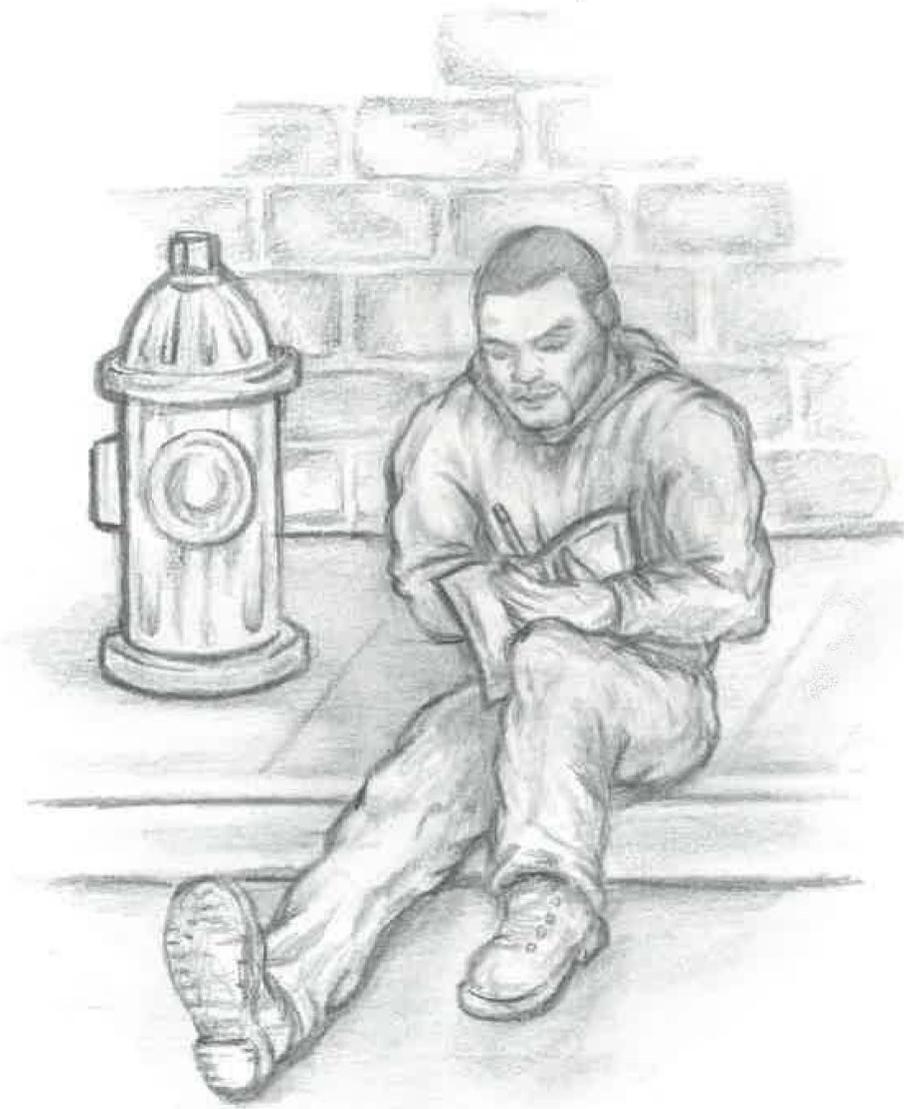
As the Seed began silently thinking, a tear fell from her, a product of the dilemma she was faced with, but the tear was one of truth, and she watched it fall. It landed in the Soil, in an imprint of her being. Memories flashed through her mind of who she was, as well as what her purpose in life was. She smiled as the Wind stopped blowing. She floated down and landed in the Soil, in the impression of her tear.

As the Wind started back up once more, the Soil covered her with his cool, and comfortable embrace. Even though she had seen all she had desired while blowing in the Wind, it was nothing compared to being planted in the Soil, as she prepared for growth, for blossoming into who she was meant to become.



The first thing to
Cognitive thinking, is the
thought process!

The Second thing:
thoughts now begin to
materialize into words!



Finally, these thoughts
are manifested from the
Poet's thought by using
One Pen!

One pen
Scribes from thoughts
Each Curve and line
Fueled from my expressions
One pen
Positioned in so many different ways
Like an artist, paints a picture of beauty
Each stanza reflects what's inside a poet's soul
One pen
Flows across a blank sheet
Nouns, verbs, and adjectives
Form their shapes upon this canvas
One vision
One thought
One pen, one pad; composition
To take words within
And embrace them into sentences
One pad
I hold within my hands
Fueled by my thoughts
And my mind captures each vision
Do I express?
Do I keep it within?
Do I caress my pen?
And let the essence of my feeling flow
A painter uses all different types of colors
To create his masterpiece
A poet
Embraces thought and words, and transfers them
With a single color pen or pencil
One pen
Moves up and down
Side to side
And the finished product
Are a poet's thoughts

One Pen

Troy Bullock

Arrested Development *by E. Paris Whitfield*

Waited—alone, the—thick air, permeated with the scent of stale urine, breath
laboring to escape through the thin bars...
the smallness cradles, like a womb,
Needing to be called, wanted to be called,
Not knowing what to expect, when I am,
Thoughts of: How the fuck did I get here? Why? Could this really be
happening—swam around my head, like a gold fish—in an all too small glass
bowl,
Laying, impatiently, hands braided, under my head,
Lying, on an overly painted, too cold,—steel lip, jutting from the bare
battleship grey cinder block brickwall; believing, that was what it must feel
like to be dead....
Watching, a fly and cock roach jockey over what looked to be a semblance of a bologna sandwich,
Left behind...
Time, ticked, pressing against my mind,
I supplied the beverage—for, my new, companions,
in the tear drops I cried...
“WHITFIELD”—barked, from the deep well—of a hollow hall,
Unrecognizable,
Yet, no need to repeat, no one else there, but I.
Clinging, cool silver, bracelets—noosing my Black, virgin wrist,
Being led, to some place, previously, never known to exist,
“Docket Number 5471/2002” is my name,
Thrust,
“Before Honorable “So” and “So”...being his—remarked, so routine,
“New York Supreme Court, how do you plea...?” asked,
Sparse, Forever—words, that stole my innocence, aborting remnants of any
naivety...
Setting me on a path of what would be,
Reflecting, today (2014),
It was a moment that defined the “who” I’ve needed to become,
abandoning the person I used to be,
Instead of descending the steps of “bitter,”
I’ve chosen, to climb, the stairs of—“better,” Knowing that when I can not
hear—His Voice, I can still believe in, what matters—His Plan,
Rather than fold, die, and wither,
I’ve risen towards the sky, like a tree,
Breaking through the ground, from where, I have been buried—alive,
refusing fate’s kiss—to not ever, again, be free...
Tries, dances in the old spaces and places of fears,
Trumpets of triumphs, being heard so so very near,
home....

First Reversal *by* Phil Miller

“Phil, can you help me?” asks an unfamiliar voice. I’m sitting at my desk in the law library of Five Points Correctional Facility, where I work as the administrative clerk. I lift my head, making eye contact with the stranger. “That depends; what do you need help with?” I ask, hoping that his request will be something simple. I’m very busy, and this interruption is taking up precious time. “Well, my name is David Huck, but everyone just calls me Huck. I was told to speak to you about legal assistance.” Damn. This is not a simple request. “Uh-huh,” I murmur, wishing that people would stop telling other people to seek me out for legal assistance. It isn’t that I don’t enjoy helping people; rather, it just seems like people show up for assistance only when I’m already inundated by what seems like a million other tasks. I push the piles of books and papers on my desk to the side, making space for Huck to put his own papers down. He understands the gesture and sits in the empty chair beside my desk.

“Phil, this is what happened...” A few minutes into his explanation, I stop him. “Huck, I’m really busy right now. Besides, you don’t even have your trial transcripts. I can’t help you unless you obtain those documents.” He acknowledges my concern and tells me that his attorney has promised to send them this week. “Listen, Huck, maybe you should speak to another law clerk who isn’t so busy,” I say, glancing at the minute hand of the wall clock across the room. “I don’t want anyone else, Phil. I’ll just wait until I get my transcripts and then I’ll come back. You’re the only person that everyone tells me to talk to about my case.” I break eye contact, feeling just a slight twinge of guilt. I reluctantly nod my head in assent, while Huck picks up his papers and walks away.

It’s my own fault that people seek me out for legal assistance. I’ve been a law clerk at Five Points since 2000, and during that time word has spread about my accomplishments. My first legal victory takes place a couple years ago, when I convince a Judge to change consecutive sentences to concurrent sentences for a guy from the Bronx. That victory is followed by successful parole appeals, Article 78 petitions, and child support modifications for other prisoners at Five Points. The more proceedings that I win for people, the more the news spreads. Even staff members occasionally seek my legal advice. So it really isn’t a surprise that the news has reached the ears of David Huck. I just wish I weren’t so busy.

Two weeks pass after my meeting with Huck, and I begin to think that, perhaps, he has enlisted the aid of another law clerk. In fact, I’m hoping that he has. As the administrative clerk, I am responsible for overseeing 19 other law clerks, maintaining inventory, completing monthly reports, reviewing the work product of other clerks, teaching the legal research class, and the list goes on. The last thing I need right now is David Huck. But fate is not on my side. “Phil!!!” shouts a voice from behind the book counter. “I got my transcripts!” I look up and see David Huck smiling at me as if he has just won a two-week furlough. “Damn,” I whisper, realizing that I can’t get rid of this guy. “Come over to my desk,” I say, already thinking of another way to keep him from taking up my time.

“I got my transcripts like you said. Can you help me now?” he asks, with more excitement in his voice than a kid in an ice cream store. I don’t respond immediately. I just sit there looking at this pile of transcripts on my desk, thinking of all the things that I will not accomplish this month if I agree to help Huck. “Didn’t you tell me that you have a lawyer?” I ask, already knowing the answer. “Why don’t you just let him do his job? I’m sure he’ll do great.” Huck starts shaking his head from side to side in slow motion, as if the slower his head moves, the more emphatic the “no” will be. “Phil, I need your help. My lawyer is not going to do a good job; I just know it.” I try to assure Huck that he’ll be okay with just his lawyer. “Huck, I don’t have time. I have so much work to do already that I can’t give your case the attention it deserves. Let your lawyer do the work, and I’ll review his brief when it’s done.” Huck’s wide eyes are pleading with me to change my mind. “Phil, I don’t have much, but my daughter can send you a food package, if you want. Can you just read my transcripts and tell me what you think?” Now I’m the one shaking my head. Not because I’m saying “no” again, but because I can’t believe I’m about to agree to help despite knowing that I will fall behind on all my other tasks. “Huck, I don’t need anything from you or from your daughter. Leave your transcripts here, and when I’m done reviewing them, I’ll let you know.” He jumps up to shake my hand with a happiness that seems so out of place in prison. After he leaves, I stare at the pile of transcripts for a few minutes, disliking the hope that Huck has placed in me. I enjoy helping people, but I’m not used to being so essential to someone else’s happiness.

I analyze Huck’s transcripts for a week, eventually settling on two issues that I feel are his strongest. The first is a repugnant verdict, which means that an acquittal on one of his charges negates an essential element of the charges for which he has been convicted. The second issue is what I call a legal impossibility. Huck’s felony assault charge is based on a predicate felony of aggravated criminal contempt, but since both of those charges are not complete until physical injury occurs, the felony assault charge cannot be based on the contempt charge. Apparently, this is an issue that Huck’s trial attorney, the district attorney, and the Judge have missed during trial. Both of the issues are unpreserved for appellate review, meaning Huck’s trial attorney never objects to them. Unpreserved issues are difficult to raise on appeal because the appeals court does not have to review them. After I draft an outline for the arguments, I meet with Huck to discuss my findings.

“Huck, you have two good issues here.” I explain what they are, but it’s clear that he has no idea what I’m talking about. I type a letter to his attorney, asking him to include these issues in the brief he is preparing. Huck mails the letter, and I am finally free to resume my own matters again. At least I think I am, until Huck shows up with his attorney’s response. “Phil, my lawyer won’t argue these issues; what are we going to do?” I grab the letter and read it myself. The lawyer says the two issues have no merit. “No merit? What the fuck is wrong with this guy?” I say, convinced that the lawyer is either new or just plain stupid. I look over at Huck, and his wide, hopeful eyes plead with me once again. “I guess I’ll have to prepare a pro se supplemental brief for you, Huck,” I admit, grudgingly. What starts off as a simple review of transcripts has turned into full-blown litigation.

It takes me two weeks to prepare the pro se supplemental brief. Despite the opinion of Huck’s attorney, I know the two issues I’m arguing are the best chance for reversing the conviction. I hand Huck the finished product, and he mails it to the Appellate Division, Third Judicial Department. He asks me what his chances are. “Huck, the issues are solid, but they’re unpreserved. That means the Court does not have to review them, but I’m hoping they do so

as an exercise of discretion in the interest of justice.” Huck nods, understanding that everything is out of his hands now. “I have faith in you, Phil.”

With Huck’s litigation out of the way, I can finally get back to work on my own tasks and personal studies. Months go by, and I see Huck only once or twice during that time. Huck is no longer on my mind, and I even forget that his appeal is still pending. That is, until Huck shows up out of the blue to remind me. In November of 2003 I walk down the main corridor, on my way to the law library. Suddenly, I hear Huck’s voice yelling, “We did it! Phil, we did it!” At the moment, I’m oblivious to what he’s talking about, but he runs up to me and hugs me as if I have just saved his life. And that’s when I remember. “Huck, are you saying that the Court reversed your conviction?” His arms are still wrapped around me, and I have to pry him off. “Well, I’m really not sure what the Court did, but my neighbor read the decision and he said it was good news.” I tell him that I’ll have my boss call him to the law library the following morning so I can read the decision. As we part ways, Huck is still saying, “Phil, we did it!” And I walk away hoping that he is right.

The next day, Huck shows up at the law library with the Court’s decision in his hand. His smile is just as wide as it was the day before. “Let’s go to my desk, Huck.” I sit and read the decision, and now both of us are smiling. The decision is reported as People v. David Huck, 767 N.Y.5.2d 555, and it is the sweetest legal victory I’ve had thus far. In the decision, the Court unequivocally rejects the arguments of Huck’s lawyer, and it reverses the felony assault conviction because of the arguments I present in the pro se supplemental brief. Huck had a sentence of 14 to life because of that conviction, and now that the Court has both reversed it and dismissed that count of the indictment, that 14-to-life sentence no longer exists. Huck is left with only a 3 ½ to 7 for the contempt charge, which means he will be a free man in the very near future. I know Huck is around 50 years old, so I tell him that he needs to make this victory count, implying that he needs to stay out of jail and cherish his freedom. “I know, Phil. I just want to spend time with my daughter and stay far away from this place.” A moment later, he adds, “If it weren’t for your help, Phil, I probably would have spent the rest of my life in here.”

Before we part ways, I have him sign an affidavit attesting to what I’ve accomplished for him. After that day, I never see Huck again. He is transferred to a medium security facility shortly after having received the Court’s decision. My achievement for David Huck is the first time I cause a conviction with a life sentence to be reversed and dismissed. And it is also the first time an appellate court accepts my arguments while explicitly rejecting the arguments of the attorney assigned to the case. Huck is also the first person to ever hug me for winning a case; the rest just shake my hand.

A Slope of Success *by* Reggie Bell

I first discovered that all things were possible while at a summit overlooking a span of blue, during the year of 1985. In those days, it was a peculiar place to find a twenty-three-year-old Black American. But, I decided to deviate from society's archetypical design and entertain my own lofty ideals of living (for a time) beyond the scope of institutionalized identities.

I set out in pursuit of a goal and, finally, settled on an agenda with the intentions of achieving new heights. Fortunately, my ascent was easily made attainable by way of mechanisms elevating me to a station representative of others. However, if I were to accomplish my aims I would, then, need to endure a rigorous path previously canvassed in white. So, before committing to a course of action, I used precaution by taking a couple of "polls" to quantify the probability of my success.

I, unavoidably, encountered obstacles – as was expected – when attempting to slide my position past a group of puffed up incumbents, which inevitably resulted in being tripped up and knocked off my feet. But, surprisingly, the white in that environment proved to be quite forgiving and invariably provided a buffer for my abrupt descents. Nonetheless, it was sheer determination that fortified me with the strength and courage to stand and try again.

In the end, my reliance on the "polls" – after ascertaining their importance – assisted me in negotiating moguls, and enabled the successful completion of a downhill run from atop of Snow Summit at Big Bear Lake, California.

I learn. It takes awhile. I am learning that as I strive, and sacrifice, I am, in fact, surviving through insanity. I have found that sometimes, with perseverance, the person I am and the hero I hope to be are not all that far apart. Sometimes. I have discovered that the path to wisdom is paved with perpetually broken hearts. I am learning that the only fate worse than death is a perpetually broken heart. I am learning that my past and my loneliness are as inescapable as this cage.

Does a degree open those doors?

Character Study by Lucas Whaley

graduation

Congratulations to the Class of 2014 graduates:

David Anthony Bendezu · Byron K. Brown · Maurice Cotton Jr. · Khalib J. Gould ·
John Hetherington · Quentin J. Lewis · Carlton McDonald · Maurice D. McDowell ·
Franklin Mendez · Nathan Powell · Leroy Lebron Taylor ·
Bernard Thrist · Jermaine West · Lucas Wade Whaley · Tyreek Williams

Associates of Arts degrees were conferred in December to members of the Cornell Prison Education Program's graduation class of 2014. A commencement ceremony simultaneously commemorates a significant achievement, and the beginning —the commencement—to a chapter of new firsts.

CPEP *by* Quentin Lewis

If it wasn't for CPEP
Man
I wouldn't see effects
The cause
Rehabilitate
Read text
The seven liberal arts
Reforming my thoughts
No longer I
Think about crime
I think about the times
This is my moment
I'm seizing the opportunity
To please
Everybody in my community
Earning degrees
Associates
Man this is appropriate
I apologize
For living my life as a culprit
Notice
I got my mind right
I'm being recognized
For something positive
It feels good and I shine bright
In hindsight
I don't want to see
It is what it is
Regret what I did
But now I'm moving forward
A reflection
Of the beautiful Sunshine Lady
Doris
I thank you
For giving me a chance
To flourish
Recidivism
Should be something
That you shouldn't horror
Because nobody
In CPEP is moving backwards
I'm sure of

“Milestones...” by Khalib Gould

As we journey through life, our roads sometimes take unexpected turns. We make plans and set goals that are sometimes unrealistic. But these are the things that keep our visions in reach. Then, there are the attainable goals. Those that challenge us to reach beyond our norm. Those that challenge us to push a little harder. Those that project us forward into a new chapter in our lives. To accomplish these goals, we refer to them as “Milestones....”

When I think of the effect that education has on those who are less fortunate, I think of an opportunity to be prosperous and proactive. When I think of the effect that education has on incarcerated people, I think of the possibility of creating productive citizens. Anyone who has taught at some level or knows of someone who has reached an academic milestone can bear witness to the transformation that these accomplishments breathe life into. With it come tears of joy, elated smiles, and the occasional dizzying depression of having to move beyond the bittersweet pains of labor, to now make use of our harvest. Throughout our journeys, connections are created that touch our hearts in ways that allow us to see the world through new lenses – this is what we call change....

Some of these changes are not always outward, but within the contemplative core of the self. We become changed in the way we communicate, in the content of our conversation, and in the ways we interact with others. For me, it is difficult to speak to that change. Not because I haven't, but because I believe that some things should be told by those who observe and interact with us. These are the people who can truly attest to the content of our character, and the temperaments for which we have been judged. For these are the people who are defined as our peers.

Nevertheless, I speak of the changes that C.P.E.P. has manifested in me. C.P.E.P. has changed my view of the world. Despite being a fairly decent student prior to high school, I never took the time out to read a book. I tell people how, since my incarceration, I receive more books than I can digest. I tell people the story of how my mom would send me packages filled with books, and how once I would read them, I would send them back home and receive new ones. Many of the books that my mom would send were books that had been on bookshelves in our apartment since I was a child, which I am now getting around to read as an adult. Some of them donned crayon marks from the times I defaced them in pursuit of my early writing career as a child.

I tell people of my dear friend who always sends me books through the mail. I tell them how I would often see my name on the package room list and my mind would go into overdrive trying to think who had sent me a package. I would eventually give up with the understanding that, whoever sent it, and whatever it was, it would get eaten. I'd find my biggest net bag and trek over to the package room. I'd step up to the window, state my name, and the guard would give me a number. Once my number was called, I would step up to the window, show the guard my I.D. card, and wait for him to bring my package. While waiting, I would see other guys with their

newly acquired goodies. In anticipation, my mouth would water and my heart would race, only to be interrupted by the guard calling my name – “GOULD.” As I step to the window with my bag opened in advance, he lifts a bin to reveal a lone book with a note attached which says: “Dear Kha, I picked this up for you at blah, blah, blah. I hope you enjoy it.” Signed, “Beth.”

As I exited the package room area I shouted silent expletives in my mind: (A book!?!? How can I eat a book?!?!). But as reality set in, I asked myself, “Are you really that ungrateful?” Of course I answer, “No.” Then, that little angel of change appears in my head and says to me, “Some people don’t get anything in this place.” And before the voice gives me a thorough tongue lashing, I am seeing my blessings through fresh eyes. I’m thinking of the content of the subject matter, and how it will enrich my spirit. I think of how “The Book” will feed me knowledge that I did not have previously, and I am truly grateful. As of date, I still have a huge book that was given to me some years ago on my birthday, which we dub, “The Big Ass Book.” (Thank You!!)

Then there are “The Friends.” My Quaker Friends. There are two in particular who shower me with books all the time! I have one Friend who frequently brings in books and periodicals for distribution. She announces that she has brought books for everyone to read, but somehow the special ones often fall into my hands. Then, there is the other Friend who is always concerned about my studies and what subjects I have taken this semester. Often, we will engage in extensive conversation around a particular topic, and she would then ask, “Which ones do you enjoy most?” Depending on how I would respond, I would usually find a book in our library on the subject sometime in the future.

Then there are the end of the semester books. Usually, at the end of each semester we are allowed to keep the books that were issued for class. Some classes require that we read entire books while others only ask that we read chapters. Those that are partially read get digested gradually over time. Those that were fully read get reread through the chapters I enjoyed most. Then there is the accumulation of books from all-of-the-above (Mom, Beth, Friends, and Class) that have yet to be touched. These I try to devour during the spaces in between semesters. I find myself reading 2-3 books at once. I’ll read one book only when I sit on the commode, another that I only read on Saturday nights, and another on Monday nights. I make time and space for something now, that I once had no interest in at all.

And my final source of reading materials comes from the “Library Discard Box.” The general library often discards books that are sometimes duplicates, damaged, and surplus. I am often met by “The Book Police,” a guy who has the opportunity to see my living space flooded with books piled everywhere. I find myself hiding from him so he doesn’t scold me for accumulating more and more books. I have recently been able to calm him by letting him know that I no longer take books back to my living space. But instead, I am utilizing an endless supply of shelf space in the area where I work....

Overall, the love of reading has become a “Milestone” in my life that is perpetuated by those who love and care for me, and through my pursuit of higher learning. C.P.E.P. has been a vehicle for me and I appreciate the opportunity that has been provided – Thank You!

Sincerely,
Khalib Gould: Class of 2014!!

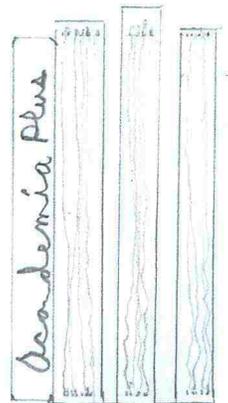
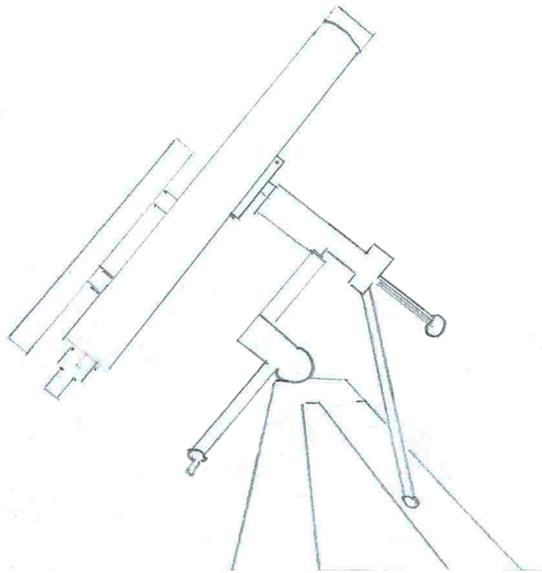
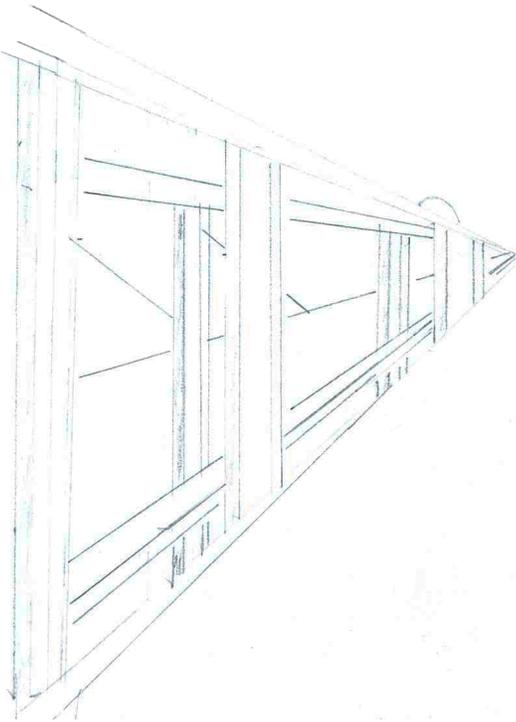
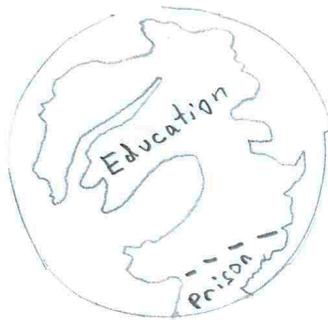
“Making It” *by* Maurice Cotton

It was a long journey to graduation,
but we made it.
Exams we took were closely scrutinized
before being graded,
but we made it.
We earned passing grades, since we made it.
There were lots of picking, sacrificing,
and avoiding temptations,
in order to make it.
We needed to catch up, excuse use, we've got lots of
effortful studying to do, so we can make it.

Biographies such as **Mandela**, and **Inner City Hoodlum**, by J. Mathis, affect me because the stories are good. The writings are good because the stories involve ex-felons. The stories show that with a higher education I cannot be discriminated against, even with a felony on my record. Nelson and J. Mathis had felonies on their records. Paradoxically, Nelson and J. Mathis were able to become official leaders. Although there are many indifferent people to officials whom experienced felony-records, I am empathic to such officials. I do not want a felony to limit me to a cycle of underclass, poverty or prison. I personally agree with the theory that poverty or prison should be abolished. So, this means that Nelson and J. Mathis had a felony, so do I. Nelson and J. Mathis did time in jail, I did time. Nelson and J. Mathis became officials, so by following their paths, I can become an official. I was talking to an offender about how far off it is before an ex-felon becomes the first American president. He thinks it will only happen in Africa. I think with higher education we can be unbiased and elect an ex-felon as the first United States president. If we can conceive fair treatment to felons, we can achieve an ex-felon becoming the first United States president.

The stories are good because people turned the tables. Instead of doing ten years walking around the yard or sitting around the prison doing nothing, I chose to take part in the vocational trade programming and the schooling being offered during the ten years. I do not want to get out the same person I was when I came in ten years ago, I want to be better. In ten years, I could have either the same skills or additional skills. I do not want to be one of the offenders trying to explain why it is taking me ten years to get a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma. In the yard guys come up with the argument, “I am going to be able to explain why I have done several years, and have not gotten a G.E.D.” “Good luck! I am not the one you are going to need to explain that to, the prison-officials are whom you need to get to hear your explanation.” I do not want to waste Ms. Buffet’s belief, nor the taxpayers’ dollars, nor my lifetime. It is easy to lose focus when people are distracted, so I focus with a telescope.

The biographies are good because the stories show society that money should be invested in higher education, not in imprisonment. Everyone does not get the same start in life. My downstairs neighbor was raised in a single-parent home and the one parent was addicted to drugs which led my neighbor to abuse alcohol. So, my neighbor was left home alone, and hungry lots of times since his mother was gone to spend the little money she had on drugs. My neighbor hardly went to school because there was no one to care. Newspapers were used as curtains. It was not long after he started going out robbing people before he was imprisoned. Once he was given a higher education, he ended up starting a business which took care of his mother and himself. Higher education was what he needed.



by: Cotton, M.

My Friend, Bill Palmer

by Nathan Powell

We were in Ithaca, New York, at one of those funky outdoor concerts where violin strings snap and the sleeky rustle of ankle bracelets was often the only percussion. A girl I thought I loved danced barefoot in the grass as these eerie, so, so beautiful voices tangled in the wind. That's where I met William Palmer. Bill was a giant with twinkling eyes. Wearing a full beard under a bald dome, he looked like he had answered a casting call to play the role of Popeye's archenemy, Bluto! I was 19 years old and had no idea how much Bill would influence my life.

The venues through which I came to know Bill almost always involved mutual friends: playing poker in Princeton, museums and Indian restaurants in Manhattan (Vindaloo, woohoo!), conventions in Vegas, cafes in Amsterdam, St. Johns vs. Duke (Felipe López at the buzzer!), George Foreman (victorious in the ring at 50!), Warren Zevon at The Stone Pony, and Fiona Apple at Roseland. Bill truly savored the full tapestry of cultures available (or not). He met the world around him with love and compassion, no matter what that world threw at him.

Don't get me wrong—he was no saint. Some of the cultures he tasted were destructive. But there was this tremendously human aura around Bill—almost like a sanctuary. He rejected the standard trappings of success. He drove a beat up car, wore comfortable clothes, and ignored the ladders of ambition propped up against the banks and skyscrapers all around him. It was like he had this unquenchable smile inside him, a confident joy that never ignored suffering, and an effortless goodness that would brook no petty hostility.

As time went by, I grew to learn what made Bill, Bill. The year I was born, Bill was coming of age in a middle class Jewish family in Brooklyn. During the height of racial tensions in the 1960s, Bill chose to attend an all black college in Tennessee. I never spoke to him about it, but having met his mom, I feel pretty sure his family was disappointed by his choices. He opposed the war in Vietnam and stood against any form of racism or sexism. In many ways he was the freest man I ever knew.

By the time I met Bill, he was teaching English at one of the worst (and most dangerous) public schools in New York City: Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. I never saw him say no to a fellow human being in need. I never saw him preach anything, try to convert anyone, or oppose anger with anger. He simply did what he felt was right.

I did see some of his former students, and the way their eyes lit up when they said, "Mr. Palmer," showed exactly how much difference a good teacher can make. Bill specialized in teaching the "bad" kids, the ones no one else could or would teach, disciplinary rejects from regular classes; unwanted by the public school system and often unwanted at home.

Bill patiently believed in them. I'm sure not all of his students succeeded in life. That's not the point. But within the bureaucratic behemoth that is the New York City public school system, there was at least one human being trying to make a difference in lives that most of our society had

already written off before they had even begun! Bill's students knew he cared. That's what he did. He cared.

Sometime after my own incarceration Bill was arrested in New Jersey. Even though another man admitted responsibility for the drugs, the "mandatory minimum" amount of drug was found in Bill's car. Bill was a school teacher and the prosecutor followed the letter of the law and Bill Palmer served a year in jail, where he lost his job, his pension, and his apartment. Even had the drugs been his, imagine how many of Bill's students chose chemical happiness to escape nightmares we cannot imagine. What do decades of exposure to this kind of struggle do to a person? Being in prison I think more highly of Bill every day. I also think more about how many of Bill's students went to prison and how deep that reality goes.

I'm sure Bill is trying to laugh right now. I'm not! Prohibition created Al Capone. The "War on Drugs" has done nothing but destroy American lives, creating worse criminals while building the largest Police State in U.S. history. We spend nearly 23 billion dollars a year on enforcement and over 80 billion a year incarcerating drug offenders. In over 40 years, this war has not reduced the availability of any drug by even a single gram! What this war has succeeded in doing is locking up more people per capita than any other nation on earth! Why are the majority of those locked up and disenfranchised the same urban people of color populations that once protested racism and the Vietnam War? Is it just coincidence?

Please consider the moral integrity of Bill Palmer's life and weigh it against the moral integrity of every judge, prosecutor, or "tough on crime" politician who has participated in this atrocity falsely labeled a "War on Drugs." I believe that these paragons of qualified immunity have made our society worse. I believe history will come to define the War on Drugs as a form of cultural genocide.

If you see things the way I do, you will do everything in your power to declare the War on Drugs over, lost, a colossal and deliberate waste of human resources. All funding for this WAR should be transferred to enhancing educational and employment opportunities in neighborhoods where children are born more likely to go to prison than to go to college.



Words are Powerful

by Leroy Taylor

Anyone who knows me well will tell you that I love to talk about my children. It may be sharing what new endeavors they've embarked upon or what new things I learn about, or from, them. Even though we rarely get to see each other in person, my children remain a part of who I am. (Thank God that prisoners can call cell phones now—I mean, aren't land-lines on the endangered species list or something?). Anyway, to stay true to who I am, here's a story about how my son, Na'cir, and I shared an educational moment. A moment that is summed up perfectly by several quotes from a well-known advocate for education and change.

Na'cir was ten years old at the time, and I would make it my business to call him every Saturday and Sunday at noon. Part of our calls were dedicated toward grammar lessons. I had copied pages from a grammar book and mailed him a new lesson each week. This was our first time trying a weekly phone-tutoring session. Na'cir would read the lesson and do the problems on his own, then we would go over them together. I was having a blast. We were learning together, how to use commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes, and all the loose rules that apply. Unfortunately, after the fourth or fifth week, Na'cir began to conveniently "misplace" the assignments or say he "never got them." The only reason he didn't say "the dog ate it," is because he didn't have a dog. I think he was trying to spare my feelings, but after some coaxing he reluctantly told me he didn't want to do the lessons anymore.

I was disappointed but determined. I told him that words and good writing are so powerful they can change the world in which we live. He wasn't convinced. "Dad," he said, "words can't change the world, they're only words."

"Okay," I said, "Let me present my facts, then tell me how you feel."

"Fine, I hope this is good," he said, as if he was readying himself to pounce all over my attempt. He enjoys dissecting weak explanations.

"Have you ever heard of Nelson Mandela?" I asked him.

"No, who's that?" I had his attention.

"He was a man who wrote and spoke words that were aimed at educating the world and his people of South Africa about ending apartheid, which legally kept black and white people separated. Mandela's words against apartheid were so powerful that the government put him in prison because they wanted to keep things the same.

Long story short, he did twenty-seven years in prison because of his words, but he kept on writing and the same words that had him imprisoned became the words that won him his release, because times had changed. His words, not only, helped to end apartheid, they also gained him

presidency of the same country that imprisoned him. So, what do you think about the power of words now?"

After a brief pause he answered me. "I changed my mind Dad, words are definitely powerful."

Less than a week after our conversation Nelson Mandela died, and his pictures and story saturated the media. It was the first time I could remember ever seeing photos of the young Nelson Mandela, before his hair turned grey. The next time Na'cir and I spoke he had learned more about this great man in school and wanted to share some of his quotes he'd found on the web. Two of those quotes resonated with me and inspire me to this day. They sum up the CPEP journey and graduation, and even more importantly life's journey. The beautiful words of Nelson Mandela spoken through my son's energy-filled voice.

"Everyone can rise above their circumstances and achieve success if they are dedicated to and passionate about what they do."

and

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

P.S. Recently, when I mailed my CPEP transcript to Na'cir, his mother told me how excited he was. "My dad got all A's and only one B+, that's my dad," he proudly told his Mom. "My dad is smart like me." Na'cir is my first and only son and I'm his first and only dad. This is my first prison-college-degree, thank you CPEP donors and volunteers. CPEP is helping to break down the legal separation of prisoners from the world through education.

Character Study

by Lucas W. Whaley

Who am I?

Am I the convicted murderer? The comic book geek? The weight-pit junkie? Am I the college graduate?

I admit it.

I am not the person I portray. I am not that person I want to be. Not exactly. I am not as strong, or fearless, or as selfless as I would like. Sure I try, but I am prone to profound despairs. I so very often want to surrender.

I never do. I always conceive some new play or stratagem. Same false hope. First I convince myself I am backed into a corner, bloodied beyond saving, then I come roaring out ready to fight. I hate myself for that sometimes.

Can any prison sentence rehabilitate that?

Am I my desires?

I would like to laugh more. I want to regret less. I want to live up to more of my ideals. I would like to impose less on the people I love. I want to be just as difficult to deal with as I have always been. Maybe in different ways. A little more inspired, a little less foolish. But only a little. I wish I weren't so crazy. I wish, for just once in my life, someone would love me enough to not leave. No matter the obstacles.

Think I can fantasize that away?

Am I my own creation?

I have worn the skins of so many hastily scribbled characters. I have peeled each off, scrubbed and scraped each away. From each I kept something, clung to some aspect I could not simply cast aside. The faint lines left after erasure. Am I the sum of these collected pieces? Am I that small core which decides these parts are worth preserving?

The distinction sounds academic, but to me it seems deeply important. Though I cannot articulate how. Or why. Does considering these questions determine who I am? Am I no more than the questions we ask? Am I the answers I come to?

Am I strong enough to lift that off of my shoulders?

Am I work in progress?

I learn. It takes awhile. I am learning that as I strive and sacrifice, I am, in fact, surviving through insanity. I have found that sometimes, with perseverance, the person I am and the hero I hope to be are not all that far apart. Sometimes. I have discovered that the path to wisdom is paved with perpetually broken hearts. I am learning that the only fate worse than death is a perpetually broken heart. I am learning that my past and my loneliness are as inescapable as this cage.

Does a degree open these doors?

So who am I?

An untethered island, forever floating around the edge of the archipelago. Some flightless creature leaping from the cliffs. A poet, writing with razors across wrists. Just some other faceless spectre passing through your life. The mixed metaphor which explains nothing and means everything.

A character study carefully wrought from the chaos.