

Vol. 14 | Spring 2021



# WRITER'S BLOC

*A literary journal for and by incarcerated students*



Anthony Fragoso

## SPECIAL THANKS

Thank you to all the contributors to this publication for their hard work and necessary voices. A special thanks to Kyri Murdough, who served as the Auburn Correctional Facility Program Coordinator for over six years before departing CPEP in summer 2020. She provided substantial input and assistance in the development of this Writer's Bloc Issue. Thank you to Pearl Ngozi, a student administrative assistant in the CPEP, for transcribing written work in spring 2020. Thank you to Emily Hopkins, CPEP Development Associate, for her contribution to the issue in the final stages of editing. Additional thank you to the staff of the Cornell Prison Education Program for their support in the development of this publication.

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# EDITOR LETTER

**T**he Writer's Bloc you will grace would not have been possible without the assistance of Demetrius, Kells, Max and Ray and many, many others. I, we, thank you all. I thank all the Cornell Faculty and volunteers for opening up my heart and mind to the possibilities and privileges that come with being educated; the power of imagination and seismic might of wielding a pen. Being at Cornell and saturating my mind in the myriad cultures has been one of the greatest moments of my life.

Sadly, in March of 2020, COVID abruptly halted all programs at Auburn prison. I extend my condolences to everyone who lost someone—a salutation to the survivors. I hope as you read this Writer's Bloc it reminds you of the infinite dignity and humanity in all human beings, including prisoners. I hope that you remember we are all deserving of compassion and forgiveness.

—Sheldon Preston Johnson  
Senior Editor

# OPENING NOTE

Throughout my time working with the Cornell Prison Education Program, I have served a number of roles. My time at CPEP began in fall 2019 when I served as a teaching assistant at Auburn Correctional Facility. Since then, I have worked as a program administrative assistant, and starting in fall 2020 as one of the editors of this amazing collection of literary work and art. Although I did not have the ability to simultaneously work with the contributors and other fellow editors of this edition due to the pandemic, I am humbled by this opportunity to work on the design of this magazine in its final stages. CPEP students in Auburn have put countless hours into this creation, starting work on it in spring 2019.

I want to take the time to highlight the impact the pandemic has had on the lives of incarcerated individuals. The pandemic has only exacerbated existing inequities in society, which is why it is so important that the voices and artistic expressions of those in penal institutions are amplified. While the majority of this work was completed prior to the pandemic, it is important that we continually utilize our voices to capture and reflect on the current moment. Writer's Bloc has always been a space for people to express themselves and I am honored to contribute to its legacy.

CPEP serves as a continual reminder that education is valuable at all levels and in all settings. I hope you enjoy this wonderful collection of work.

—Amina Kilpatrick  
Layout and Design Editor

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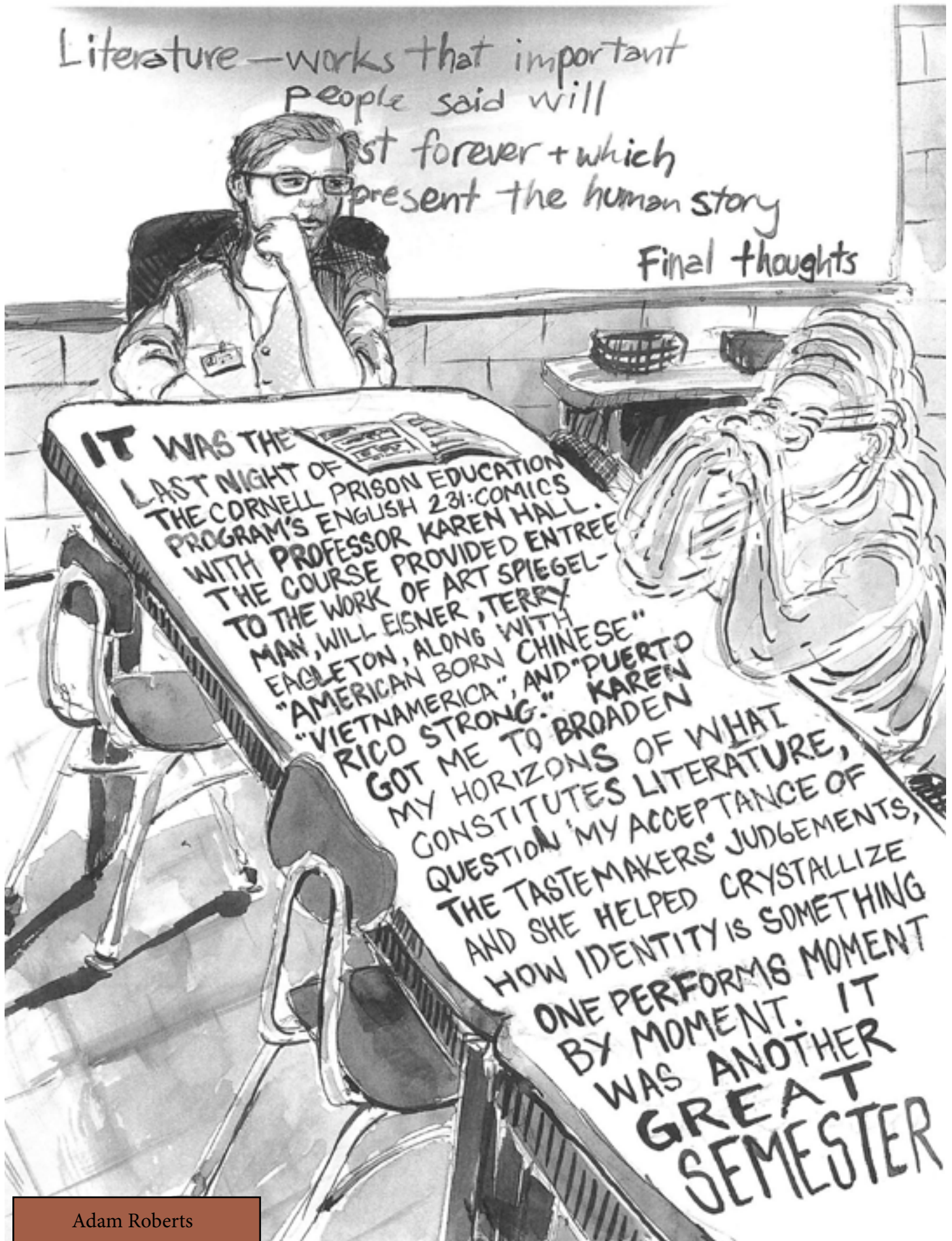
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Adam Roberts



Maximino Alvarez & Justin Kelly



# “Beyond the Veil...”

Khalib Gould

Percolating onto papyrus,  
Seeps the substance  
    Of things  
Nature, Culture, Place  
    Forbid him to proclaim  
Publicly;

Privately, however,  
    The poet  
Emerges from embers,  
    Transformed into emeralds,  
Making love on lines ...

He hopes to be remembered –  
    Etched into the echoes  
Of the enchantress,  
    Who keeps  
His secret safe.

# Somalian Sermons

Khalib Gould

Outside looking in, at  
mirrors beauty,  
oddly I feel detached...

Craving White Chocolate –  
While drinking White Lightning –  
Bolts, electrify Silver Souls...

In the Age of the Aquarius,  
trapped, I am, inside  
a hedonistic hell....

Though High science connect  
the conscious, and onyx  
Overwhelms the alchemist,

Her milky ways  
Bind a paradox  
The questions "Spring and All."

# 365 — Sorry — Not Sorry

Shane Lewis

Three-sixty-five, times  
fifteen equals, sorry  
Not sorry.  
I didn't get a letter, card, visit today.  
It was my birthday.  
I was very hurt.  
We had a huge argument the next day.  
She said a lot of things  
That really hurt me.  
She didn't say a lot of things  
That hurt me even more.

I know she's sorry and  
Didn't mean the things she said  
Or didn't say.  
I got a letter from her today.  
I didn't get a letter, a card,  
no visit today.  
It was our anniversary today.  
I called tonight and she said  
How sorry she was  
She was very busy—she just forgot.

I woke up this morning  
Treading about, heart beaten  
and bruised to the core  
With not many words to say  
I knew she was sorry because  
I got a letter from her to say  
As much today.

She gave me no thanks...  
I'm a year older today  
It's Cupid's day...  
Three-sixty-five gone by.  
No card, no visit, she's not sorry!

I didn't call, I've said all I could say  
Sorry—not sorry, she left me  
With pain, yet taken all else away.  
So many years gone in day  
Three-sixty-five,  
Times fifteen equals  
Sorry not sorry.

# The Word No

Keith Wilcox

When I was little I was amazed by the word no. It was such a powerful word that I heard many times during my formative years. “Mom, can I have some cake?” “NO.” “Can I stay up late?” “NO.” So as I grew, I began to use that word to achieve my own power. “Keith come here” “NO,” “Give me a kiss,” “NO,” but my no’s seemed to result in slaps, punishments, or other unpleasant outcomes. I couldn’t seem to get it right, why didn’t my no’s work? Was I using the word right? Maybe I wasn’t saying it with enough force. NO, no, NOOO, hmm it sounds right to me. As I got older the work took on new meaning. I had started grade school and could use no to keep all the blocks to myself, but then the teacher would come over and say “Keith, you have to share” “but I said no,” and still it didn’t work, why not? Why does your no have more power than mine? You’ ll understand when you get older. Okay, how old? Ten, Twenty, a Hundred? Isn’t there a constitution or something that gives me the right to say no? Well, it isn’t working. I’d like to order a large pizza with extra cheese, please. No. How about a few extra chicken legs at chow? NO. Can I stay up and watch the NBA finals? NO. Why is your no more powerful than mine? Okay I made a mistake, so that invalidates my no? I’m sure you’ve made mistakes too, you just didn’t get caught, YET, but when you do is your no also going to be noneffect? I’m still human, I still have feelings, so if at times you allow your no’s to be yes’s, then maybe peace can exist between us, and I can have some dignity about myself and you.

# Comprehension

Jeremy Simmons

A pain that can't be spoken but is seen  
And understood.  
This pain erases all of the good in moments  
For what?

If a survival is no run  
Just so that lesson can be learned,  
If survival is at risk;

Then what is that lesson teaching at this point?  
Walk into death's arms or keep death around like the  
Griffins?  
Everyone accepts the right thing to be done all the  
time  
Except when all the wrong things are happening to  
them.

Perfection is accepting of one's own flaws.  
If this is my truth,  
Then I know less than I did yesterday  
Because of the new questions I have today



# (This isn't Love)

Jeremy Simmons

I feel the warmth I receive  
In your comfort,  
Regardless of the distance  
We may see.

My thoughts of you have increased  
And I don't want them to stop  
The pattern that you create  
When the speed of our words  
Reach their sound.

I think of you I see colorful shapes  
Like someone on psychedelics  
But still,

This all appears to be sound  
Since you've been around,  
I see in 360 degrees  
I soar,  
Then I wake up

And realize we have yet to meet,  
So wake me up  
when that time is here,  
cause for now I'll remain asleep.

# A Verbal Fast

Sheldon P. Johnson

I don't remember exactly what I said, but it couldn't have been more than a nanosecond after "fucking bitch" that my face exploded and blood gushed everywhere. We were grocery shopping at C-town supermarket and I wanted the real Fruity Pebbles with Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble on the front of the box. I was tired of eating the same old bootleg version of Captain Crunch: King Vitaman.

"No," my mother snapped in my face with her thumb, index, and middle finger, followed by a distorted vocal tone. I obviously had become too

accustomed to cursing while playing in the stairwells of the ghetto projects; way too accustomed to cursing while running the streets with my friends and loved the ways they'd ogle and fawn around me as if I was speaking a foreign language. And just like that it came out "FUCKING BITCH." So on the first of the month, welfare check day, in broad daylight at the overcrowded neighborhood C-Town supermarket, she sucker punched me square in the face. I can still faintly recall being stunned as flickers of white dots swarmed my vision and for a moment my legs buckled, almost giving

out.

Despite all the ass whoopings and more than thirty years in passing, I cannot seem to erase the supermarket incident; it has somehow consumed any memories of affection. Possibly because it was my first direct confrontation with an explosive and unpredictable act of violence. I mean, it was virtually impossible to be naive to violence growing up during the crack-era in New York City's Harlem: gang-land shootouts, rooftop overdoses, strong arm robberies, and five dollar pussy. Still, I had never expected for my first direct experience with such a spontaneous and immediate act of violence to be perpetuated by my mother; the woman who I looked to for nurturing, to teach me what love looked like, to guide and protect me as a child.

I can vividly feel the gawking stares of spectators on the long embarrassing walk home. It was mid-August hot and had to be close to 100 degrees; a little after two o'clock in the afternoon when the sun peaks. I couldn't have been more than eight years old; I had on red short-shorts (the ones that kids nowadays would point and laugh at), a plain white t-shirt and my favorite white and black Converse Skippy's. I clearly remember struggling to

keep up with her fast paced walk down Fifth Avenue between the long blocks of 112th and 115th streets—

mentioned. I sometimes wonder what a confrontation would look and sound like? I rationalize that her actions

as a child all I felt was a mother who hated her son; and as a child, there existed this inability to understand why my mother despised me; pushing me onto the ledge of mutual hatred and blind rage.

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**I can still faintly recall being stunned as flickers of white dots swarmed my vision for a moment and my legs buckled, almost giving out.**

---

three concrete paved city blocks that are combined into one; bordering two infamous project complexes in Manhattan's Harlem: Taft and Foster.

I can still feel the blood crusting on my face. Ruining my milk white t-shirt with dark purple splotches—scabs on a wound; while I stumbled under a baking sun shooing away hungry mosquitos. Theresa never said anything afterward. Nothing—no sorry, no PEP talk, she didn't even clean the blood off my face. There was just a cold frigid silence. I remember climbing onto the bathtub's ledge, tip-toeing to look into the mirror; watching in awe and horror, as both my eyes magically swelled into small balloons, and my nose appeared to be crooked.

Till this day the incident has never been

were prompted by life's hard cruel sense of balance, that she was bitter because she was deaf and mute; alone and challenged. Did she see my father in me? Punished me for the transgressions against her heart. Of course

Theresa, my mother, cannot talk and cannot hear; she is a deaf mute, but reads lips like a professional spy in some antiquated World War II movie. A skill that most people, including me, underestimated; but Theresa seemed to love music, she always played it really loud while placing her hand on the nearest table or wall to absorb the vibrations. I imagine that she had dreams of being a singer. In fact, I recall on a few occasions where I caught her lip-syncing; when she thought no one

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**As a child all I felt was a mother who hated her son; and as a child, there existed this inability to understand why my mother despised me.**

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as a child, I could not begin to comprehend the depth of these moral and emotional implications; as a child what I did feel was the indifference to my needs;

was watching: reliving dreams that were shattered by an inability to talk or hear. A symbolic reminder of her incapacities. In many ways I pity her. Perhaps, I am

making excuses for a woman who was just mean and scorned; but a woman who had every right to be angry at fate and circumstance. I try to imagine what it feels like to see people talk, yet never hear a sound; to be robbed of your own voice; to scramble daily to remember what a voice, any voice, sounded like. I envision myself drowning in the eerie silence of a dark spaceless silence; infinitely tortured with the inability to voice what I think, what I feel, into the harmony of syllables—language.

As a child I envied the relationships most of my friends had with their mothers. Sadly, I don't recall the presence of many fathers, just single mothers. I loved to spend the night at my friend Nicholas' house. His mother worked at a post office and his father drove a bus. Nicholas had everything: the newest video games (Atari and ColecoVision), nice clothes, a Beta-Max (the equivalent of a VCR); a shelf full of movies and wall-to-wall carpeting. Their bathroom had a flowery shower curtain, a pretty ivory toothbrush holder attached to the wall; their toilet seat even had cushioning. The kitchen cabinet was always filled with cookies, chips, and stuff that I couldn't pronounce. Before we went to bed she would ask us if we were still hungry,

help us wash our faces and brush our teeth. It was at Nicholas's house that I first learned to floss my teeth, a habit I have carried till this day. She even kissed our foreheads and tucked us into Nicholas' big bed with the soft-silky comforter—wishing us sweet dreams.

I find myself struggling to access random memories of good night kisses—I love you's, but all I seem to draw are blanks. Just a lot of screaming and yelling. My mother screamed a lot. I contemplate that she was self-obsessed with trying to voice her voice; suffering from the anxieties of not being able to hear and speak; thus every opportunity to voice her objections, small or large, were met with a scream or holler; and those not voices were dramatized with excessive—aggressive finger pointing to make a point or blame someone for something.

Of course I can see how she had every right to be angry, to hate the world in which she was temporarily disconnected; a world where she had to constantly depend on other people in order to find her own voice; to beat me for being a bad

**But I've come to accept that she'll probably be on her death bed before I am reminded she's still alive.**

kid. I don't hate her, but I can no longer pretend that we share any real sacred-emotional connection. I have found myself hoping that someday, one day, she'll send me a letter and apologize for being callous; that she'll pour out her maternal heart and tell me how sorry she is, how much she misses and loves me; that she doesn't hate me; that she never hated me; how she knows she wasn't the best mom and give me a plausible excuse that I can grasp onto in order to find forgiveness—FORGIVENESS. A concept I have swished around the palate of my mind for a long time. Perhaps, it is too late for forgiveness. It has taken me over thirty years to let go of who I thought my mother should have been to her son. To find balance in the trauma, to find solace in a cauldron of anger, to repair the damage.

I haven't heard from Theresa in eleven long years. I was hoping she would attend my graduation. But I've come to accept that she'll probably be on her death bed before I am reminded she's still alive. I wonder how I'll respond when they tell me she has died. Will I experience the normal stages of grief? Denial, anger, acceptance? No, I believe I'll be more disappointed that we never had the opportunity to have a mother-son relationship.

Maybe we did, but any ideology of what a mother is supposed to represent has been distorted by too many white privilege Silver Spoon, Different Strokes sitcoms. At the moment, I cannot seem to conjure the imagined grief that a son is supposed to feel when his mother dies. Just an emotional distance that can never be crossed, an abysmal silence of futile space and wasted time; and every day thereafter, like every day before it, I'll look into the mirror and relive the infinite crookedness of my nose. A nose that glasses never seem to properly sit on; a nose that has a protruding bone; a nose that was never reset to heal correctly.



# What do I want?

Jeremy Simmons

We've all had opportunities for that feeling we can't  
seem to find,  
Until we reach a turning point.  
It's never too late  
Because we're destined to reach our fate  
But as of late  
I've realized that there are far more fates worse than  
death;  
Being alone is mine...  
Even though I have those that care  
Their sense of obligation keeps them here.

No matter the numbers,  
No matter how sharp the weapon,  
My biggest fear is not having a companion  
To share my fears with  
To share my joy with.

Just to share my life with someone who can stand  
with me  
Through the hard times  
Just like they can stand with me during the good  
times...

Maybe what I want is a fantasy.

# The Fall of a Leaf

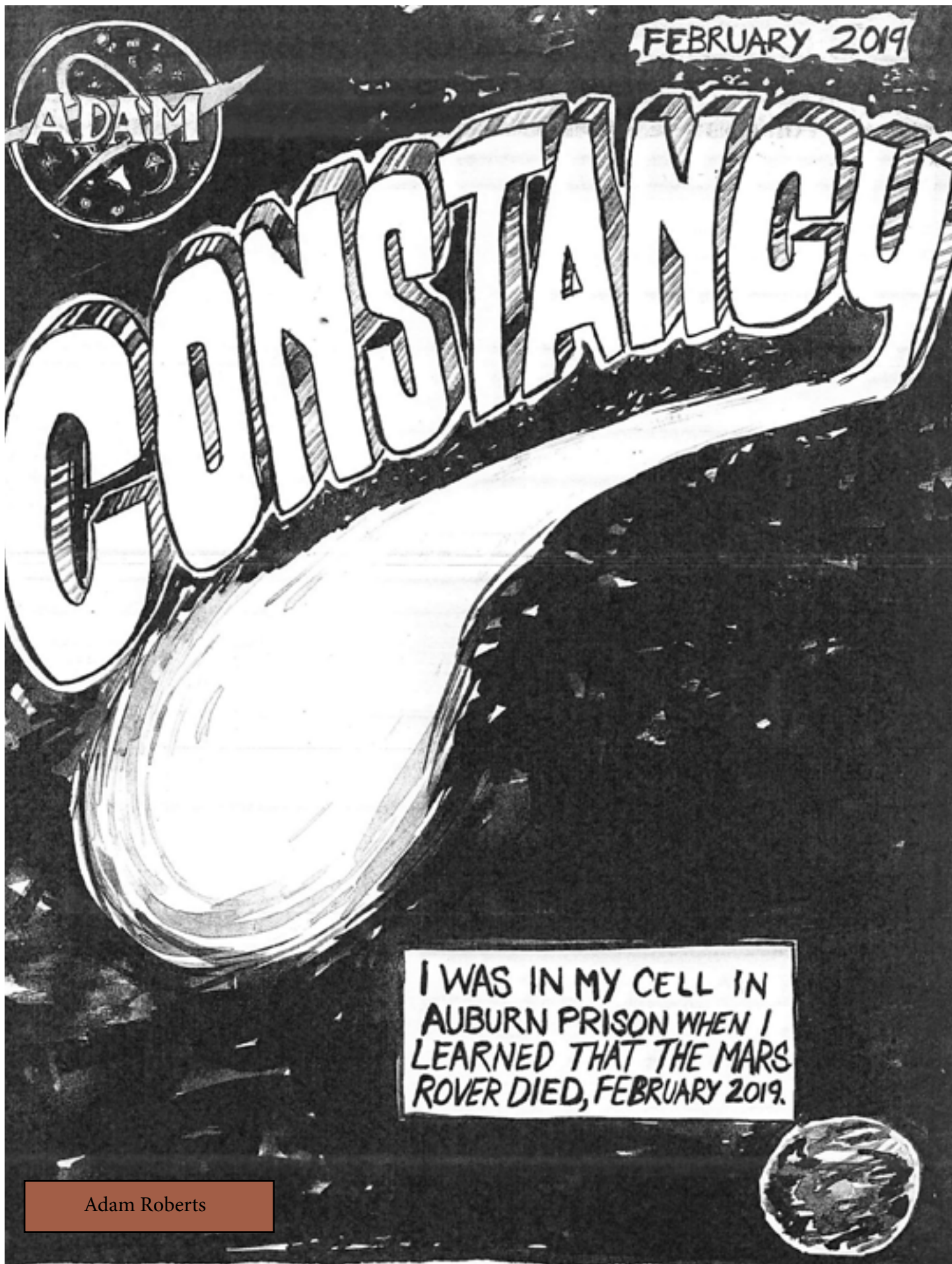
McArthur, G-Boi

It's fall again and I am a leaf.  
This is the time of year that I regret.  
The time of year I feel used and old.  
I crumple and fall hitting the cold ground  
Like a feather.

Many people gather me with look-a-likes  
in big piles. Some just let me blow in the  
wind.

To be lost in the wind will be my purpose.  
No one will have the slightest idea of where my  
home was. Where I came from or where I will  
end up when the wind calms.

No one could remember that I once bloomed  
and blossomed and gave shade on the hot and humid  
days. I took the heat. But today I'm gone and forgot-  
ten stuck in the sewer gutter.



FEBRUARY 2019



I WAS IN MY CELL IN AUBURN PRISON WHEN I LEARNED THAT THE MARS ROVER DIED, FEBRUARY 2019.



Adam Roberts

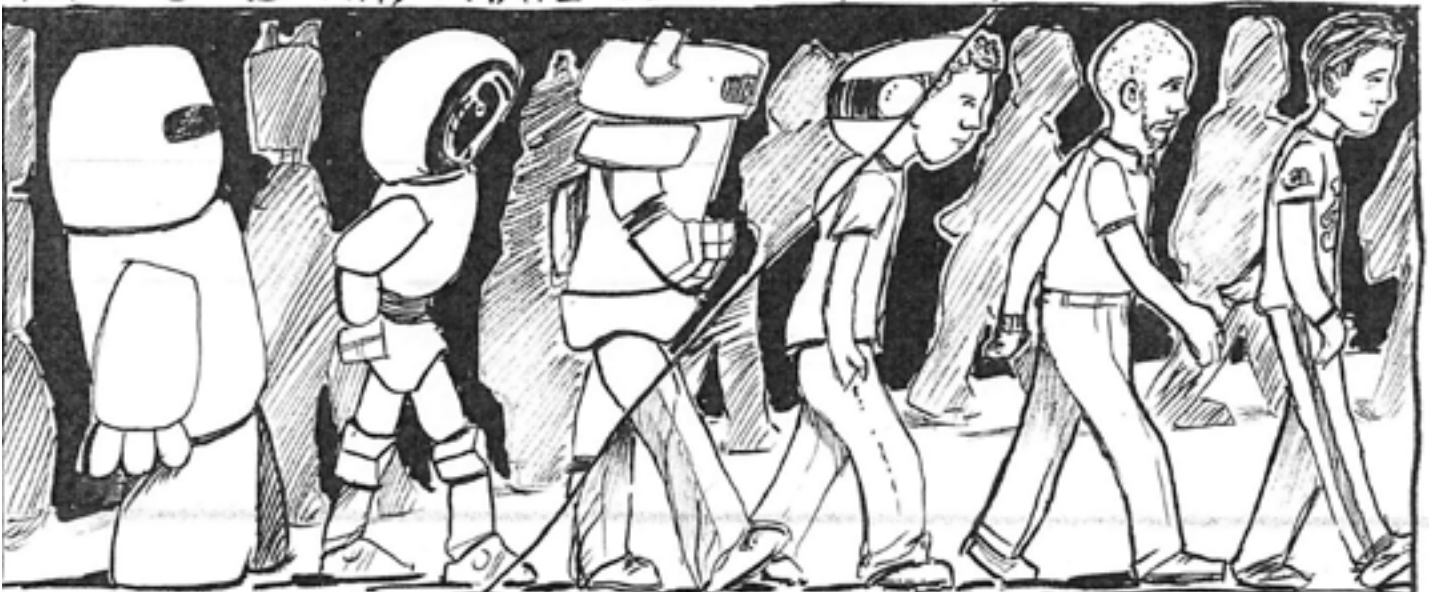




I TOOK THE NEWS HARD.

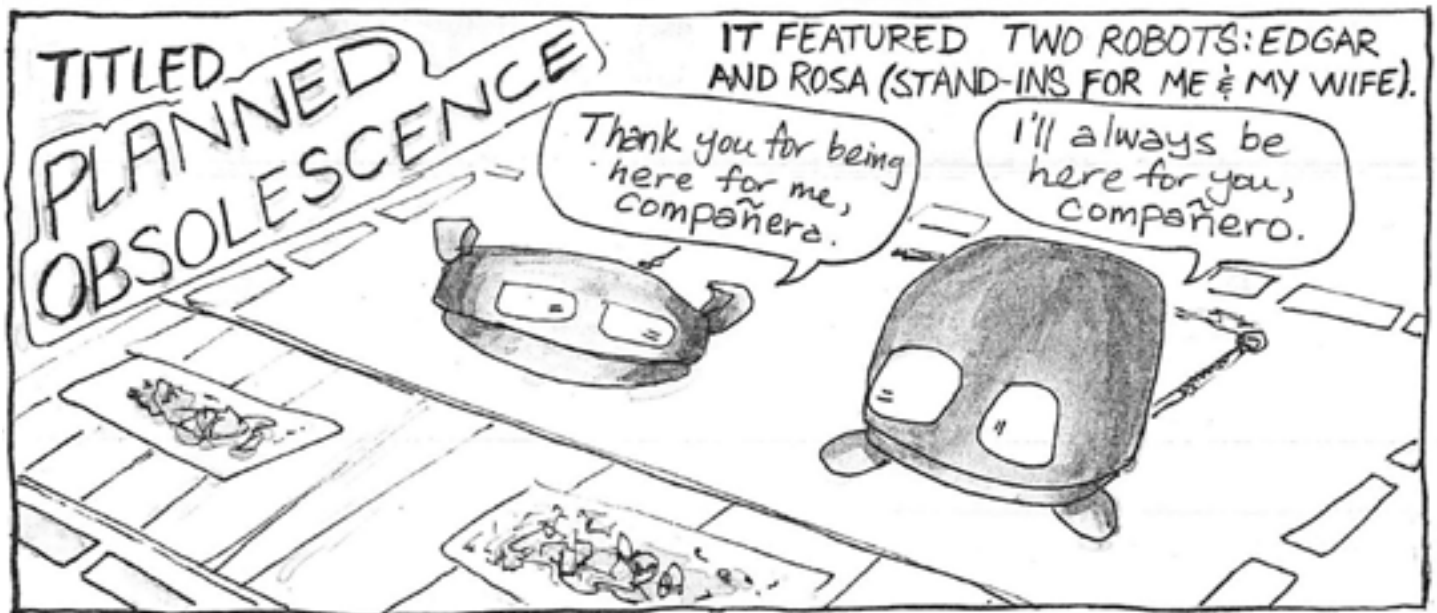


NOT SURE WHY I HAVE SUCH AN AFFINITY FOR ROBOTS.



PERHAPS BECAUSE, LIKE PRISONERS, ROBOTS ARE VIEWED BY MOST AS UNFEELING, LIFELESS THINGS.



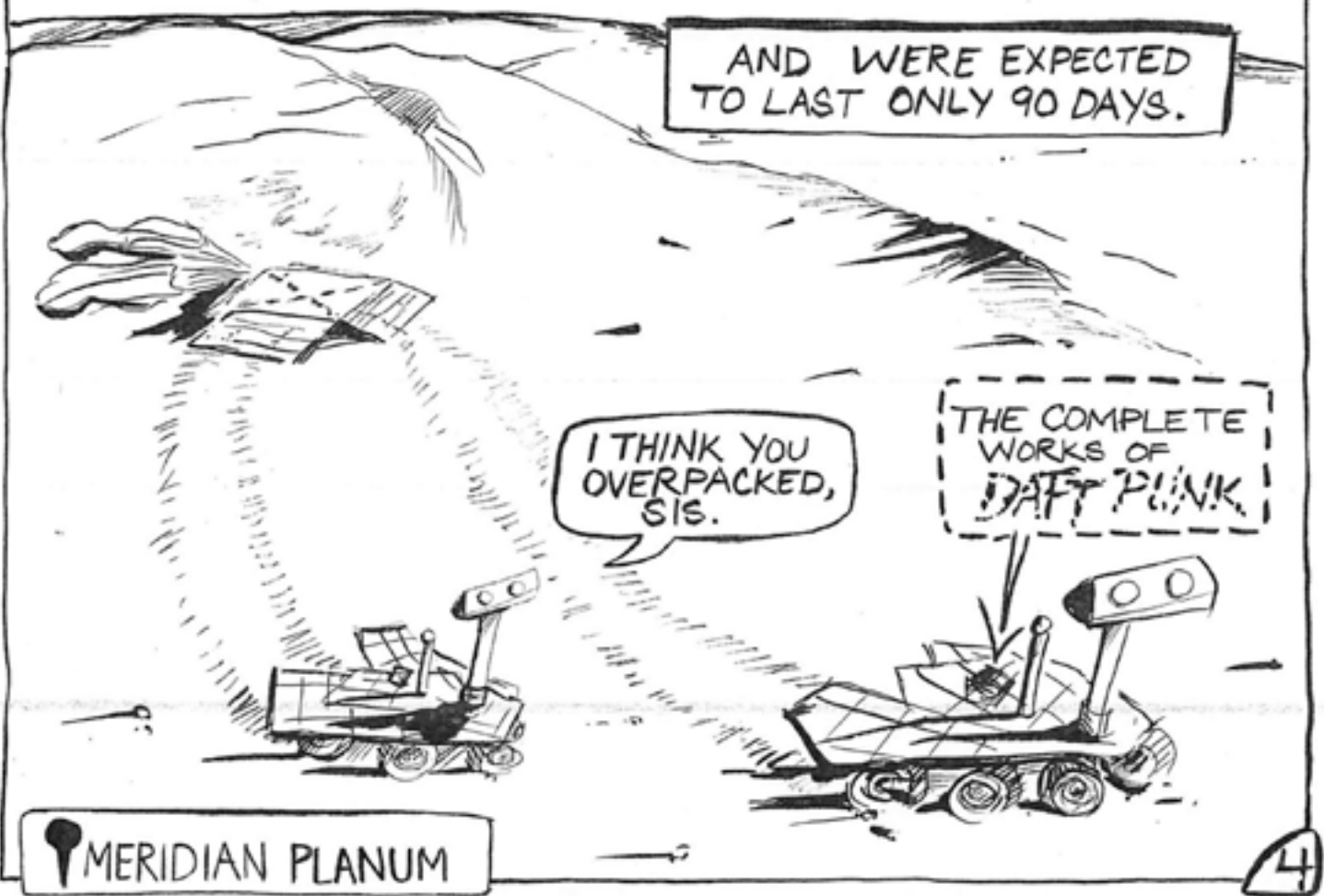






SHE AND HER SISTER, SPIRIT, LANDED ON MARS IN 2004...

AND WERE EXPECTED TO LAST ONLY 90 DAYS.

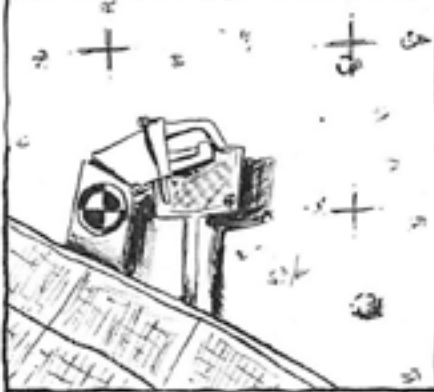


OPPIE WAS THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD.



(SHE OUTLIVED SPIRIT.)

THE DATA SHE SENT BACK TO EARTH ADVANCED MANKIND'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE RED PLANET.

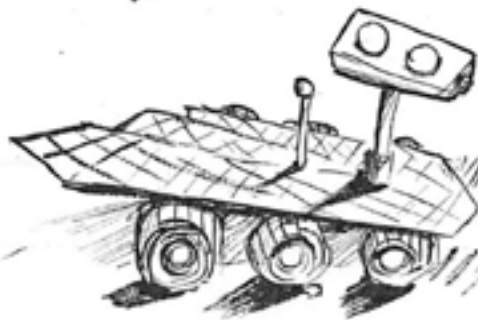


IN THE AUTUMN YEARS OF HER LIFE, OPPIE DEVELOPED A PROBLEM WITH ONE WHEEL.



SO, THE ENGINEERS HAD HER TRAVEL BACKWARDS.

WHICH SHE DID, WITHOUT COMPLAINT.



CONSIDER THE ROVER

FOR JUST A MOMENT.

OUT THERE IN A COLD, LIFELESS ENVIRONMENT. ALONE IN THE VACUUM OF SILENCE, AS YOU SIT READING THIS.

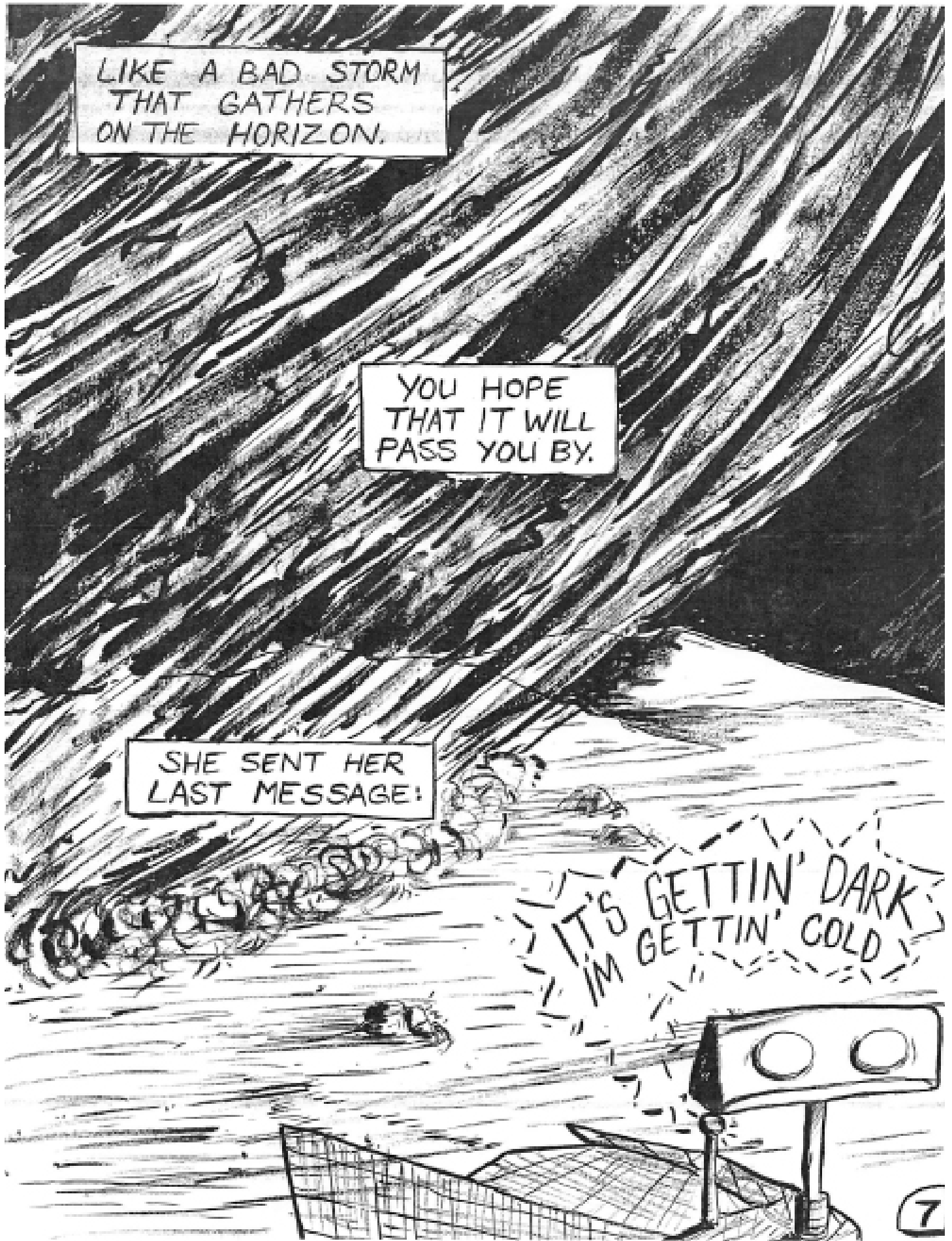


THE MESSAGES SHE BEGAN SENDING HOME CLUED NASA THAT THE END WAS NEAR.















# Ever Since

Michael McKenzie

It seems like  
since birth  
I've been cursed with  
my mother's hate, my father's sin.  
Or my mother's hate  
for my father's sins,  
which caused her to neglect  
me as a child.  
Witnessing my father's abuse  
absent any help.  
And how could  
a young woman's pregnancy  
at 16 not be a cry for help.  
Someone, help.  
I need assistance  
with loving my mother past her hate  
and praying that God forgives  
my father for his sins.  
for even in a perfect world  
is there really such a thing.  
I've invested a lot of compassion  
in a house, that still remains  
an unhappy home.  
Although, I've grown  
to become a beautiful Rose  
life has pricked my body  
and left scars beneath the clothes  
deep, within my bones ...  
all over my soul.  
Am I my father's son  
the man who raised and whooped me.  
The one I call Dad,  
Because he told me  
"your mother had an affair  
and she named you after him.  
Thanks Dad. Now I understand.

# Prada

## Michael McKenzie

It feels like since birth  
I've been cursed with  
My mother's hate and my father's sins  
Or my mother's hate for my father's sins  
Which has caused her to neglect me as a child  
And at thirty I'm still trying to figure that out

Why was my father abusive and no on trying to get  
him help ?  
Or is a girl having her first child at fifteen and a boy  
dropping out  
Of school at sixteen not a cry for help  
Well, I'm a product of the two and I'm crying out  
Somebody help.....

I need some assistance  
With loving my mother for her hate  
And praying God forgives my father for his sins  
Because even in a perfect world .....  
But nobody is perfect though  
I spread an abundance of love in my house  
But I still feel unhappy....Home

Quote: From the concrete I've grown,  
To be a beautiful soul  
Still life has scabbed my body,  
And left scars beneath my clothes  
Covering my skin  
Underneath my flesh  
With-in my bones  
All over my soul.....

My skeletons aren't in any one closet  
They're also stacked in the basement and  
I am holding the door closed  
Because if I let the knob go  
I will fucking blow.....

And go Jason on Halloween  
Michael Meyers in Scream  
Hands up don't shoot , "BOOM, BOOM, BOOM",  
BREATHE.....  
But it's not the black guy this time who is left on the  
scene.

Life is A mess  
However being black just adds to the stress

# Weekend at Auburn

## Focus

Long before  
 the inhumane U.S. Mexico border facilities  
 there was: 72 hours, unconstitutional conditions  
 Auburn prison.  
 3 days, 2 men, 1 cell, no deodorant.  
 No toothpaste -- no change of clothes.  
 Condemned male bodies  
 disillusioned with Daddy issues  
 within a static smog of fecal gas  
 second hand smoke, and stale breath  
 from smuggled drugs and tobacco  
 meant as an anodyne:  
 no fresh air, no privacy,  
 no media, no oversight  
 An homage to an American heritage  
 the European goal.  
 The far floating flag  
 of the slave ship.  
 A debauched and demonic threesome  
 of conquered continents and cultures.  
 We dig beneath the styx.  
 Each cell is a caisson pressurized  
 in repressed anger  
 and deferred dreams.  
 Entrenched in oppression, helplessness,  
 we descend deeper than Dante.  
 One weekend at Auburn.  
 The oldest modern prison in the world.

# The Depot

Sheldon P. Johnson

Dark and dank, dingy and dirty  
is the stationary slave ship.  
Pig iron amalgamates steel encasements  
faint urine and feces scents  
assault the senses  
persistent chatter and distant clanging  
are like baritones and clarinets in symphony.  
Smoke and screams awaken an awareness  
of the spirit that lingers between dimensions.

Vomit green mattresses and shredded pillows  
beaten into submission lye in matrimony  
with restless nights and weighty hearts.  
They arrive in trips,  
TRIP ONE: Black, brown, beige  
TRIP TWO: Tan, Yellow, White  
TRIP THREE: The forgotten.  
To be warehoused without, toothbrushes  
toothpaste, washcloths, or soap;  
just swabs, and vacant stares lubricated in butter.  
Destination: Attica, Comstock, Elmira  
Sing-Sing, Green Haven...  
Flesh and bone deposits desensitized  
by human's humanity.

Grey sheets and pilled blankets caress  
skin like Small Pox; pregnant  
and domesticated roaches show up like  
pets, conditioned, to the crumpling  
of brown paper bags. On the CHOW!  
Slate grey bologna and milky white cheese  
constipate heavy, hard, hungry stomachs.

Despair reeks in waves off uniform greens  
That lean like broken banisters  
from the weight  
of antiquated shackles and chains;  
transported to-and-fro across DOCCS

defined borders in Greyhound buses  
disguised by shades of modernity.  
Infinitesimal closets of metal and stone  
mimic recycled caskets and deadpan tombstones  
where nicotine and caffeine are king.  
And the plethora of mistakes and stories that  
will never be told, for they are  
as old as forgotten folklore, passed down  
from generation-to-generation  
into the trap of capital's complacency.

# A Praise Song

Keith Wilcox

I come to you when the day is stifling and oppressively hot, offering you comfort, yet you curse me and tell me to go away.

I bring life to your parched fields, to your dry valleys, and your arid deserts, and yet you hate me.

I kiss your face, your neck and arms with a thousand kisses, and yet you run and hide from me.

I cause your rivers to flow, your grass to flower, the worms of the earth come out to greet me, but you shun me.

I come as a mist, as a warm embrace yet still you despise me.

In my anger I tear down your homes, wash away your fancy cars and clean the filth of your crowded streets away, but you called me a disaster.

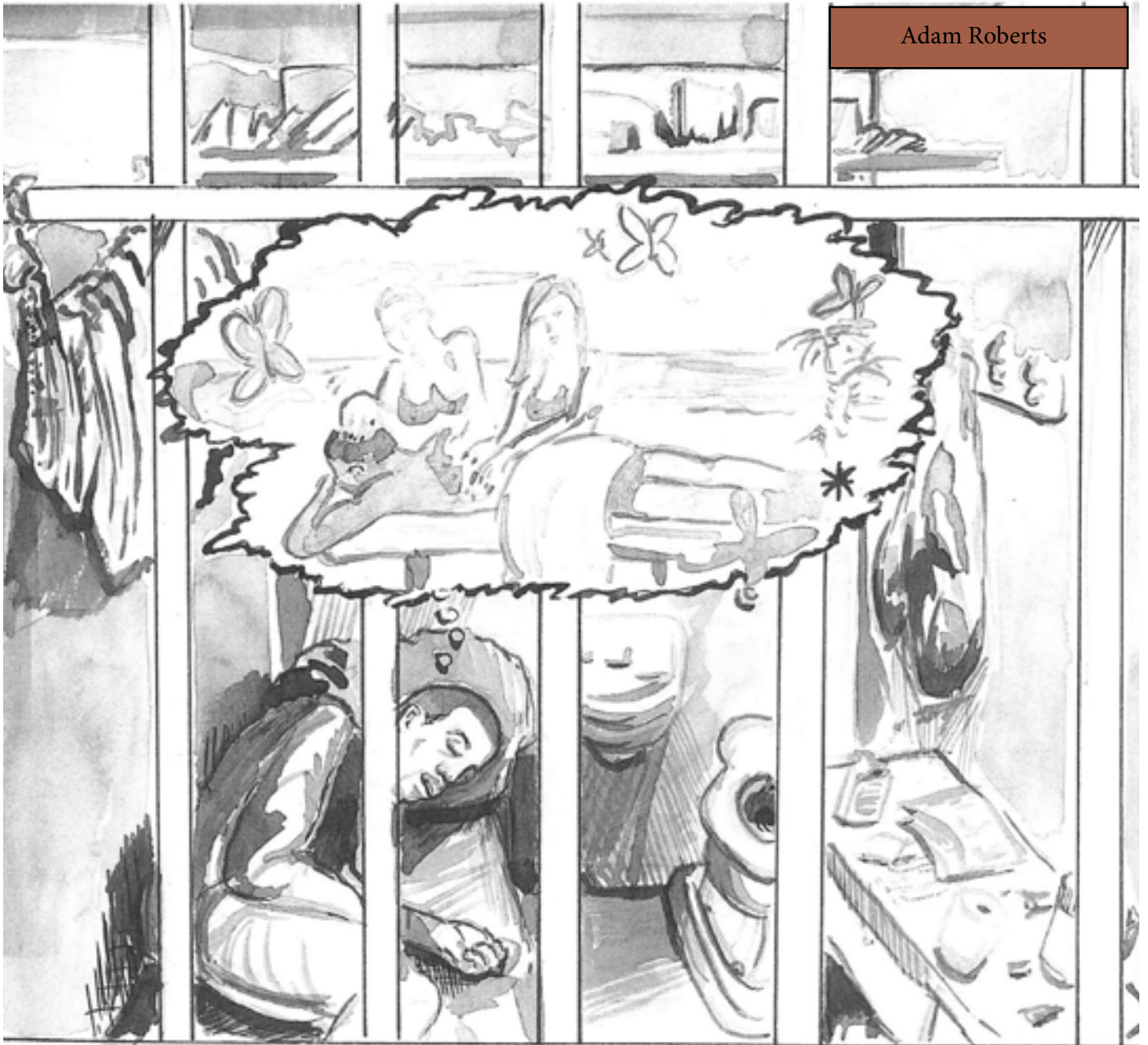
My lakes you fish and swim in, my rivers carry your food from tower to city, my oceans provide beauty and food, and yet, you proclaim me as a passing nuisance.

Your children play in my puddles, my rivulets, in their many colorful pastel coats, but you call out to them to ignore me, that I'm to be avoided.

You praise my sister in your songs, build forts in her and frolic in her frigid arms, and yet I am an outcast. Why can't you love me as I love you? Your body needs me, your crops call to me, but you, whom I adore, you hate me.

My name is sweet, whisper it softly or shout it in rage, I hear you. Write ballads unto me and give me that which I desire of you, simply, your love, for I am Rain.





⚠️ WARNING: PRISON RULE NO. 7 ⚠️  
LET SLEEPING DUDES LIE.  
EVEN BAD DREAMS BEAT HERE.

\*THIS LUCKY BASTARD, TYSON, DREAMS OF BACK SCRATCHES & BUTTERFLIES,  
WHILE I HAVE THAT DREAM OF MY TEETH FALLING OUT.

# IT'S A RUFF LIFE by Ashell



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Adam Roberts

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