

Writer's Bloc



Photo by Julia Woodward

Volume I, Issue 1, Fall 2009

Dear readers, writers, educators,

"Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go."

-E.L. Doctorow

"Writing is making sense of life. You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area."

-Nadine Gordimer

"Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals."

-Don DeLillo

We have begun this literary journal with these fundamental ideas: writing is an outlet, it is a deeply personal expression of self, and, as such, it should be given an opportunity to be heard - a forum for self-expression, if you will.

For us, teaching with the Cornell Prison Education Program has been a learning experience akin to writing - what you learn about yourself is unexpected, what you learn about others is beautiful.

We hope that *Writer's Bloc* will be a platform for the Auburn students, both to say what they want to themselves, and to say it to their audience. It is our hope that reading the work put down in this journal will be a chapter of our experiences for you, a look into Auburn, the work that the Cornell Prison Education Program does there, and what our students produce.

We will both be graduating from Cornell in a few short months, and we both can look back on our teaching experience as one of the most meaningful we have had at Cornell (our application essays to teaching jobs and law schools attest to this). If you believe, like we do, that *Writer's Bloc* is a truly worthwhile endeavor, please contact us to help out with future editions. We would like the literary journal to continue when we leave Ithaca.

The writers featured in this journal have poured their innermost selves into making *Writer's Bloc* what it is, and for that, we thank them. Enjoy.

Yours in writing,

Julia Woodward '10 and Rahul Desai '10

Writer's Bloc

Staff

Editor.....Rahul Desai '10

Editor.....Julia Woodward '10

Staff.....Marisa Breall '10

Staff.....Kristine Heiney '10

Staff.....James Lee '10

Cornell Advisor.....Peter Enns, Faculty Director, CPEP

Cornell Advisor.....James Schechter, Executive Director, CPEP

Note to CPEP participants: You may notice that our student staff exclusively represents the senior class. We are hopeful that the journal will be able to continue next year, so if you like what you see, and are interested in getting involved, and especially if you are not a member of the class of 2010, please contact Rahul at rrd25@cornell.edu, Julia at jkw38@cornell.edu, or CPEP - Executive Director, Jim Schechter at jas349@cornell.edu. Happy reading!

Writer's Bloc

Contents

Fiction

Ricardo Naafi Callender, *Waking*.....25-26

Robert Cumberland, *Natural Selection*.....19

Non-Fiction

Saifuddin Abdus-Samad, *The Veil: Cultural or Religious Obligation?*.....14

Javon Chavis, *In Awe of Rain*.....28

Jose Latif Diaz, *A Message in the Leaf*.....10-11

Gherald Harrison, *The G-Code: The Fallacy of the Hood*.....6

Gherald Harrison, *Mother's Day vs. Baby Mama's Day*.....7

Elvin Lebron, *My Cornell Experience*.....16

Nathan Powell, *An Orwellian Approach to Defining Piracy*.....27

Christopher Shapard, *Case Argument: Kano et al v. Florida et al*.....8

Clifton K. Williamson, *Ethnography: Ritual*.....20-22

Writer's Bloc

Contents Continued

Non-Fiction (continued)

Mike York, <i>Untitled</i>	12
----------------------------------	----

Poetry

Salim Nafis Az-Zahid, <i>Alone</i>	13
David Bendezu, <i>His-story</i>	18
Steve Bush, Jr., <i>Freedom Seekers</i>	9
Michael Shane Hale, <i>God Hates Me</i>	23-24
Eric Partak, <i>Existence</i>	15
Christopher Perry, <i>It Begins With You and I</i>	29
Gary Stewart, <i>Your Picture</i>	17
Shawn Williams, <i>Reflections</i>	30

Note to Readers: As space is limited, some of the longer pieces are excerpted in this journal. Full versions can be viewed online at http://cpep.cornell.edu/_journal

The G-Code: The Fallacy of the Hood

Gherald Harrison

Gangsterism.

“Ain’t nothing but a G thang baby. Two loc’ed out G’s going crazy.” Snoop Dog and Dr. Dre penned these lines and the entire hood embraced them. West coast, East coast, Midwest, Dirty South, straight down to Dade County!

Being a G became the thing to be! To be honest, people in the hood was repping sets long before Snoop and Dre let that one go, but there is nothing like an anthem to galvanize millions of people into one mindset and course of action!

Being a provider and protector of your children! Not in the G-code? Being a leader of your community and a responsible man? Aha! That’s in the G-code. Yes it is! I made a painstaking search of all the bylaws, principles, morals, tenets and prerequisites to becoming a G and I found a specific mention of responsibility and community leadership. However, that mention had to do with never being seen as a responsible leader of the community seeking to uplift and positively affect his/her environment.

The G-code should stand for genocide, but really it’s more severe than that. When another race of people attacks you and forces you into gas chambers or unto slave ships, that’s insanity.

When you embrace morals, tenets and principles that destroy yourself, that’s lunacy.

If you truly want to read the writings of gangsters, all you have to do is read the Declaration of Independence!

Give me liberty or give me death. That’s gangsta.

I’m a black man who’s proud of my heritage, but not proud of my past behavior. I can continue to kill myself or kill the thought patterns that triggered my suicidal behavior.

Those who feel the same may understand my frustration. How do I tell young brothers and sisters not to do something I’ve done for most of my life and not seem hypocritical?

I’ve come to this conclusion: “If I become the change, I want to see, I will see the change in those trying to be like me.”

Mother's Day vs. Baby Mama's Day

Gherald Harrison

Every day is Mother's Day unless you are a young woman who was unfortunate enough to have a child with a young man, who's now raising the child alone! She should be thankful that everyday isn't Baby Mama's Day because although Mothers got their well-deserved respect from their sons, those same young men show nothing but contempt for the mothers of their children. Why this misogynistic behavior attaches itself to our young women and not older women is a question that begs to be asked, analyzed, and answered. One thing is certain; all women deserve to be respected, loved, and treated royally, especially our mothers! Young mothers need our help. Older women, younger women, older men and younger men all have an obligation to speak out against this brutal attack on some of the weakest members in our society, whenever or wherever it raises its ugly head.

The immortalized song of Tupac Shakur, "Keep Ya Head Up," warns us about a race of babies that will hate ladies. In his most famous paeon to mothers, he celebrates their strength, even in weakness with, "...even as a crack fiend mama. You always were a black queen mama..." Finally, he speaks directly to those men in our community that walk away from their responsibilities and then have the audacity to verbally degrade and demoralize young black mothers. He sums up the opinion of them with, "...no love for my father because the coward wasn't there..." While those words speak volumes about the fathers in our community, we caution all to be aware of the mistake of trying to help one group of members in our communities by disparaging another!

Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream, Malcolm X had a gun, Langston Hughes had a pen, Marcus Garvey had a boat, but they all had a vision of a strong, united family. Today we have a nightmare: the natural protectors of our most precious resources (Young mothers) and vanguard of our community is waging a vicious assault upon our women. I have a suggestion. Let's stop calling our young women, "baby mamas," and start viewing them for what they really are: Mothers! Yes, everyday is Mother's Day and I want to wish every mother, a happy one, for the sake of their self worth, self respect, and our progeny!

Case Argument: Kano et al v. Florida et al

Christopher Shapard

To begin, I represent the appellants, Kano and St. Clair. It is our contention that the lower court's ruling, in the case at bar, was inconsistent with the law. Precedential case history and the U.S. Constitution have clearly pointed the way. Specifically, the appellants have a right established by the Equal Protection Clause to be free from discrimination based upon their sexual preference. Furthermore, under the Due Process Clause, no state may infringe upon this right without the due process of law.

J.S. Mill, in "Utilitarianism" (1861), wrote, "the entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions by which one custom or institution after another...has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and free men, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of color, race, and sex."

In their Amicus Brief, the Florida Catholic Diocese states that, "marriage is inextricably linked to Judeo-Christian values—values that dominate the history of this country." They imply that this is the "American" conception of marriage. Unfortunately for that argument, there are strict prohibitions against merging church and state. While it may be true that the majority of law was motivated by Judeo-Christian values, the issue here is one of liberty.

The issue of liberty is one of individual power, true, but it is also one of right and obligation. It should never matter how many are opposed. As Mills pointed out so aptly, "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

The necessity of freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression, may be based on three grounds.

First, any opinion that is silenced may be true and in silencing it, society assumes its own infallibility;

Second, though the opinion may be on the whole wrong, it may also be partly true, and because the prevailing opinion on the subject is rarely completely true or right, it is only through the collision of these adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth as any chance of being found;

Third, even if the prevailing opinion is completely true and correct, it will eventually become dogma, prejudice, and formula unless it is exposed to the challenge of free discussion.

Freedom Seekers

Steve Bush, Jr.

Floating through this darkened abyss
I miss what I knew and will never again know
Showing no emotion or feeling
Dealing with this misery filled plague
A vague light appears in the distance
Yet a resistance denies me this light
I fight to continue and stand tall
A call against this battle and war
Forward I march towards an enemy line
Defined as walls, bars, and wires.

Flowers bloom on green graves
Braves lost in the struggle to survive
Thrive we must or else pay an endless fee
A sea of our souls an ocean of our kindness
Mindlessly caught in a revolving door
More coming in than going out
Do not doubt that this is what's sought
Fought we once did and must again do
You and I, we, all of us must
Get justice. Freedom is what we seek
Peek over this mountain and see the end
Friends and family, blue skies and sun
One more out, let our bids be done.

A Message in the Leaf

Jose Latif Diaz

“It is at the mercy of change. It is only happy when it is caught up in the process of change, but this love of change contains a measure of fear, and this fear itself is dukkha (suffering),” Gotama once said. Change is something natural in all life forms. One is born, then dies, and the process of life is repeated again.

As God has said in the Qur’an, “And God hath sent down from the heaven water, then enliveneth He with it the earth after its death; Verily in this is a sign for people who listen.” Also, “And we have enjoined on man goodness unto his parents; Did bear him his mother with pain and she delivered him with pain and bearing and weaning him thirty months; Until when he attaineth his maturity and reacheth forty years, sayeth he: ‘My Lord! Arouse me that I may do good which pleaseth Thee and do good unto me in respect of my offspring.’” See how the process of change is observed. The earth changes from life to death and from death to life, as well as man is born from his parents, grows up, then later becomes a parent to repeat the process that preceded him. The suffering in which man goes through is only a natural process of life and none can change it. The fear of the transition of the old into the new is something that must be accepted.

Unlike the leaf, man evolves in his stages of life mentally first, and then he physically conforms to his evolution. With the correct awareness of the reality of life as taught by many of the great sages of time and the calling to a higher realization, man will be pulled to correct living through this transitory phase of life. The following message is delivered by Imam Ali (AS), the brother of Prophet Muhammad (SAWA):

O People! I advise you to give up indulgence in vile and sinful affairs of this world. It is a place, which will disown you, though you may not like to renounce it; a place which will gradually decay your physique, though you may very much like always to remain young or to rejuvenate yourselves. Remember your life here is like that of a traveler on his way, yet you behave as if your journey has come to an end, and you have reached your destination. It is a sad delusion for those, who have got to continue their journey; they have to keep on going, it is inevitable; and they shall have to reach the end, it is unavoidable. To believe in immortality in this world is an unprofitable self-deception for him whose span of life is fixed, and who is destined to face death. Towards which the very life is driving him. Do not crave the false honour and glory of a vicious world; do not inordinately covet its pomp and sinful pleasures; likewise do not get frightened of and do not be cowed down before its calamities and disasters, because the pomp and the pleasure, the honour and the glory of this world are passing phases bound to come to an end sooner or later.

“Every phase of life on this earth is shaped to change, and every living being is foreordained to die,” Ali (AS) says. He calls people to the awareness that we all must face (death) no matter how self-indulgent or enlightened we may become. The process of achieving a higher awareness of reality and better understanding of life, its deceptions, and ultimately its death could convert those who are willing to oblige. Therefore, one needs to escape the sufferings of the world by placing his life under his control.

When individuals no longer place value to the things of this world and do not live for the self (desire), they begin to live for others. The calling to this moderate way of righteous asceticism can only be accomplished through practice. The connection between Ali (AS) and Gotama are similar and their concept of awareness is real.

In conclusion, when an individual becomes aware with true enlightenment, his decisions and actions are molded by it. One is then connected with the reality of truly seeing things and how they are connected with the nature of life and the undeniable link one has with the creation and all its analogies. As Armstrong said, “the man or woman who seeks enlightenment is in tune with the fundamental structure of the universe.” The answers and solutions all start from reflection and then action. Imam Ali (AS) reflects this: “Thy sickness is from within thee – thou perceives not. The remedy is from within thee – thou seest not. Thou thinkest though art but a small body, whereas within thee is folded a vast world – thou ponderest not.” So being conscious of our ways to better fix them as said by one of the Imams (AS): “Take reckoning from yourselves before you are called to reckoning. Weigh your actions with the scale of your own ear of shame, before they are weighed for you, [and never be like] one who imagines himself to be all knowing will surely suffer on account of his ignorance.”

As can be seen that my perception of the leaf and its similarities to man is real and the connection between us and the universe is not just esoteric babble, but a higher understanding of realities; realities known to the mystics of the ages, but not obtained without pragmatism of the same ancient ideologies, self-reflection, and acknowledgment of this awareness (reality).

Untitled

Michael York

“Thug.” “Manslaughter.” “Knucklehed.” “Student.” At one time or another, I have been all of these things, and some of them remain even until today. But it is an accumulation of experiences and how I’ve dealt with them that defines who I am.

Hands down, Cornell is the saving grace in my life’s résumé. The opportunity that Cornell represents is redemption in the eyes of my family and society at large. My life was chaos and the promotion of it. Now it has become order and expanded views. The limitations, the minimal means that I had at my disposal to express myself, have opened up dramatically! One semester in and anyone who has any idea of who I was can’t believe who I am today. And I’m sure they can’t begin to wrap their minds around the idea of who I’ll become—I know this because I can’t! Sky’s the limit, thanks to Cornell.

I’m done speaking of the past, but you can bet that some of it is mixed into the equation of who I am. Ultimately though, I’ll speak of the future, and in doing so, I am paying the ultimate respect to Cornell, because prior to this experience, the future was uncertainly dark. Whereas now, I certainly see the light!

Thank you.

Alone

Salim Nafis As-Zahid

Alone, in a world filled with chaos
My vision blinded by steel.

I lay hidden behind the invisible doors
My tears splash upon the concrete
Creating pools in which to drown
An escape from the sorrow and pain.

Dead, yet still breathing
Suddenly, I am forgotten
By all those who once revered me.

The weak amongst us now hold the reins of power
Visions of slavery and life on a plantation
Is all that occupies my conscious dreams.
I am trapped
In a world where only the strong survive.
Oppression.
Is this real?

Infancy... Adolescence... Adulthood....
Filled with memories that were never captured
Lost.

Paradise within Hell!
I am given six hours of freedom
Imaginary.
The overseer plots, crouched in the shadows
Enough time for a smile ... a tear...
He cracks his whip and bellows, "Time's up!"

Once again, I find myself,
Alone, in a world filled with chaos
My vision blinded by steel

The Veil: Cultural or Religious Obligation? (excerpt)

Saifuddin Abdus-Samad

There has been much discussion on the subject of the veil worn by Muslim women. There are those women who observe this as a religious obligation. Then there are those who argue that this is out-dated. They say that this is not a religious obligation, but merely an aspect of Islamic culture. If this last argument is correct, then this renders the wearing of the veil as something voluntary. It can be worn or discarded according to how one feels. So, which argument is correct? In this paper I will argue that the veil is a religious obligation, and not merely an aspect of culture.

In Islam, there are sources of guidance. When a person accepts Islam as his or her way of life, they accept that certain obligations are placed upon them. These sources of guidance are the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Let us start with the Qur'an.

The word Qur'an literally means 'the reading' or 'the recitation.' However, we cannot stop there without realizing what the Qur'an means to the Muslim. To the Muslim, the Qur'an is literally the speech of Allah revealed to his prophet Muhammad in the Arabic language. The proof that the Qur'an is the speech of Allah appears in the Qur'an itself. For every claim made, one must have a basis for it in Islamic religious texts. In Chapter 9, verse 6 of the Qur'an Allah says, "And if any of the idolators seek your protection, the grant him protection so that he may hear the speech of Allah." In the beginning of this verse, there is a reference to non-Muslims fleeing oppression and the obligation to grant them protection, however, there is also evidence of the Qur'an being the speech of Allah.

Those who seek to relegate the veil to an aspect of culture nonchalantly cite 33:59 and 24:31 in the Qur'an. The first reads, "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters, and the believing women to draw their jalabib over their bodies. That would be better that they should be known so as not to be annoyed. And Allah is ever Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful." Before providing an explanation to this verse, I would like to comment on the branch of Uloom Al Qur'an known as grammar. This is the study of grammatical meanings of words as they appear in the Qur'an. This verse is an emphatic statement and has the strength of a command. In fact it is exactly that. Being such, it is something that must be done. It is not optional. That would make it an obligation. So, in this verse, Allah commands the Muslim women to draw their jilbaabs over their bodies. This is so that they will be distinct in their appearance from non-Muslim women. This is also for purposes of modesty.

Existence

Eric Partak

Distant shores that harbor shimmering iridescent tides.
Reflections of the moon's illuminating glow pull the tides
Like strings of a puppet.
The heavens are richly filled with millions of twinkling stars
Whose wishes carry infinite secrets of ages.
The tranquil night's breeze blows the sweet smell
of nectar mixed with salt water.
Sounds of foreign insects and strange creatures riddle the air
And conduct a symphony of mystery that is irresistibly melodious.
The sand beneath my feet feels soft and dry as it squeezes through
the cracks between my toes.
Time matters not in this sublime moment of existence.
The past becomes the present intertwined extravagantly with the future.
Stolen serenity that Man's money or materialism is
incapable of capturing.
Nature's tongue speaks truth of undeniable accuracy and wisdom.
Contentedness lies in mortal silence.
Words are nothing more than relentless selfishness,
Incapable of conveying life's irrefutable beauty which lies secluded
In distant corners buried by remote preservation.

My Cornell Experience

Elvin Lebron

Too often life in prison is a recipe for building resentment and frustration. Fortunately, truly meaningful programs like Cornell's Prison Education greatly outweigh the capricious acts encountered in prison, by instilling prestige and positive aspirations in the prisoners who have yet to give up on themselves.

When in grade school I was given a scholarship by the 'I Have a Dream' Program, and told if I graduated from high school they would pay for me to attend whatever college I got accepted to. In turn, I graduated a year early but unfortunately decided to give myself too long of a break from school and ended up being incarcerated. Once arrested, I came to terms with prison becoming my home for a very long time, so I hoped to make it a productive stay. However, with the rise of Governor Pataki and the ongoing popularity of being hard on minority mantras, under guises of being tough on crime, higher education in prison was essentially eliminated the year after my imprisonment, depriving me of the most meaningful way to truly better myself. So when I ended up in Auburn prison sixteen years into my sentence, and learned Cornell was holding classes there, I seized the privilege, doing whatever I could to take as much advantage as I could of what their prison program was offering. Experience with the repressive ways towards prisoners taught me a long time ago to seize opportunities when available, because it is not guaranteed they will be around tomorrow.

Initially, I started out wanting to do well but I still had the same perspective I had in high school about not doing extra work. However, after my first class was over I quickly grew out of that. I soon realized if my basic efforts could earn a B+ that I was capable of doing a whole lot better if I really applied myself as much as necessary. Yet, in all due fairness, the credit towards me doing well – and even better subsequently with over a 3.0 GPA – does not all lie with me but with my instructors also. Their belief and compassion in us as students and people not only awakened in me the desire to do well but the realization that despite cynicism, pessimism, and the prevalence of a prison's adversarial environment, such is not the populace's norm. This was inspiring and humbling, causing me to appreciate the good of society and higher learning, having experienced what it is to be without this educational honor.

Your Picture

Gary Stewart

I still have your picture in a frame,
And every time I see your face,
I hear you call my name.
Maybe it was written in the script,
You are long gone, but I'm still losing my grip.
I don't know what the future holds,
But I hope it is holding us together.

It was my fault why we split, my bad I admit.
Losing you was bad for my health,
I need one more chance to redeem myself.
I reneged, 'yea' I did you wrong,
But it brings tears to my eyes,
Every time I hear our song.
And when you're not here to dance with me,
I dance with your picture,
Though it is not the same, but still a victory.

Your picture holds a thousand kisses.
And my dreams are filled with 'get-you-back' wishes.
I hope when you get this letter you will reply.
P.S. Please give us another try.

His-Story

David Bendezu

He grew up with fathers who had no father figures;
The kids on his block wore new era fitted caps,
and the kind of fun they had was when they climbed up snowy hills only to slide down
in garbage bags.
Some might have thought that was sad, but not him, he was having a blast.
A young kid growing up super fast, not knowing what direction to take, so he just
walked his journey behind everyone else and always seemed to be last.
He went to school with holes in his shoes, no one thought he was cool, small amount of
money he carried that barely got him food.
Just imagine if that were you.
One bad report card and his ass was grass.
When he got beat everyone seemed to laugh.
No matter what he went through, he always put on a smile, but deep inside his heart
went wild.
When his mother was called a bitch, he quickly threw a fit, but he was scared to act on
it because the so called "father" had a clip.
When he went outside, guns and drugs is all he saw in his eyes.
If you weren't tough and didn't know how to fight, I guess you hated your life.
There were no role models, only broken bottles, no dreams to follow, only more fiends;
That's all of what he swallowed.
All he wanted was for someone to care about him, but no one did.
As he got older, he started to realize his life was heading in the wrong direction with no
intention to better himself.
To make his long story short, that direction landed him in Jail; with no bail; he
thought he failed but later learned that he was only delayed of his dreams, hopes
and future.
His-story is not only his, but ours.

Natural Selection (excerpt)

Robert Cumberland

My name is Adam Dykes. 40 years of age, of African-American descent. 6'1", 230 lbs. People said I resemble Ice Cube provided Ice Cube sported a shaved head and goatee. Just thought you should know what I look like should happen to come across this document. What I am writing here is a transcription of a DVD I made and burned 1,000 copies of. I intend to tape a copy to the entrance of every major library I come upon. Today is December 25, 2009. The end of the world came just nine days ago.

It was pandemic before anyone noticed. By the time they did, it was an epidemic of major proportions. It took 36 hours to realize just how major.

I lived in New York City—billed the world over as the city that never sleeps. As of December 15, 2009, New York was also known as the city of 8 million stories, in reference to the number of her populace. When the 16th came, those 8 million stories each came to the same end.

December 16, 2009, 6:15am

My alarm clock went off at 5:45am. It's set to WABC News, you know, "all news all the time." I like to hear the weather report to know how heavy to dress. Mid-winter in New York. Like I really need to know how to dress. But there are other things besides the weather and every so often something catches my attention as I struggle to leave the warm confines of my bed. It's about the only time I question the wisdom of bachelorhood, since it denies me an incentive stay in bed on cold mornings.

After a hot shower and a shave, I set my cable station to News 1, which covers the New York City area exclusively. This allows me to access the city's condition—which trains are running on time, what psycho is loose in which area, etc—as I sip my no-frills coffee and prepare for the job of looking for a job. I've pretty much been living off the severance pay Goldman-Sachs gave its "non-essential" employees when half their work force was cut. I guess it's taking twice as long to deliver the mail now if I remember my physics correctly.

The News 1 helicopter was reporting on a six car pile-up on the Major Degan Expressway. That coverage was cut as reports of an MTA bus crashing into the Paine-Webber building started coming in. That caught my attention, because that part of the city was part of my job search grid for the day. As I sat on my sofa giving close attention to the bus crash, an even bigger event occurred. The News 1 helicopter dropped suddenly out of the sky.

Ethnography: Ritual

Clifton K. Williamson

Preface

Prison, as an institution of human confinement, nurtures its own unique and peculiar culture. Specifically, the social interaction among its human population tends to the abusive and anti-social. However, deviation from this cultural norm does exist and is observed best during the rare ceremonious events where important and novel identities from society witness and affirm the humanity of incarcerated people.

Since the Fall of 2008, Cornell University has enabled willing and incarcerated people to earn a 'Liberal Arts and Humanities' associates degree. Many men take this gift of education serious, committing themselves fully to this opportunity. Yet, among all of the excitement and expectation for Cornell's Prison Education Program (CPEP), incarcerated students remain, largely, opinionless and passive participant-recipients. It is rare that our voices of appreciation are heard, and rarer still, to set eyes on our individual faces.

On October 29, 2009, 40-50 incarcerated students stood waiting to speak with Cornell University's president. This Ethnography is focused on the impact that this ceremony of external recognition (the integration of CPEP students into the larger Cornell academic community) has upon the incarcerated student.

Within the three yellow chalk-lines that created a box against the wall of cell-block A, students waited to be called into the chapel over the P.A. system. People stood in clusters with close associates, greeting and socializing. Occasionally, a member would break away from one cluster to briefly associate or join another. Beyond the familiar faces, there are no reliable and distinguishing features that would allow the unfamiliar person to identify CPEP-students within the crowd of 75+ people.

When the P.A. system's microphone was tapped to gain the busy crowd's attention, only a few people stopped to listen. A muffled voice spoke, "Cornell call-out, report to the chapel." Slowly, portions of the crowd tapered off in the direction of the chapel, and with it the murmuring chatter of multiple conversations. At the door prison guards made students line-up in two rows. Two at a time we were let into the chapel. Inside, prison guards littered the back walls, pointing us in the direction of a guard who filled us into the center section of pews. The first three rows of pews were reserved for Cornell students and faculty. All the pews on the right side of the stage were reserved for the president and his assistant staff, and other persons responsible for coordinating CPEP here in Auburn prison.

Under the influence of the new setting the murmur of conversations reduced to whispers. As students scanned the dimly lit space, I observed their eyes pause to scrutinize and interpret civilians in the pews. Walking about us were prison administrators, and

professors and students that taught previous and active CPEP courses. Professors and students who recognized some students waved and greeted them. One man in particular, wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and tie, was making rounds and shaking the hands of every CPEP-student. From the other side of the dimly lit and tightly packed chapel I couldn't make out the interactive details that took place between this man and the students he shook hands with. As he made his way around, I noticed that several other students were also following his approach. Some students straightened their posture and assumed an approachable demeanor. Other students remained uninterested in what could be seen as an extremely elaborate and empty formality being carried out by this man. As it turned out, the man in the dark suit was the president of Cornell University himself. "Hello, I'm David Skorton" [paraphrasing] he said to each student as he shook their hand. As he made his rounds among the back pews I noticed too for the first time that not just incarcerated students, but Cornell people and prison administrators, too, watched his every action.

President Skorton stood just off of the stage in front of the podium where the microphone was set up for his talk and asked, "Can you gentlemen hear me?" The question caused students to look upon each other, some nodding their heads, others looking befuddled. A moment later, in virtual unison, students in front, middle, and back confirmed the consensus that everyone could hear him. President Skorton's question seemed to prompt the instant solidification of the student body's collective consciousness, which just moments before was frayed among the many individuals. The incarcerated person is used to the public administering of 'orders' and 'information' directed at the whole while simultaneously intended for each individual. Consequently, it takes something more to us as individuals through a group address.

President Skorton, made short of his formal accomplishments, instead he jumped right into a candid sharing of his humble beginnings; immigrant parents, his childhood memories as a shoe salesman, and his unfulfilled dreams to be a professional musician. Students listened with increased intensity as the president testified to the mutual mortality and kinship as one who, too, endured some of life's most difficult challenges.

After sharing his personal experiences and history, then discussing the various domestic and global educational initiatives that Cornell sponsors, President Skorton moved on to fulfill his purpose for coming to speak to us. "I want you to know that as participants of CPEP, each of you are Cornellians, members of our academic community", said president Skorton, with unquestionable candor. He paused briefly, then extended his hand out in front of him towards the audience before continuing to talk about the values and transformative power of education.

When president Skorton opened for questions following his talk, the "student body" seemed to collectively reflect before the first student sought to express himself. In par with President Skorton's sharing of a personal story, several students shared their personal testimonies about how education inspired real change in their life. One man, in particular,

was noticeably experiencing an emotional response to being able to express his experience to someone who truly cared about his well-being, and recognized his value as a human being. This emotion apparently resonated with other students, as each student's question or comment affirmed the unity of their body consciousness and the embrace of their status as Cornellians—legitimate members of the Cornell academic community. Various exchanges between students and Skorton involved the use of terms such as “cohort” and “colleague” which connotes unity of interest and purpose. It was also clear that Auburn's community of incarcerated students were recognizing each other as a valid unit.

When the session was over, unlike when it began, the student body gave their president a standing ovation that was full of vigor, emotion, and pride.

As the students were all herded out of the chapel area by prison guards, their body language expressed a freshness that was undeniable. Conversation was excited, and some students' eyes seemed to be occupied observing something beyond their present environment. The majority of us left smiling inside, and some outside as well. Beyond the chapel, back into the prison yard, men moved like a single wave embracing and bestowing good wishes to close friends and newly acquainted Cornellians.

God Hates Me*

*The title of this poem has been changed for publication.

Michael Shane Hale

A G-d with alzheimers
Ill's without cures
Born in the morning light
Forgotten by twilight.

Crafted by the Potter's hands
From clay mud, wet sands
Two arms, two feet
Eyes and smiles so sweet.

G-d has a lot of game
Centuries ago it was the same
Death by a thousand cuts
(God deals from the bottom of the deck)

The law of the land
Give with one hand
Take with the other
So why even bother?

Because love demands all
Dykes and Fags stand tall
It's like that for all of us
Like Sergius and Bacchus.

Two Roman soldiers, lovers
Warriors over the field and under covers.
In you, God, they saw the light
And martyred for the Good fight.

Sergius, to you, went first
Bacchus stumbled against His thirst.
Sergius, Bacchus's faith renewed
By a vision, "I will be your reward."

In Rome's Church of St. John,
Same-sex marriage in the name of the Big Don.
Did doves fly into the air for joy?
Or to escape the flames of the burning Bottie Boys?

In Feudal Japan the Samurai
For their honor do they die.
Sacred vows spoken by few,

Between the Ninja and his Wakeshu.

With the swing of the Samurai's sword,
Slicing through the tree fold cord.
A ringing sits in the air
Polished metal holds the sun's glare.

Blinded, groping, searching for the way
No guide, My fears to allay.
The chain to the past broken
Chinks found here and there, a token.

What might've been, could've been,
Should've been is now a sin.
Condemned to die,
Not knowing why.

Only knowing the isolation
A gay life of frustration.
Thinking you're the only one.
Recognition glints before it is gone.

Looking up and praying why me, God.
Condemning me, why do you hate me so God?
Did you forget that you knew me before
The world was formed from your roar?

I am alone before your throne,
Waiting for you to throw the first stone.
Stony silence is all I receive,
I so want to believe.

The placard is still there
Like you, silently aware.
Blinded eyes stare,
Separating the wheat from the tares.

Throwing my past away,
My connection to sway;
With romance, love, epic
All centuries wiped away, septic.

Yet here I am calling your name
Admitting with no shame
That I am the I am
Whole, no longer damned

Waking

Ricardo Naafi Callender

Breathing like he is still asleep, Roy looks around his darkly lit room, in his mind's eye. Clothes are thrown all over the floor. Drawers are pulled open. Plates of half-eaten sandwiches cover every flat surface. The smell is like hot baby shit that permeates the room. Roy wonders if how a man lives reflects who he is on the inside.

Opening his eyes, Roy contemplates all the things he has to do today. Top on the list is seeing the doctor. He has been putting this off for months. Making this trip seems impossible, but he knows it's necessary. Why he hasn't he could think of a hundred reasons, none valid or worth repeating.

Breathing deeply, Roy felt the rumblings of phlegm in his chest. He prays for dear life that a coughing fit doesn't leave him bent in two, sweat soaking his crumpled and frail body. It's been like this for months now. Coughing until his ribs hurt, spitting phlegm, dark red, clumpy and stink. Roy feels like his body is slowly decaying inside and out. It reminds him of radiation poisoning. Slow, but always deadly.

Rolling his tongue over the hard candy in his mouth, he pauses. "Where did this come from?" he thinks to himself. It has no taste and does not melt. Grimacing from the pain in his shoulder, he raises his left hand to his mouth and spits the object out. A dead, decayed and broken tooth. His second in recent weeks that has fallen out. Another lost part of him, never to return.

Again he thinks to himself that he has to get to the doctor. He knows he will not get there. Over the last few months he has observed almost helplessly as his body seems to wither away, one injury or ailment after another. Slowly he falls apart. Roy doesn't remember the first sign that something might be wrong. He only realized that for weeks, his breath seemed short and trips outside seemed few and far between. Clothes that once fit snugly now hung off his body like they were two sizes too big. Brushing his teeth made his gums hurt and the wintergreen mint toothpaste red. Slowly these changes crept up on him.

Rolling onto his side, he attempts to get himself out of bed. The pain in his back and legs is excruciating. It seemed to begin just below his shoulder blades, ooze down his spine to his buttcheeks, then on down the back of his legs. The pain is almost swooningly potent, yet he fights his way up out of passing out, then up off his back. Pausing to catch his breath, he sits with his back bowed, head hanging low – dejected, out of sorts and hurting. Roy looks over his once muscled monstrosities, now atrophied and sore-riddled legs. He smells the decayed pus wafting all around him. The nail beds on his hands and feet are black from fungus. Both look like shrilled claws of a once mighty beast. Ridiculous! Why can't he get himself to the doctor's? Every part of him yells for an examination and antibiotics.

Slowly and with much determination, he rises off the bed. His knees crackling like Rice Krispies, he's caught by a sudden wave of dizziness. After breathing deeply and slowly for a few minutes, it passes. Laboriously, he makes his way to the bathroom door. Looking in he notices a swarm of flies swirling around the toilet and sink. It's been a while since he remembers flushing the toilet or washing his sink. Dried puke coats it like stucco. Dark, grimy and stink. Fighting the urge to retch he bypasses both for the shower.

Reaching out to turn the knob, a dull ache courses through his fingers and hands. Using what seems like an unusual amount of energy, the knob turns. Somewhere in the walls of the bathroom pipes groan and rattle. Out of the shower nozzle a slow drizzle of rust colored water begins to seep out. Slowly it builds and seemingly dirties the floor of the shower stall.

Amazingly, today it only takes fifteen minutes to clean up. Roy finally makes it into the shower. Resting his hands on the wall, he lowers his head so the spray can hit his head, neck and back. The first pleasure of the day. "Ahhhh" A semblance of sanity washes over him. "Today might be the day" he says to himself.

Roy opens his eyes slightly and puzzles over the raising water and mouse in the drain. "Mouse in the drain?" Blinking for about two minutes, his eyes finally clear. It's not a mouse, but his hair is clogging the drain. Somehow it coiled itself around the drain, wet and round. Using the blackened nail from his left big toe he attempts to clear the drain. Gross. This is hair from his head he realizes. Once luxurious, his hair now falls out in clumps, never to grow back again. By now he must be bald. No more salons and expensive shampoos. It occurs to him once again for the umpteenth time that he needs to go to the doctor's. Everything on him is either hurting or falling off. But he knows he won't make it. He never does. He looks around for the soap he knows is not there. These showers are just thirty minutes of water, sometimes hot, running down his head, neck, and back.

What seems like an hour later, after an extremely long time drying his decaying body and painful exercise at dressing, Roy finds he is ready to leave the house. The long walk up the corridor from his room to the front door awaits. He stares at the door. Preternaturally, it seems to move further and further away. While at the same time raising monolithically from some primordial swirl imposing. His heart beats fast, his palms sweaty, his throat dry. He takes the first tentative steps towards the door. Roy relishes the sweet pain of the first footfall. It seemed to begin at his toes and travel along his foot, around his heel and ankle, up along his tibia and fibula bones of his lower leg and gather in his calf. It slides up his patella fossil then shines out of the front of his patella. This is the first of many such shocks on this long, journey, he knows.

With every footfall, dizziness and a desire to throw up keep him company. Determined to make it to the door, Roy senses that today has to be the day he makes it to the doctor. His health has failed. Even though it is a slow decline, he has to bottom out soon. Another glance at the door and its giant black behemoth stature looms overwhelmingly over him. It stands in the way casting its shadow over his very being. Slowly and painfully, Roy makes this arduous journey to the door. What seemed like forty or fifty feet minutes ago now stands just under ten feet...

"It's only a door. It's only a door." he cries to himself. "Turn the knob and step outside." It occurs to him he's here where he's been many times. Nothing seems new but yet is even more imposing. This tall thick door, his greatest nemesis. Cold, looming, and ever imposing. Roy reaches his hand out and grasps the cold knob in his knobby, snarled fingers. Easily the door shifts. Slowly creaking on its hinges, the first rays of light spill out along the edge of the threshold like a halo illuminating the dark window.

An Orwellian Approach to Defining Piracy

Nathan Powell

Captain Hook Dueling with Peter Pan; cannons bursting off the starboard bow as the swashbuckler's hero swings across the silver screen; these are a few images conjured up when one thinks of piracy. These images conform to the traditional definition of piracy as "an act of robbery on the high seas" (Webster's Dictionary). The closest most of us come to experiencing piracy, however, is watching a "pirated" copy of a film before it is legally released, or downloading music from the internet without paying anyone. Why these acts are deemed "piracy" and not "free enterprise" leads to the question: who defines our words and why?

Language and definition can be used to demonize good or justify evil. "Copyright infringement" does not have a fraction of the nefarious connotation "piracy" has; therefore it is not as useful to the corporate entities in protecting their profits. Likewise, when governments employ piracy it is termed "privateering," a more harmless, less loaded word. When a government uses its overwhelming naval power and military superiority to steal a nation and commit heinous acts of genocide upon that nation's people, this is called "Manifest Destiny." These two lofty and noble words conceal the hideous crimes beneath them while protecting the profits. Wars, with all their horror and brutality, can be termed "Police Actions," while society condones imprisoning a man for life for stealing a slice of pizza because he is a three-time felon.

Defining piracy relates strongly to defining criminality in general. The definition can be the evil one we are instructed to believe or the definition can be the boundary of freedom itself. Who was freer than a pirate? Isn't one man's "terrorist" another man's "freedom fighter?" It is a fact that one of the freedoms this country fought for in our revolution, protected by the very constitution that defines us, was the freedom to own slaves.

In Awe of Rain

Javon Chavis

Was there ever a time when I stood in awe of life and the world in general, a time of awe that was totally unbidden?

Almost every time it rains! The whole, natural effect of rain is profoundly appealing to me. Think about it: as a kid you heard numerous stories about why it rains – “the flood gates of heaven are opening up,” or “God is crying.” My generation even had songs, like “It’s raining, it’s pouring, the old man is snoring.”

Rain will forever be mysterious to me. Science tells us that rain is recycled water that rises into the atmosphere from large masses of water such as oceans, seas, and lakes. The process of raining has to do with the temperature and the condensation of clouds. But science’s explanation for rain only makes it more mysterious to me. Such an explanation doesn’t take away from the mood I’m in when it rains; this mood isn’t necessarily negative or even positive, but more of a reflective mood. When it starts to downpour, so do my thoughts. I become very inquisitive. I want to know why this happens now, how it happens, and even why it has to happen. I guess you could say that I get philosophical.

A lot of times when it begins to rain, I people seem to feel down about the weather, but not me. I actually look forward to the rain. That’s when my mind goes on a journey.

It Begins With You and I

Christopher Perry

You are not me,
and I am not you,

You see not
what my eyes see,

(snap) It's time to
wake up to reality ...

We are all part of
humanity,

You and I...
But not us ...

The connection,
Blocked by a wall of hate
That we ourselves create ...

It's time to change the
World's fate...

Reflections

Shawn Williams

I'm like an Egyptian Prince caught among the
heathens of his day.

My emotions are like a thermometer put in the desert
and arctic, constantly they sway.

I stand true and alone,
my demeanor like a lion I dominate on my throne,
come be with me, feel power unleashed.

Only my surroundings hold me back
I'm still seen as a beast.

Special Thanks:

to the Cornell Prison Education Program without which none of this would be possible;

to Jim Schechter, without whom *Writer' Bloc* would be a fund-less, floating fantasy;

to the Auburn Correctional Facility administration and their unending patience;

to Peter Enns, who found time to support us and everyone else;

to Mary Katzenstein, a force wherever she goes;

to Reeve Parker, who finds the deeper meaning in everything;

to Pete 'the Doc' Wetherbee, who is loved by Cornell students in Ithaca and in Auburn;

and to all the dedicated and selfless professors and teaching assistants who helped collect submissions in Fall 2009, and who made it their business and their passion to teach the students at Auburn.

Note to readers: Submissions for the next issue will be collected again in 2010. Auburn students wishing to submit should fill out a release form (can be obtained from Professors or TAs), and staple it to their submission. Poetry, fiction, and non-fiction are welcome. While not all submissions will be printed in the journal, all (barring inappropriate content) will appear on the website at http://cpep.cornell.edu/_journal. Lengthy submissions may be printed in excerpt in the journal, and in full on the website. Thank you!

Printed by Cornell University Press

