



WRITERs BLOC

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Writer's Bloc Literary Journal is an independent student publication produced by students in the Cornell Prison Education Program and Cornell University. **Writer's Bloc** is an independent student organization located at Cornell University who produced and is responsible for the content of this publication. This publication was not reviewed or approved by, nor does it necessarily express or reflect the policies or opinions of, Cornell University or its designated representatives.

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*"If life is a book – do I
change chapters with each year of
my existence?
Or does my forecast story cascade forward
with no structure or boundaries – just one
continuous page?
If life is a book – who wrote my
story? Is it written by someone who
knows me?"*
- E. Paris Whitfield

Dear Reader,

Writer's Bloc began in 2009 as a literary publication devoted to showcasing the creative work of students in the Cornell Prison Education Program. Since then, our publication has expanded its mission to not only serve as a demonstration of the beautiful art of our incarcerated students, but also to recognize the importance of self-expression in the life of any human being. Writer's Bloc aims to enable those whose lives have been written by society to redefine themselves.

We believe that individuals – no matter their history – have the right to express themselves and be heard. It is this acceptance that allows you as the reader to engage in a dialectical relationship with the authors within this journal and distinguish them for their work, and not for their actions. It is this acknowledgement of a common humanity that allows the authors to legitimize their subjectivity. We as the editors would like to state our admiration of their bravery in sharing their stories, memories, and hearts with us.

The second issue of Writer's Bloc Literary Journal features pieces that evoke the sorrow of detachment from the immortal beloved, the determination to fight the good fight, the courage that comes with seeking knowledge and freedom, and the beauty that is found in passion.

We are glad that the writings from students of the Cornell Prison Education Program have continued to reach a diverse audience—perhaps this publication may give you a glimpse into the lives of individuals who rarely have an avenue to be heard. The journal serves to illuminate the experience that volunteers of the Cornell Prison Education Program engage in every week, which is to be part of the incarcerated students' journey in their academic endeavours. With this final remark, we thank the authors for making Writer's Bloc Literary Journal what we, the editors, hoped it would be: a testament to their continual pursuit for intellectual and personal growth.

Keep on writing,
Tiffani Burgess '11
Esther Kwan '11
Adina Rubin-Budick '13

Letter

Writers'

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“ If I choose to do battle with my shortcomings and make a daily effort to ameliorate the situation, I will be content with who I am today. I may not have all the answers yet, but today I am a man with confidence and a sense of self-worth. ”

From *The Treacherous Ascension from Adolescence to Adulthood*,
by Brendan Miller

Today

Calvin Nathaniel Harmon

=====
TODAY A MAN WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON. TODAY ONE WAS SENTENCED TO LIFE. TODAY A MAN DIED, ONE CRIED, AND A BOY CHILD WAS BROUGHT FORTH THROUGH THE NEEDLE'S EYE. TODAY A DECISION WAS MADE THAT WOULD CHANGE THE FATE OF US ALL. AND TODAY, A MISTAKE WAS MADE THAT WOULD CAUSE AN EMPIRE TO FALL. TODAY A GENERATION X'ER QUESTIONED HIS FUTURE EXISTANCE—WHETHER HE WAS BORN TO DIE AS A MAN ON A PATH, OR FALL TO HIS LOWER MISERS IN PRISON. TODAY A YOUNG GIRL CAME INTO WOMANHOOD AND CELEBRATED IT WITH HER MOTHER, SISTERS, AUNTS, AND THOSE WHO WOULD HELP GUIDE HER FUTURE; WHILE ANOTHER LOST HER VIRGINITY TO A MAN SHE LOVED...A MAN WHO, IN REALITY, WAS ANYONE BUT THE MAN SHE LOVED. TODAY'S WISHES ARE TOMORROW'S DREAMS; YESTERDAY'S FAILURES AND THE PAST TO BE RECLAIMED. TODAY IS NEW TO A CHILD WHO WAS JUST BORN—THE BEGINNING OF ONE LIFE AND THE END OF ANOTHER, FOR TODAY ONE DIES AND HIS SPIRIT MOVES ON. TODAY IS ANOTHER CHANCE TO ACCOMPLISH THAT DREAM YOU HAD ABOUT THAT PLAN YOU MADE TO CHANGE THE WORLD AT LARGE. REMEMBER THAT PROMISE AT THE GRAVE? TODAY A WOMAN'S TEMPLE WAS VIOLATED BY A MAN WHO COULDN'T CARE LESS, A MAN WHO IS A PRODUCT OF HIS ENVIRONEMNT AND A SOCIETY WHO HIDES THE VIOLENCE, BIGOTRY, RACISM, AND JEALOUSY... BUT TODAY, I'M HERE TO SPEAK ABOUT WHAT TROUBLES ME...

WHAT TROUBLES ME IS HOW TODAY HAS CHANGED. THE YOUTH NO LONGER IDENTIFY WITH THE PAST; THEY SEPARATE THEMSELVES FROM IT AS IF THEY DIDN'T COME FROM IT. TODAY NEEDS A CHANGE, IN WHICH THE YOUTH AND THE SAGE COME TOGETHER TO MAKE A CHANGE AND BRIDGE THE GAP OF GENERATIONS TO REBUILD THE NATION. TODAY IS ANOTHER CHANCE TO RECLAIM WHAT WE HAD THAT WAS REALLY NEVER LOST, BUT IT WAS TUCKED AWAY LIKE THE KEEPSAKES GRANDMA KEPT SAFE.

TODAY. TODAY IS LIKE ANY OTHER DAY, BUT FOR YOU IT CAN BE DIFFERENT. IT'S ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER CHANCE, AND A NEW BEGINNING JUST LIKE TOMORROW WILL BE, AND THE NEXT. IT'S YOUR TIME TO RISE UP! FREEDOM IS A MUST! OR YOU CAN WITHER AND WASTE LIKE YOU DID YESTERDAY, AND BY THE TIME YOU DO WAKE UP...YOU WILL FIND OUT TIME IS UP. TODAY!

TODAY....

My Lost Love

Jermaine West

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My beloved Freedom, where have you gone? Since the day you left me, my world has been without song. Just today, I was told that my beard is too long, it doesn't conform to our society's norms.

My beloved Freedom, my heart is torn, our women are being forced to abandon their adorn. The governments of European states outlawed the right for Muslim women to cover their faces. No hijab on our soil is what they state, as the onlookers chant, "Muslims must conform to our taste." What happened to a woman's right to choose? Why is this only in abortion cases, shouldn't it be religion too?

My beloved Freedom, I'm strained so, our rights to pray are none. Our identities must be kept low or off we go. Say Allah is your lord and we may never hear from you again. Mention Mohammed and water board is your abode. Practice Islam and off to Gitmo you go. On the news at six, "Muslim terrorist caught" is what they'll say.

My beloved Freedom, can't you see, listen, do you hear their secret chants? Shh, listen close, the terror alert has gone up. It must be election time or someone's president has screwed up. Clinton got caught cheating on his wife- orange alert. Bush invasions- orange alert. Barack's over-spending- orange alert. Scare the world into submission, they're not alert.

My beloved Freedom, can't you see, America is oppressing me. We are blamed for the wars and poverty. They scare our children and rip apart our families, look at Africa and see. They did it there, this can't happen to me. Please, freedom, answer me. Why haven't you returned back to me? No phone calls, no letter, not even a sweet goodbye whisper while I was asleep. Now look, your departure has Germany going in for a repeat. The Muslim immigrants won't integrate. They are to blame for our faulty financial state. Freedom save us from the concentration camp fate.

Freedom do you know how it feels to be alone? Forced to live in the shadows and watch as my way of life is crucified and stoned. Freedom did I not treat you well? When we were a couple, I loved you so. We would trade secrets, I gave you tons of block gold, fought your enemies while you were home- safely,

you stayed behind .You supplied me with arms and training, those were your toys not mine. 100% U.S.A designed. Our Union was sublime, what went wrong freedom?

My beloved Freedom, is there someone else and does he treat you better? Was it my beard and the length of its growth? Was it my sister's coverings that enraged you the most? Is it the fact that I love my Prophet and Lord? Please, tell me freedom, what could it have been? My race, my culture, my place of origin.

My beloved Freedom, let me live to see the day where I could say I am Muslim, and not in the process for fear you will again leave me. I miss you darling, please return to me. Until your return, I will continue to long for thee.

P.S. Freedom, I also have some brothers you would love to meet, introduce them to your family. I think Palestine and your sister Justice would go together sweet, and how about Afghanistan and Liberty—they're both so much the same. And your young sister, Equality's presence around Iraq will bring him so much joy and change.

Michael Johnson

“What have I got to see?”

“I can’t tell you, you’ve gotta see it. Come on,” Jade said, as she tugged her arm, practically hopping with excitement.

“Ok, ok, but I hope this is a good one.”

“You’ll see.”

Nia was stunned, dazzled really, by brilliant sunshine, by glossy foliage accenting tropical hued blossoms. The wild latticework of intense color against deep shadow curiously absorbed sounds. For a moment Nia was lost in the illusion. She imagined she stood at the delicate fringe of a tropical rainforest, but she was still in Brooklyn. Wait!

Almost beneath their noses lay an iguana sunning itself upon a large flat rock. This was a very strange iguana. Every color of the rainbow rippled and shimmered across its iridescent skin. Yellows and greens smoothly melded into cool spectrums of blue. Plums ran into warm mauves that burst when met with magentas and reds.

Nia was a little afraid of the strange creature though the eleven year old would never admit it to her little sister.

"He's kind of strange," Nia reasoned.

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"But he's pretty."

"Well he could try it, but be ready to run if he tries to bite. And we can't tell mom and dad either. They won't like it."

The sisters nodded in agreement. Jade made the first move, reaching out, small fingers out-stretched. Not to be outdone Nia matched her sister's approach.

"Oh!" both girls exclaimed, sopranos in unison.

The iguana didn't bite, as Nia feared. Nor was he cold and scaly as Jade imagined. He was actually quite warm with slinky, silky smooth skin. The sisters petted and fussed over their new rainbow-hued friend. The iguana almost seemed to smile with a silent hum of pleasure over the girls' gentle attention.

Too quickly, the afternoon passed and it was time to leave. As the two walked away the women passed a young couple. The teenage girl was excited.

“You’ve got to see this has got to be the coolest cat you’ve ever seen. “
Nia and Jade turned to tell the older girl she was mistaken, that the enclosure held an iguana. Shock coursed through both girls. Then they smiled and turned to walk away. The rainforest was no longer there. In its place stood another type of enclosure, in which resided the most beautiful multi-hued rainbow cat.

The Only Good Indian

Nathan Powell

First remember Mike Rafferty when we went to fourth grade together. He had a great Indian-head belt buckle that seemed ancient and powerful to us kids. He and I wound up in a rock throwing fight with two other kids, Moose and Squirrel. Their names matched their sizes, and they swore "Bullwinkle" was written about them. Moose got nailed with a fistful of granite, and he didn't like that too much. So he hurls this wickedly jagged hunk of flint that curved and twisted in the air like a boomerang. It miraculously struck the center of Mike's belt buckle from 30 yards away. If it had struck anywhere else, he would've bled!

So now the Indian-head on this buckle has a scar on his nose, and he is even cooler. A skinny girl, named Lisa, had seen the whole thing and told all the other girls at school. In the hallway she would trot over to show them, tracing the outline of the scar on the Chief's face, while Mike nearly bursting with pride.

Now you must have a notion of how many kids wanted that damn buckle. I recall 3 fights over it. The best fight was with Moose himself; he brought in this gold nugget, which he claimed came from Alaska. He slapped it down on the edge of a see saw and challenged Mike for his buckle.

"I get to pick weapons," Mike said.

Moose nodded his head, initiating one of the strangest combats ever seen after school at Franklyn Elementary. Mike knew Moose would beat him, so he chose two-by-fours. Watching them wield those long pieces of lumber was like being at a drunken joust where the knights had lost their horses and armor, but still had some fight left in them. We all "ooh"-ed when Mike finally got hit in the chest so hard you could actually see the dust burst out of his jacket and float in the rays of sunshine split by the swing-sets. I don't know how Mike remained standing, but he did. At that point, he gave up trying to stab and cross lances with Moose, and he swung that two-by-four like a battle axe. Moose had his legs swept away like a couple of straws, and his oversized body hit the pavement with a sickening thud. Mike let out a whoop and scooped up the gold, prancing about like a pale Hiawatha. We all cheered and danced with him. Moose didn't get up, but he groaned when we left.

You will never believe who got a hold of Mike's precious talisman. We were swimming out at Arapahoe Falls, where frisky fish would nibble at your heels after each dive. Mike came up out of the water with his sandy hair plastered to his narrow skull. He couldn't find his pants, and ran about like a

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desperate ant. We were cracking up, until finally he saw them crumpled into a heap by the tall grass. No belt buckle in sight.

We all heard giggling coming from the trees. "Give it here," Mike told Lisa, who was perched at the top of a tree. She shook her head and stuck her tongue out at him. His anger showed in the fierce grip of his hands, as he started to climb after her. She had chosen her tree wisely, and Mike could only ascend by jumping to grab the lowest branch. They played an odd game of tag, as Mike's hands were "it" trying to grab Lisa's little feet. She never gave him time to pull himself up, and she tagged him as he fell to his knees by the gnarled roots. Her cackling infuriated him, and Mike grabbed a rock and threw it hard. She dropped from the tree and ran off, bleeding and crying. The buckle lay facedown in the weeds.

I can still see Lisa up in that tree, with her eyes shining over her silly buck teeth. Mike found a treasure chest and buried it with the buckle inside. Some say he forgot where he buried it, and others say Lisa watched the burial only to dig it up later. We never did see that old belt buckle again.

The Treacherous Ascension from Adolescence to Adulthood

Brendan Miller

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Jesse Owens once said, “The battle that counts is the struggle within yourself.” These words deserve more than just a cursory glance. The deduction I arrived at, after a thorough dissection of this quote, is that the struggle within yourself is actually the struggle to know yourself. How many of us can state, with infallible certainty, exactly who we are? In order to acquire such knowledge of one’s self, a person must be ready and willing to probe those dark places that we all know exist, but rarely embrace. The secrets, or deficiencies, that reside within us serve as the starting line for self-development, and that is what this enigma we call life is all about: assiduous devotion to the betterment of yourself. It is impossible to improve if you have not made the appropriate self-analysis and identified the areas in which to improve.

I often question what is holding me back from the success I desire. How can “good enough” evolve into greatness? I am well aware of my own ability, but the path that leads to the cultivation of my potential is lacking clarity. I will know that I have found my way when I am able to state with conviction: this is what I love—I am good at this, and most importantly, this is where I belong. The path to true self-knowledge still eludes me, but consequently, I have learned which paths not to tread along.

For most of my life, I was held host hostage in a cycle of violence and drug addiction. Everyday was a new nightmare. I was overwhelmed by guilt and shame. The guilt and shame grew into a bottled up rage that would explode into another episode of violence, and the violence would only serve to perpetuate the cycle further. As the drug use and violence escalated, I descended into the furthest depths of self-destruction, where my demons and misery were the only companionship I knew. I fooled myself into believing that I had found true love, despite the sobering realization that anyone who truly loved me had long since vacated the area. The agony completely engulfed Brendan Miller, leaving only a fragment of the young man, who once has such a promising future. The only comfort in life was the certainty of my self-inflicted dystopia. Death would have been a joyous reprieve.

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Reprieve did indeed come, but it did not arrive in the form of death; it arrived under the cover of a prison term. The day of reckoning was upon me and penance was due. I paid with my time, my body, and my mind. The looming question was what would I do with my captivity? Would I allow myself to become a product of the system, or would I use the system in an effort to become productive? I could have allowed such an environment to drag me further down than ever before, but instead I had a moment of clarity. Some look at prison and see hopelessness and despair; I saw an opportunity to grow. Growth can come in many forms and, in my case, it came in a return to the morals and values that were instilled in me during childhood. I realized that I no longer had all the answers, and I would spend the rest of my life fighting to unearth them. I focused my energy toward appeasing the man staring back at me in the mirror and, for the first time in many years, I had respect for what I saw. I knew it was time to put adolescent ideals to bed and awaken the principles that would guide me to becoming a man.

My struggle with such a gripping addiction, and a propensity towards violence, has had monumental consequences. There is no way I could possibly atone for all the harm I have caused to others, as well as myself, but it would be an atrocity not to make an attempt. The State of New York has provided me with a seven-year hiatus from society and a great start toward self-discovery. I can still hear the devil whisper in my ear from time to time, but the difference is that now I am well aware that if I answer her call, my life will no longer be my own. If I choose to do battle with my shortcomings and make a daily effort to ameliorate the situation, I will be content with who I am today. I may not have all the answers yet, but today I am a man with confidence and a sense of self-worth. Today I am a man who is no longer ashamed of his past because my past has blessed me with an unrivaled strength and unwavering resolve. I have struggled long and hard to reclaim myself and I continue to fight tooth and nail against regression. The battle may never end, but today I can claim a small victory because today I am a man, and that is what counts.

A Fragment

Lucas Whaley

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I approached the casket slowly. I had been putting it off all afternoon, always finding one more thing that I had to do first, or one more person that I had to have some insane conversation with. What was there to say? What words could adequately sum up the life of an angel, whose light had illuminated my whole world? I had forgotten how cold it was in the darkness.

I forced myself to take every painful step, distracting myself with details. The coffin was made of some kind of black wood polished until it reflected the subdued lights of the room like a mirror. The handles on the sides were etched to look like leafy vines growing out of the wood. I hadn't been asked to be a pallbearer. The inside was padded with red velvet crisscrossed with black diamonds. She would have hated it.

I realized with a shock that I was beside her. Throughout the day, I had heard people commenting on how good a job the mortician had done, and how life-like she looked. It was bullshit. The body lying there looked nothing like her. She wasn't her golden brown hair, or her round nose, or the beauty mark just to the right of her upper lip. She was her laugh, her love for everything Mickey Mouse. She was that stupid dolphin noise that she would make that never failed to cheer me up.

The soft voices from the other end of the room became an intolerable buzz in my head. How could these people talk? Didn't they realize that something had gone terribly wrong with the world? Somehow, somewhere, someone had done something wrong: something that was never meant to happen, something that had caused the world to jump its tracks. What other explanation could there be?

My sanity paced in the sanitarium of my mind. Or was it the Sanitarium? Was there even a word for a hole so dark and hopeless as to be assigned as the exile of the ill and the mad? I was a living testament that such a place existed, for how could I ever be well again—either physically or mentally—without her? I noticed that they had tied a black scarf around her neck and wondered morbidly if they had even bothered to stitch up the wound. She had been found in a dumpster with her throat slit. I couldn't imagine the magnitude of evil that

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a person would have to possess to be able to bring himself to kill her. Had they somehow managed to miss the beauty of the spirit that she encapsulated?

I remembered the first time that we met: me, a dirty street kid, flirting with her, the daughter of a minor celebrity, as she had smiled shyly. I had never seen anything so breathtaking—that's what she had done to me, take my breath away. I remembered our first kiss, in the back of a pickup truck barreling down a back road in the middle of the night. I remembered everything, and while I would happily saw off my right arm to keep those memories, having them only seemed to make her absence more profound.

She had always seen within me a better man, and had made me want to be that better man although I hadn't known how. By the time we had met, I was already too broken to be the knight that she deserved, but that had never stopped her from seeing me as such. I had never met anyone who trusted me so implicitly, who was willing to love me so completely.

It was not only her life that had been taken, but also our life. Even if I someday found the strength to carry on, it will be as a shell, a ghost haunting the land of the living until I could pass on- hopefully to reunite with my love and live once again.

I realized then that the thing about loss like that, a loss that burns your whole world to ash, isn't that there's nothing left that you care about—it's that none of it is enough.

My Mother's Creation

Lawrence Dotson

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They'll never break me. And I could never thank my mother enough for this. An incredible woman did an incredible thing. My mother didn't just create me once—like all mothers do when they conceive their children. My mother created me twice! The second time was when she instilled all of her great values in me, which made me the man I am today.

Entrapped by a trillion ton of steel and concrete, yet I'll never break. Every second of every day, my oppressors try to break my mother's creation. They try to dehumanize me every chance they get, they try to replace the name given to me by my mother with ones like stupid, convict, inmate, and even nigger. But their verbal assault bounces off me like small pieces of hail, and I laugh at their ignorance.

Baffled by my responses, they try other tactics to break my mother's creation. They attempt to rob me of my dignity by having me strip so they can stare at my nakedness. But like their other attempts to break my mother's creation, this one fails as well because instead of invoking shame and humiliation, my pride radiates through my nakedness causing my oppressors to shield their eyes with the backs of their hands and yell for me to get dressed.

Again, I laugh because there's nothing they can do to break my mother's creation.

Although I'll never be able to sufficiently thank my mother, I have to do my best because the realization is, if she didn't make me the man I am, I probably would have been broken long ago. But since I possess her strength, courage, pride, will, determination, honesty, and integrity...They'll never break my mother's creation.

A Scene With Two Views

Joshua J. Keppen

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It was August, the greatest month. The summer of '98 was at its end, and I was dealing with the reality of just losing my life. Those were my thoughts as I arrived at the Sing-Sing Correctional Facility, after two grueling days shackled down on the state bus. My joints ached from being confined in a sitting position for the last eight hours. My hands were cuffed between the "Black Box," a plastic and metal sheath which hides the keyholes and makes the cuffs into a solid unit, further restricting movement. My useless hands sat clasped, forlorn in my lap, bound six inches from my waist by a thick chain tied tight against my torso like a monk's belt. Today had been quick, the day before we were shackled like that for thirteen hours, all forty of us. We drove across the state, side by side, shifting in plastic seats not designed for our comfort. No use trying to scratch your chin bound like that. It's just better to use your shoulder instead and stare out the window, immobile as the landscapes, like dreams, slip by...

The sun had set and it was dark then, as I was led to my cell through the twisting corridors of the facility. Artificial light illuminated the compound, and I could see a rolling green belt outside of my cell's window. The prisoners with me in five building were feeding the cats with pieces of meat off their trays, despite their own hunger—all vying for the cat's attention, just a glance or mew. In prison, common animals become exotic and we always envy the birds. I can still remember how elated I was to have such a large window...and cats! It was a cool night after a hot day. The breeze caressed my face like a lover...her smooth hands invisible as she held me like no woman ever would again. Memories of my former life would always haunt me in those days when I was fresh up. Now I have to strain to hear those whispers, like an eidolon in my periphery that vanishes when I look directly at her.

In the darkness, with nothing, sleep comes in fits. At every waking

A Scene with Two Views (continued)

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moment, I was at that window, alone with my thoughts. Introspection can be a curse when you strip away all of the baggage and excuses and with true honesty examine your soul. Before me lay a life of misery and solitude, and I could no longer handicap myself with the delusions I harbored. All around me were examples of my future, I had only to look: men so jaded and bitter after so many hard years alone. Abandoned, rejected, let down time and again, forgotten...common themes that unite so many in here. Would I too become institutionalized, my heart atrophied by disguise? I look back at myself then with respect for seeing so much, despite my naiveté. Dignity and my humanity would be my prize, and I would have to fight tooth and nail to keep them. I would have to accept hurt and loss, yet still hope. The past would be my balm, and I would have to find beauty within myself, to dispel the ugliness around me and within.

Sing-Sing sits like a fortress on the escarpment of the Hudson River. As the dawn began to break, I could see out across its beautiful waters. Already, multihued sailboats were cutting silently across its surface, like beads of rain sliding down a window, refracting light. As the sky was transformed by vibrant pastels of blue and mauve, I began to make out the distant earthen cliffs of the opposite shore, along with a verdant lush forest. I sat there transfixed as the world changed contrasts from drab tones of grey and black into a scene of such beauty that your heart aches and you dare not breathe or blink. Words cannot capture such a vision—you can only look on in awe, enthralled by nature.

That theme of change, of improvement, has always resonated with me since. Could it be that I am more than the crime I committed? Is there beauty within me beyond the mist and shadow of this black heart, just waiting to break the horizon, like a dawn? A childhood poem by Jean Giraudoux comes to mind:

"Sadness flies on the wings of the morning;
Out of the heart of darkness, comes the light."

Untitled (My Life)

Joshua Torres

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Adapting to any environment—is that possible? Clear and free of storms or unpleasant changes, and untroubled by conflict—is that possible? By displaying chameleon-like characteristics, will I still know who I am?

Honesty, respect, and loyalty—are those possible? Fair straightforwardness, deserving esteem, and steadfastness—are those possible? I've been dishonest with myself and others, do I deserve to be trusted? My self-esteem will not dictate my expectations of others, will I still be esteemed? My bonds need to be earned, will unbreakable promises be broken?

Dedication, determination, and discipline—are those possible? Firmness of mind, firmly resolved, and exercising development—are those possible? Will my firmness of mind be resolved enough to exercise development?

Sanity is an insane environment—is that possible? Proceeding from a reasonable mind after so much foolishness and unreasonableness —is that possible? Can I be rational after so much irrationality?

My suspicions have been tainted by my experiences. I will not be deterred by my trials and tribulations in life. I will continue to believe in the possibility of relationships with honesty, respect, loyalty, dedication, determination, and discipline.

This is my life. Live yours.

An Excerpt from "The Ambuscade"

Keir Weimer

It was mid-afternoon, and Wayne had just gotten back from his afternoon program. It was a sunny but cool day in western New York—warm enough to have the windows in our room open halfway. Tom was the only other roommate in the room except for myself. He was deep in some obscure fantasy novel, with no regard for anything else. Wayne looked fatigued. He sat on his rack in the corner of the five-man room we all shared; our two other roommates still not back from their programs. We talked for a minute, about nothing really. I had been busy when Wayne arrived, and made a point to be terse in my replies to his inquiries. You see, Wayne liked to talk...a lot. You might say he had “the gift of gab”, but you might not, just as well.

Wayne was about my age, in his late twenties now. Wow...maybe time is moving faster than I tend to realize. He was about six foot, probably 230...maybe even 240He fit the mold of a classic Mesomorph: thick, doughy, and slightly rotund. He was committed to bettering his physique, frequenting the weight-pit regularly. The problem, however, was tripartite in nature: no cardio exercise, horrible genetics, and a 6,000-calorie diet per day. When Wayne finally took my subtle hints, he took off his shoes and lay back on his bunk with the latest James Paterson novel in hand. Suddenly, one of our neighbors from across the hall came into our room unannounced, with a certain bellicosity in his movement. He had on what appeared to be some sort of handball, or weight-lifting gloves. He went directly to Wayne’s bunk and got in his face. “Super-tough huh? Super-tough? Nah...I’m not super-tough... this is me motherfucker,” he said as he lunged at Wayne. He laid three hard punches into Wayne’s unassuming face—Wayne and all of us in shock. “This is me motherfucker. Super-tough nothing, you faggot! This is me you motherfucker!!!” He unleashed another flurry of punches, just bashing Wayne’s face in as he laid down face-up on his bed, completely defenseless.

“What the fuck, S—let me get my fucking shoes on man! What the fuck?” Wayne uttered in desperation, trying to buy a reprieve from the onslaught. At this point, Tom had stopped reading—which was rare. I was standing up, in shock. I didn’t know what to do. I was horrified at what I had just seen happen to my friend and roommate. I was also instantly plagued with a deep sense of ambivalence and guilt. What should I do? I had never witnessed such unsolicited and horrific violence in my life. Wayne was bleeding from his right nostril, and his eye looked like it was beginning to swell up.

Archaeology's Discovery

Michael Shane Hale

|||||

The artifacts are spread across gray felt.

Touch one, put it down, pick it back up, 'til Catherine says, "Sit down".

Class is beginning.

Journeying through time and space.

Pieces transport a tactile sense to the Upper Paleolithic (Late Stone Age) with a stone scraper—scraping meat from hide.

Scraping to get by.

Small guesses are made at how old each item is—how long it has been around. Eyes are on artifacts transported from their time and place to stare back. Casting their molded gaze from atop a piece of gray felt.

Out of context

Free to be whatever the imagination needs it to be.

Meeting the needs of men who understand

being taken out of context/society/only their crime put on display.

Spread behind gray bars.

The pieces converse and condemn to ask?

How long have you been around?

What's your function?

What interest do I have of you?

Shocking silence, stony stares, ceramic glaze.

50-to-life.

Me too.

—I have you both beat, 125-to-life.

In Arabic, an Egyptian copper plate admonishes, "What God Hath Wrought".

Archaeology's Discovery (continued)

While the Egyptian Shawabti, cursed with a spell from the Book of the Dead, cries, "Don't look at me, you're the living dead, there's no help for you here."

One metal button embossed with an eagle and olive branch and a 1-R-T cackles a hyena's laugh.

Its contents of irony spill out and engulf the gray felted table.

Found in the 19th century Georgia at the first excavated slave cabin.

The Revolutionary War's 1st Regiment buttoning up slaves...in independence?

"Ha!" the button offers.

"Time, there was a time, I meant something to some nigger family.

Discarded after the war, they embraced me.

Uprooted and thorn prices, they knew what I meant, talons piercing olive branches.

Never laid to rest in gray felt like a special artifact,

They wore me as a talisman, a symbol, a reminder, a button."

Archaeology's great discovery?

Hope.

That one day the war, fought in and behind gray fog and clouds, in retrospect, would include them too."

Inspired by Catherine Koehler's Scope of Anthropology class 7/21/2010 showing artifacts.

A Language Everyone Understands

Michael Rhynes

|||||

Waking up at 6:00am, screaming in broken English for help. I call the guard, but no one comes. I call Mexico, my friend, but he doesn't answer. I call Danny, because he is close to the guard's desk.

No one hears me.

No one answers me.

Why can't anyone hear me?

Am I dying because of my broken English?

At 7:00am I tell the guard in broken English, hand gestures, and facial expression, I am in pain and dying.

At 7:35am my cell cracks open, I am escorted to the hospital with my hands in my pocket. I see the nurse, but she doesn't understand the pain and misery I am in. With fractured English I tell her, "I am dying". She doesn't listen. Back in the cell I pace in English, while my Spanish mind is in turmoil, trying to figure out a way to tell these English-speaking people, my soul aches.

Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, back and forth. Trying to come up with a way to convey what it feels like to be alive to be with so much pain.

At 3:00pm I take all the black laces from my shoes. Covering the front of the cell with a green blanket. Sitting on the bed, I begin to fashion a noose.

One, two, three, four, five, on six I step up on the toilet. Slipping the end of the noose behind the shelf above the toilet, tying it in the Gordian knot.

Putting my Mexican mind into English laces. I step off the toilet, leaving a message anyone can understand.

Written by Michael Rhynes on the day Albert killed himself.

My Last Words

Dedicated to Tookie

Kavlin Nathaniel Harmon

|||||

Standing here, caught in the mix of emotions and trying to make sense—relentless, but at times it seems pointless. But still, doing it until I’m spent. ‘Til my veins run dry, my heart stops, and my brain doesn’t work anymore—sheets cover my face, curtain closed, show’s over. I’m dead for a crime I didn’t commit. Governor said, “Fuck da nigger, let ‘em kick! He’s been killing his own for years, now we kill ‘em—it fits.” I wrote a few books to show the youth that my selfish ways wasn’t it. Jessy praised me, Farrikan tried to save me, and I apologized to all the mothers—but in the end, it wasn’t it. It’s always in the last days that we try to make amends, but still it wasn’t enough. And I watch the rest that walk before me—walking all calm and cool, and eating their last meal—souls in purgatory. What about the ones who were lynched and hanged, yet fought until their death? But, here I am, about to do the same walk to my death. But no last meal to I eat, just thoughts of the so-called “indignant ones” watching me be put to sleep like a dog in the streets. What’s a life worth? What’s redemption if it’s not believed? If your remorse is believed to be a sham—and this is the supposed to be the department of corrections?! I was placed here for my foolish indiscretions, and after 24 years on death row, I haven’t my penance? I’m denied a life in prison. What do I got to be—a mass murderer, a killer of pregnant women, or the murderer of his father and mother—to receive some leniency? A black Charles Manson? A black Ted Bundy? What do I got to do—sell my soul for clemency?

So here I sit, another statistic all along. I’ve prostrated to the lord and received forgiveness for past wrongs.

Redemption, redeemed, remorse—it’s all impossible for the discriminated mind to believe that I AM a redeemed soul. But I bite the bullet on this one and walk to my death. For as the teacher, this will be my final lesson. And if you miss my message, our youth will pay the price for your lack of attention...

MY LAST WORDS

**“ To the victims of
viscous violence,
Their stories not one-
sided and silent.
It speaks to the world of
senseless fools,
Who purge their demons
to bring anew. ”**

*From A Tear from the Phoenix's Eye,
by Jason Calkins*

Only When You Smile

Gary Stewart

To my daughter, Shakira

Only when you smile
Happiness entertains laughter
Joy is conceived, fashion delivers style
But only when you smile

Only when you smile
The roses bloom with blossoms
Fragrance of exotic essences
Flavored with rich aroma
That excites and stimulates the heart
But only when you smile

Yes, only when you smile
The glow kisses the moon
As moisture quenches the morning dew
Melodies composed songs
Inspiration delivers the purpose of poetry
But only when you smile

Only when you smile
Hope, faith, and salvation
Resurrection elevates redemption
Sparks ignite, flame lit fire
The wind whispers to the petals of the rose
You are true beauty, the apex of the pile
Every time you smile

Your smile is like the truth
It sets me free to ponder the mellifluous
Flow of your laughter
Which causes the below to propose to the above
And wedge in the middle

Your smile highlights my existence
When you smile the uncertain makes sense
The past meets the present
And all this happens only when you smile
So smile for me Shakira

The Ungraspable

Michael Shane Hale

What's to say?

I sit, acknowledge your gift and wait for nothing to happen.

Life shifts all around and within us, wondering who is dreaming whom?

The slippery slope slides slick and slithery—it is unattainable.

Why do my hands rest in the grasping position?

They seek to grasp, to understand, to know—YOU. Know, as Adam and Steve knew one another in a secret garden of long ago.

Love bloomed and fell away, decay, it was never my love anyway.

It nourishes wet group; petals upon petals, shed over you, lying there giving life and succor, a quilt of immense beauty and comfort: A bean bag begging to be lay down upon. Float atop my love,

Rest, Resist, Rest, Resist, let it wear itself out.

Heart in my Chess

Marlon Black

Chess is a Lover's Game.
Love and War is both the same.
My heart is the white light
and black heart's fight to be right.
I declare Love not war with my horse
who moves in an L-shape, of course.
The top of the rook, being designed from Cupid's arrow,
Knows that Love is a road that's wide and not narrow.
On the perimeter is our castle, for my queen, its not hassle.
As we watch our pawns grow up,
I'm the king with Love overflowing my cup.

"So Close, Make It Real"

Mark Cramer

After 15 hours my eyes open
To be where I saw, I was hoping
It's blur so real, my heart full with love
That angel, so beautiful from above

Her dark complexion so full of light
My heart still skipping from her sight
First her hand and then her heart so close
Her naked body burned up against mine, we kissed, almost

Then that pull as she said, "Please don't go."
I fought so hard but said, "I love you so."
My heart cried out as the burned raised
That burn from being torn apart, blazed

Her warm look faded as pain to set in
She whispered, "Don't go, you have to win."
"For you, I will," I whispered back
"My love for you will never lack."

I fought so hard as it ripped me away
Her tear brought implosion, last thing was to pray
Tunnel vision occurred as her hand,
Broke free from the strength of our band.

I fought so hard to watch her fade
Her hand still out, but from the fight I'm jade
I yelled so loud in all helplessness
To please, just let me finish this

My lips so close to feeling hers
That magic around us that barely occurs
The eye rains from this as the heart crushed
Reality all to soon, runs, rushes

As breath fills me full with air
The pain hits me as passers stare
My heart crushed as I tried to hold it in
Her beauty, her mark, all visible but dim

After 15 hours, I have to
Find my way back where love is true
But maybe she heard the crier of my heart
That in real life I'd never let them tear us apart...

Burn Man, Burn Man, Burn

Michael Rhynes

We all gather without Abraham for self-sacrifice. On Nevada's Black Rock Desert.
In our beautiful nudity, we lie spread-eagled where Isaac was laid.

We offer up our tender, most sensitive, parts to this world.
Without shame, inhibitions, regrets, or censorship.

We burn our Victoria's Secret bras, and Calvin Klein underwear. Because we no longer
seduce ourselves into buying the American dream.

We burn our Nikes, Jordans, and Adidas.
Because we will no longer run in political races we can't win.

We will not run for pink elephants, jackasses, or teetotalers who sip at parties
funded by the Madd Hatter.

We burn our credit cards, mortgages, car notes, tax forms, and the letter of democracy.
We will no longer be indentured servants behind a Walled in Street, in the land of the
free.

Burn man, Burn woman, Burn child, in the spirit of democracy.
Burn men, Burn man, Burn.

You'll Find Out Who Your Friends Are

Gary Stewart

You'll find out who your friends are
In a cold unforgiving world
Without sentiments, or emotion
When you tried everything, and you're out of work
Your pride is hurt, and you need a change of shirt
You need a place to stay. A temporary couch to lay
You need a hand till your horse come in
And you don't know where to begin

You'll find out who your friends are
Car stuck in a ditch, your life's a bitch
Two tires flat, pocket broke, imagine that
Then you start to fret, cause you have to call collect
And you wonder, if they'll accept

You'll find out who your friends are
2:30 in the a.m., and like jelly you're in a jam
Is it too late to call? Would they come at all?
This is where the saddle meet the horse
This is where the train hits the track

You'll find out who your friends are
People say they have your back
And they wanna join your pact
Like groupies when you are at the top
But when a pebble shift, your feet hit a slippery rock
And your show flop
You find out who's full of crap

You'll find out who your friends are
When they get that call and drop everything
Runs to your side no matter how late or far
Without thinking, "What's in it for me?"
A friend in need, is a friend indeed!

A Tear from the Phoenix's Eye

Jason Calkins

As the tear silently seeps
From my eye, I stop to think
And ask, WHY do I cry?
Can it be for me? NO!
It must be for you,
And your never forgotten loved ones too.
To the victims of viscous violence,
Their stories not one-sided and silent.
It speaks to the world of senseless fools,
Who purge their demons to bring anew.

I cried for you
Now I cry for me.
A boy that was,
Is not the man to be.
Like the phoenix rising,
From damnation's ashes,
I'm to rise from the state of madness.
A chance for redemption is what I ask,
Visions for the future,
While atoning for the past.

I've cried for you,
I've cried for me,
Now when I cry, I cry to be free.

"Sounds Enough"

Shane Kalb

Your voice your eyes your face they pierce me, the mind there
the beauty, the dark pupils a laser focus incision across by ear:

I hadn't heard that sound before, so mesmerized by you;
I closely watched the shifting hue that rests somewhere in brown and blue
behind your eyes—that hide from me—your eyelash grid on reality.

But now I listen:

And that sound unveiled, I fear, may be
the sound of loneliness in me. A rasp of thirst to hold your vision
reminding me that I'm in prison—wishing naught but your decision.

To tilt your ear to me and hear the flutter of my heart,
the nervous twitter of you near—the dear—twinge of pain...
and if you listen close the gaze of eyes across a page and
the gentle rustle of the blaze...

Its wordless whisper.

Its words are falling ashes from the fires of these passions—
my pen's quiet scratching to your voice your eyes your face
the mind there—the ultrasonic boom that echoes
back and forth like gardens trading legends aptly verdant—

Likewise I whisper ardent
Promises to illumine the darkness—that if you lent your ear to me
Then loneliness' sound would be
A Wagnerian melody! Like seraphim my heart would sing
If you'd accept the love I bring.

I'm rambling though—you're deaf by now
but sure of my young crush on thou...
So let me ask you one last thing:
are sounds enough for your courting?

"At First Sight I Knew"

Mark Cramer

Is it not plain, my emptiness?
Is it not obvious you make me reminisce?
It's you who takes that burn and cools my soul
It's you I want to fill my heart's empty hole
Not just for now but for our ephemeral life
I don't have the answer, but you're worth the sacrifice

Your book is unread by my eyes and heart
But that extra beat you caused, where do I start...

Akon's words, "nobody wants to see us together"
So true in present, but to you my love is forever.

Love

Marlon Black

What is Love?
Is it the passing wind
that you can't grasp or see
but it is ever present
at the slightest touch, sends chills
through your body?
Or is it Fire?
That's too hot to hold
but can be felt through passion and desire
when it is lit, can't be cooled nor quenched.
Or is it water?
That flows deep
and gets overflowing.
Or is it Earth?
That keeps us grounded
and planted by the roots.
The truth is Love is Life and Life is Love!

Wanda's Heart to Life Cider

Burnell McLeod

(To my cousin Wanda for my second chance at life)

As a gift to her soil unfolds,
sprinkled seeds were given.
Rooted in by a firm stronghold,
a mere single-leaf twig emerged her journey's beginning.

Growing to heights not blinding one's eyes to see,
glorious with branches her leaves could firmly grip.
The breath of wind gives life to her apples' tease,
sitting with a petite trunk yet amply thick.

Birtherd in a sweet nectar that gave me juice to quench my thirst,
a taste of earth when I had no teeth.
She picked and crushed in sacrifice to my worth,
once able to walk then given thin slices to eat.

The morning I went in search for knowledge,
troubled to find what purpose holds her fruit now grounded whole.
It was her rights of passage my becoming of age,
as I took my first bite into it's core.

Where I found the awakening of intelligence into my own soul.

"The Well Read"

Maurice Cotton

How can you become "well read"?
 How can you know what was said?
 Where did you come from?
 Where are you going?
 Who are you?
 What is the meaning of this?
 What is the meaning of that?
 A philosopher would say.
 When you were a child did someone suggest to you to read?
 Why are you having problems putting things together?
 Read, baby, read!

In order to write or talk substantially,
 You must read substantially;
 Sometimes the same material twice or more.
 Write, baby, write; the knowledge you obtain
 It will get you through the tough times,
 It will get you through the rough nights.
 Write, baby, write – talk, baby, talk;
 The same material twice or more.
 Potential benefits, potential problems into sight
 Before they become something more.
 A few generations ago you had no right.
 The impression that it is too much to read,
 too much to write or say
 you really do not want to insinuate any more.
 You think that reading and writing and speaking are hard,
 Try making a living walking with a blue collar, as a laborer.

Cruel Injustice

E. Paris Whitfield

Smiles hidden in lying eyes. Handshakes
not worth the while.
A schooled heart alerting you of portraits
that have had much to many frames.
Hoping that an unwritten tomorrow will not
be the same—scripted yesterday walking
through my very own shadow of the valley
of death, quickly loosing memory of my
last free breath. Existing in a Pandora's
box of stale cage. Becoming less human.
Exchanging sacrificed love for all consuming
rage. A system needed, but has manage to
fail so many for the almighty monetary
value. My worth viewed in dollars, quarters,
dimes, nickels, and pennies. Old sails
loudly howl. To no avail. Blind, Deaf,
Justice for the assorted hues of brown
bound in a locked kiss with poor whites.
Eyes lying, hidden in smiles while cruel
injustice chances to the bitter sweet
synchronized melody of Fate.

"Echoes of Pathos, Pt. I"

Shane Kalb

I researched in the laboratory in my head: a million ways to hallucinate.
 As seeker of buzzes, I seized the beehive and dropped the ball
 so carried nothing and fiendishly grasped as wisps of smoke
 that turned out to be memories.
 Schizophrenically self-destructive,
 I set traps for my alter-ego and caught him but the bastard died along the way
 and left me in this place where natural alarms are in chaos
 and sad paranoia bleeds like a scalp wound.
 I hated him, anyways.
 How can things seem so forgettable then in a moment of clear realization
 transform into a desperate need for meaning, a desperate need to live
 a need to love, a need to cry, a dazzling and elusive and fleeting glimpse
 of something I painfully long for? A dawn has spread its bright blanket
 over things previously hidden by a darker shroud,
 and describing it loses something, like a poem typed,
 like words themselves
 a linger then
 a blink.
 Odd things happened
 when I refocused the
 crosshairs of my concentration and decided I wanted
 to study in the field since the sun's out anyway;
 but stupid gazes and curious glances led me to wonder
 how I never noticed all the ugly narcissists – who in turn
 wonder what airline carries the astral plane. My deep
 disdain for people deepens 'til I contemplate the ease
 with which I love them—
 then drifting
 off like ellipses
 the ideas float away and the words lose meaning but
 leaving absent the air of uncertainty (the vague threat of sudden ignition)
 I stand with pleasure in my void that prompts me to remember that
 I have just done essential thing to do: live, and while I'm at it, love; then
 my defense fails as simply as parting silk.

Unforgettable Regret

E. Paris Whitfield

Swaying dances, Mind immune
with pearl white powder or pills
Once praised poison substances
liquored up to accomplish the
apathy of numb. Receiving lights
to cigarettes once never smoked—from
strangers. Holding with two finger precision
as an old professional
Bad choices spun from frienemies
hushed voices—unseen but felt.
Living in this state of perpetual hell
Or its bordering neighborhood.
Handshakes not matching the lying smiles
schooled heart taken notes of life-altering lessons
Secret motives
Plain indiscretions
Yet, unforgettable regret—that still arise
Are those pain-filled diamonds that cascaded
helplessly out from my mother's almond
shaped eyes
My rock of Gibraltar—cried. Each
tear splashed and slashed a permanent
hole in my soul. Old yesterdays come and gone still
so very unforgettable, are those, tears.

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