

# **BLEAKHOUSE REVIEW**

## **ISSUE #1, MARCH 2008**

### **Carpool Buddy**

a short story by Thais H. Miller

### **Asphyxia**

a short story by John Corley

### **The Bird Man of Van Zee**

a short story by Louise M. Louisell

### **Child's Play & Equality**

poems by Rachel Cannon

### **Going Nowhere**

a short story by Susan Nagelsen  
& Charles Huckelbury

### **Begging to Get Into Prison**

a short story by Raymond Edward Williams

### **Boundless**

a short story by Divine G

### **Night View**

a poem by John Corley

# Carpool Buddy by Thaïs H. Miller

"Ma'am, can I see your license and registration, please?" Officer Li could smell it immediately—through the baby's screaming, the beeping of Sam's video game, Matt and Jody's fight—he could taste it right away. Mrs. Liza Martin's hands scratched at the glove compartment three times before she finally got it open. Officer Li tapped his boots against the freshly smoothed pavement. Mrs. Martin handed him the papers along with the license. She tried to cover up the picture—it was taken before she got her new chin. Officer Li moved Mrs. Martin's thumb.

"Okay, you want to step out of the car, ma'am."

Mrs. Martin stepped out of the giant white mini-van, her carpool children continually yelling at the top of their lungs. She was relieved that she decided against putting her hair in curlers that day. Mrs. Lindsey McArthur slowly drove by and watched as Mrs. Martin put her finger to her nose.

"Morning, Liza," Mrs. McArthur said amongst her daughter's cries, staring at Officer Li's badge, "morning, Officer."

Mrs. Martin groaned as Lindsey drove away. Lindsey would be on time and Mrs. Martin would be late, yet again. Most importantly, Mrs. Martin would miss the beginning of the Room Mothers' meeting—one in which all of the stay-at-home fathers and soccer-moms would gather together plotting the latest President's Day celebration and Halloween bash. She knew what the gossip would be today: Mrs. Martin failed a breathalyzer.



"Honey, this is for your own good," Mr. Fred Martin firmly clutched the magazine—"says here, a 'Buddy' proves the perfect companion for those feeling neglected.' I'm sure Dr. Fielder would approve. Just someone you could drive carpool with—something to keep your habit in check." He looked at Mrs. Martin sympathetically, "They use them in prisons."

Still hung-over, Mrs. Martin fingered the edges of the magazine as they rubbed against her oak, kitchen table. "This is a prison, Fredrick." She got up from the table and closed the blinds so that the entirety of the room was submerged in darkness. "You want me to learn how to love myself through an object? What do I look like, a man? I'm sorry, but we can't all have imaginary playmates, Freddy. Stop trying to handle me like one of your clients."

"Damn it, Liza!" She felt his fingers wrap around her wrist so quickly she thought she had been stung. "You're out of control! Drunk—driving carpool! Liza you got a fucking DUI in front of the kids!" And then she was stung—stung by a W.A.S.P. His hand flew quickly and the blast snapped against the top of her cheek bone. All she could think about was \$10,000 for new cheekbone implants, \$5,000 for a lift under her eyes—if she went to Dr. Sherman, he always gave her a discount. With each sting on her face she imagined the dollar amounts she would withdraw from her husband's account. The price of beauty. And revenge.

Mr. Martin stormed out of the room, wiping his hand on the "Happy Mother's Day" dish towel that hung from the stove. Mrs. Martin rose up from the imported, Spanish-tile floor and sat down once again at the kitchen table. She stared at the magazine. Buddies came in all different shapes and sizes. There was even one that looked like Nicole Richie.

"Hmm... just to keep me company during carpool," she stared at the blank doorway. She felt her cheek and stared at the blood residue on her finely manicured fingertips. "I guess it'd be nice to have someone to talk to. Heck, it's got to be better than a stint in rehab." She picked up the phone and slowly dialed the numbers, then re-dialed. As she spoke to the sales person on the phone she ripped at the corners of the magazine like she wished she could tare herself into pieces.

"I want the blonde skinny one, number seventeen. I want that one. That's going to be my carpool buddy."

"Have a safe trip," Mr. Martin told her as she buckled her new carpool buddy into the passenger's seat. Mr. Martin kissed Mrs. Martin on her still-tender cheek and waved goodbye to Matt and the baby in back. Matt waved back and then yelled at Mrs. Martin to change the radio station and make it "LOUDER, MOM!"

The van doors closed and they were off. The first stop was Jody on Bellagio Drive, followed by Sam on Chalon Road. Mrs. Martin didn't drink this morning, in the hopes that her new carpool buddy would serve as a new form of entertainment. Mrs. Teri Lewinsky was late getting Sam out of the house, again. No time for small talk, just reel them in. Finally, just fifteen minutes behind schedule they got to the school. The van doors opened and the kids ran out. The doors slammed closed.

"This is a normal day," Mrs. Martin muttered to the shiny plasticized figurine—life sized of course. The buddy stared back, now Liza had someone to share these memories with. "I think I'll name you Debby," she poked at the figure. "My best friend in high school was named Debby." Mrs. Martin placed the car in drive and sped forward.

Five hours and two martinis, three Bloody Marys, and two glasses of wine later it was time to pick up the kids from school and drive them to soccer practice. The baby had been quiet all day, and Mrs. Martin imagined that's how the house would sound when she was old enough to go to day care. Just a few more months. Just a few more episodes. Mrs. Martin reached for the wine bottle when suddenly she looked back at the doll. "No, you're right," Mrs. Martin put down the bottle, "That's just what he's expecting. I better not."

Mrs. Martin backed out of the driveway, carpool buddy at her side, and went in front of the private school's gated entrance. Everything in her world seemed to have gates—her housing community, her son's school, her backyard, her heart. She turned to the mannequin. The carpool buddy saw that now, she could read between the jittering lane changes. She understood the thoughts behind the nervous flicking on and off of the air conditioning.

The kids hopped in and it was off to the park. Matt got a C on his spelling test; Jody was upset because there was something in her eye. Matt wanted to bring home the class rat for the weekend and Billy wanted to come over for dinner.

"No, no, we'll see, no, no."

In the parking lot the kids desperately scrambled into their various uniforms. Then they were off again. No, "I love you, Mommy," or "I'll miss you." No kisses, no soft hands desperately trying to reach around her body. Mrs. Martin waited for the car behind her to back out. The lights blinded her. Mrs. Martin turned to her carpool buddy and gave the doll the hug Mrs. Martin so desperately craved. The minivan behind the car moved and Mrs. Martin pulled out, driving away from the park, back to the house to clean up before Mr. Martin got home. Carpool buddy seemed to have a sobering effect.



"Debby is staying for dinner," Mrs. Martin explained to her husband. Mr. Martin chuckled at the site of the carpool buddy at the kitchen table. "She helped me prepare dinner." "Alright, if you feel that strongly about it," he sat down and the kids reluctantly took their seats. Mrs. Martin sat on the other side of the doll, using the carpool buddy as a buffer between herself and her husband. The kids flicked on the TV and the drone of high-speed car chases filled the silence of the room. Long ago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin had given up trying to induce deep conversation with the kids when an electronic device was in the room.

"How was your day, Fredrick?" Mrs. Martin scooped the mashed potatoes onto Matt's plate and then put down the bowl. Mr. Martin looked at her nervously. "What?" She asked him.

"Debby doesn't get any?" Mr. Martin smirked. Mrs. Martin cringed; she stood up and took the doll's plate from the table. She went to the oven and took out the rarest piece of steak—Mr. Martin's piece—and placed it on the ceramic dish.

"Well," Mrs. Martin answered, "she was on a diet, but to hell with that."

Mr. Martin put his fork on the carpool buddy's plate and Mrs. Martin pushed it out of the way with her knife.

"Na uh, now Freddy; you were the one who was complaining that our guest didn't have anything to eat."

Mr. Martin awkwardly placed his fork down onto his plate. He paused a moment, as if wishing to wake from this nightmare, and then wiped his face and placed his napkin down on the table. Mrs. Martin started to eat her salad. Mr. Martin pulled back his chair and even the sound of the legs scrapping against the floor did not distract the children from the TV.

"Tell me when you get your senses back," he muttered and Mrs. Martin shifted her eyes to his shinning, patent-leather shoes creaking on the tile. Mrs. Martin looked back at the doll—she was so much more than just a carpool buddy—she was a friend. The mannequin turned into a confidant that could help her stand up against the withering assault of her husband's high expectations. Mrs. Martin dreamed that all the pressure would deflate, just as her husband would deflate the doll, when the doll wasn't serving its purpose in the car—or, now, in the home.



2:37 am that evening and Mr. Martin wasn't home. Mrs. Martin didn't know if he'd be back in the morning—claiming he was off working, in a bar—in a strip club—or worse! Another woman's arms... No, Mrs. Martin wasn't going to think about it, she had already taken the pills and lay on her queen sized bed in pink satin pajamas, next to her new playmate. Mr. Martin had neglected to deflate the doll that evening so Mrs. Martin allowed the carpool buddy to rest silently next to her on the bed as she watched reruns of "M.A.S.H." and "Flipper." They shared a dry martini.

"Debby," Mrs. Martin's voice emerged from a deep, hidden place inside her. She looked at the plastic doll and allowed her hands to fold slightly over a shinning hand. "He's going to leave me... I know he is. What am I going to do... with the kids? I can't get a job, Debby. Do you remember...?" But then her voice faded out, the pills started to take their effect and the light from the flat-screen television blurred gently into the coral-peach of the walls.

"Debby..." Mrs. Martin's hand slowly slid onto the doll's sleek thigh. She allowed her fingers to gently rub between the inward pointing seams—scratching her ring finger with the stitching. She kissed the doll's lips, "Goodnight, Debby."



Mrs. Martin woke to the sound of a car door slamming and then a started engine. Her eyes adjusted to the red lights cascading from her alarm clock. 7:06 it read.

"Shit!" She ran through the house in her fuzzy pink bathrobe. "Mathew! Time to get up! Mommy's running late this morning!" Matt wasn't in his room. Mrs. Martin ran down the hall and found the baby asleep in her crib. "Thank God," she muttered under her breath. She went to the kitchen to relieve herself with a cup of coffee. There was a note by the pot.

"I'm taking Matt to school on my way to work. I found the pills. We need to talk. – Fred"

"Damn it!" Mrs. Martin let her body sink down to the tiled floor, only to find the chipped drawer that her head once banged against. She kicked and slid her feet against the central cabinet like a four-year-old.

That's when she saw it, lying wrinkled against a box of Matt's old clothes Mr. Martin was planning on giving away. The carpool buddy's crinkled body, deflated and folded like a pool toy. "Oh, God!" Mrs. Martin screamed as if seeing a dead rat in her Jacuzzi. She rose from the floor and grabbed the keys to the minivan. He was not going to take this away from her. She lightly brushed her nails against the carpool buddy's disfigured body. Mrs. Martin found the air hole and quickly brought it to her lips, pushing out air as quickly as possible.

"Good as new," Mrs. Martin lied as she put the dirt stained carpool buddy under her arm, and headed straight for the garage. It took Mrs. Martin an hour to reach her husband's firm in the traffic. She was still wearing her pink bathrobe; she had forgotten, or ceased to care about how she appeared.

"I can't do this alone!" She blurted at the doll, which seemed to sympathetically agree. Mrs. Martin grabbed the carpool buddy and hustled out of the car. "Oh, fuck!" the doll's foot was jammed in the door and Mrs. Martin had to unlock the car and take the mannequin back out. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Mrs. Martin hurriedly slurred. She quickly shimmied with the doll in hand, past the security guard into the building.

The elevator ride seemed twice as long as the stint on the 405. People stared at her as she walked past glass offices and open doorways. Mr. Martin's receptionist didn't even recognize her, calling at her "excuse me, ma'am—can I help you? You can't go in there!"

And there he was. Mr. Martin hung up the receiver just as Mrs. Martin entered the room, positive that his wife was having a complete meltdown. "Liza?" His stare went immediately to the carpool buddy, whose wrinkled face seemed even more neglected and unloved than his wife's. Mrs. Martin approached his desk but lacked the strength to slap Mr. Martin, or even just whack him with his stapler. Mr. Martin's colleagues stared at him from the hall and his secretary was on the line with security. Mrs. Martin closely gripped the doll's waist and stood her up, parallel to her owner. "Liza?" Mr. Martin repeated, still trying to get a sense of his wife's mental state.

"Fredrick Martin," Mrs. Martin's chest expanded with a strong breath of air as if she were trying to inflate herself to appear as expandable as the doll.

"Liza? What is it?"

"We want a divorce!"



**Sonia Tabriz** is a junior at American University, majoring in both Law & Society and Psychology. She is an active member of the University Honors Program, and also volunteers as an AU Ambassador to provide guidance and support to new students. Sonia was awarded the Outstanding Honors Sophomore Award for her achievements, and has earned a spot on the Dean's List every semester during her tenure at American University. Upon visiting the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, Sonia was intrigued by the intricacies of prison life and was inspired to explore an underground world with which most people are not familiar. Since then, Sonia has been published in and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. She looks forward to attending law school upon graduation and aspires to continue writing and creating art on issues of criminal justice and deprivation of liberty.

**Victor Hassine** is the author of the widely used text, *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* (Oxford University Press, 2009), as well as several works of fiction, including *The Crying Wall* (WilloTrees & Infinity, 2005), which he co-edited and which contains several of his short stories. Official accounts indicate that Victor took his life on April 27, 2008, during the 26th year of a life sentence he was serving in the Pennsylvania state prison system. Victor Hassine was a vibrant voice for reform, a living embodiment of the humanity of those we confine in our prisons, and a person and artist who will be sorely missed.

# Going Nowhere by Susan Nagelsen & Charles Hucklebury

Stone nodded at the nurse's sympathetic smile, then walked slowly past frail bodies, broken bodies, terminal bodies, until he was out of the building. As soon as the sun hit his face, he pulled a pack of cashews from his jacket pocket and popped a handful into his mouth. His Altima was two rows over, and as he headed toward it, he thought about how good a beer would taste and maybe hot pastrami on rye with a wedge of dill pickle. He pulled out of the parking lot and aimed the car toward the VFW six blocks away.

Larry was sitting at his usual table in his usual corner with his usual Budweiser in front of him. Stone grabbed Heineken from the bartender and pulled out a chair across from him. Larry pointed to the bottle as Stone chugged half of it, the fingers on the other hand withered and curled into a semi-fist. "When you gonna stop drinking that sissy beer and start drinking American?"

Stone wiped his mouth with his hand. "When the bastards stop sending us to every shithole in the world to get fucked up."

Larry grinned through his beard and tipped the Bud back. "I'll drink to that."

"You'll drink to any goddamn thing," Stone told him.

The older man rubbed the faded tattoo on his forearm with his good index finger. "At least you could chase the bad guys in the city where you could see them. We had to hunt the sons of bitches in the goddamn jungle and wade through gallons of Agent Orange while we did it."

It was a standard contest between them. Stone had the same ink on his biceps, and he played along. "Yeah, but we had to go house to house, and just like you, we couldn't tell which one of them was smiling at us in the daylight and shooting at us at night. At least you never had to worry about somebody driving up to you with a carload of C-4 and detonating the whole goddamn load."

Larry shook his head. "And look what it got both of us. Still makes me want to saddle up and head down to D.C. and hose the whole lying bunch of 'em." He put his beer on the table and got down to business. "So what did the doctor say?"

Stone made circles on the table with the bottom of the bottle. "About what I figured: three months, maybe four at the outside, probably not enough time to find out if Clemens is gonna sign with the Yankees for one more season."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Stone. I truly am." Both men drank in silence for a couple of minutes before Larry waved the bartender over and ordered two more beers. "Ain't this a bitch? You've been a cop for years, even been in a couple of shootouts with some real bad dudes and lived to tell about it. You come through a hundred hours of Desert Storm without a scratch and then go back for three tours to finish what should have been done the first time. You got every raghead in the country tryin' to kill you, and you make it home just to get ambushed by your own body? That sucks big time." He nodded to the bartender as he put the beers in front of them and took two swallows. "Anything you need me to do?"

Stone absently scratched the thick scar on the side his neck. "Not now, but thanks anyway. We'll see how it goes later."

Larry wiped his mouth with his good hand. "What kinda cancer is it anyway? Something from that toxic shit you guys were in over I-raq?"

Stone shook his head. "Nothing like that, at least I don't think it is. This one's pancreatic cancer, the kind that killed Michael Landon, the guy from the TV show."

"Yeah, Little Joe on Bonanza."

Stone grinned. "Before my time, Pop."

Larry gave him the finger, then turned serious. "Killed him quick, I remember right."

"Yeah, real quick. It's a nasty one." The kind that took you fast, he thought, before you had finished even half the items on your to-do list.

"Your pancreas?" Larry asked.

Stone sipped his beer and belched. "That's where it starts."

Larry sat back in his chair. "What the fuck does your pancreas do anyway?"

"Makes insulin and helps burn sugar, that sort of thing. It's what fucks up when you get diabetes." He took a breath and put both elbows on the table. "Seven months out of the Army, and I got less than that left before I'll be propped up in some hospice with tubes running in and out of me, shitting in a diaper, and probably begging an old friend like you to put a bullet in my head, or at least bring me a loaded piece so I could do it before I get too weak to squeeze the trigger."

Larry extended his hand across the table. Stone grabbed it in a brotherhood grip as the older man's eyes burned into his. "No way will I let you check out like that, brother. Just say the word, and I'll be right there with it. I promise you."

Two beers later, Stone slid behind the Altima's wheel and popped Bonnie Raitt into the CD player. He needed to see some country, to be on the road again while he still could. He pointed the car toward his apartment for a shower and change of clothes.

When he pushed open the door, Stone expected to see the apartment changed somehow to reflect his new awareness, maybe the lights dimmer or the colors more somber. But, of course, there was nothing but the same furniture in the same place, the same Impressionist copies on the walls, and when he opened his bedroom closet, the same weapons.

From the shelf, he took down an old Colt .45 and walked over to his bed. He ran his finger along the blued slide, then dropped the magazine from the butt. Six rounds glistened with a thin coat of oil, one short of capacity. He slipped the magazine back into its well until it seated with a click, then cranked the slide to chamber two hundred forty grains of copper-coated lead.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and turned the pistol around, inserting his thumb into the trigger guard. Then he pressed the muzzle flush to his chest just below the sternum. He imagined all those cancer cells crying in panic, scared and mad because he was going to stop their clock before they had a chance to win, and he laughed out loud.

He sat like that for a minute or so, then took a breath and turned the pistol away from his heart. "Goddamn it," he muttered. He didn't feel sick, and until he did, he had things to do. He flipped up the thumb safety, laid the pistol on his night stand, and started packing.

Stone left Orlando an hour before midnight in a misting rain. Driving at night was always soothing; something about being awake and alert when most people were asleep. With a little luck, he could ride the darkness all the way to Atlanta.

He hit the on-ramp and started to accelerate when he saw the hitcher on the side of the road with a sign propped against a tote bag. TALLAHASSEE was scrawled in block letters across a piece of cardboard. Shaking his head, Stone eased off the gas and pulled to the side of the road. She had to be either stupid or naive, and either way, she didn't need to be out there by herself where any freak could come along and snatch her. He popped the lock on the passenger's door and waited.

The woman might have been twenty-three at the outside, but in the spillover from the headlights, she looked like she had already lived a dozen lifetimes, none of them easy. A too-big sweatshirt with Gators emblazoned in orange across the front and jeans with the knees out didn't do a lot to help the picture. She pushed lank, brown hair behind an ear and managed a half smile as she opened the door.

"Thanks," she said, but before Stone could respond, she reached around in a practiced move, unlocked the rear door on her side, and swung it open. Then she sat down on the seat and pulled a .25 automatic from under her sweatshirt and pointed it at Stone's face. "Freeze, asshole."

Her partner rose from where he had been lying in the bushes and sprinted the six steps to the rear door, a black pistol in his hand. He jumped in and slid all the way over behind Stone, the smell of stale sweat and cigarettes billowing in with him. "Put it in park, and keep both hands on the wheel," he ordered before turning to the woman. "I'll hold him while you get the rest of the stuff."

She nodded and slipped the .25 into her jeans. She was back in less than thirty seconds with two more tote bags that she tossed into the rear seat before slamming the door and climbing in beside Stone. She hit the button for the lock and pulled out the .25 again, holding it low in her lap. "Don't get any smart ideas, believe me; I will shoot you. Don't be fooled just because I'm a girl..." Stone had known a lot of girls, and whoever was sitting in his front seat was definitely not a girl. Girls watched Dora on TV and wore ribbons in their hair; they didn't point guns at people.

Her partner in the rear seat laughed and shifted his position toward the center, his gun carelessly close to Stone. "Yeah, man, don't do nothin' stupid. Carol here will shoot you and then eat a burrito while you bleed to death."

Stone glanced in the rearview. The man was around the same age, possibly a little younger than Carol. He wore a dirty polo shirt and had a red bandana tied around his head. He needed a haircut and was missing three teeth on the bottom. Stone moved his gaze back to the woman.

"What are you lookin' at?" she demanded, lifting the muzzle of the pistol an inch.

Stone shrugged. "Just wondering."

She started to say something else, but her partner broke in by prodding Stone in the back of the head with his pistol. "Not your job to wonder, buddy. Your job's to drive." He ran his hand over the seat. "Nice. This is the first one of these I've been in."

Stone slipped the Altima into drive. "Any particular place?"

Carol spoke up. "We'll let you know. For now, just head up on the interstate and keep going until I tell you."

"Sure," Stone said, accelerating up the ramp. He was soon doing a smooth sixty headed north.



Carol looked at her partner and indicated Stone with a slight motion of her head. He wasn't acting like some scared citizen with two guns pointed at him. The man in the back seat shrugged and sat back against the door while Carol dug around in her bag and fished out a pack of Marlboros. She shook out a cigarette with one hand and lit it.

They rode in silence for a few minutes before Stone spoke again. "You two been at this very long?"

"Long enough," Carol said.

Stone pushed the button to mute the CD. "I mean is this what you do for a living?"

Carol leaned back and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. "We do a little bit of everything. I strip a little, boost a little, hustle a little. Things got a little rough, so finally, me and Ernie, we decided jackin' cars was better than givin' twenty-dollar blow jobs. You never know what kind of pervert's gonna stop and want some action, you know?"

Stone nodded. "I bet. Which one of you was giving the blow jobs?"

Carol snorted and nearly choked on the smoke. Ernie sat up in the rear seat and prodded Stone's shoulder with the gun. "What's that supposed to mean, motherfucker? You think I'm a fag or something?" He glared at Carol, who was still snickering, then poked Stone again with the gun. He leaned over the seat and pressed the gun's muzzle into the side of Stone's neck, his breath sour. "I could make you do anything I want, smart guy, even blow me, so you just remember that the next time you think about bein' funny."

Stone let his left hand drop to his lap, the fingers grazing the Colt tucked inside his waistband. It would be so easy.

"Oh, relax, Ernie," Carol said. "You know damn well there's a lot of guys hustlin' on the street, and you never got all touchy about it before. What about J.C. and Jerry?" She took a drag off the Marlboro and smiled. "You tellin' me you wouldn't help out if things got rough?"

Ernie threw himself back against the rear seat. "Fuck you, Carol, and him. That kinda shit ain't funny."

Carol leaned toward Stone a little. "Ernie's a little sensitive about that sort of thing. He had some bad experiences in foster homes when he was a kid. There was this one guy over in Tampa—"

"Shut the fuck up, Carol," Ernie said from the shadows. "I'm not gonna tell you again. Let it go, or you'll be walkin' the rest of the way."

Stone watched Carol fight for control. She looked anorexic enough to be a crack head or a heroin junkie. In either case, she was definitely bad news with a gun and the more dangerous of the pair, but dumbass Ernie was clueless. They stared at each other until she relaxed and settled back against her door. Ernie took that for a surrender on her part and bumped Stone with the gun once more.

"Same goes for you, asshole. Any more shit comes outta your mouth, they're gonna find you on the side of the road with extra holes where they ain't supposed to be. You got that?"

Stone nodded. "Got it." He cut his eyes over at Carol and raised an eyebrow. She wrinkled her nose and kept smoking.

"Okay," Stone said, slowing a little as an SUV with Vermont plates passed him. "Jacking cars is a bigger payday than peddling your ass, but you ever think about the other end of things?"

"Like what?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, like what?" Ernie echoed from behind him.

"Like what happens when you two get busted? Since I'd guess that both of you know what the inside of a jail looks like, you'll get gun charges on top of the kidnapping and armed robbery, and in this state, you're looking at some serious time."

Ernie laughed. "We're too good, man. Cops are stupid, and there's no way they'll ever bust us. If you knew half of what we'd done already . . ." He laughed again.

Carol looked at Stone and then tossed her cigarette into the slipstream outside her window. "And why would you give a fuck about us and how much time we'll get anyway?"

Stone shrugged. "You're right, I don't. I just have a hard time understanding why people do stupid things."

Ernie sat up again in the rear seat. "That's fucking it. I've heard all I'm gonna hear from this cocksucker." He punched Stone in the back of the head with the pistol. "Pull the fuck over right now. I'm gonna put a bullet in your goddamn head and leave you for the fuckin' gators. We can find our own way to Atlanta from here. You think because you're some hotshot in a new Nissan that you can talk to people any old way you want, but I got news for you. You ain't real smart after all; you're fuckin' dead is what you are."

"Ernie," Carol said softly.

"And you shut the fuck up, you stupid cunt. I've heard about all I need out of—" He never finished it. Ernie had conveniently leaned over the front seat toward Carol, so it was an easy matter for her to bring up the .25 and shoot him just about dead center of the forehead. He dropped his pistol and slumped straight down on the floor behind the seat.

Stone put his finger in his ear and wiggled it. "That was a little loud."

Carol moved the gun quickly to cover him and stayed where she was. "Just keep driving," she told him, then glanced over the seat and sat back. "I've wanted to do that for a long time," she said. Then she picked up Ernie's pistol and tucked it between her leg and the seat. The .25 back was back in her lap and pointing at Stone before the Altima's climate control dissipated the smell of gunpowder. In response to Stone's look, she said, "Ernie was all right at first. I mean, he knew how to score dope and was a pretty good thief. He's been on the street since he was, like, thirteen, and was a survivor."

"Until now," Stone said.

She shrugged. "Yeah, until now, but Jesus, I got so tired of the same old shit. He was always whining about this or crying about that, and he got so he thought he was God or some fuckin' thing just because he had a dick. And no one, I mean no one calls me a cunt." She looked over the seat then back at Stone. "Doesn't look like much blood."

Before he could say anything, Carol lit another cigarette and stared at him. "Where'd you get the scar?"

He automatically traced the line from his right ear to a point just below his chin. "IED," he said.

"Huh?"

"A bomb."

Carol sat up a little straighter, her eyes bright. "No shit? A bomb, huh? Somebody tried to take you out with a bomb? You must have pissed them off big time."

Stone turned and smiled at her. "You could say that."

"How old are you anyway?"

"Thirty-six," Stone said. "How about you?"

"Nineteen last month." Carol thought for a minute. "Thirty-six, huh? I used to think that was old." She laughed. "Still do most days. My mom's boyfriend was about that when he started slipping into my bedroom at night to fuck me or make me blow him when she was on the nod, and he always had kind of an old smell. Know what I mean? Might have just been his clothes. He worked at a garage and didn't shower much."

"How old were you then?" Stone asked, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"Eleven," Carol said and gazed through the windshield as the first big drops of rain starred the glass. She tossed out her cigarette. "Guys are such pricks."

Stone nodded. "That's for sure."

Carol's head snapped around. "What'd you say?"

"I said that's for sure. Guys are pricks. You just learned the lesson younger than most."

Carol smiled again, and for the first time, it didn't hide anything. "What's your name?"

"Stone."

"Just Stone? That's it?"

"Just Stone."

"Well, Just Stone, I can't remember ever meeting a trick like you. Most guys I talk to are like Ernie back there: everything's always got to be about them and what they've got between their legs." She laughed a little then cocked her head and looked at him. "But you're the first I ever heard admit that you're all pricks." She eyed him carefully. "And then there's that other thing."

"What other thing?"

Carol smiled at him, and the caution was back. "Don't try to con me, Stone. I mean, I'm sittin' here with a gun pointed at you, and I shot Ernie a few miles back there, but you act like we're on the way to a concert or something. I've seen a lot of scared people, and you ain't scared. You goddamn sure oughta be, but you aren't, and I think that bothers me."

"Neither are you," Stone told her.

Carol laughed. "No shit, but I got the gun."

"You can have a gun and still be scared," Stone reminded her.

She was quiet for a few seconds, and then asked him, "If I get busted for shooting Ernie, you think I'll end up on death row down there in Broward?"

"Hard to tell," Stone told her. "Ernie's no loss, but neither are you when it comes down to it, so yeah, I'd bet on death row."

She thought that over for a minute. "That's what I thought. Like you said, Florida ain't nothin' nice when it comes to crime stuff, especially for people like me and Ernie."

"Which should tell you something."

Under a frown she asked, "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"If you're worried about what'll happen to you if you go around shooting people, then you're in the wrong business. People who care get married and have kids, go to work every day, and pay the bills. They worry if they're late with their cable payment or if the kid's got a cold."

"Like I could ever do any of that," she said.

Stone ignored it. "But if there's nobody else but you, that's when you gotta get over that part about giving a shit what happens to you. If you care what happens, then you're gonna end up making a lot of mistakes." He turned and winked at her.

"You gotta be the first person ever told me to stop giving a shit. Everybody else tells me I gotta care about me and nobody else to make it on the streets."

"Try it out sometime," Stone told her. "You might be surprised. Just make up you're mind you're not gonna give a good goddamn about anything any more and see how much easier things are."

She shook her head. "I don't know, but you're probably on to something. Nobody ever cared about me, not even my mom."

She watched the rain for a few seconds before looking back at him. "Is that what you do, Stone? You really don't care about anything, not even about you?"

He shrugged. "Most days. Some are easier than others."

She raised the gun a little. "What about today? What about right now?"

He nodded. "Today's a good day. No worries, no cares."

"That's what I was afraid of," Carol told him. She chewed her bottom lip for a few seconds, then came to a decision. "I'm real sorry about this, Stone. I mean, you've been good to talk to and all, but, hey, you just witnessed a murder. So why don't you find a place to pull over, maybe the next exit, and we'll figure out what to do about you."

"Nah," Stone told her. "I can think of something better, sort of show you what I've been talking about." He pushed the accelerator down until the Altima was doing eighty. They passed a sign telling them that the next exit was Tavares.

Carol leaned toward him and lifted the .25 until it was level with his temple. "I said pull over, Stone. You don't think I'll shoot you?"

Stone kept his eyes on the road as the speedometer climbed. "Sure, I believe you'll shoot me. You shot Ernie; he was your partner, and I don't mean a damned thing to you." He eased off the accelerator and took the off ramp at seventy, hit the access road, and then accelerated again past a sign warning about construction ahead.

Carol shifted in her seat, quickly glancing at the two-lane disappearing under the Altima's grill before turning back to Stone. She thumbed the hammer on the tiny pistol. "I mean it, motherfucker. Slow this goddamn thing down and pull over."

"Or what?" Stone asked her as the speedometer hit ninety. "You shoot me? Then the car crashes, and you might get killed yourself. Then again, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll get broken up so badly that all you can do is sit in a wheelchair and drool on yourself all through your trial. Then, after you're convicted of killing Ernie and me, you'll spend maybe ten years in a death-row cell watching Jerry Springer until they finally truck you up to Starke, strap you on a gurney, and pump enough poison in you to kill an elephant. And that's if the idiots don't fuck it up and take thirty minutes to do it." He shrugged. "So shoot me, or put that gun down and stop being stupid. I told you I've got a better idea, one that takes all the risk out of it."

Before Carol could ask what that was, Stone clipped a sawhorse blocking his lane, splintering the wood and sending fragments flying across the windshield. The right headlight went out, and Carol dropped the .25 and reflexively put her arms up in front of her face. Day-Glo signs with flashing amber lights zipped by on either side of the road. A mile in the distance was the new overpass that would eventually connect Tavares with the interstate. Stone took a deep breath and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

Carol picked up the gun, leaned across the seat, and held it six inches away from Stone's head. "Last chance, Stone. I'm not playing."

Stone grinned at her. "And neither am I."

The Altima ate up the distance to the bridge abutment in thirty seconds. Stone cut his eyes once more at Carol. "Don't worry about a thing," he told her in a soft voice. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Well, shit," Carol said and shot him in the head just as the bridge filled the windshield faster than she would have thought possible.



**Susan Nagelsen** is Professor of Special Education at New England College and Director of the Writing Program, associate editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisoners*, and editor of *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery* (New England College Press, 2008). Her work has also appeared in *Entlechy*.

**Charles Huckelbury** has served thirty-four consecutive years in prison and is currently incarcerated at the New Hampshire State Prison in Concord, New Hampshire. He is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and the winner of four PEN American awards for both fiction and nonfiction.

# Asphyxia by John Corley

I can't remember the dead man's name, though I took pleasure in calling it moments before I pulled the trigger. I watched his life end, he, fallen in the wilted grass under a July sun, shirtless, pale and pot bellied, the body resigned in its throes, gasping, eyes glassed under half-closed lids. It was a sickening spectacle.

Death repulses me. I've been its angel, but it repulses me.

Come, they said, it's time. Time. Time clicked off the wall like a cocaine heartbeat while I waited, while I tried to remember his name. Not that it mattered. Details like that have never mattered. I don't register the small stuff, only concepts. A man is dead-that's my memory. The image, the fleshy carcass, that's in there, too. But no name, and no reason for what I did except I had to do it. My mind doesn't record the small stuff.

That last walk is a doozy. They come, smug, stony bastards, trained to hold eye contact to prove they're not ashamed of killing me, they're doing what the State decreed, they're agents on a sacred mission and they are not intimidated nor will they falter. Come, they glared and said, it's time.

The man gagged when the bullet hit. Coughed a gob of blood then crumpled in a heap. He couldn't believe that his life would end with a hoe in his hand and fresh-turned earth beneath his flowers-I don't know what kind of flowers. Don't care. Concepts, right?

"It's best you go peaceably," the warden told me that last night, because his boys would either escort me or drag me to the table, depending on how I wanted to do it. The warden said it was time to get right with Jesus 'cause I'd be seeing him soon. I told the warden to bite my ass. He didn't like that.

Last meal-they gotta give you that. Don't matter what you order, they'll send to all comers of the globe to fill that request. It's the only time in my life I felt important, a star on the red carpet, when I handed over my list and the guard said, "We'll take care of it for you, Mr. Laforce." Mr. Laforce. Mister.

"We'll come for you a half hour before sunset," the warden said. "Walk or be carried-for God's sake give yourself the dignity to walk on your own two feet like a man. Don't give us any trouble, you hear? Ain't no way around it. We'll have you trussed up real good and they's ten of us to lead you out. You're goin' on home, Isaac. Be a man about it."

Actually, it was good to be going somewhere for a change. I'll tell you, nothing you can imagine is more horrible than watching that big ass clock tick off the seconds down to the last week, the last day, the last hour. I cursed that clock so many times I know it'll bum in hell beside me. Every click was a breath sucked out of me, and it hurt.

"We'll walk you from here through the visiting room-empty, of course; you won't see anyone not assigned to the team-and through the big steel door. That leads to the room, Isaac. You know the gurney's in there. We got people who's gonna strap you down, and then the doc's gonna put the needles in. I'll be right there."

You expect me to go easy? Me? One crack and I slip. The warden described the drugs and how and how long they would take to do me in but I was thinking about a girl, Nettie, burnt out at twenty-five with a daughter she never saw and a job she hated in a sleazy juke joint. She lived on the backside of Plainview, the boonies, in her dead parents' farmhouse on a couple acres of clear-cut timber land. She'd fought and beat cancer, hepatitis and three marriages, and once spent a six-month hitch in jail for hot checks. She was an alcoholic. I'd known her since we were eleven.

When I had no place to go and nothing to my name, Nettie put me up. She got me a job handing out beers and cleaning up the joint. It was a real shithole way to make a living, but it was cash money and a roof over my head until I could get on my feet.

She picked me up at a phone booth on the outskirts of Leesville in a ragged Toyota that smelled like Saturday night at the Stinkfinger Saloon. I was drunk, dirt broke, some soldier boys had beat hell out of me, and it was storming. I gave her a peck on the lips that made me cringe. No telling where those lips had been.

We didn't talk for a long time. Finally, when we turned off the highway at Hornbeck, Nettie fired up a smoke and said, "You look good." I tried to laugh but my face hurt.

How do I look now, Nettie?

"I ain't wearin' no diaper," I said when they came for me. "I ain't goin' out like that." They were grim-faced gargoyles in blue and tin, and they didn't sweat it. It was dark in the corridor, death in the air. It was time. Chains rattled and a preacher prayed and the clock tick-tocked so loud I thought it would explode.

When was it-when did I make my move? When they opened the cell to chain me up? When we passed by a door that should've been closed? I don't remember the small stuff, only the concept, and this is the concept of escape, the condemned man sprinting like a scared Kenyan, their crashing calamity behind me ignored. "Come back here!" they shouted. Like I would stop and say, "Okay, sure, I'll come back so you can KILL me!" I ran.

Ran and ran. Across the prison grounds. Up fences and through razor wire.

They were shooting. I was sweat-soaked, my eyes stinging so that I could barely see but I ran like prey on the open plain, like I hadn't run since I was a kid in the field and the big jets flew low and screaming and scaring the shit out of me, hurling me at top speed for the safety of the trees or the old potato house.

I ran like that now, unable to stop because they were coming and I was terrified, not so much of them as of the long cold sleep. I wasn't ready for it. Too young, too much left to do. I ran.

The bloodhounds were out. They're trained not to bark so I won't know how close they are. But I know. The dogs are always close. Let them come me; I'll rip their jaws apart. This is life or death and no four-legged fuck's gonna pin me.

They got civilians in the mix, too, the locals who hang loaded shotguns over the mantle and lean them behind the door and chomp at the bit to gun down some poor bastard who decided he wasn't ready to waste away in their cage. Fucking farmers in overalls, their cheeks tobacco-pooched, their redneck baseball caps with bowed visors, out for a hunt in the hills. Let them come near me; I'll shove those shotguns so far up their asses they'll need false teeth.

I'm really not this violent, except when I am.

Strap me to a gurney, ha! I been sitting in that cell six years, staring at those silver slivers, listening to the lawyers' crap and the warden's crap and the inmate preachers' crap, and you expect me to just get up and go die? You killed me a long time ago with that damned clock. You only get once.

On I ran, hours, days, weeks, everything rushed past blurred, wrapped and writhed like shadow snakes in my brain. I outran them all. Outran the dogs, the clods who followed, the helicopters, radios, civilians. The State Police and the goddamned National Guard. Out ran the snakes and shadows, a boxer-clad shoeless guy.

Funny how these things happen. Sometimes you just can't explain them. Sometimes you gotta take at face value what comes up and roll with it because trying to make sense of it will short out your synapses and leave you standing in a pool of piss and drool so they can cart you off to the white room.

I ran without thinking. I ran for my life, my life, mine. The woods were terrible. Deep valleys and steep hills and thickets that shredded my flesh; my feet were bloody flaps. There were moccasins in the swamps, and gators, big,

fat, cold-eyed bastards lying on stinking black logs in the muck, waiting for me to misstep or bog. Waiting for an easy meal. Not me, you son of a bitch. I'm not ready for your table.

There were monsters in the swamp. Ghosts, the nameless shirtless man peeking from behind cypress trunks, leering in the slime, snickering quietly while I fought through a parade of demons I thought I'd slain long ago, victims, indiscretions, betrayals and stolen hopes. Ah, they come back, and always at the most inopportune time. Time.

Mosquitoes fat as honey-fed sparrows and strange, buzzing, black bugs swarmed around me, sank their fangs into my veins. Slithering things wrapped around low-hanging limbs cast Medusa silhouettes against the murk. The fetid water was alive, gauging me as the sun blinked out and all was dark as death.

No rest. I ran. Doesn't matter if you're bloody or dehydrated or snakebit or if you step in a gator's mouth when the chase team's on your tail. Better to die in the wild like a man than on display on a table before your enemies at the hands of strangers.

Oh, those damned bastards. I hate them. I hate them all.

I was still running when I fell asleep. I dreamed I was twelve and on my route. It was my first job and I got twenty bucks a week. My partner said I was the highest paid helper on the circuit. His name was Harmie, a happy, redheaded fellow with a glass eye and false teeth he kept in his shirt pocket. It was yesterday, I was a kid in the city and no one hated me.

Harmie'd park his Jap wagon in the street and blow the horn Saturdays and Sundays before sunrise and I'd stumble sleepy-eyed from the house. He'd drive to the Times depot under a downtown bridge, where they'd load the truck with newspapers. I loved the smell of fresh ink and paper. We drove north to Blanchard.

I'd fold and band the papers and stack them on the seat next to Harmie, who'd sling them out the window as he puttered along. The cab was cluttered with a paper man's debris, rubber bands and shavings, coffee cups and ticket pads. A rack of polyethylene sheathes were hooked to my window latch; when it rained I slipped my trifold into a sheath so the paper would stay nice and dry for the Blanchardans.

We'd stop by the Kansas City Southern depot. He'd have coffee and I'd have hot chocolate, and my stomach would chum and rumble but I'd grin and hold it in because I was scared to shit in a strange place. I can still taste the thick richness from the steaming ceramic, and the railroad cafe was for workers with heavy boots and calloused hands who reeked of diesel and loneliness.

I never saw the people whose papers we delivered. They were phantoms, though I knew their houses and the neighborhoods, I knew their names and the cars they drove, I knew who lived like they had money and who didn't, or didn't. Harmie and I moved through a netherscape where everyone slept; they didn't exist and we paper men were patrollers of a dark, dead dimension.

Harmie crashed his truck into the back of a U.S. Army personnel transport vehicle on the other side of KCS two months after I went back to school. He died in the road with ink on his fingers and twenty-seven rubber bands around his wrist.

I was still running when I awoke.

I was still running when the path narrowed under a canopy of pines and muscadine-draped pin oaks beside a shallow creek. Sunlight filtered kaleidoscopic. My pursuers were coming, but they were far away. I had time to stop and think. Time to breathe. Time.



An opening, and there a farm, familiar but forgotten. Damn my memory! I crouched in the shade and saw no movement, summoned my heart and slipped from the woods and crept half-slumped, like a primitive, like Bigfoot, through a pasture, soft, sleek, knee-high coastal Bermuda undulating, waving me forward toward the quaint little cabin across a rough gravel road.

I was never more alert. I knew they were coming. The air was perfumed with long lost scents, wild honeysuckle and creosote, summer lilies and tomato blooms, deep green, sun, love and security. Was it springtime already? I couldn't remember. A crude fence ringed the lot, five strands of rusty barbed wire against aged hewn pine and a few store-bought posts overcome in places by purple-dotted blackberry bushes, slender-stemmed Johnson grass and bulbous-headed thorn thistles. A crab apple tree shaded a wide, battered aluminum gate hanging half off its hinges, held closed with frayed hay string.

There were no cattle milling about. No biscuit-hungry mutts barked. I was sweating. There were no bees, no jays in the blackberries.

Through the gate to my left a rickety, paint-stripped, plank and timber car and tool shed harbored a rusty red Cub tractor from a bygone era, its forward lights blinded now, blinded forever. Time-eaten implements, plows, broken brush hooks, a termite riddled wood-handled cross-cut saw in the rafters. The smell of burned motor oil. A row of antique bottles, Garrett snuff and RC Cola, empty masonjars. Of course.

"Of course." I began to laugh. "Of course!" I cried, and the echo from down the hill where the creek ran slow and cold mocked me. Of course I was here-where else? Where else would I be? Should I be? Of all places on this damnable earth, where else would I run to? I knelt and scooped red dirt from the road, took a deep whiff and watched it pour through my fingers, its coppery dust waft away on the breeze and I laughed aloud.

There was another field behind the shed. A slate-faced pond below a long abandoned log house filled, I knew, with time's detritus. I knew; I'd been there, explored the tiny musty rooms, climbed over the dirt-daubers' chest of drawers, years-old hay straw littering the rotting floor, mice here, a chicken snake there. Odd to see that little shack, considering my brother and I burned it to ashes in 1978.

A lone cedar rose up from hard-packed clay outside the cheap wire fence surrounding the house. This is where the kinfolk parked their dust-coated cars, under the tree, on Sunday mornings. I felt summer again, the sun beating me, and the flower beds inside the fence were drained as I was. My journey had been long. I was moving on adrenaline and sleep was beginning to whisper.

Up the creaky stairs between berry bushes-don't ask because I know them only as berry bushes that produce little red berries my grandma said will kill you dead if you eat them but they're quite colorful in the green. The porch was small, tongue-in-groove and painted blue-gray. There's a throw rug in front of the door, a cowhide rocker, a swing hanging from the ceiling. There's a bare, hundred-watt bulb up there, too, woven into gnat-laden webs. The breeze has died. Nothing moves. I step inside.

Pine, dust, Dr. Tichner's and Nozema. Juicy Fruit and coffee. Age. Time. Mix them together and this is what I smelled, and I wept. The red brick fireplace much smaller than I remembered, a dark hole behind a dark screen. The mantle above, family photos in dollar store frames ;my dad at 17,my aunts and uncles when they were easy on the eyes. The old clock with its dark brass pendulum behind the glass, chiming on the quarter hour, raising hell on the hour. A can of Prince Albert, a box of Red Ball matches.

When I ran from death, I ran all the way to Bizzarroland.

The kitchen was bacon and catheads, the minerally well water and ever-present Seaport coffee-I'd forgotten the brand. I'd forgotten the tiny webs in the window screens, the spring on the back door that slammed it with a startling clap. I'd forgotten the hubcaps for dog bowls out back, the sprinkling mimosa tree.

There was no one in the house. No one in the kitchen. No one sitting under the mimosa, cranking the ice cream bucket. No one--chasing me, slinking through my woods, my turf, my sanctum sanctorum.

It's as it always was in the cell; even in my dreams no matter how peaceful my slumber always reality's subliminal gravity tugging me down, down, down. Never a fucking moment free of the shadow of those bars, the thunder of that damned clock- always it was there, time, chiding, time running out, watchers in dark rooms, memories clouded by more serious concerns like LNING. Here in this sacred place time followed me, corrupted the very soul of me, and I grew angry.

A pissy little convict preacher asked me one time if I was angry with myself for my crime, for disappointing my family and causing them so much grief. "Does it make you mad, Isaac? Doncha wish you could take it all back?"

I said "It makes me mad that I can't reach you so I can pull your fat ass through these bars and beat you to death with that fuckin' Bible." Like I should apologize. Why? Will my remorse alter my present condition? Will all the emotion I can muster change the past?

What makes me mad is, I got caught. I don't regret killing, I regret paying for it. And believe me, I've paid. Years under pressure, losing everything, losing my way.

But here I was. Through the crisp, low-cropped carpet, past the barn, scary haven for spiders and reptiles, looking for my way. The place was a figment, empty of life, a mere wax model of molded memories. I stepped around the propane tank, picked up a pecan. I heard a sound from the pasture behind the barn.

In the distance a siren in a flowing glow, sun-tinted hair teased by the renewed breeze, her face cloaked yet I knew it could turn them to stone. She danced on a cypress stump in the slope where I used to play, and she sang a woeful song that drew me to her even as my gut warned against it.

Yes, from some burial ground inside me, memories; the closer I got the brighter they burned. She used to tell me about Galveston and the good old days when she waited tables and cleaned rooms in the great Galvez Hotel as a young lady. From the moment I saw the muddy sea I thought of her and wondered if I was tracing her steps along the seawall, admiring the same briny scent of the Gulf shore and the music of the waves over the gray sand.

It isn't the cleanest stretch of coastline, and it's a ways from bayou country, and there's a somber desolation to the surrounding mainland and southern drives. But the island itself seems alive with her presence. I've felt, really felt her there, in the little shell shops on the piers jutting into the bay. Caught her perfume on the Gulf wind at midnight. Heard her song in a corner of an alley with a gun in my hand.

When Hurricane Rita was cutting a swath for Galveston I was watching from my death row cell with a heavy heart. I'd seen Katrina's catastrophic destruction from Louisiana to Alabama on CNN, and I couldn't stomach the thought of Galveston suffering the same fate. I was relieved when the storm turned northeast and crashed into my own state. Funny, the things one finds meaningful when death is imminent.

There was a time I thought I might live in Galveston, but those were days of confused priorities. Lots of booze and drugs to paint surreal portraits with sins and shortcomings. Maybe when the dogs are gone and the people stop looking I'll go back because once upon a time someone dear to me inhaled that salty sea air and dreamed her dreams of youth and carried her memories all the way to a future time to share with a boy who'll remember both her and that Texas island she once called home.

No concept here. I've not forgotten. I won't ever.

Oh Mother, look what they've done to me. Don't you remember when we waltzed with JFK? Look what I've become. From the tiny thing to the hunted haunted horror. Running and hiding and will you still take me?

She knew I was there but she didn't look at me. She sang to the trees, to the wind, to the spirits that inhabit the wild, like a Wiccan, or a Druid. She was waiting.

I won't apologize and I don't want your forgiveness. My debt is paid. They can come for me if they want but my debt is paid and I won't give them anything more. If they try to take me here, she'll stop them. She's waiting. She always has been. Always the only one.

There was dew in the grass but I let the grass swallow me. I'd run so far, so tired, so weary. For the first time in a long time I felt safe. Stop them, Mother, when they come for me. Bite their heads off. I'm not ready. Not ready to go even if it is time. Time.

I can't remember the dead man's name. It's sunset slowly. Somewhere-is it the clock on the mantle? The thunder and the eyes of my sins sear me-Oh, sweet sleep and when I awake maybe the beating will have stopped. Maybe I can go on then, may...



**John Corley** writes for the *Angolite*, a magazine published by Angola Prison in Louisiana. His work "Life in Four Parts" was accepted for publication in *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery*. New England College Press (2008).

# Begging to Get Into Prison by Raymond Edward Williams

On a warm spring evening in the southern Arizona desert south of Tucson, my friend Ron and I found ourselves standing outside the gate to the Echo unit of the Arizona State Prison. It was shortly after ten PM and we were trying to get into our unit of the prison. That's where we belonged; where our beds awaited our return.

Only one problem. We were on the wrong side of the fence and there was no one waiting to let us in. There should have been, there would have been, if everything had gone right, but things had been going wrong all day. It was late and Ron and I were ready to beg to get back inside. We were afraid someone might accuse us of attempting to escape.

Let me tell you how this all came to pass. At that time, 1995, the prison offered some college level classes, usually taught at night. These classes often required as much or more studying and homework than those offered in brick and mortar schools. Also, the prison required that all inmates work at some prison job.

I drove one of the busses that took visitors and guards from the main complex gate to the various units within big fences. It wasn't hard, as prison jobs go, but the hours were longer than most. Each shift was a full eight hours, with time to eat only when I could find it. I usually worked second shift. With the time I spent in the library studying, it made for a very full day.

The night before I had pulled a double shift, and it was well after breakfast before I got back on the yard and into my bed for some well needed sleep. Shortly before five in the afternoon I made my way into the Echo unit dining hall for dinner. I didn't usually wait until the last minute to go to chow, but I had been working on a school assignment, and lost track of time. That's not a hard thing to do in prison. I could sleep away hours, even days, without realizing I had done it. Or I could stay busy and make the hours pass by even faster.

I had thought about skipping dinner, which was supposed to be chicken. We joked about it really being pigeon, but it is one of the few meals where we actually got something that could be identified as real meat. Just my luck, they

ran out of chicken and I had to settle for a double-cheese soybean burger, a large serving of fries, and an extra portion of Jello.

That night my class was sophomore level Abnormal Psychology. The teacher was a local, internationally known Freudian Psychoanalyst. I had already completed twenty credit hours of psychology just so I could get into his class. I planned to ask the professor what he thought of the idea that I might have offended because I was "Begging To Get Into Prison." A psychiatrist I was seeing before my trial suggested I had offended so as to avoid going back to Texas to take care of my aged, ailing father. That wasn't a place I was yet prepared to look.

After dinner, I gathered my school books, notes, completed essay assignment, and reported to the gate to wait for the unit transportation officer, whom we called Cowboy, to arrive.

Waiting was another way to pass time in prison. Waiting for count to clear so I could go outside where, in Echo, my minimum security unit, there could be a relative sense of freedom. There was waiting in line for meals, in line for the doctor, and in line for mail, (which didn't come often enough to alleviate the urgent thirst for news from the outside.) Then there was waiting for the day when I would find myself going out the gate returning to a family I no longer knew, and to a world that no longer seemed real.

My friend and fellow student, Ron, was already at the gate. He was sitting on the gravel, with a book open on one knee trying to write on a pad balanced on the other, his assignment only partially completed. Cowboy was so late that Ron was almost finished.

Echo was a minimum security unit located outside the complex perimeter fences, where, for a time, some of the rules were not strictly enforced. In other units we would have been strip searched and then handcuffed. That night we walked as free men out the gate with Cowboy, but not before a female guard patted us down.

Just out of the academy, it was her first evening on the job. She started at my ankles instead of my shoulders like she was supposed to. When she reached my crotch I cleared the ground about six inches. She apologized and turned to pat down Ron. She asked him to take the cigarette lighter out of his pocket. Poor Ron blushed and politely informed her it was not a cigarette lighter.

Cowboy was still laughing as we crossed the road to where the official vehicles were parked, next to the garbage bins. Large ravens, maybe my next chicken dinner, flew off as we approached the pickup truck, whose doors should have been locked. We climbed into a three year old Ford F150 without mentioning the security breach. The truck smelled of hay and manure. Cowboy got part of his nickname because he also worked with the horses used by the chain gang guards. The chain gangs cleaned the right-of-way along the highways. He rode better than the gut fat guards, but did not like the duty.

A short drive from Echo brought us to the locked, unmanned, main gate of the Tucson Complex. Cowboy radioed the complex control office for someone to let us in.

"Ten-four,(okay) I'm Ten-nineteen (in route) to Forty-five (meet you) your Twenty (at your location)," Came the reply.

For a leisurely fifteen minutes we listened to old country-western no-body-loves-me songs on the truck radio. The outside perimeter patrol officer drove up in his new Dodge Ram pickup wanting to know what we were doing there. No one had informed him of any students from Echo going to classes inside the complex. Not that we hadn't been doing so three nights a week for the past five weeks. He wanted to see our paperwork, but before we could comply, another car arrived on the inside. The sally-port control office entered the gate shack and motioned us to drive up to the sally port. The gate slid open to admit us, leaving the frustrated perimeter patrol office standing outside.

For those not familiar with the vehicle entrances to prisons, a sally port is a fenced in enclosure with two gates, only one of which can be opened at any one time; like a river lock. All vehicles, whether they are official cars, trucks

loaded with food, a bus full of inmates, or the garbage truck, must pass through this miniature prison within the prison fences. Identification of officers and inmates alike are checked and recorded.

The sally port control officer searched our vehicle inside and outside. He even looked under the hood to be sure no unauthorized person was being secreted into the prison complex. I'm not sure how anyone could hide himself under a car, or conceal himself atop an engine, but I am told it has been done.

The Tucson prison complex consisted of six separate units, each with its own set of double fences. Once we were inside the complex perimeter fence we still had a long drive to reach the Cimarron unit. I had been driving those roads around and around five nights a week, taking guards and visitors to and from the main entrance to the various units.

My first night on the job an officer offered me a five dollar bill -- ten hours pay -- to go directly from the main entry to the Cimarron Unit without stopping at the other units on the way. When I declined, he offered to pepper spray me. There was always one officer who would try to see how far he could push a new driver. We lost lots of drivers that way.

After zig-zagging through the warehouses and food factory buildings, we passed the Rincon unit where I began my incarceration five years ago. It was a low maximum security unit, where we were locked down 20 and 7 in two-man cells, with two hours of outdoor recreation twice a day. Unless you liked to read, workout on the cell floor, or were addicted to soap operas, there was little to do there but wait.

Next we passed the new Winchester unit where, the last I had heard the inmates were still waiting for their mandatory drug and alcohol recovery program to begin. DOC was waiting for enough inmates to volunteer to go there. Inmates don't volunteer for anything! (They also don't do a very good job of building prisons for themselves. I found that out when I helped run the cables for the TV system from the Hub to Winchester.)

At the end of the road, at the Cimarron unit, Ron and I joined four other inmates who are already waiting in the visitation room. They were upset, but not at us. The guard who was to let us in had been delayed. So, even though class had already started, we had to wait for the mandatory strip search. We all shuffled toward the far end of the room, toward an inmate restroom, and a door providing access to the yard and classrooms. I needed to make a quick stop. As I opened the restroom door a guard stepped out pushing the end of a calving glove up his arm.

"Next!" he said loudly.

I found myself in the middle of the group backing away. I've gone through as many as seven strip searches a day, but not once has any of them included a body cavity search, except for the mouth and ears. Nor was I in any mood to face, or rather bend over and crack a smile, for a guard wearing that kind of glove! I've delivered more than one difficult calf, and am well acquainted with the glove and its intended use.

"Gottacha," the guard yelled and then laughed as he pointed at Ron. "I told you when you left here that someday I'd get you."

It took another minute for us to realize we had all been had. Somehow it didn't seem funny to anyone except Ron who had managed to pull a practical joke on this good natured guard some six or seven years before. Well, at least it got us into class that night without a strip search.

Our teacher, the psychiatrist, was busy trying to get a stubborn video machine to cooperate. (Perhaps it was in denial of its true purpose in life.) A very few minutes later he had the VCR and TV working together. It was an interesting video about the history of the old snakepit asylums and the modern use of psychoactive drugs. More than one of us was already familiar with such drugs from our own experiments on the street, and possibly in prison too.

Half-way through the class period our friendly guard, sans glove, came in to announce that the unit was being locked down for a special count. This was the kind of thing they did when they couldn't find someone who was probably already where he belonged. The men from Cimarron were herded back to their cells, while the remainder of us were escorted back to the visitation area for a strip search that could not be avoided. Almost immediately the four inmates from Santa Rita were picked up by their unit bus, leaving the two of us from Echo to sit and wait.

By then it was already dark and the only light in the visitation room came from an array of tempting ads on vending machines; for which we had no quarters. Waiting there reminded me I was still waiting for my first visit. My family lived in another state and I would have wait an eternity before they would come to visit. Even if it occurred to them to visit me. So there I was, sitting in that large visitation room, empty of all but the lingering ghosts of visitors, and wondering what it would be like when the lady from a church fulfilled her promise to come visit me. Around me I sensed the images of inmates talking quietly with loved ones, stealing a kiss when the guards weren't looking -- young children playing on the floor -- families sharing sandwiches, sodas, or maybe a pizza from the vending machines.

Normally, someone from Echo unit would have come to pick us up as soon as the lock-down was called. It was nine-thirty before I stopped contemplating the room's ghosts long enough to realize they were very late.

This was a complex-wide lockdown and the Echo guards were doing counts. Or maybe one of them was sitting in the pickup truck at the sally port waiting to get in. Either way, I had nothing more to do than to look out the large windows at the lights from the other units.

It was amazing how much I could see through that expanse of glass. For the previous five years my view of the outside world had been limited to a four inch wide, three foot high window. Back then I was yet to appreciate the expanded view I enjoyed at Echo where I could go outside and look across at the desert. Even so, I didn't see real shapes, only blurs of green and brown. The real world had no more shape for me than the ghosts I was seeing.

I could no longer see the tall fences or the gleaming points on the rows of coiled razor wire around Cimarron. I could only see the narrow road and wide spaces between the prison units. Waiting in a room meant for the general public, a room that bore little resemblance to the rest of the prison, I could almost convince myself I was in a bus station waiting for the bus that would take me far from the reality of prison, back into the fantasy of real life.

At about ten o'clock a Cimarron guard, who had just come on duty, sauntered into the visitation room to get a cold soda. At first he didn't see the two of us sitting quietly at a table.

"I'll take one of those," I said.

"What !" the guard turned, at first surprised then angry, "what are you doing here?" he asked.

No matter the reason, at that hour it was going to mean more paper work for him. I explained our situation. He looked out the window at the empty road as if hoping he could make a truck from Echo appear.

"Okay, I'll get a truck and take you back to Echo myself."

I didn't see how that was going to reduce his paperwork. In fact, it is strictly against the rules. He should have called Echo unit and ask them to come get us. He didn't seem to be mad, but neither did he seem to be in any mood for me to point this out to him.

The trip back through the complex was made 'at speed' with the truck bouncing over short cuts across the expanse of raw desert between the units. Someone must have called ahead because the sally port was open on both ends. Something I didn't think they could do. We went through with no delay, not even a cursory check under the hood or a look at our ID's. As we passed the guard shack I saw someone tearing up what looked like a log page which should

have had our names on it. There was now no record of our having even been inside the complex. We drove around to the Echo gate, hardly keeping all four tires on the pavement.

No one was there to meet us. We waited. After ten tense minutes I could see the Cimarron guard was getting anxious. Probably because the guard at the sally-port was waiting to let him back in.

"Look," he said in a whisper, "you guys wait here until you can get someone to let you in. I've got to get back to my post."

We got out of the truck, somewhat astonished, and watched him drive away. Here we were, two inmates, standing outside the prison fence at ten P.M. with nothing between ourselves and Tucson but sage brush and coyotes. As I looked around I could see a glow to the north from the big truck stop on the freeway. From there a person might have a chance for a ride, providing the driver hasn't seen, or is willing to ignore, the signs prohibiting the picking up of hitchhikers.

"We could walk away and no one would notice until morning." I remarked to Ron. "After all, we are on the 'out count' so no one is expecting to find us in our beds or, for sure not standing around outside the gate, begging to get back inside."

Ron smiled and looked at the glow from the lights of Tucson. "My girlfriend and I used to spend evenings like this sitting in my car at our local taco stand," he said. "We might have time to slip into Tucson, maybe meet some women, have a late meal, maybe a couple drinks. We could still get back before anyone comes to let us in."

I looked at Ron, hoping we were both kidding.

"You get to ask the professor about your begging to get into prison?" he asked.

"Yeah, I've got to write an essay about my thoughts on the subject. Maybe I will include some stories about others who have done things that got them sent to prison, or back to prison.

"I remember a guy who escaped into Tucson," I reflected aloud. "He made two critical mistakes. The first was calling his girlfriend. They had a tap on her phone. The second was placing the call from a pay phone outside a convenience market wearing nothing but his boxer shorts. Why he shed his prison blue jeans and tee shirt I don't know. They certainly were not marked like our current orange clothes are. Two policemen passing by in a patrol car got suspicious and were just turning into the parking lot when they got a call about an escaped inmate using the phone."

"He's not the only one," offered Ron "there was the guy who made his escape to Phoenix. He avoided calling anyone he knew. Then one night, after about four months, he went into a convenience store and shoplifted a carton of cigarettes. Two policemen coming in for coffee nabbed him as he tried to exit. When they patted him down they were surprised to find a prison ID and forty dollars in his pocket. So why did he steal the cigarettes? And why did he keep his prison ID in his wallet"?

I couldn't think of a good reply that didn't include the word "begging."

One thing was for sure, I reflected to myself, those men got an additional two to five years to sit and wait, and they didn't do it in a minimum unit. That thought was enough to cause me to forget about the distance to Tucson or the Mexican border. What worried me the most was that it was just possible the guard who came to let us in might be the kind who would use our situation as an opportunity to say we had tried to escape. Who's to say otherwise? The truck and guard were back at Cimarron by then. Maybe we got scared and came back. My insecurity level was accelerating. I felt the need to be on the other side of the fence, inside where I could feel safe and secure.

A sound caused me to turn away from the fence, expecting to see the perimeter patrol. Instead, I spotted a coyote a couple dozen yards away. She had her head cocked to one side, as if wondering what we were doing on her side of the fence. I wondered if she had spotted the rabbit huddling by the fence, closer to her than to me. The rabbit looked as if it might be considering the safety of a life in prison. It suddenly ducked under the fence leaving tracks to confuse the sleepy perimeter patrol guard. The coyote gave a yelp and four pups joined her to trot off toward the sagebrush where more yelps told of a pack hunting rabbits.

I was tempted to follow her just to see what she might teach me about her world. The freedom she knew - hunger, death, and survival in the bright moonlight. Had she become so dependent on the sandwiches left by the guards that she could no longer survive without help? How about me, what kind of help would I eventually need to survive on the outside? I asked myself, if I follow her, might we wander into a society that wanted neither of us in their neighborhoods? I then thought about another kind of dog, tracking another kind of rabbit - me.

After more than half an hour, I finally saw a guard coming along on the inside of the fence, head down. He was looking at the sand trap for footprints, dragging a rake to wipe out his own.

"CO," I said softly.

He jumped back.

"Could you open the gate and let us in?" I finished.

"What are you doing out there?" he growled, sounding like he wasn't ready to believe anything we would say.

"You two stay put. Don't wander off." He barked as he walked off mumbling something about not having the keys.

It was fully eleven o'clock before a sergeant showed up to let us in. Even then she wouldn't open the gate. She used to be an lieutenant. That was before a riot at another unit, where in a panic, she threw down the shotgun she was carrying and ran. The department busted her back to sergeant, then sent her back to the academy for retraining. They put her on third shift at Echo because it was a calm, laid back unit, especially at night. Today was her first night back and she wanted to be certain of our story and our identities. At first she wanted to know the name of the guard who dropped us off, then decided she didn't want to know. I was beginning to think we are going to have to beg to get back into the prison.

I knew we were in for a thorough strip search. There was no other way of finding out what kind of guns, knives, drugs, or other contraband we might have picked up.

Finally the sergeant opened the gate. "Get to your houses and go to bed. No showers," She said as she walked off mumbling about more paperwork. She was shaking. The gate was still open. Ron closed and locked it.

I had no doubt that sometime the next day I would be summoned to the captain's office to retell my story about the night's events. That was pointless. More than one officer had decided that the paperwork needed to explain how two inmates had to beg to get back into prison was just too much. There was no paper trail to confirm my story.

No one, especially me, wants to be in prison. But I have met men who had no place to go when released, or who had become so acclimated to prison life that, in the end, they did something to get themselves sent back.

I remember Ron telling me about his return to prison. As the car carrying him back to prison passed through the gates, an officer in the front seat turned to him and said, "Guess you won't have any trouble finding your way around."

Before he thought about it Ron had replied, "No, it's good to be home."





Raymond Edward Williams' published works include "A Weekend with the Inmate Plumber," published in *Crime and Punishment: Inside Views* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

# The Bird Man of Van Zee by Yvette M. Louisell

For as long as I can remember, I've had a secret life. It started not with make-believe fairy princesses and talking animals who sat with me for tea, but with real stuff. Adult stuff. For example, when I was nine, I used to meet Joe Brady every day after school. Joe was in the seventh grade, while I was only in the fourth. Still, he was basically my boyfriend. We'd make out hidden in the brightly painted cement-block tubes that lined our school's playground. I'd let him kiss and grope on me until I had to get on the city bus and go home, mostly because he seemed so excited about it.

I also shoplifted from the corner market whenever I wanted candy, since it wasn't allowed in my house. That is, until I got caught and was banned from the store for life in exchange for the owner not telling my dad. I was fingerprinted and had to write down my full name and address on a form like any other criminal, but I convinced the store owner that my father would beat me if he found out. I wasn't lying, but I have to admit that I made myself cry extra hard for effect.

At home, I spent hours in the basement inhaling the musty aroma of my Uncle Jim's marijuana plants, their rich green stems stretching lazily under purple grow lights. I liked the way my arms looked under the dusky glow, and sometimes I'd take a small mirror with me to see how my face looked with the purple reflecting off of it. Then, when I tired of that, I'd hide behind Jim's stacks of old girly magazines, masturbating to classic editions of *Hustler* and *Playboy*. The fact that I was a girl looking at other girls didn't bother me, but I somehow knew that it wouldn't be good if I got caught.

After I started sixth grade, my dad and I moved into our own house and I started at a new school. These changes didn't keep me from having a hidden life or from roaming my old neighborhood, though. There were only about five blocks between the new house and the one we'd shared with my Uncle Jim, so I'd walk back to my old neighborhood whenever I felt like it. Usually, I'd take the train tracks instead of the sidewalk, even though I'd been told to stay away from them. I'd visit Jim and Sally, my uncle's long-time girlfriend who wouldn't marry him but ended up tying the knot with my Uncle Ken. Or, if they weren't home, I'd let myself in and hang out with Hezekiah, their geriatric, slobbery Great Dane. Hezekiah and I would recline on oversized pillows in the alcove, listening to my favorites from Uncle Jim's two-thousand album collection. Everything sounded better once it hit the alcove's six walls and ricocheted back into your ears. My favorite was Pink Floyd, especially the "money" song.

Sometimes I'd still sneak into the basement and check out Playmates from years past, but I had to be careful about that now that I was getting a little bit older. Uncle Jim probably wouldn't suspect me of being a closet lesbian at age ten, but he was very protective over his indoor garden. He was also protective over me, making sure that my dad, my other uncles, and their friends didn't give me alcohol or weed to laugh at my reactions or to get me unconscious. Uncle Jim had sent me up to my room plenty of times when my dad would have let me stay in the middle of their nightly party.

But after my dad and I move, there isn't any company at all. None of my uncles visit our house because Uncle Jim's house is already established as the party spot, and because they all like Uncle Jim better than my dad, anyway. The new house is quiet, and the new neighborhood boring. There aren't any kids my age on my entire block, not that I would have much in common with them.

To overcome my boredom, I visit Uncle Jim and Sally at least once a day. Sometimes, I walk over to their place right after school, have a snack, go home to do my homework, and then go back to Jim and Sally's for dinner later in the evening. My dad doesn't seem to care since he is trying to make the mortgage; the more I eat at Uncle Jim's house, the less he has to spend on food. As long as I get my homework done and get home before the street lights come on, I'm okay.

It is on one of my normal after-school walks to Uncle Jim's house that I meet Mr. Ferguson. The kids on his street call him the Bird Man of Van Zee, but I don't know that yet. All I know is that a slight, silver-haired old man is sitting in his yard feeding a bird out of his hands, and I want to do it, too. I stop in the middle of the sidewalk, watching in awe, careful not to make any sounds that would scare the birds away. I am amazed at the number and variety of birds that take turns flying in and out of the yard. Time stands still as bird after bird hops across the shaded grass to eat from the man's hands. Finally, after the last bird flies away satisfied, the old man looks up at me and smiles.

"You like that, eh?"

"Yes," I exclaim. "How do you get them to do that? Could I do that, too? I want the birds to eat out of my hands, too."

"Well, first, tell me your name. Do you live around here?"

"I'm Amanda, but everybody calls me Mandy. I used to live two blocks over that way, but now I live three blocks that way," I point as I rock excitedly back and forth, convinced that the nice old man is going to teach me how to feed birds from my very own hands.

"Well, Amanda, my name's Mr. Ferguson, but all the kids call me 'The Bird Man of Van Zee,' or just 'The Bird Man' for short. I'd sure be happy to teach you how to make friends with the birds, but do your parents know where you are?"

"I only have a dad," I explain, "and he doesn't care where I am until the street lights come on." As I say this, I look a little over and past the Bird Man's eyes, not because I'm lying, but because I'm afraid he'll figure out the whole truth.

The Bird Man looks at me carefully, like he's deciding whether I have potential by the look in my eyes.

"Well, Mandy, then come sit on the grass with me. Not too close, 'cause too many people are sure to scare the birds away. Sit under that old walnut tree just there. Yep, sit just like me and wait."

I start going over to the Bird Man's house almost every day. I make lots of excuses to go to Uncle Jim's house, which isn't that hard since all the kids in my class still live in my uncle's neighborhood. I hate being at home. It wasn't so bad when we all lived together: me, Uncle Jim, and my dad. Now that we live alone, though, there's nothing to stop my dad from doing whatever he wants-and what he wants doesn't have anything to do with ten-year-old girls.

But everything seems okay when I'm with the Bird Man. And no matter what time I walk over to Van Zee Street and knock on his door, he comes out ready with his tin can of unsalted peanuts for the birds and squirrels and a candy bar for me. Sometimes he wears a fishing hat, sometimes a worn baseball cap. Always, he is silent, passing me what I need and nodding in the direction he wants me to sit. Easing to our special spots on the ground, we extend our peanut-covered hands in complete synchronicity, listening, waiting, for our friends to arrive. We sit in quiet. We sit in peace. We sit in prayer.

After the fifth or sixth try, I start to get discouraged. The birds don't fly away from me, but they don't come close, either. They seem to ignore me as they make their way over to the Bird Man. Sensing that I'm ready to give up, the Bird Man invites me into his house for a candy bar and some encouragement. I'm happy to finally see the inside of

the Bird Man's house. It does not, as I suspected, look like the inside of a birdhouse. Instead, it looks just like the inside of my grandparents' house and my friends' grandparents' houses. I sit on a stool at the kitchen counter, chewing my king-sized Three Musketeers bar and listening to the Bird Man.

"Mandy, it's time for me to tell you a secret," the Bird Man begins. "I've only told one other person my secret, and that's my daughter, Laura. It was always our secret, but she's too grown and too busy for birds now. I asked her permission, and she said I could share our special secret with you. But you have to promise that you won't tell anyone else."

"I promise," I affirm, meaning it with all my being.

"Mandy, I don't just sit and wait for the birds and squirrels to come to me; I talk to them in my head. I say, 'I'm your friend. I want to help you. I have good food. Come to me.'"

"I can do that," I answer between bites. "I can send friend thoughts to the squirrels and birds." I smile brightly, knowing that the Bird Man's secret is going to work. I concentrate on eating all the chocolate off my candy bar first, thinking to myself that this is going to be an excellent day. As soon as we go back outside, I tell myself, a bird is going to eat out of my hands for the first time.

A moment later, I realize that the Bird Man and I are not alone. A petite, gray-haired woman has walked into the room and is leaning against the kitchen counter silently watching. The Bird Man looks up, realizing that the woman is waiting for him to speak.

"Mandy, this is my wife, Mrs. Evelyn Ferguson."

"Nice to meet you," I say between bites of nougat. Mrs. Ferguson doesn't look happy. She keeps staring at the Bird Man, giving him the kind of look my teacher sometimes uses when the class gets too noisy.

"Yes' the Bird Man asks, standing to meet Mrs. Ferguson's eyes.

"I'd like to talk with you for a minute," she answers, walking into the living room. I can't hear all of the conversation that follows, but I hear enough.

"I don't think it's a good idea for her to be in the house. You know how people are.... You don't even know if her father knows she's here."

"Evie, she's a good girl. She needs someone to care about her. There's no harm in her coming over here, or even in the house. For goodness sakes, you're here all day long. It's not as though I brought her in the house alone." The Bird Man's words are quiet, yet certain. He finishes his conversation with his wife, then walks into the kitchen and hands me more peanuts as though nothing has changed. I feel a little sad that the Bird Man's wife doesn't seem to like me as much as he does, but I tell myself that she just doesn't know me like he does.

"Ready?" the Bird Man asks me, unlatching the front door.

"Right behind you," I answer. Remembering the secret, I instantly forget all about Mrs. Ferguson and being sad. The Bird Man smiles, too, as we go back outside to keep our silent vigil in the yard.

Even with the secret, it takes a long time before the first bird eats out of my hands. Yet, I know that I will succeed if only I believe, if only I keep sending good, kind thoughts to my would-be friends. When it finally happens, it's a sparrow, the smallest bird I've ever seen up close. I'm so excited that my heart beats faster than the little bird's wings, but I keep every other part of my body steady. It's like the birds being in my life has given me magical power over who I am and what I can do.

After the first bird eats from my hands, more and more come to the feast. Every day, the little sparrow comes first, as though she is my special bird, or I am her special human. Then, a cluster of robins, a yellow-winged blackbird, and even a cardinal. When the birds are done, the squirrels know that it is their turn to feed. Then, after all of the birds and squirrels we know have fed out of our motionless hands, we scatter our leftover peanuts across on the ground, hoping to attract some new bright-winged friend to sing to us, some injured squirrel in need of temporary aid. This goes on for weeks, months, this silent ballet between the Bird Man and me. I even get brave and express my newfound fascination with birds to my dad. When he buys me an illustrated bird encyclopedia for Christmas, I pass it on to the Bird Man, who treats it as a treasure.

Then, without warning, everything changes. Sitting in the Bird Man's yard one misty October evening, I know that something is wrong even before I hear or see the car. Looking up, I find myself locked into my father's eyes. Instinctively, I know that the Bird Man and I are over-not because we've done anything wrong, but because my dad has to, must, destroy anything I have that is separate from him. I stand up slowly, like a captured robber trying not to get shot by the police.

Without lowering my hands or letting go of my peanuts, I walk to the car. In a moment of clarity, I realize that with my arms in front of me and my fingers spread wide, I look like I'm sleepwalking. I turn to look at the Bird Man and see that he, like me, has not changed positions. From his seated lotus position, he spreads his fingers wider as if to say, "Come, come."

My father calls the police, and the police run a check on the Bird Man. It turns out that Mr. Ferguson was convicted of raping a sixteen-year-old girl in 1948. I'm taken to DHS, and they take me to the hospital. I'm poked and prodded and questioned. The social worker and doctor decide that I've been sexually abused previously, but not on that particular day. There's no semen, no blood, no skin cells, no hair. Just old rips and tears that have permanently scarred over. The police search the Bird Man's house, but there's nothing there except the bird encyclopedia. Still, he moves away.

A year later, when I start junior high, I am finally able to get away long enough to ride my bike by the Bird Man's house. He's gone. There's a new, yellow convertible in the driveway, and all but one of the bird feeders are gone. I ride by the house every day for a week, and the yellow convertible is in the driveway every time.

Finally, on the second week, a tall, reed like blonde walks out of the Bird Man's house and unlocks the convertible. I ride closer and stop directly in front of the driveway, putting my feet down on either side of my bike.

"Miss," I begin, "Do you live here?" She pivots the top half of her body slowly, methodically, but keeps her bottom half poised to enter the car.

"You must be Mandy," she says, looking down at her open-toed shoes and painted toenails instead of at me. Something about the way she moves her head, as though its position could direct traffic or change the world, makes me realize who she is.

"Are you the Bird Man's daughter?" I ask. "Is he okay?"

Turning the rest of her body to face me, Laura lowers her keys and walks two small steps closer to me.

"Mandy," she starts, again tilting her head to the ground, "He knew. My father knew all along. He isn't upset with you. It isn't your fault."

"But..." I start, then hesitate. This time, it's my turn to look down.

"I don't understand. What the police said, how can it be true?"

Laura shifts, leaning on the side of her car for support, or maybe just to move farther away from the bad memories.

"Yes, Mandy, it's true, but that was a long, long time ago."

"She was sixteen," I ask, my voice faltering.

"Yes, she was sixteen, and he was nineteen."

"Who... who was she?"

Laura swings around and opens her car door, then changes her mind and turns back to me.

"She was my mother, Mandy. She's my mother, and her father was just like yours."

This is the end of our conversation, I know. I move my bike away from the driveway, watching Laura as she steps into her car, backs down the driveway, and turns at the end of the street. I know I'll never again see the Bird Man and that I'll never visit this street again. But just this once, just this one last time, I move across the yard to my spot under the walnut tree. Folding my legs under my body, I sit with my arms out and my palms up, just like I did with the Bird Man. And I cry. And I smile. And I cry.



**Yvette Louisell's** work has been honored by PEN America's Prison Writing Program. Her memoirs ("The Century" and "The Size") were accepted for publication in *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery*. New England College Press (2008).

## Boundless by Divine G

Tonya Jackson inserted the key in the door of her fourth floor apartment and instantly heard rapidly approaching footsteps. Before the lock was unfastened, the door was snatched open. When Tonya saw the terrified look on the baby-sitter's face, her heart sank. "What's wrong, Quinesha!?" Tonya rushed inside, her adrenaline already flooding her system.

Quinesha's chubby cheeks looked smaller than normal as she spoke, "Kasim came home, dropped off his report card, and left.

Tonya's bulging brown eyes returned to their normal size. Thank goodness it wasn't the unthinkable: death or severe bodily harm. "Is there something wrong with his report card?"

Quinesha nodded her head and handed the report card to Tonya.

Tonya began reading. The shock written on her petite chocolate colored face gradually increased. By the time she ingested the last score, she had to find a seat because the strength in her legs had given out. She flopped down on the sofa. How could this happen!? He was an "A" student his entire life. Then Tonya started examining her past behavior, wondering if she did something wrong.

"I tried to stop him, Tonya," Quinesha took a seat in the armchair, wiping her sweaty palms on her baggy blue jeans. "He was so upset I figured tryin' to stop him wasn't a good idea.

"Don't worry, you did right." Tonya stood, stuffed the report card in the pocket of her brown leather jacket and headed for the door. As her hand touched the doorknob, she noticed Quinesha was practically breathing down her back. "I gotta handle this alone. I'll be right back. You can hang out here if you want.

Quinesha nodded her head and Tonya disappeared out the door.



As Tonya exited the Project building, the aches and pains in her bones and muscles from cleaning bedpans, changing linen, and serving food trays at the River Manor Rest Home transformed into pure energy. The sun had disappeared and the cool November breeze came out of its hiding place. Tonya's mind was searching desperately for answers as she headed for Stanley Avenue. Was there something terribly wrong with his Junior High School? Why hadn't she noticed he was in trouble?

It didn't make sense because she monitored all of his homework assignments and class notes. There was no doubt Kasiem knew the materials. Hey, wait a minute; she suddenly remembered that newspaper article about delayed trauma involving victims who've lost a loved one. Kasiem's father, Kendu, died during a construction work accident when Kasiem was ten. Tonya saw he never really got over it, although four years had past. But why now, after doing so well in elementary school?

Tonya put a stop to the onslaught of questions bombarding her mind as she entered 247 Stanley Avenue and hit the button for the elevator. Walik Henry was Kasiem's best friend and Tonya suspected this is where Kasiem would be. She got on the elevator, hit the number 7 and moments later was knocking on the door of apartment# 7D.

Tonya saw someone look through the peephole and then locks were being opened.

"Hey, Tonya," said Lisa, Walik's mother.

"What's up," Tonya saw Lisa's hair, as usual, looked in need of a major overhaul. By the look of her eyes, she was high on marijuana.

Lisa waved for Tonya to enter. "Yeah, he's here, come on in."

Tonya entered. The smell of lemon room freshener was thick in the air.

"Kasiem!" Lisa shouted towards the back. "Your mom is here!" She faced Tonya. "How you doing, girl?"

"I'm hangin' in there," Tony leaned against the wall. "What's up with you?"

"Same ole nonsense," Lisa took a seat at the kitchen table and lit up a cigarette. "These damn kids drivin' me crazy, money's twisted, and stress levels are high. The only good thing is Kasiem got a lot of influence over Walik. If he didn't, I would've lost him to the streets by now. Gangs, drugs, droppin' out of school. I wish Dana could find herself a friend to help keep her head on right."

Kasiem came out of the back room with his coat on carrying his book bag. Walik was behind him. Tonya smiled because she enjoyed seeing the two together.

"Hi, Mrs. Jackson." Walik stopped in front of Tonya, gazing up at her with a huge smile.

"Hello, Walik," Tonya smiled, realizing at close range he really did look like a miniature Xavier of the X-Men dipped in caramel syrup.

"Walik!" Lisa called to him. "What I told you about staring at people like that? Come over here and-"

"It's okay," Tonya was about to continue her comments until she saw Lisa give her that 'mind your fuckin' business' look.

"Bye Miss Henry." Kasiem said, breezing pass his Mom, heading for the door.

"Goodnight." Tonya followed Kasiem.

"Y'all be easy." Lisa shouted.



Tonya and Kasiem said nothing to each other during the elevator ride. Tonya wanted to launch a wave of questions at Kasiem, but decided to let him initiate the discussion.

As they exited the building, Kasiem spoke.

"Momma, you mad at me?"

"No, I'm not mad at you," Tonya made eye contact as they traveled down the walkway. "I'm confused and surprised at you."

"Because I messed up in school?" Kasiem said.

"Yeah. I'm hurt because I thought we agreed to talk to each other. Something's wrong and you're not talking to me."

"You won't understand." Kasiem shifted his bag to the other shoulder.

Tonya realized this was going to take sometime. She saw a bench and headed for it. Tonya sat down and Kasiem looked at her as if she was crazy. She patted the bench and Kasiem sat next to her.

"I thought we were friends first?" Tonya said. "You said you would never keep secrets from me. You know you can share anything with me. Whatever it is, we can fix it as a team, remember?"

Kasiem suddenly felt guilty because he broke his promise. He knew he had the coolest Mom in the whole Projects and she really was his friend first and foremost. The funny feeling in his chest and stomach told him to come clean. "I want Walik to be with me in School..."

At first Tonya didn't comprehend what he meant and was waiting for more. Then it hit her. Kasiem was promoted to the 7th grade and transferred to a new school while Walik stayed in the 6th grade.

She embraced Kasiem's hand, massaging it. "Kasiem, are you telling me you deliberately failed your classes?"

"Yeah." Kasiem tried to pull his hand away.

"Kasiem, baby, do you realize you're hurting yourself?" She let his hand go. "You're going about it all wrong."

"That's not what Daddy would say," Kasiem said softly. "He told me to never leave a friend who's in trouble, and to go back for him and stay with him."

Tonya was at a loss for words. She caught a flashback. Those were definitely Kendu's words and she would never forget the reason why he held such a position. Tonya met Kendu under circumstances that made it impossible for her to tell Kasiem to disregard that advice. Kendu saved her life based on the principle of never leaving a friend in trouble. One night at a party, Tonya was with Shawn, her ex-boyfriend. Tonya saw and waved to Kendu (an old friend from her Public School days). Later that evening, Shawn clashed with two men he owed money. Shawn couldn't pay his debt and one of the men wanted to have sex with Tonya as payment. Afraid of upsetting the thugs, Shawn agreed and the two men attacked Tonya. Kendu came to her rescue and the rest was yesterday's news.

Tonya shook loose of the trance. She knew she needed strong medicine to remedy this situation because Kasiem's zodiac sign was Taurus the Bull. If there was a word to identify an attribute stronger than stubborn, that would be the word to accurately describe Kasiem. There was only one way to address this dilemma. Tonya sighed. "Why didn't you come talk to me about this, Kasiem?"

"Because you wouldn't have let me do it."

"What if I tell you there's a way to fix this without you messin' up yourself?" Tonya saw the excitement race through Kasiem's body. "Yeah, there is a way to fix this."

"Really!?" Kasiem rose to his feet.

"Yes, but it's gonna take hard work and patience. And you gotta promise me you'll get those grades back up."

"I promise!" Kasiem sat back down. "How can you do it?"

"We can get Walik back to his right grade by getting him to work harder, study more and Before you know it, he'll be-" She saw Kasiem's smirk and the enthusiasm disappeared. "What's the matter? Walik can make that one grade up if he gets-"

"He won't do it, Mom." Kasiem pouted.

"I tell you, he can do it and both you and I will make sure he does. . . You still got faith in Your Momma?"

Kasiem nodded his head.

"Have I ever let you down?"

Kasiem shook his head "No."

"We're gonna get Walik back to his right grade and that's a promise." She put special emphasis on the words 'that's a promise', which was a statement Kasiem knew she didn't throw around lightly.

When Tonya saw that big beautiful smile on her child's face, no one could've convinced her she wasn't the ultimate super-woman capable of accomplishing anything.



The following day, Tonya went to her job and asked for a change of work hours. Since she was an excellent employee with four years under her belt, there was no problem obtaining the 7-3 shift.

Kasiem had some difficulty talking Walik into coming over to the house everyday after school to study with him and Tonya, so he could regain his lost grade. At first Walik was totally against the idea of having to do extra schoolwork, but Kasiem wasn't taking a refusal for an answer. "Listen man!" Kasiem had said to Walik. "If we homeys for real, you would do this. My Mother's going through a lot of stuff to get you back to where you belong." Eventually, Walik agreed to the program.

As Tonya went through the academic book section at Barnes and Noble, she suddenly Realized it might be a good idea, before diving headlong into this journey, to make sure this grade skipping business was an attainable task. She cut her book-purchasing endeavor short and returned home to make a series of phone calls.

The first place she called was Walik's school. Tonya wanted to know was there an examine a left behind student could take to re-gain his grade and the Principal informed her that such an examine was rarely utilized, but it did



exist. However, the only person who could order such a test was the chairman of the Board of Education and there had to be substantial reasons justifying the student's initial failure.

When Tonya called the Board of Education, a secretary with a vile attitude told her the Circumstances surrounding Walik's case didn't fit the criteria. Fully aware of the dangers of taking information on face value, the next day Tonya visited the library, and learned the truth. According to New York Education Law section 34, subdivision(d), "if the student has undergone a traumatic ordeal during the School semester, a grade replacement examination may be conducted." Tonya knew Walik would have no difficulty meeting that criteria because in their community, there were more than enough 'traumaticordeal[s]' in the form of killings, drug and gang wars, folks dying from AIDS and other ailments, and all around suffering of all kinds.

The final hurdle, and probably the biggest, would be convincing Lisa to fill out the required application and convince the Board of Ed. to give Walika second chance. After pondering the pros and cons of approaching Lisa before the process got started, Tonya decided to hold off until a later date.

At their first study session, Tonya had a nice talk with Walik and discovered Lisa called him stupid on a regular basis. Tonya was so infuriated she wanted to kick Lisa in the behind for saying something as catastrophic as that to her child. Didn't she know dangerous words like that shatters a child's self esteem and motivation? Tonya instantly came up with ways to get that poison out of Walik's head.

The months rapidly flew by. Walik's progress started off extremely slow, but by the third month it picked up significantly. His most difficult areas were Math and Social Studies, but Tonya was determined to neutralize those weaknesses and focused on them with the same energy as that of a gold-medal hungry triathlete at his first Olympics.

About three months before the test, the two hundred dollars Tonya was using to buy treats when Walik successfully completed a task was almost gone. She wondered would she have to borrow more money from her relatives down South. It was also time to approach Lisa.

When Lisa opened the door, Tonya saw she was high. Tonya was about to do an about face and return later.

"Hey, come inside, Tonya, "Lisa grabbed Tonya's arm and pulled her inside. I'm sure glad you looking out for my boy."

Tonya was surprised because she told Walik to keep it a secret, but she was glad Lisa was happy about the whole thing.

"That's what I came to talk to you about," Tonya invited herself to a seat in the kitchen. "We need you to go down to Church Street and fillout the forms so Walik can take an examine to regain his lost grade."

Lisa took a seat across from Tonya and said nothing.

Tonya was growing angrier by the second. It's a damn shame she didn't care about her child enough to dedicate time to see him grow and prosper. Tonya started calculating the amount of money she had left to bribe Lisa. She hoped a hundred dollars would be enough.

"Tell me exactly what I gotta do."Lisa said with a smile.

Tonya was shocked. She was so glad Lisa proved her wrong she gave Lisa a strong sisterly hug.



Lisa's efforts went well. The examine was conducted on a Saturday morning in mid April. Afterwards, Tonya noticed Walik was in a good mood, but did a terrible job at concealing his strong doubts concerning how he thought he had done on the test.

On the day the examine scores were expected to arrive be in the mail, Tonya and Kasiem were as nervous as Mexican Chihuahuas. Tonya was more nervous than Kasiem and when the knock on the door came, she almost ran Kasiem over on in her effort to get to the door.

When she snatched the door open, and saw Walik's sad facial expression, she held back the tears. "Come here,Walik." Tonya gave him comforting hug.

Tonya went to the living room, and started getting her "never give up" speech ready. Then she heard Walik and Kasiem snickering among themselves. When she turned, they screamed.

"April Fools!! We got you!"

Tonya lit up with exhilarating happiness."You passed!?"

"Yeah!" Walik shouted and started dancing with the paper in his hand.

As Kaseim and Walik celebrated, Tonay savored the power of positive thinking (the most powerful force in the universe) and she realized when used righteously, it could truly move mountains.



**Divine G** also known as John Whitfield, is a prisoner at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York. He writes in a number of genres including fiction and drama. His play, "Peak Zone" was accepted for publication in *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery*. New England College Press (2008).

# Child's Play & Equality by Rachel Cannon

## Child's Play

The Puritans  
Our Forebears

So sure  
So wrong

No hanged juries for them  
Just hanged women  
(and a few men)

Dangling from the words  
of children



## Equality

A shell of a person  
filled with the corpses  
of victims

An empty vessel  
filled with blood  
and bone and gristle

I kill, therefore I am  
alive  
I kill, therefore I am  
killed  
done to death by

A shell of a society  
filled with the corpses  
of victims



**Rachel Cannon** is a sophomore honors student majoring in international studies and literature at American University. Rachel has enjoyed writing since she was in the second grade, and most recently, she helped found a creative writing club at American University. This poem was inspired by a justice class taught by Robert Johnson at AU.

## Night View by John Corley

Perimeter lights  
horizontal halogen stars in a  
flat universe  
blinking in the rain.  
A cellblock-  
hundred foot paddleboat sans  
paddle, sans stack, sans that  
winning hand.  
Empty court-  
puddled cement where  
death plays.  
Barbed wire capping a 12-foot cage.  
Reinforced glass.  
Little chance for a better day tomorrow.



**John Corley** is prisoner #131810 at Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, Louisiana 70712. His most recent creative writings appear in *Exiled Voices* edited by Susan Nagelsen (New England College Press, 2008).