



BLEAKHOUSE REVIEW

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BleakHouse Review is an online literary magazine that provides a venue for writing and art on human liberty, both its deprivation and its achievement. Some people find freedom behind prison walls; others, ostensibly free, build prisons for themselves in their everyday lives. The interplay of persons and settings, as well as limits and possibilities, forms the palette on which our writers and artists work, examining their subjects with imagination and care.

BleakHouse Review is edited by **Robert Johnson** (literary content) and **Carla Mavaddat** (art and design). For the 2013 issue, we gratefully acknowledge the assistance and support provided by associate editor **Jada Wittow**.

BleakHouse Review 2013

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FEAR by Sarah Bousquet

Fear is the darkness,
The shadows that crawl up the walls
Of this castle-like place
Contorted to seem out of shape
In order to hide
What really happens
Behind these rusted bars

Fear is not meant for the weak

Fear is without freedom
It captures you and captivates you
Refusing to let you out of its
Claws
Drawing you in
Deeply
So no one can hear you scream

Fear is not meant for the quiet

Fear is all knowing
All seeing,
All hunting
All ignorance and pain
All every damn thing.

Fear is not meant for the wounded

Fear is loss of control
Loss of hope,
Disorienting and harsh
It merely laughs as you
Struggle for survival
And when you reach the point
Where you are willing to do anything
For release
Fear will destroy you

Fear is not meant for the free.

FADE TO GREY by Sarah Bousquet

His footsteps
Echoing against my soul
Reverberating against the soft carpet
A rush of fear
Searing my veins
And I hear the twist
Of the door handle
And the drawn out creak
Trying to resist
Trying to warn
Trying to protect me

The shadow of a man
Or what was once a man
Leering over me
And I know
What has happened
In the dusty old kitchen
And I know
What will happen
In my room

I can still hear the cries
Of my mother
As she begs him,
Not again
And I can still feel the screams
Trying to escape
But I bury them
As he walks towards me
And the seconds stretch to hours
And I try to hide beneath my covers
But I know they will not
Be my savior
I have no savior

And as he staggers out
Stumbling,
A sour, acrid scent
Strong on his breath
My world loses a little more color

And I stare out the dirty old window
Waiting for a sign of hope,
As the streets,
With the lights few and far between,
Slowly fade to gray.

NO TIME by Sarah Bousquet

We like to pretend,
In the darkest of our hours,
That we have done all that we could
And we have helped all who have asked
But underneath it all,
We know the truth

It doesn't matter how far you run
You will not be going anywhere
Because inside this cage
This damp, dark, hopeless cage
That people come to, and beg of you
Why her,
You cannot escape the nightmares
And you cannot escape the pain

And you know hope is a empty ideal
That only the weak, or the guilty
Cling to,
Yet you cannot help but hope
For redemption
For someone to believe you
And when your last hope fails
Because it will always fail
You can only wish for death to come more quickly
But quietly,
As to not wake you when you sleep

And you still remember the day
The jury decided your fate
Because your lawyer could not give a fuck
Because your lawyer could not stay awake
And the judge, believing your guilt
Believing she should be going home soon
to her freeze-dried dinner and just dessert,
can't hear anything at all

And now, you have no time left
Other than dead time
And the faster you run,
In this tiny cage you live in
the more you wish,
you had no time at all



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

Only the good die young,
I was told,
but when you sit on death row,
barely 18,
are you still one of the good?

And the years pass,
As you watch yourself grow older
And you dread the day you will die
And you regret the day you were born
But there is nothing you can do
You were guilty, after all,
Weren't you?

I guess we like to pretend
You were never good
That evil was always there
Behind those innocent eyes
So that way,
When they strap you down
After that fateful phone call
Your last hope, crushed
You are not one of the good
Who die young

And even as you feel the needle
Slide into your arm
Your death, barely a prick
You know that you are innocent
Of the crimes they say you committed
Your guilt, if it is guilt, the fruit of brutality
Of a world too harsh and too much to bear
And so, really, you are one of the good
That die young.
Aren't you?

HOME by Sarah Bousquet

'Mom, I'm scared'
I whisper
As she tucks me into bed
Demons crawling
In the shadows of the night

She comforts me
And holds me tight
'No one can hurt you,
I'll make things right'
And she kisses me on the cheek
And shuts the door tight

If only she had known
I was one of them
The demons of the night

She was in the kitchen
When they found her
The yellow tape
Around the shattered porcelain
And a tea bag,
Still dripping

Her wounds
Still dripping

Now,
There is no one to tuck me in at night
And comfort me,
Shield me from the
Demons
That crawl through the cells
Along the walls
Through the bars

Into my head
Into my heart

Lingering, lurking, waiting
To carry me home

We watch you
Fight
For life
And pray
As we prey
On you
Your guilt

You're guilty
They said
And who are we
To disagree

We hear you
Beg
For appeals
And yearn
For the truth
Your innocence
You're innocent

Appeal denied
They said
And who are we
To disagree

We see you
Die
At last,
When hope
Is gone
And you're all
alone

At peace
They said
And who are we
To disagree

What's it like to be an inmate?
Even if you ask her, she won't answer
Or at least not truthfully.
She'll say to you what you make her say
Because you told her to,
Because you're making her do it,
Because you'll throw her away
Anyway
If she isn't what you need,
And because being needed is better than being
Alone.
Because she thinks she loves you, and who are you to correct her?
She's just a doll.

You talk to her when it pleases you
And make her believe she wants you to
Even though what you say might be
"Get me some coffee,
Make my bed,
Do my laundry,
Is there a problem?"

Is she a mother, doing your laundry like that?
Is she a lover?
Is she even a true person anymore?
Can someone so unfeeling really be a woman,
Or a lover,
Or just a doll?
Just because you can't buy her in a store
Doesn't mean she isn't a toy,
And it doesn't mean you won't be able to take your pick
Of which toys you want.

No matter what they look like, you'll always say,
"You've got such a pretty smile,
No one's ever listened to me like you do,
I love you,
I need you,
You know I do."

"And by the way, I could really use a cup of coffee."
"Thanks so much, doll."

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE by Joanna Heaney

The most gently I can remember being treated
Was when I was walked to the electric chair.
Two people on either side of me, each holding an elbow;
If I was older, it would look like they were helping me cross the street.

“You can do this,
No problem,
You can do this.”

Well fuck you, man, I really appreciate your confidence in me
But it's too little, too late.

Where were you telling me I could make it
Through the toughest years of my life?
Where were you to believe in me
When I was trying to live and not to die,
When I was trying to feed my brother and sister, [have a life]
When I failed high school math.
Where the fuck were you?

You were probably learning about justice.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

I bet you were learning that justice is
Holding people accountable for their wrongs,
Punishing the evil people in the world,
No sympathy or wavering, standing firm
Saving pretty single mothers from robbers
And getting their phone numbers afterwards.

Do you really care about justice?
Or is it just making things right
On a man's last night.

You won't help me live well,
But you'll help me die well?
You'll send me off to hell,
Tenderly.

BODY by Kaeley Majewski

Warm body
Cold body
Free body
Sold body
My body
Her body
His body
Plastic body
Dead body.

Cell Buddy
My Buddy

We all want Somebody
Even a Cell Buddy

To have and to hold
in darkness and in light

To chase away the demons at night,
to dispel the memories that haunt the cell
make this place a living hell



Washington D.C.: Carla Mavaddat

CAVALRY WAY by Aubrey Rose

Criminal

I had a job to do
I am no murderer
Don't you dare point your finger at me
I didn't pull the trigger
In the dark of night
Dangerously alive on meth
I could barely feel a thing
Mind swirling
Johnny wanted to fuck with a few stupid kids
They shouldn't have been in the woods all alone
company
Childish naïve kids, they know nothing of pain
They shouldn't have screamed
Johnny should've left the glock at home

I only nodded
After all people die everyday
On Calvary Way

Executioner

I have a job to do
I am no murderer
Don't look at me
I didn't sign the warrant
In the dark of night
Dulled by a Xanax or two
What's it to you?
Mind numb
The state wants this business finished
This bastard should've kept better

Stupid kid, he doesn't know the pain he caused
He should have walked away
The state never leaves the needle at home

I only pressed a button
After all people die everyday
On Calvary Way

A WORLD I CAN BELIEVE IN by Aubrey Rose

On Christmas morning, I lie barely awake on a musty Persian rug, letting my heavy eyes follow the flicker of a relentless fire. Somehow I am always warmer in my grandfather's ancient farmhouse, a relic of the past in an overdeveloped Maryland suburb. Deemed Sleepy Acres many years ago, it stands as a monument to a purer and more honest life. As the sun rises, I can feel in my bones the restlessness of the children in the neighborhood who trust in magic. I wait patiently for the only magic I still believe in.

Ring. Ring. I hear the slow but persistent rustling of my grandfather's feet as he picks up the first call from the corrections. Prisoner #1058 calling for Al Rose. Like a child who is afraid to disturb the magic of Santa's late night arrival, I pretend I am still asleep as my old weary grandfather settles into his rocking chair. He talks quietly to the unknown man on the other end of the line. He laughs and teases, eagerly asking questions about a life he knows is empty and lonely. I fade in and out of the conversation in my sleepy haze until I hear him sigh.

"I love you too John. I love you dearly."

I pretend I don't hear, afraid that I may have witnessed something so sacred it was meant to remain hidden. Ring. Ring. Prisoner #7568 calling for Al Rose. When the last call is made and I hear the shallow creaking of an empty rocking chair, I roll confidently out of my blankets into a world that I can believe in.



Montreal, Canada:

Carla Mavaddat

Words like knives
Letters like gunshots
Locking me in
Setting me free

Lines like bars
Poems like shackles
Tying me down
Releasing me

Pages like walls
Chapters like handcuffs
Forming my cage
Letting me speak

Stories like tribute
Books like resistance
Changing the world
Imprisoning me

Home?

I ain't got a home
Right here's my home
You call this a prison
I call it a home

Born rough on the streets
Fighting for survival
Well, I'm still alive
Locked up and caged in
Better than dyin'

Rather be locked down
Than dead in a gutter
A needle in my arm
Bullet through my brain
If not for this house
I'd be dead all the same

But there's always the chance
Of lethal rejection
A different kind of needle
Sleep's tight embrace
My only way to leave home
Wheeled out of this forlorn place

Whatever happens
I'm not leavin' here alive,
Least not with my eyes open
My heart beatin' red blood through my veins,
My only hope is to be strapped down and
Murdered in this hellhole I call home

I smoke cigarettes, and yet, its something I do not fear to admit. I have realized, contrary to some friends who ask “don’t you know that’s bad for you?” that cigarettes are a direct cause of death. I understand this concept fully, and have been constantly reminded by my mother, a smoker herself of 20 years (who was smart enough to quit when I was 10). Does my perpetual smoking mean that I somehow do not understand the concept of inevitable death as well as I think I do?

My answer is no. In fact, I believe I understand the concept of death better than the ordinary person. I smoke, and have no mental reservations about it, because I am young. I understand I am young, and I understand I will die if I continue to smoke. Yet, I believe that my desire to live while indulging in certain vices is more important than living a life of constant regulation. I smoke because I enjoy smoking. I enjoy the taste and how its lingering smell on my shirts reminds me of the way my mom smelled when I was young. I love sitting outside with a friend and escaping from the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives; and at night, I enjoy sitting outside by myself and staring into the sky. I like the feel of a half-empty pack, knowing that it may grant me a temporary catharsis from my daily routine.



Washington D.C: Carla Mavaddat

I find some sort of solace in the fact that a cigarette is unhealthy for you. When I have one in my hand, I know I am in control of my life. I feel a burn in the back of my throat and I know this burn is something I have chosen. There is not much else in my life I am sure I have complete control over. I am in college because I know I must go to college in order to compete in the job market. I know I dress a certain way because I must to be taken seriously. Yet, the Camels in my pocket say that there are certain things where the word must is irrelevant. And it is at night when I can step outside and enjoy a cigarette, that I feel the most free. And this is because I am my own man, and my vices will be the end of me. But this is an end that I have chosen for myself, in a world where many of my choices have already been decided for me.

That being said, I abuse my body with tobacco and simultaneously go to extremes to take care of it. I am a dedicated long distance runner (whose ability has admittedly diminished since smoking) and gym rat, and still love the juxtaposition of the lingering tobacco smell on my sweat-soaked workout shirts. I like the stares I get if I light up a cigarette on my way out of the Bender gym.

For me, life is about living unapologetically as the person you wish to be. It's important to never indulge too much, but it is equally important to indulge in the first place. I don't think people are ever supposed to live with such strong absolutes, as we're beings constantly experiencing temptation. So why not regulate our temptations and lusts, instead of constraining them completely?

People might stand from afar and cackle about how I will eventually regret these decisions. They will see my behaviors as one of a stupid and naïve. I will look back at them and wonder why they took everything so seriously, and ask them what is a life that lacks regret?

Donovan remembered how he felt just six months ago as his legs and arms were strapped down. It was a difficult feeling to relive, simply because it was one that lacked context in his life. Six months ago, Donovan knew that his experience was temporary, and it made the entire ordeal tolerable. He knew his pain was to be fleeting, so living in that moment was not so difficult. It was more of an effort to escape into the corners of his own mind than to allow fear to consume him as fear must be consuming this man now.

Donovan moved his hand over the tough leather strap on the left of the table, and guided the man's leg into the harness. He strapped the leg in and a feeling rushed through him like a wave of nausea. His hand had briefly brushed against the front the man's ankle and he felt the hardness of the man's bone and a soft plushy flesh. Surely, there was blood and a soul underneath the skin. Yet, it was not the process that was about to take place that sickened Donovan, it was the overwhelming sense of power. Still looking at the man's ankle covered in orange, Donovan realized that somewhere down the line, the state had given him ownership of this ankle. Somewhere down the line, this man was given to him as property, and the man's will was no longer relevant.

But Donovan's job was not to empathize or understand; simply to strap down a left leg and the leave. He realized that there was a moment where he understood that his capacity to relate to this man did not exist. He was Donovan and this man was something else, or better, a non-human sacrifice. He allowed himself to look up and meet, the eyes of this man: black with a shaved head, large defined features, and a thin moustache over his broad, unmoving lips. He noticed the bags under the man's eyes, eyes that seemed to hold a Pandora's box of emotions. And indeed, Donovan could not close the box once he met his eyes.

A sudden wave of nausea again, and the heavy salivation right before vomiting. He swallows and pulls on his collar as he realizes an inevitable fact that he had been avoiding since the beginning, that this man was innocent. Not innocent in the sense that he did not commit his crime, but innocent in the sense that this punishment was not suitable for this man. His tired, puffy, aging eyes bags screamed "time served" and forever bore an image of guilt into Donovan's soul. Donovan could not help thinking that six months ago, the experience he went through was like this one now, on the surface. He should be ready to observe. Yet, Donovan looked away, and retreated behind the glass. He felt uneasy, but as he looked down and fiddled with the zipper of his coat, he began to think of what he would cook himself for dinner tonight, or if the woman he met at the bar had returned his text message. As he left the room, the man's eyes had already disappeared in his mind, and his discomfort became fleeting as it did six months ago.

I believe that there are certain things that individuals must champion in order to have a flourishing life. Without these things, it is sure that our existence would not be a positive one. Perhaps the largest of these characteristics is naiveté.

Say that I knew my eventual death were to take place mid-June in 40 years, and that I would die of heart failure in my sleep. Many have their opinion on whether it would be beneficial to know the date of their death, but I would argue that it would destroy my very existence. I would no longer feel like a free-willed human being. I am instead a rotting piece of biomass, on a linear progression from point A to point B. Indeed, my decisions between A and B are still unknown, yet these unknown actions have all become a gradual step from A towards the inevitable B. Things would begin to seem as a means to an end, instead of an end in themselves. I will never be able to enjoy a cup of coffee like I can now if I know there are X cups left in my life. It becomes a simply a cup of caramel colored liquid, instead of an aromatic buzzy enjoyment.

I will never be able to look at a beautiful woman like I can now, knowing that perhaps a romantic relationship between us would surely end with one of us unceremoniously departing.

I do not perform the act of living knowing that I have an expiration date. I often live thinking that I do not, that perhaps my will would be strong enough to supersede the possibility of death. That perhaps my hopes and dreams will all come true, and that I may have the strength to pursue them to their ends. Despite my actual ability, I believe these things because I must. I must believe that whatever I dream at night behind closed doors is something I have the capacity to experience one day, because if I do not: I remember I am only human. I am constrained to the physical and mental limitations the world places on me. I cannot fall in love with the most beautiful woman in the world and I cannot one day run for president. I will never be able to hike Mt. Everest and I may never run another marathon, and my coffee will always taste sour. I remember that I am only on a linear progression from point A to point B.

For these reasons, I do not wish to be comforted by the knowledge of my eventual death. I would like to live thinking that the limitations of the world will somehow breeze over my head, as I continue on my own way.

“The streets is where I’s born
And the streets is where I’ll die”
Plays on the radio
In the jail
The assertive voice of a flamboyant strutting white man
Wailing and whining its way like a siren
Losing its pitch to Doppler as the officer strolls down the hallway with a swagger
Tense and alert and flexed because this is the bottom of the barrel
Scum of the earth
And you can never let them forget that
Because what is a boxer
Without a punching bag

“The streets is where I’s born
And the streets is where I’ll die”
Lines stolen
From an old refrain of drunks
And disheveled detritus of the late night hours,
Appropriated for a mid-80s foot-stomping rocker
That blasts now over coughing speakers
Dancing off of unswept floors and shit-smearred walls
Smacking into ears red and swollen from a blow
Delivered for raising your hands past your groin
At the wrong time
Poking at empty stomachs and hands shaking from dehydration and mouths snapping open and
shut wordlessly from withdrawal and heads aching from having been thrust into transient state-
run boot camp and screaming
“Pussies”
Because we need to make them never want to come back here
But they always do
Funny how that works.

The streets are littered with refuse
Human and animal
Cluttered together on corners and at the bottoms of hills
Sprite bottles and dog shit and cigarettes and fluttering Ziploc bags
Catching the faint breeze
Streets that will later that night be wandered by terrors
Men with dark eyes and dark intentions;
And the less concrete,
The desperation of poverty and of tearing open aluminum cans with your bare hands

For the french fry that fell inside
The senselessness of the gangs, the mismatched colors broadcasting allegiance
To this death or that one
The abject subjugation
Of growing up female
In a world that will never let you be a woman
The streets beckon with a sickly black finger
And an empty smile.

The jail from the outside adamantly refuses light, seeming to absorb
The streetlights in the parking lot
The glow of a dying sun
Taking it and muting it to an opaque grey
Grey like the walls inside
Walls representing the confines of the only interaction with the state
Most of these men and women have or will ever know
An interaction that makes them beg
And yearn
And cry
And pray
For the sweet warm embrace
Of the streets.

Guidebook for a New Yorker Awaiting a Trial for a Crime They May or May Not Have Committed: Table of Contents

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 - B. Do not dress black
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 - B. Do not dress poor
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 - 1. Do not be poor
- III. Do NOT be a woman
 - A. Certainly do not be anything other than a man or a woman
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 - A. If black and poor AND a woman, put down this guidebook. You shouldn't be reading in prison.
- V. You are not a beautiful unique snowflake
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 - B. Live somewhere whiter
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- VII. Do not expect help
 - A. Help is for your family to provide
 - 1. Get a family
 - 2. Keep them around
 - B. We are not your therapists
 - 1. And you're a pussy for needing one
 - C. Nor your doctors
 - 1. And you're a pussy for needing one

- D. Nor your hospital
 - 1. You shouldn't be on drugs anyway
 - a) Lose the addictions
 - E. Nor your soup kitchen
 - 1. Get a job
- VIII. We have no obligation to your well-being. When you leave, you leave for good.
- A. Except when you don't.

I am making a difference.
Can you feel it in the way I talk to your family?
Not douchenozzle or jerkoff but
Sir? Ma'am?
Can you feel it in the way I look at you in the courtroom?
I've been told my compassion is palpable
You can feel it in every cavity of your body
Before it slaps handcuffs on you,
Gently.
I am making a difference.
Just last week I "accidentally" let a big drug case slide off my desk
and into the trash
Untouched
And let me tell you:
The chewing out from my boss
And the cold disgusted silence of my co-workers
Who would from then on sometimes "accidentally" let my lunch slide out of the fridge and into
the trash
Untouched,
It was like hell.
Sometimes I think you don't even appreciate
All the sacrifices I make for you.
I am making a difference.
Look around me.
At the statues of ivory and ego and dinero
That litter the office.
I am not like that.
God made me by holding up a mirror to the underbelly of society
He held up a cell phone and took a picture of that mirror
And He photoshopped a few bits
Namely the parts that put you in that defendant's chair
And me in this brand-new suit.
But the point is I get it.
I am a one-man counter-culture
I am the champion of the oppressed
I oppress them less
And the less oppressed are more inclined to confess
Because confession relieves us of our sins
And I confess
I am not making a difference.

THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD DO by Adam Bradley

“Is there any phrase in the English lexicon more immoral than *There was nothing I could do?*”

First of all

Don't give me that 'victim of society' bullshit.

Oh, I know how it goes. You were born

Millions of dollars in debt with heroin in your umbilical cord

So black that Malcolm X would cross the street at night

To avoid you

Your mother died during childbirth,

Your father drank rubbing alcohol straight from the bottle

And beat every kid in the neighborhood

But especially you. I know, I know,

You were dealing drugs on the street by the age of 4, I know

How easy that shit is to hide behind.

But I know you better than that, I know you're more than

A thousand little accidents of circumstance,

You're more than the calloused hands that strangled my daughter

In sewage water

While I waited up for 5 hours.

You're fucking evil.

There's a painting in the Sistine Chapel

You know it? By Michelangelo,

“The Creation of Adam”,

Where God strains against his little army of nymphs and a pretty godawful beard

To reach out and gently

Meet Adam's finger. And so God granted life.

Sometimes I just know that's how you remember your birth;

You slid out crying into a beautiful world

But for whatever reason, the outstretched finger of depravity

Marked you

And from then on,

There was nothing you could do.

Well, staring through three glass frames

At your bound wrists and the single tear escaping down your cheekbone

And your chest as it rises

falls

rises

falls

and doesn't rise again,

I can't feel sorry.

You say you were doomed,

A byproduct of your birth, your childhood, your poverty.

Well, I've been marked too.
But the finger that drove into my life was yours.
And there was nothing I could do.

FEELS LIKE PRISON by Grace Austin

Sometimes we use hyperboles like, 'I feel like I'm in prison'
or 'this school is like a jail'
Sometimes we feel trapped in our lives, in our minds
Prisoners to our own emotions and inability to cope
We don't stop to think about the weight those words carry
 We don't ask if we're being politically correct when we say them
 We don't know nor care who we offend by them
 And we don't know what we are saying
Your mind may feel like a prison but what does an actual prison feel like
 A prison within a prison, maybe
You can't get out of your cell in order to escape the cell your mind is trapped in
 You can't walk outside whenever you want; you can't get a change of scenery in order to
 shift your mood
 The walls become participants in the conversations you have in your head, the
 shadows your audience
 Left to your own devices you drive yourself insane
But you were probably a little insane to begin with
You wrestle with your guilt, your guilt is unbearable, it turns into anger and your anger con-
sumes you
 It's not about your crime anymore; it's this place that's a crime
 It's about the overcrowding, the violence, the apathy, the despair
Your mind never shutting off, never taking a break, never able to focus on the right thing, or
channel your energy somewhere else
 But then again I don't know, I've never been to prison.
 For all I know it could be all rainbows, ponies, and chocolate cake.
 Or maybe, it could be much much worse
 than any of us out here
 Can imagine

DUAL PERSONALITIES by Grace Austin

My family saw me as their precious little girl
But to my teachers I was the fuck up in the corner
I'm living in a world that sees me in dual versions
On the one hand I'm a gentle woman who couldn't hurt a fly
But I'm also the savage criminal who needs to be locked up
To the parole board I'm a helpless case of societal neglect
But in the prison yard I'm the bad bitch who can't be fucked with
The CO's laugh at my bad ass moves and hard stares
But when I flash my shank their eyes flash fear
I'll be you're sweet little girl if you treat me with respect
And if you don't, I'll shank that smug grin right off of your face



Venice, Italy: Sophie Auffret

The first time a person is confronted with reality is a jarring experience. Mine came the first time I saw a dead body. It was my father's and I discovered him lying on the couch in my living room. My mother instructed me to wake him up. An easy enough job, I thought. I poked and prodded but he wouldn't respond. Somewhere in my naïve head I thought I should listen for his heartbeat, never expecting that there would be nothing to listen for. When I pressed my head against his chest all I heard was the hollow sounds of an empty ribcage. I was six years old, and since then I have never been the same. I imagine this feeling is one that many prisoners experience at a young age. Maybe they felt the sting of abandonment from one or more of their parents, woke up to find a family member dead from a drug overdose, witnessed a drive by shooting or realized the other kids in their class weren't beaten every night like they were. I can tell you that feeling slaps the childhood right out of you. You feel like a stranger in your own world, like you have this secret that no one else knows. The secret you hold is how cruel life can be and how close death is to each and every one of those you love. After coming to this realization you vow to never be surprised again. You vow to become tough enough to handle the next blow, because trust me there will be a next one. While all the other kids wince at the part in the movie where the dog dies, you just stare at the screen and force yourself to swallow it. After crying for a year straight, you vow to never cry in public ever again. No matter what. You never let anyone else see your weak side—what weak side, you don't have one. One moment you're bottling up your feelings and the next your beating the kid up on the street that called you a pussy. After that you feel invincible, like no one in the world could ever be tougher than you. And when you pull the trigger on your first kill, you remember the first dead body you ever saw, and realize how desensitized you have become since that moment. Six months later you're lying in your cold depressing prison cell when you begin to piece together the events in your life and suddenly comprehend how different everything would have turned out had you just let yourself feel.

Let's play a game, a fun game.

It's called legal-illegal

And it's all about context

A man is heard saying, "Tonight Johnny will die"

Legal, illegal?

Pick wisely, the answer is not always obvious.

Well what's the context?

Prison guard, 55, talking to his buddy about Johnny Ricket who sits in his cell eating his last meal.

Legal.

Here's another one,

A man is heard saying, "Tonight Jenny will die"

Legal, illegal?

Context: man sitting in his bedroom drinking jack stroking his shotgun thinking about his girlfriend.

Illegal: threatening to kill is a crime punishable by law.

The game continues, Legal, illegal

A bunch of people are sitting in a room, trying to decide if and when to kill someone.

Context?

Court house, room 354.

Legal: a jury decision between life without parole and death.

Good job, now what about this one:

Bunch of people sitting in a room trying to decide if and when to kill someone

Context?

Basement of a drug dealers house, putting a hit out on a rival

Illegal: murder plot, intent to kill.

You've caught on quickly, now here's a good one.

Legal, illegal?

People in a small, closed off room, some men, some women, brightly lit. Sterile. A phone rings.

Silence. A needle is readied, steadied, flush with poison. A man nods. Some people are happy, some are crying. Some don't know what they feel. Maybe they feel nothing. Tension rests uneasily like a mask on the faces of the killers. A mixture of calm acceptance and subdued horror on the face of the target. A button is pushed, a pinch is felt, and a life quietly slips away.

Context?

Execution chamber, Texas state penitentiary, Huntsville unit.

Legal.

MY CELL by Tatiana Laing

They call it a door, but how's that if it can only open from one direction? How's that if it locks me into this cruel dimension. Did I mention*the window? The wind blows against the thick plate glass placed way high up where I can't reach it to peep out into the world I once knew. I once grew, but time stops, it mocks me as days turn into months and years and I remain stagnant. Just a fragment of what I could be, what I should be, what I would be if I was free. I'd be more than just flesh man, a freshman, in college! But nah, all of got is baggage—hope and dreams weighing me down to the ground as the sound of silence haunts me, taunts me as I lay frozen on this sad excuse for a bed, with this sad excuse for a head
... If I had a good head on these shoulders, I would have fled, fled from this cell, from this hot-bed of despair, from this inescapable snare.

In the distance, a toilet flushes. The only thing that rushes down and out the drain, is the pain of the incarcerated, the emaciated spirits, once fat with future but now thin with grim loss. Infinite limitations and unending time, enough to reflect on your crime but more so to reflect on the squandered opportunities, till it drives you crazy... 'til sanity slips from your soul and onto the painfully plain walls to keep your company.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

It turns out that we don't have a lot of either...
How to get them back?
To be safe and free? ...

The land of the free, the home of the brave
But no one can see that we're still just slaves
Slaves to ignorance
Slaves to a lie
Slaves to the notion
That there's a logical reason why
Why when we add two and two
We sometimes get five
Five year sentence for a four minute crime
Why somehow math makes sense
When our skin is white
Why four minutes makes ten now
A ten dollar fine

And we call it justice
We call ourselves free
I guess that's how it just is
This freedom isn't free
And fairness isn't fair
It depends on the texture of your hair
The shading of your skin
Or the type of clothes we wear

We're in the minority
In race
In wealth
In opportunity

Cause in order to control the crime
In order to paint a picture sublime
They need a cleansing
They need the earth pure

Good or Bad
We're all alike
Cause black is wack
And white is fine

They'd like to be color blind

Impure, Unclean, Child Support, Thief

Rapist, Murderer, Basketball, Sneak

Colored, Welfare, Useless, Filthy

All of these stereotypes can be summarized by: GUILTY

No child left behind. But what about me? I can't spell life and I can't understand death. Can't write a sentence, but I'm destined to serve it. I don't have the depth, but I have the debt, a price to pay for generations of your systematic oppression. Systematic recession of those like I; Those who need help, but instead get shoved along the conveyer belt of your education. Dummies in and dummies out. Just till we're old enough to fall off and fend for ourselves. Our minds left to gather dust like books on shelves. They just need to be opened, just need to be treated with care. Just need special focus, just need someone there. There to crack open, crack through to get to that deeper understanding. My mind might work slower, maybe that's why you can't understand me. But I'm here standing in a holding cell, not sure what it means to be held. Last time I went to school I was in the fifth grade. Last time I went to school was the last free meal they made. Don't know what it means to pay. So I go to the store and just take. Don't know what it means to add. Stole the latest fashions to keep up with the latest fads. I was too old to be in elementary. Plus those concepts you tried to teach were just too hard for me. The streets are easier to learn in. All you got to do is what you need to survive in, a hostile environment, a jungle. Like those stories you read to me. I mumbled, along like I could read the words. You mumbled along like you could feel the hurt, the pain it caused to know I was stupid. To know I would never absorb your teachings. But they taught me something easy. Run from cops, and fight back immediately. And you wonder why I'm here today, chained behind these steel bars. You now wonder how to break the chain. You look as though you're ashamed of me, of the scum I turned out to be. But society, you're the one who forgot me. Maybe, I wouldn't have done the crime, if you hadn't abandoned me.

First Their Eyes Close
Then their breath Slows
And then like a faint breeze,
Time escapes the lips.
It's over, It's Through.

First, their eyes close.
To every and anything bleak.
Stomach's no longer weak.
Darkness can't jolt one,
Whose eyes aren't open.

Then their breath slows.
Anything goes.
No gasp at demise,
Steady breath through the sight
Of those less than alive.

And then like a faint breeze,
Time escapes the lips.
Every second you utter,
The words "I'm okay."
A lifetime of sanity,
Just slips away.

It's just your job,
No significance otherwise.
As if that white space,
Didn't haunt your dreams at night.

Just push a button,
Then stand back unmoved.
As if you yourself,
Are part of the room.

Then like that precious life
You become less than you.
As for your sound state of mind
It's Over, It's Through.



Sicily, Italy: Sophie Auffret

OBJECTIFY ME by Tatiana Laing

Degrade me to the status of a mere object. A mere project of the system, a mere product a mere victim, to my past... I was free indeed but trapped inside these stronghold institutions. Didn't have the capacity to choose a woman president, didn't have the intellect to set a precedent among the ranks of the gender you more favored. College, not good enough for the knowledge that would allow me to- succeed...

Objectify me further, won't you? Seventy seven cents on his dollar is all I am worth to you. We're equal in work ethic, but don't share in the reward. Get home by five o'clock, pathetic, have dinner ready for the lord.

Don't stop, degrading. Hold on to what's fading. Your explicit power's wavering as I gain strength in the scheme of politics. But you've got tricks, subliminal messages whispered in the ears of the public. Interview me about my clothes, instead of my foes. Assume I'd answer better a question about shoe's rather than the what why's and who's of my expertise. Misleading me into self deprecating displays of what my image should be. Only praise he who is a him, with straight forward questions that beget straight forward answers. Then call him better faster stronger.

You mustn't slow down! You've been objectifying me all these years, all my fears of wearing a skirt that's a little too short or a dress a little too low cut. Cause if he rapes me, it'll be my fault. Such a slut, of course it was what I asked for. Furthermore if his seed takes hold, I shouldn't be so bold as to refuse it. It's always been his choice, my body, and what to do with it.

So I stood up, and decided not to let your objectification define me. I got up, and decided to take swift action against your misogyny; Swift action that left you in agony, begging me for mercy. Pleading for me to fall back in line, don't do the crime, fall back into systematic apathy. I refused, so you shackled me. Packaged me and shipped me off to a land lacking liberty. According to you, yeah, I was free. But what's freedom in a place that objectifies me?

The group piles into the lobby, excited and nervous about our day.

We were warned, warned about one thing. We were warned, warned about the smell.

The lobby is clean, shows no signs of what's behind the door, it almost smells like cotton candy. The head of the tour sees us with our noses in the air trying to detect the smell of despair.

He laughs and says, "Give it time, the smell will hit you so just be prepared"

We walk through the doors and there it is. Attacking the senses, forcing its way in. One intern coughs, another one gags. "What is that!?" we ask. "It ain't flowers" he says.

The whole jail smells this way, like men and body odor, and masses of people. Like short showers with no soap. Like sweat and tears. Rage and angst. Perspiration, preparation, indignation.

And the smell doesn't go away. Once you leave you can smell it the rest of the day. On your clothes, in your hair. Everywhere.

SURFACE TENSION by Cienna Breen

Do not assume
my unmarred skin
means I have not known pain

Do not assume
my heavy-lidded eyes
mean I haven't any fear

Do not assume
my steady hands
mean my pen does not tremble

Don't you dare assume
my lack of feeling
means I do not *feel*

I live in fear of the day
when they will reach beneath my sleeping head
to take from within my starched pillow case
a simple notebook in a weathered jacket
filled with words of hope and naïve sincerity
and quickly-fading memories of freedom
and in citing regulation they will take
not only my conquered reality
but also my dreams.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

I plead guilty
to the charge of
aligning his smirk
with the barrel of a gun
of watching his face transform
into a mirror of my own fear
of seeing his regret and laughing
because it was far too late
and far too self-serving
of taking some small joy
in this private act of vengeance
for this public brand of shame
of fingers clenched tightly 'round the trigger
so that he might finally understand
what I meant when I said no.

ACCOMODATIONS by Cienna Breen

Standing in the yard with the grass beneath your shoes and the bluest of skies stretching onward over the wall—that's when you really feel like all hope is lost. You want to be a cloud sailing over the wire, miles and miles above your own trail of destruction and your own stabbing regrets.

In the cell is where you come alive. Four white walls are your canvas; a lumpy mattress is your starship. It is here where your mind can escape, where you can escape, where your chains link all that is great and precious and unattainable to the confines of your reality. You read and write and draw and immerse yourself in endlessness so you can forget your own limitations, so you can overcome these limitations and start anew, because a clean slate is not regulation.

So you start over. You rebuild. You lay the bricks of your empathy with the mortar of your wisdom and found a community in the wreckage of your past. You tend to the twisting vines of your present and guide them up the lattice toward your future. They reach for the sun, as do you, as will every new soul that mends with the maturity that comes with realizing that this is Life, but it's also *life*.

And little by little you bestow upon yourself that which the institution withholds: rehabilitation.

I suppose I should start off by saying I'm innocent.

The records will tell you otherwise, of course, but straight from my mouth and my memory and the soul of my dead friend, I didn't do it. All evidence points to me, they sneer, but you can wag a blunt-nailed, accusatory finger at me all night and it won't change the fact that my hands are clean.

But prison is relentless. You go in strong, shouting at your cell to do its worst, and it does. It bends you, breaks you. Prison isn't chivalrous. For a woman such as myself, this is the end; if I leave here, I do so as something hardened and scarred, unmanageable and undesirable. To me, those changes may be negligible, but for a world hell-bent on regulating my identity, I have become something that cannot be salvaged; I carry my time and my resulting imperfections as jarringly bold as a neon warning sign around my neck.

And maybe the other women can sense my resignation—the real criminals, the ones determined to worm their way beneath my skin. Maybe that's why they push me, spit at me, scream in my face and send their palms sailing across my cheek. Maybe that's why my cell mate tortures me so, spewing vicious lies so poisonous that a few short breaths make me dizzy with confusion, crazy with delusion, a weeping lump of debilitating self-loathing, at rock bottom and sinking. But tonight, I'm breaking free. Tonight, I'm taking control of my fate.

With a blade tucked under my arm, I await my cell mate's arrival, blood thrumming with the anticipation of my awakening.

Oh, I'm innocent, alright.

But she's rounding the corner....

JUNGLE GYM by Cienna Breen

This uniform is not for school
Nor are these books for learning

The lumpy pillow on your bed
Won't end your homesick yearning
The steaming slop you're passed at lunch
Is not a home-cooked meal

These strangers aren't your wonderland
Their yellowed snarls are real
The young man smiling crookedly
Doesn't want to play

He'll slice his dagger through your side
And bleed you any day
Exhaustion-induced reveries
Don't mean the dawn will come

These bars are not your playground
For this cage is now your home



Mexico City, Mexico: Carla Mavaddat

I don't want to die.
Not in pain, not in vain.
But this is the price you say,
The price I pay,
for slaying a life away.

So,
 take
 take
 take away,
 For all the ugly things I did
 yesterday.

Forget about the good I've done,
Before the night that I held that gun.
Forget about the person I was,
A son, a brother, a father who loved.

So
 strip
 strip
 strip away,
 Take it all for your own
 tomorrow.

Just as you took my name and gave me a number,
Just as you took my home and gave me a cell,
Rid me of my forgiveness and penance,
Throw me down a sentence to hell.

So
 kill
 kill
 kill away,
 Tell them how the monsters pay:

*Let good vanquish evil on execution day,
For a villain's blood has been shed away.
Let us rejoice at his death
Let true justice ring,
in the face of our justice
and his endless suffering*

Split up into groups
like stanzas
We'll come back in the end
To make melodies:

“Write a poem on Plessy
A doggerel on Dred Scott
For our meter's messy
Gentle scholars we are not”

Let's fight this out
Like Foreman
Like a gunshot
Brains spilled on paper:

“Ain't nothin' mo' dangerous
than a man without
an ideology –
except a man with one”

Good, keep 'em closed
Keep writing
Rage, rage
Against the death of the light:

“I don' givvuh fuck 'bout this class
or your black ass?
How's that for a poem?”

Take this seriously, James
Book time's a privilege
I know you're frustrated
Don't give up:

“Peach fuzz right above her lips
The scent of a woman.
I sink into the fruit
And wake up alone”

Very powerful, Mo
Time's running out
Like the ink

in your pens:

“The hum of cicadas
In my homeland,
My people,
This prison”

Yall’s improvement is quick
I can breathe the
Sincerity
Of each word:

“Constant are the rugged ridges of each finger
Though my eyes were ghosts,
I left an imprint on each slug
And on the ones I turned to ghosts”

How dangerous writing can be!
Will you stash these slips of paper
In the sheets of your mattresses?
Tag each wall with each beckoning call?
Live in the library
‘Til you bust the bindings of each book,
before each sentence once again
constricts you?
Can you weave a ladder of Leviticus
To free lady Liberty?
Live in fear of the turnkeys
Looting, defiling, ransacking
Each treasured page
Until all that’s left
Is a jumble of
Formless phrases?
Who will listen to the refrains of
Rehabilitation,
Rejoice,
Restoration,
Renaissance?

Time’s up for today.
Truth, my friends, is a risky business.

Dropped outta Booker T High
For the School of Hard Knocks
I nevuuh gave a shit about no books
No poetry, no words
I think in numbers
The strategies, tactics
Of a down-n-dirty hustla

The Cat in the Hat?
I busted him up.
The Giving Tree?
More taking for me.
The Very Hungry Caterpillar?
That nigga still hungry.
Goodnight Moon?
Time to prowl.
Where the Wild Things Are?
Here.

Who give a fuck if I get written up?
Teachers say I won't amount to much?
Locked up
I got more connects than there are kids in class
More paper than torn-up texts
More marks on my head than teachers got F's
More eyes on me than a pair of spex

Shorties look up to me
The King of this Domain
Smokin' weed in the bathrooms
To clean out my brain
Your conked-headed book clubs
Speak nothin' to my soul
But I'll write a couple couplets
To get out on parole

Alexander and Julius are two boys who grew up in two completely different worlds.

The boys are opposites in character. Growing up, Alexander was the class bully, pushing and shoving other kids on the baseball field for no reason, laughing when he sees the tears of his next victim. Julius was the peacekeeper, the mediator, and inspired other kids in the classroom to act likewise. You can tell from a young age which kid is likely to spend time in prison at one point in his fragile life—right?

Wrong. There is a crucial difference between the life of Julius and Alexander.

Alexander will never spend a day in jail. Julius will end up on death row.

Alexander has several advantages over Julius. He will grow up in a middle class neighborhood, with providing, middle-class parents. He lives in a beautiful red brick house and was able to play with other kids daily on the cul-de-sac outside of his house. He will probably go to church at least a couple times in his young life. His teachers at school will be more patient with the few troubled students they encounter, and will help him develop better social and learning habits. But what it really comes down to is that Alexander's parents have money, and can provide a better life for their son, and an escape should he ever get into trouble.

Julius, although the kindest, most caring student in his class, is unfortunately disadvantaged in many ways, and this will ultimately land him on death row. Julius' parents are working full time to support their son and other children. He is left vulnerable, left to play on the dangerous streets in front of his house where drug dealers stand on the corner and recruit blossoming young men to the hustling business. His friends will idolize the greatest hustlers on the street, and he too, will work hard to be accepted within this population. As well-off Alexander rushes fraternities in college, Julius will be rushing gangs on the street, and ultimately get caught up in a violent cycle that will land him on death row.

You would never expect these two boys to go in the direction they did based on their personalities or character. It was a matter of environments that they had no role in choosing: they were shaped and changed and mutated by the grips of the settings they grew up in. It's a lab experiment that we see every day: Alexander the successful CEO and Julius the cold corpse both started at point A, but one was unfortunate enough to have been placed on a bumpy, curvier, thorn-ridden path. How is this right?

COLD by Randi Saunders

"How can you expect a man who's warm to understand one who's cold."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Cold

The people

The wind

The snow

The world

The ice—

And hard, too,

The drifts,

And white

A blur

Each day

Each week

Each month

A perpetual winter

Footprints filled

As soon as they are made

And yet

Sweat

Red with blood

The only reminder

That life

remains

The only spark

The tip

Of a cigar—

Flaring into life

For a moment

Then fading

And fading

Into gray

Into white

Into snow

Into night.

“You can’t trust them,” I remind the new kid.

“I know,” he says.

Kid doesn’t know anything. Not a damn thing. I know, he’s been through training. Been through all the manipulation training so some senior guard like me could maybe tell him that he can’t trust them and that he can’t give them anything but that doesn’t matter. He doesn’t get it.

He doesn’t get it because he’s young. Dammit but he’s young—got to be twenty-seven if that. They sent him over from county. County! Like county could ever prepare you for a place like this. County’s a damn picnic compared to this.

“This isn’t like your old patrol,” I remind him. “These people are hard. They’re gonna try to get shit from you. Just don’t give them anything.”

“I know. Prisoners are prisoners,” he says with a shrug. “Scum’s scum’s scum.”

Thank goodness he’s got that down.

“They’ll try to eat you alive,” I say. A last warning.

“Can’t be that bad,” he says.

I narrow my eyes. “You live local, son?”

“Sure, I live just down highway ten—”

I cut him off. “Not here you don’t. Here you don’t live anywhere. You got that? You don’t live local. You live in your office. You live nowhere.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because here you’re here. You’ll learn that fast enough I guess. You need to keep this place separate from everything else. Because they’re not your friends. They’ll try to make chatter with you, but you just ignore them. Build up a wall in your head and keep your life separate from here and you’ll be a happier man for it. Your wife—you have a wife? Whomever you’ve got at home, they think they want to hear about this place but they don’t,” I add. “And these prisoners, you don’t mention a damn thing to them.”

“Oh.” The kid pauses and then says, “But aren’t they here being reformed?”

This is what I was afraid of. Kid’s still too young. “Yeah, that’s what they say. But that’s danger-

ous thinking. You leave the reforming to the counselors, you hear me? Leave that to the counselors because you and me, we have a different job altogether. We keep order. We don't reform them."

"Thinking of them reforming makes you think it's okay to trust them," Chuck pipes in. "And you can't do that. You can't trust them. They're in solitary for a reason, kid. Just remember that." The kid nods, and I'm thinking we finally got through to him. He puts on a name tag that says "Ben Larson", and I try to remember that.

Ben Larson, I hope you don't get eaten alive today.

I'm just glad we don't have unit two. Unit two was throwing yesterday, and Brett reacted to that so much, and I'm sure they'll be throwing again today. Brett's another one who never learns. He's only in his second year, and I guess that's why, but you'd think after the first year he'd have figured it out.

That's why I look at the kid and sigh. "Ben, I know you've probably heard it too much already, but don't react to anything that happens in there."

"You can rant and cuss all you want in here during lunch or on your break," Chuck adds. "But don't so much as flinch when you're in those halls. That's what they want, see? You don't ever give'em what they want."

Ben nods, and there's nothing else I can say. I don't have another damn useful thing I can think of right off to keep him from screwing it up; he'll have to figure out the rest of it.

"Alright then...Jeffery, Ben, let's get a move on," I say with another sigh.

But I'm watching Ben as we start, because I've been here eight damn years and I know—I just know—those inmates are going to smell fresh meat and they're going to pounce. It's just a matter of when and how, and I hope it's just enough that Ben'll never fall for whatever he falls for again.

You can't trust them. I learned it the hard way, but I learned it true. Never, ever trust the inmates.

Turn the key
Hear the bolt
A steel barrier
Between them and us

And who are they?
The scum of the streets
The shadows in the corner
The monsters under the bed

Or maybe just

The products of
a country built
on lies and false hopes—
men who were told
they could fly
only to learn
all there was left to do
was to fall



Eastern Townships, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

and to be taken
broken
bruised
and blamed

to hear the world say it is
because of
single mothers
and marijuana
and sexual anarchists
and the unraveling
of the social fabric—

But they're not unraveling it at all.

They are just
The loose threads
Starting to fray
As we pretend that
The people in charge
Are not the ones
Letting it all fall apart.

In the yard
I keep my head low
attention outward
one eye open

in my cell,
attention inward
working out
my salvation

PARADISE by Katie Hart

I never knew
I lived in paradise
'til I landed in hell
and can only remember

I never knew
How much I loved
'til you were locked out
and I was locked in

I never knew
how blue the sky was
'til I didn't see it
but once a day

I never knew
how weak I was
'til my strength failed
when I needed it most

I never knew
how much I had lived
'til the freedom to live
was taken

I never knew
what true freedom meant
'til I was free no more
a prisoner-forever.

DREAMS II by Katie Hart

sipping my coffee I hear her
treading down the stairs
into the kitchen
offering her a plate of eggs
she kisses me good morning

and in her embrace
with the fleeting fragrance
of her shampoo
engulfing my senses
I know this is heaven

but I find myself rising
out of heaven
up, into conscience waking
onto my cot
into my last day
in hell

I live in this square cell
bare walls, hard bed
bad food, no friends

I heard tell once
'bout this pyramid
and I think it shows
how low I've fallen

I'm the bottom rung
incomplete, stuck
no way back up

I messed up once
and it cost me
and now I've lost me

my little friend
follows me around
all day
and some nights

within these prison
walls of concrete
bars of steel
she is there

flits and flirts
and fears not
she trusts me
to keep her safe

though she vanishes
when the lights
turn off
and dreams become

nightmare and
the worst nights-
the ones when I wake up
and she isn't there

I read a story once
where this boy's companion
got trapped inside the window
when it was shut too fast

and I worry that
one day
she won't make it back
into the cell at closing time



Paris, France: Sophie Auffret

My choice
your compromise

My success
your status quo

My education
your eradication

My system
your supervision

My decision
your fate

My law
your life

one at a time
draw back the curtain
show the man
with all his flaws--
violent, addicted,
illiterate
but draw the curtain
back a little further
and show the steps
that brought him here
uneven, dangerous
a perilous procession
into prison.

Slow System
Predictable Precedent
Ballooning Behemoth
Reform? Ridiculous!



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

PRISON STEW by Jaim Coddington

Prison stew simmers
Not enough to live, simple
Searing Survival.

Meat for the dark rack
Substantial suffering
Is it just enough?

Broth, soup, stew, gumbo
Strange ingredients, hungers
Shrouded chefs stirring.

Acrid prison stew
What alternative remains?
Know that we chose this.

I thought I knew the rules
The basic idea of the rules
Now I know them better.

I want to break them into a thousand pieces
But I cannot move, I cannot think, I cannot weep
I'm the broken one, and
Nothing I do now, or could have done then
Can put me back together again.

To think that I was on my way to salvation!
And that I couldn't
Stop myself from turning back to that smoldering spectacle -
What *you* call 'sin.'

Bored, impatient objectivity
Citizens and civil servants
Made sure that I'll remember that moment
For the rest of my death.

Now I'm dissipating in the wind and the rain
Now, I'm in the wrong place
Doing the wrong time.

If prisoners could vote,
Huey Newton's ghost would be running the country.
With daily addresses on pirated cassette tapes.
And the Presidential motorcade would have
Twelve inch rims and badass hydraulics.

If prisoners could vote,
The Constitution would read:
*"I leave niggas traumatized like they mama died/And they was responsible for the drive by
homicide"*
And kids in school would Pledge Allegiance
To Immortal Technique every morning.

If prisoners could vote,
There would be bombs on the Washington Bridge
Detonated every 4th of July
And McDonald's would gently phase out paper tender
In order to encourage purchases with 9mm bullets.

If prisoners could vote,
Dems would be Crips,
Reps would be Bloods,
And Supreme Court appointments
Would be debated via rap battle.

If prisoners could vote,
They'd elect the greater of two evils.
They'd keep the White House running red.
And God-fearing people like you and I
Well, we'd just be dead.
Right?

It was a splendid afternoon on Floral Avenue. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and the dogs were rutting to their heart's content.

And Mrs. Sheila Abernathy, having fed, burped, changed, and set her darling Suzette down for a nap, now set about cleaning the already spotless-kitchen in her second-best polka dot dress and pearls.

She rinsed the plates. She dried the plates. She straightened the curtains. She wiped the windows. She swept the floor. While she did all this, she hummed Cole Porter's "Anything Goes".

She refilled the water pitcher. She started the crock pot running, and put in tonight's dinner. She checked the smoke detector. She threw out the cans from Suzette's lunch.

Or rather, she *tried* to throw out the cans from Suzette's lunch.

"Hey!" exclaimed the banana mush. "The fuck you doin'?"

Mrs. Abernathy's blonde curls bobbed up and down as she snapped her neck around in surprise.

"I'm sorry?" she asked, incredulously.

"You can't throw me out!" cried the can. "I don't know what you think I done, but I ain't the one that done it!"

Mrs. Abernathy blinked. "I...don't know what you mean..." Her ruby-red lips tightened, though, and she moved closer to the garbage can. "You're trash..."

"Oh, *that's* nice," huffed the banana mush haughtily. "Oh, so I'm *trash* now? When I was pouring my guts out for your little girl, I was a choo-choo train headed down the fuckin' tunnel, and now I'm *trash*?"

Mrs. Abernathy's false eyelashes fluttered prettily as she thought. For fifteen seconds she thought, the longest time she had ever concentrated on one thing in her whole entire life. When she finally reached her conclusion, it was definitely the best choice she believed she had available to her.

"You're trash..." she insisted, opening the lid of the garbage can and holding her fist, with the banana mush inside it, over the stinking heap contained therein.

"NO!" shouted the banana mush. "No...please. *Please* don't throw me out, Ma'am. I'll be good, I promise! I won't do whatever it was again!"

“You’re trash,” repeated Mrs. Abernathy. “Don’t you want to...be with your friends?”

“My *friends?!?*” The banana mush choked back a laugh. “You see any Gerber’s in there, lady? Do I look like a *wrapper* to you? You see that yogurt there, you see it? That guy’s been waitin’ for me to get eaten for a good long while, he says. He’s been tellin’ me what he’s plannin’ to do when I finally get in there. At night while you all are asleep, he’s been muttering that he’s gonna...*please*, lady, you gotta help me!”

Mrs. Abernathy’s carefully manicured hand shook a bit as she regarded the yogurt. “I... don’t...believe you...” she said, looking away uncomfortably. “Can’t you just...”

“Look, there’s another way,” bargained the banana mush. “All you gotta do is give me a bit of a rinse, all right? Then you can pop me in the recycling!”

“We don’t...have a recycling plant here...”

“You...you don’t...you don’t *what?*”

“We don’t...have a recycling plant...”

“..”

“..”

“*Why the fuck not? Why the FUCK not?! What kind of two-bit-*”

“I’m going to...drop you now...”

“*-backwards-ass town-*”

“Okay then...”

“*-no forward-thinking-*”

“Goodbye.”

“*-waste of potential-HEY!*”

Mrs. Abernathy decided to take out the trash, even though the man wouldn’t be there until the next morning. While she walked back to the house, she hummed “Civilization” by Danny Kaye and the Andrews Sisters.

“We the jury do find the defendant Not Guilty, but Probably Guilty, Even Though There’s No Real Evidence, but We Don’t Want to Have Him Out Wandering Around with Our Kids and Wives and Everything if He is Guilty, but We Also Don’t Want to Find an Innocent Man Guilty, so You Do What You Think is Best, and Everything, Right?”

The words echo in Doug’s head again, and again he considers running, and again decides against it.

How the Hell did this happen, is what Doug wants to know. He had just been standing there, minding his own business, and some girl had tripped and fallen in the street in front of him, and been hit by a hovercar, and then some lady had pointed at him and sworn up and down that she had seen him push the poor girl, and some other guy had run up and told the lady to shut up, he had seen the whole thing and Doug hadn’t even been near the girl at the time, and then another person had run up, and before he knew it Doug was being kept in “protective custody” by police-bots, and then he was being put on trial, and then he was being found Probably Guilty?

Yes, come to think of it, that’s exactly how the Hell it had happened.

Doug supposes it could be worse: he could be on a shuttle for the prison planet right now, but that’s only for the Totally Guilty, and no self-respecting judge would sentence a Probably Guilty white non-mutant man to anything more severe than Stasis Suspension.

But at the same time...it could be a lot better, considering Doug is Totally Innocent, only Probably Guilty of one count of Being in the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time, which at worst is just a fine and a few weeks of probation. Unfortunately, due to recent advances in justice-delivering technology, facts and emotions are now equally admissible as evidence, and there had been plenty of emotions surrounding the death of a young girl, who, as it turns out, had been on her way to donate blood, so that was another Probably Guilty for her poor dead grandmother, and all fingers pointing at Doug.

Doug looks at his door yet again. He could run, but then he’d be Definitely Guilty, anyone would be able to see that, and what little protection he had left would straight-up disappear.

Indefinite Suspension isn’t so bad. He won’t age, he won’t have to pay taxes, and even though it’s “Indefinite,” at least it isn’t “Infinite.”

Well, here goes: the technicians are coming in, and Doug is passively letting them put his arms and legs in the stasis generators. They have him give verbal consent to Indefinite Suspension, wish him luck, and hit the button.

A great purple light takes Doug. He can’t see anything else, or feel anything, or even conjure up emotions like panic, or thoughts like, “will I get hungry or anything?” He’s in Suspen-

sion, Indefinitely, for his Probable crimes; he's sans thought, sans feeling. Sans touch, sans smell, sans taste, sans sight, sans hearing. Sans time - indefinitely.



St-Jovite, Canada: Sophie Auffret



(Smierciak, 2009)

Dignity Denied

The cages
The red bars
The long skinny stripes of light down the wall

Your knees on the ground
Your face turned down
Your proud nose pointed low

Your mouth is turned down too
In one dark line

And there are your hands
Behind your back
And that gloved hand
On your shoulder
(you're too dirty to touch)

Those scary black shoes
And those big navy pants
That say "government" and
"authority"
And "I'll cuff you now"

No nonsense
By the book
Tucked in
Keeping you in line



(Nicholson, 2012)

Caged

This looks like something out of a horror movie
Like *Saw III*
The box on the far left looks like an animal display
Or a scary prop for a haunted house
The padlocks are comically small
And the men inside look like saggy marshmallows
The smaller grates remind me of fishnet stockings
The kind that pinch your legs when you sit down
Or a cheese grater
That your mother always told you to handle with care
For fear of getting cut

But really
Those aren't fishnets
Or giant cheese graters

Those are cages Actual cages
Built to hold people

The cages look so small
Like they might feel claustrophobic
Or what if there was an emergency
And someone needed to get out fast?

It would be impossible

Do you see the chair and the guard in the reflection at all?

Maybe it's just the hint of blue

Or the presence of wheels on the stool

But somehow the reflection

Seems a thousand times more free

Than all the men in the cages put together

I live a life of privilege.
I get whatever I want,
Whenever I want.
People cater to my needs.

I have room service
Fresh food and snacks
Made by the finest culinary men
Delivered right to my door.

My barber does house calls,
He comes to me
When I need a trim
I don't have to lift a finger.

In the summer
A delivery man comes along
To make sure I get my fix
Of ice chips and cold drinks.

I'm always able to call people
On the Outs.
I'm on the list.
I've got connections.

Washing, drying, folding
My laundry,
I get it back fresh scented,
Clean, spotless, in one piece.

I could even have
A room cleaning service,
But I take care of that myself,
Like a real man.

Who would have thought
The underground prison businesses
Could make life
So comfortable?

I am prison royalty
King of my cramped domain

With time and a few luxuries
To spare

The bell rings –
Lunchtime.
Pile into the cafeteria,
Grab a tray
And some mystery meat.
The lunch ladies
Smile as you
Grab a chocolate milk
And pay for your lunch
With the three seventy-five
Mom gave you
This morning.
The bell rings –
Recess.
Run around
With your friends.
Fight over the swings,
Push a girl off the slide.
Uh oh,
Here comes a teacher.
Sent to the principal;
Do not pass GO
Do not collect
Two hundred dollars.

The bell rings –
Math.
No one likes math,
And it's worse when
You're already in
A bad mood.
Shoot a spitball
At the smelly kid.
The class laughs.
Equations and
Word games
Are your biggest problems.

The bell rings –
Liberty.

The bell rings –
Lunchtime.
Food thrown into your cell
Given a plate of
Mystery meat.
No tray, too dangerous.
The guards grimace
And grunt as you
Shovel your food
Into your mouth
While you avoid
Eye contact.
The bell rings –
Yard time.
But not for you.
Stuck inside
While others breathe
Fresh air.
Spit at a guard.
Uh oh,
Sent to the warden;
Do not pass GO
Do not collect
Two hundred dollars.

The bell rings –
Your attorney is here.
The most human interaction
You've had all day.
He breaks down
Any last hopes.
Back to your cell.
Use your shit as
A weapon.
Everyone's the smelly kid.
That's the least
Of your problems.

The bell rings –
Lockdown

I pace
And I pace and I pace
Back and forth
In an infinite loop.

You can't go very far
In the eerie, sterile quiet of
This long, narrow cube
With its long, narrow door.

I thought I'd get lonely in solitary.
But I'm not. I'm not even alone.
My thoughts won't ever go away.
They race and rush and roil

Until I'm too exhausted to think.
Sleep. Try to read. Pace some more.
Try to remember how it feels
To live outside my own mind.

They put me in here ages ago
To let my anger simmer down
But it flares up and goes off,
A solitary firework in an empty sky

That no one notices. Or cares about.
I can feel my blood boil.
Sitting here with my thoughts
I am not lonely. I seethe.

There's an entire universe outside
But will I ever see it again?
Or will I be left in here
And only see the inside of my head?

It's us versus them.
Good versus bad.
Think of them as others.
Don't give away trust so easily.

They want attention.
Give an inch, they'll take a mile.
Don't tip the balance of power
Or let them lure in new prey.

They say they hear voices.
They say the walls are closing in.
You feel sorry for them – at first.
But you can never be too careful.

We're taught to be skeptical.
After all, everyone here is a little crazy.
After all, this is a prison, not a picnic.
Everyone in here chose to be here
Crazy as that sounds.

So when they complain
They're losing their grip
Or they're scared
Keep your distance.

Don't show weakness.
No special treatment.
They're not sick.
They're faking it.

And when they sling shit at us
Or when they panic or speak in tongues
It's all an illusion, a trick.
You tell yourself they choose to be this way.

You aren't the problem here.
You're just doing your job.
Keep repeating that to yourself.
It's always us versus them
Crazy as that sounds.

I wasn't like this when I got here
And I can't know for sure when
I started to feel this way
But something has changed

Because I felt my hope disappear
Like a sun setting in a desert
The second my cell door shut.
No one cares about you here.

Because a shadow found me
And seeped into my veins,
A darkness so toxic and deep
I had to purge myself of it.

Because the razor-sharp caress
Of a makeshift knife
Felt like a sweet release
Across my taut, tired wrist.

And when the COs found me yesterday
I wanted them to forget I was there
So I could vanish into thin air
And fade into the black beyond

But they bandaged me up
And trapped the dark inside again
And put me in a tiny, lonely cell
While they stare like I'm in a zoo.

I don't know what happens next.
I don't know if I'll ever feel better
Or feel like the sun has risen again
But they're paying attention now.

When they let me out
I was a squinting newborn
Seeing the bright, loud world
With fresh eyes.

There had been times inside
When all the stress and anger
Made me think a demon
Would jump straight out of me

Frenzied, breathless nights
Of lightning fast thoughts
And thunderous feverish rambling
While I felt myself spiral down

Down into deep, dark pits,
Black hole vortexes of despair,
Where reality ended
And my mind began.

That's when the COS brought pills,
A kaleidoscope of chemical magic that
Made my eyes heavy like stones
And my tongue drag like lead

Until one day I finally felt
Like I could see clearly
For the very first time
Since all my trouble started.

I have these bottles full of miracles
To ensnare the manic monster,
But what happens
When the bottles are empty?

You pushed me out

You pushed me out
Into the street
Mama didn't have the time
Dad didn't have the money

Into the street
I ran headlong
Into a world of quick cash
A fast buck and a silver slug

I ran headlong
Past what could have been
To what you pushed me to become
And here I am

Past what could have been
Trapped in this tiny cell
Waiting for the next time
You tell me I'm not worthy

Trapped in this tiny cell
I roar to be heard
But you've taken away
My very voice

I roar to be heard
And the silence echoes back
Beyond the wrongs
That could have been righted

And the silence echoes back

White walls surround me
Cover me like a blanket
Keep me safe
Keep me warm

Outside is cruel
The bars don't stop
As screams pierce the silence
Of my concrete cocoon

Here I have time to think
To feel
To be
To grow

Inside this prison womb
I change from a crawling mass
To a beautiful creature
Flying free

But my wings will never open
Trapped
The bars don't stop
Silence and screams collide

Only time for time
Never stopping
Never moving forward
Upended, suspended

In my personal slice of hell
Thinking, feeling, being,
Living, but never getting to give
Back

I Believe in the Judge
The Decision Maker Almighty,
Creator of Freedom and Bondage;
And in the Judge on the Bench, his Reason, his Humanity,
Who was Conceived by Society,
Born of the Law,
Suffering as the new Pontius Pilate, duly
Elected, serves, and now buries me.
He descends into Court.
This day He arises again from the Politics;
He Ascends to his Seat,
Sitteth at the right hand of the Law,
Statues and Canons; from
Thence He shall come to Judge the Living and those who Wish they were Dead.
I Believe in the Judge, the
Holy laws guiding him, the
Release of those innocent, the
Rehabilitation of sinners, the
Resurrection of the body, and
Life everlasting.
Amen.



Death Valley, USA: Sophie Auffret

Alone
I sit here knowing
I have no family
I have no friends
Even guards shrink back from me

Alone
I sit here knowing
My lawyer does not defend me
He thinks I am scum

Alone
I sit here knowing
No one knows me, knows why I do
the things I do

Alone
I sit here knowing
Death Row means
The Death of Hope

Alone
I sit here knowing
Death waits for no man
The Gurney waits for me

Alone
I sit here knowing
I am condemned to die
Alone

Kids,
Meant to be playing on the playground,
Swinging from the monkey bars,
Laughing and smiling
Living life fully

The bell should ring,
The kids should file back into the classroom
Ready to be taught
How to read, how to write, how to speak
So that one day, when they grow up,
They can be successful and productive,
True members of society

But this doesn't happen

Broken homes,
Failed neighborhoods,
Lack of funding for education --
Blame it on whatever you'd like,
The truth remains clear
Bush was right,
"Our children isn't learning"

Instead, they're loose on the streets,
Doing drugs, robbing cars, killing people
Learning an entirely different form of education
That life is hard and justice is harder still
That if you're not white and rich, you hardly stand a chance
That no matter what you do, you're pretty much going to end up in jail or dead
Because of the neighborhood you were born in
And the injustice you were bathed in
And the hope you were denied

So why bother trying

Since these kids aren't in school,
They grow up to remain kids
Functionally & socially,
Just in bigger bodies
Until that inevitable day when the police come
And take them away
Off to the big kid's school,

The only one the state actually makes sure you go to,
Jail

I am me
Only I cannot be
Not if I want to be
Safe

Soft and tender
Fragile and Emotional
Full of worries and concerns
All of these traits describe me
Well

But they don't help you survive in the
"Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"
Existence that is life inside the prison walls

So I hide myself away
Behind a façade
My private prison wall
So that no one knows the true me



Northern France: Sophie Auffret

I act rough
tough
strong
confident
manly

Even though I am none of these things
And pray every day that no one will see
My act for what it is, an act
For if they do, that would be the end of me

So I repeat my maxim over and over again
“I am not me”
“I am not me”
“I am not me”
“I am not me”
Until I truly am myself no more

You have been dead for three years. It's been three years since you tired of the monotonous struggle that was your addiction, and stuck that needle in your arm for the last time. Now that you're gone, I don't think I will ever fully understand the incessant need you felt to inject poison into your veins. As I sit reflecting on a lifetime spent trying to save you, I know exactly when I realized there was something wrong with you. I know exactly when I took on the responsibility of being your savior.

We were driving down the street on our way home from your "friend's" house. I beg and beg until you allow me to sit in the front seat. I am always able to win you over in these arguments if I try hard enough, which I always do. The back seat makes me feel too far away from you, too disconnected. I sit marveling at your ability to street the car with your knees while holding a lighter under the spoon full of your precious "medicine", never spilling a drop.

The part that I am most fascinated by is the meticulous calculated movements involved in the way you draw the poison into the syringe. As you hold the spoon with your right hand you bring the top of the needle slowly toward that small puddle, flicking your wrist just before it reaches the edge of the spoon, like a small display of your excitement. As you draw the liquid slowly into the transparent cylinder, your breath draws in also filling your lung just as the syringe is being filled. Once it is full you play with it, adjusting the plunger and flicking the cylinder to extract all the air bubbles as you drive on, waiting for the next red light.

When that scarlet signal finally comes you let out a sigh of relief, the wait is finally over. The car comes to a stop. I watch the needle sink into your arm and the poison slowly drain into your veins. Your head falls back, your eyes close and that small, faint smile crosses your lips. At this moment you look completely at peace. At this moment you look so happy that I hate to ruin it by poling you to let you know the light has changed again, so I prolong it for just a little bit longer. It isn't until the cars behind us begin to honk their horns that I reach over and jerk you back to reality.

As we continue our drive down the long straight road I see the telltale signs of one of your nods coming on. Your mouth begins to sag open and your eyebrows rise as your eyelids slowly droop to a close. As your head falls forward your hand slips off the wheel causing the car to swerve. With this sudden jerk of the car your head shoots up and that forever protective right arm shoots out to prevent me from flying forward as you slam on the brakes.

You were always a good mom like that.

As you look over to make sure I'm okay you notice the red and blue lights flashing. You were so calm as you pull the car over. Your mind is too clouded by the toxins circulating in your bloodstream to remember the needle that has fallen into your lap, or the small bag of powder sitting in the groove under the emergency break. Because you are so calm, I do not realize that there is anything wrong until I see the expression on the police officer's face as he looks at me

and shakes his head. When he asks you to step out of the car I start getting nervous. I grab your hand and hold on as tight as possible as I begin climbing over the seat to follow you out of the car. When the police officer begins to yell at me to sit back down I begin to cry. You light squeeze my hand and tell me it is going to be okay, just sit back down, so I do, but I can see the fear in your eyes. I know that we are in trouble and I know that we need to stay together.

As you stand with your back against the window of the car I see the officer yelling at you. He is making me angry with the way he keeps pointing his finger in your face. The moment you look back at me with tears in your eyes I know that I cannot leave you alone with him any longer. I am not going to let him hurt you. The car door is still standing slightly ajar, so I climb over the seat, careful to avoid stepping on your discarded needle with my bare feet. The police officer is so consumed with lecturing you that he does not notice my movements until I have managed to slip through the door. As soon as I make it out of the car I immediately wrap my arms around your leg, grabbing on to the long strings hanging from your cut off shorts. When the officer begins yelling at me to get back in the car I start to cry even harder. I squeeze your leg and tell you over and over again, "It's going to be okay Momma, don't be scared, I'm here now" I hear the police officer get on his radio and request back up as you kneel down to hug me. You wipe the tears off my cheeks and brush the hair out of my face as you gently kiss my forehead. You whisper to me that we are going to be fine, but I can see in your face that we are not. I know that something really bad is getting ready to happen. I can feel it in my stomach.

Once the officer finishes talking on his radio he ushers us into the backseat of his police car. As you stand up I immediately wrap my arms back around your leg refusing to let go, and we begin the walk to the police car prolonged by your awkward gait. When the door to the police car closes I feel more secure and release my grip on you. Pressing my face against the glass of the window, I begin to glare at the police officer. I think that by staring at him hard enough I can annihilate him with my eyes. As I feel you grab me your touch reminds me of what my job really is. I am here because you need me. You pull me into your lap and begin to cry saying over and over, "I'm sorry baby, I'm so sorry."

When the second police car pulls up I see two women step out and begin walking toward us. The first police woman opens the car door and asks us to step out. You hold onto me together as you begin to slide forward toward the opening. Just before you reach the point where you have to stand up you pause, kiss me on the cheek and tell me you love me with all your heart.

That brief moment was the calm before the storm, a small moment of peace before the chaos ensued.

As we cross the threshold into the open air one of the female officers immediately grabs my waist and begins trying to pull me away from you. I resume my grip on your shorts as the lady begins coaxing me to let you. You also begin urging me to go with the nice lady, telling me that it will be okay, but I know better. I begin to scream, "No Momma, don't let them take me".

When the lady grabs my waist again she pulls even harder ripping you out of my arms; with me comes a handful of the strings from your shorts. No matter how hard I kick and thrash about, there is nothing that my six year old body can do to break free from this woman's grip. Restrained in this strange woman's arms I watch them press you up against the police car and place handcuffs of your wrists.

The woman holding me begins explaining that you have been bad and have to be taken to jail. You look so scared that I begin trying to reason with her. I tell her that you will be scared in jail all by yourself and that you need me to go with you. When this doesn't work I tell her that I have been bad too and need to go to jail also. I tell her everything that I can think of to convince her not to make me leave you. None of it works.

They place you in the back seat of one police car and me in the back seat of the other. As both cars begin to pull off and you slowly move out of my sight I can do nothing but rub the strings I still have from your shorts against my lips.

From that point on I knew you were broken. I knew that you would always need me. I knew that I would always have to be strong enough to carry both of us. In the end I wasn't. In the end I broke. It wasn't until I left you that you finally succeeded in taking your own life. I spent my life trying to save you. You only make it three months after I gave up. For this reason I will never be fully exonerated for your death. You will always be my worst failure.

Lost.

I've been here for a while now. Well, in here. I've been in here for a while now. I'm not really sure how long. Long enough to learn every sound and smell, but not long enough to understand.

I didn't mean to come here. It was an accident, really.

We were lost—my parents and me.

Our old home is gone. I'm not sure where it went, but they said it's gone. It was probably the two legged ones, humans or whatever—they don't like us much. Yeah, I think that's it. Humans.

We were looking for a new home when it happened. I fell behind, tangled in an object of the tunnels. They scurried ahead. The tunnels are not an easy place to find anything that is lost.

Lost. Was I lost? Were they lost? Neither has been found.

Wandering through the dark and winding tunnels, I wondered if I would find safety, warmth, food.

Eventually I saw an opening. Not too much light, but enough to draw me in, enough to give me hope.

I had to squeeze a little to get through. Head feet, two front legs, belly, two back legs, tail sliding through with ease. When I came out on the other side, it was dark, but not as dark as the tunnels. I was tired. I decided to rest for a while.

Now I have explored the whole place. Well, at least I think I have. I find new places sometimes, new things. I have looked for others like me. I haven't found any.

Maybe I should go back into the tunnels. Maybe not. But I haven't found another way out. No way out means warmth, protection...maybe food. It's scary out there. Dangerous out there. In here, I can relax.

I decided to stay, to explore. It's nice not having to worry about birds in here, or snakes. It doesn't rain either. I guess it won't be that bad after all. I would like to find a tree to sleep in, like my old home. I haven't found a tree in here, though.

Them.

I was surprised to find so many of those humans here.

Well, maybe these are humans. They look like the ones outside, but I've never seen those humans do anything like these ones. Usually you know it is a human because they only use two of their legs. Usually they all look different. Usually they don't look like this.

In here, there are only two kinds: the Ones that sleep in the cages and the Ones that just roam.

The Ones that sleep in cages all look the same. They wear the same clothes, the same shoes everyday. Regular humans all wear different clothes.

Their bodies look different too. Their heads don't stay up all the time; neither do their bodies really. Some of their backs curve so much it looks they're going to start walking like us, on all four legs. Humans never use four legs; this is another reason that they can't be humans. That would be something, the humans walking like us.

The Ones who just roam are strange too. They look like some humans I've seen outside who always wear the same clothes. Dark clothes. They all have a small shiny metal piece on their chest and shiny circles hooked on their hips.

Sometimes humans fight outside and they get their top legs attached with the shiny circles. Maybe this is why humans only use two legs, so they can still move if the top two get attached.

In here, I'm not sure what the Ones that just roam do. I've seen the Ones that sleep in cages fight before, a lot actually. But when they fight, the Ones who roam don't always use the shiny circles. They don't always make it stop either. I don't like the fighting. Too much noise.

I don't know what to make of them—the Ones in the cages and the Ones that just roam. Humans? I thought so at first, but now I'm not sure. Maybe almost humans.

Sounds.

I hear the sound every day, multiple times every day. I've tried to hide from it, but there is no escape. It fills the halls, bouncing off the walls and off the ceiling, surrounding me. It sends sharp spikes shooting into my body—freezing me for a moment.

I'm not sure where the sound comes from, but it is how I know that time is passing. Outside, the sky tells me when it is a new day. Here, a day begins and ends with the sound; this sound is not for the night. The night has its own sounds.

I only explore during the night. Some of the Ones who roam go away at night. This makes it easier to hide in the corners and the shadows. It is not completely dark, but it's dark enough.

Most of the Ones in cages sleep at night, but not all of them. Some scream, crying out endlessly.

I can hear them, but I cannot hear what they are saying. What are they crying for? Who are they crying for?

I wonder about the Ones who roam, I've never seen them sleep. But if they don't sleep, don't they hear this crying? They could stop the crying, but they don't. I don't like the crying.

I know it is finally morning when I hear that awful sound again. At least the crying stops for a little while. It's funny how they cry at night when no one is awake to listen, but the crying stops when the other Ones in the cages wake up.

After the first sound of each day, the crying Ones and the sleeping Ones start moving. They stretch, cough, yell and stretch again. They stand, sip, spit, sulk and stagger. They each do these differently, but all eventually end by standing at the door of their cages, waiting to be let out for the day. Always the same—yesterday, today, tomorrow.

Forever?

Jay.

I've never touched a human before. Usually they freeze, jump, or run if they see me. Some of them scream. I don't know why, I've never tried to touch one before. I've never wanted to touch one before. I know of others who have been tricked by them, trapped. Too many lives exchanged for one fleeting, tasty morsel.

Jay is different. He's one of the Ones that sleep in cages but he is not like the others. His cage is far away from the rest and the Ones who roam don't visit him much—only when he starts to scream. Jay doesn't do the stretching, coughing, spitting, sulking and staggering like the other Ones when that sound happens each morning. But he also doesn't have to stand at the door to his cage. He never gets out.

The first time I saw Jay he was sitting on the floor in the middle of his cage. He sat perfectly still, as if he had been frozen. If he had been frozen, it probably would have been by one of the Ones who roam. They never talk to Jay, unless they are yelling. They usually laugh.

They don't like Jay. I don't know why. He sits in his cage all day. He never fights like the other Ones. He doesn't even have anyone to fight with, except himself. I don't know why they always yell at Jay, but I am glad that they do not visit him often. I don't like the yelling.

When I saw Jay for the first time, sitting in the middle of his cage, I thought maybe he was sleeping. But his eyes were open. His eyes were going in all different directions. His head started to move with them. What was he looking at?

Next, Jay started slapping the ground. Every few seconds, his eyes would dart to one side and he would slap the ground with all his might. A few seconds later, his eyes would dart in a new direction and he would slap the ground over there too. "Gotcha," I'd hear him yell, "I've got you this time!" Every few slaps he would cheer for himself, "Keep up the good work Jay, you'll kill em' all someday."

This is how I know he is called Jay. Or, that he wants to be called Jay. The Ones who roam call him other things, like "Nutter," or "Basket Case." They also call him "Monster." They should just call him Jay. Maybe then he wouldn't be scared of Them.

When Jay saw me for the first time, he didn't freeze, jump or run. He smiled. We both just stayed still for a moment. Then he started talking at me. A human has never talked at me before. Jay can't be a human, only another almost human.

He said that he was happy to see me, and that he hadn't seen anything friendly in a long time. Friendly? Was I friendly? He said that he didn't want to be in here. "Neither do I!" I shouted, "I just got lost!" He just smiled. Could he hear me, or was he guessing that I would agree? I'm not sure any thing would actually want to stay here, wherever "here" is.

The Ones who roam bring Jay his food. This way they don't have to let him out of his cage. It makes Jay sad that they don't let him out of his cage, but it seems nice to me. A home where the food finds you. No searching and no chance of getting lost.

The next time I visited Jay he had a treat for me. He reached one of his top legs out. He was holding a small piece of bread. He put it on the floor and let me have the whole thing. This was not a trap. The bread reminded me of the snacks I used to find in the big containers that sit at the end of narrow streets, outside. The bread was very hard, so I had to chew it a lot to get it into my belly.

One part of the snack was different than the rest. It was a little fuzzy, like my fur almost but very soft. This part was delicious. I wonder why Jay didn't want to eat it? He never has much food; they only bring him a little, he says. Maybe he can tell the Ones who roam that he needs more food, that he's still hungry. He says they don't like him. They might yell at him more if he asks. I don't like the yelling.

Smaller Ones.

One day I found some Smaller Ones who sleep in cages. They also look like some humans outside, the ones who jump off the big yellow busses and run around the parks where some of my friends live. They climb in trees and chase each other. Sometimes they sing and dance. They laugh, run, smile, and jump. These Ones don't.

These Ones have bodies like the bigger Ones who sleep in cages. Their heads hang down, looking like they might fall off. Their backs curve in the same way, but some even more. Are they trying to walk on all four legs too?

There is one Smaller One that I hear them call Tim. Tim must have just gotten here too. His clothes are cleaner than the others, and he smells more like the humans I used to smell. But again this confuses me, if these are humans, why are they all here? If they aren't humans—if they're almost humans—have they always been here? If not, where did they come from? I've never seen them anywhere but here. Whatever they are, they should try to get out—no one seems very happy in here.

The bigger Ones who sleep in cages visit Tim a lot. They say they just want to talk to him, show him around. He doesn't like to talk to them; they do not make Tim happy. They tell him he has to be tough, has to protect himself.

Protect himself? From what? From whom? They tell him to be smart, not to be a rat because rats don't last long. I know that Tim isn't a rat. He is definitely not a rat—I know rats. I wonder how Tim could turn into one, or why he would try to, if rats don't last long.

What does he mean rats don't last long? I've got to get out of here...

Sometimes, Tim cries. He cries quietly but the bigger Ones always hear. The bigger Ones say they know how to make him happy again. They tell him they will share some magic with him if he gives them something for it. Tim says no. He says he doesn't do that stuff. They usually leave then, but they always come back.

I wonder why Tim doesn't want to be happy. I also wonder how the bigger Ones can make Tim happy. He would probably be happy if he could dance and run and climb like the smaller humans outside. I wonder if he ever did those things, before.

Julie.

Last night I was on my way to see Jay when I met another One like Jay, One who never comes out of his cage. Hidden. Away from the rest. I was thinking about how much I hoped Jay had a snack to share. It is hard to find food here sometimes. The Ones who sleep in cages always eat all of their food. Only Jay shares.

It was dark, but as I scurried along the silent hallway the other One caught my attention. He was doing something I had never seen any of the other Ones do before. He was up on two legs, walking from one side of his cage to the other. Back and forth...back and forth.

His head looked like it was on right, not hanging like the others. His back was straighter, more

like the humans. His eyes were closed, but he was smiling sometimes, laughing others. He was talking to someone named Julie. If he opened his eyes he would have seen that there was no one named Julie in his cage. Even though there was no Julie, he smiled. He smiled like Julie was in his cage too.

He said, “Here Julie, hold my hand. Left foot first, then right. Left...right...left...there you go, just take it slow. Try to make it to the wall by yourself. Don’t worry, I’ll be here to catch you if you slip.” He was smiling big. I wondered where Julie was, and why he was not there too. I miss my family, my pack.

After talking to Julie awhile longer about how to catch herself if she falls, and telling her that the only way to get better is to practice, he finally opened his eyes. After he opened them, his smile faded and he started to cry, but only softly. Not that anyone would hear it anyway.

He walked over to his bed laid down carefully and closed his eyes once more. I could still hear him crying. I hope he stops crying soon.

Jay, Free.

After leaving the One who talks to Julie I continued on to Jay’s cage, hoping he would have a tasty snack for me. I hope he has something with that soft fuzz on it. I’m glad Jay doesn’t like that part.

As I got closer to Jay’s cage, I got a funny feeling. There weren’t any sounds coming from Jay’s cage. Jay is usually quiet—he doesn’t want the Ones who roam to yell at him anymore—but I can usually hear him talking quietly to himself. There was no talking, no yelling.

Sleeping maybe, but Jay never liked to sleep much. He said when you sleep is when They can get you. When you can’t see Them, you can’t stop Them. I don’t know what he meant. Who was Them? Probably the Ones who roam. Jay said they didn’t like him. Jay never slept much.

Something was wrong. Maybe they let him out of his cage today. Probably not. Jay said They never want him to leave, so They never let him out of his cage. I don’t want Jay to leave, either. I like the tasty snacks he gives me.

A moment later I stop at Jay’s cage. This is where I am now. This is where I have stopped. It is dark, but I can see Jay’s whole cage. I can see the floor and the ceiling and all of the space in between. I can see Jay’s bed; I can Jay’s books. I can see a big object in the middle of Jay’s cage. I can see Jay’s clothes coming out of the object. It looks like what humans use for the food they don’t eat, the clothes they don’t want, stuff they don’t want, the stuff they don’t want.

It goes to the streets. It goes to the big containers at the end of narrow streets, outside. Other

humans get to have this stuff. Humans are good at sharing.

It goes to the streets. It goes outside.

This is it. I can get out, go back to...anywhere. I don't like it here. Here, there are no humans, only almost humans. Their heads don't stay up straight. What if they fall off? Can they get them back on?

This is my chance. I make my way in, climbing to the top of the object and fall down inside. I'll never forget this smell. Jay's smell. This is Jay's smell. It is a nice smell, a friendly smell. I think I'll rest here. Jay will have to come back for his clothes. Maybe. Hopefully.

Found.

I never sleep for a very long time. There is too much to explore and food to find. But this time I did. I slept until I heard that awful sound. It was morning again. I forgot where I was for a moment, engulfed in a sea of Jay's smell. I like Jay's smell.

Jay. I wonder if Jay is back. I can't hear anything, except for some voices far away. The voices are getting closer. The voices come from two of the Ones who roam.

Their voices get louder still. They are in Jay's cage. Why are they in Jay's cage? I have never seen them in Jay's cage. They don't like Jay.

I hear them.

"What should we do with this shit?"

"He doesn't have anybody. He didn't have anybody."

"Just put it out back then. It's just garbage anyway."

I feel the object, and myself with it, being lifted into the air. I am moving. I am flying. Flying. I wish I could fly. Birds would be less of a problem if I could fly.

I don't fly for long. Soon I hear sounds that I had forgotten. Is that a bird?

We stop moving and I fall down, hard. I start eating my way through the side of the object. This tastes familiar.

When I finally chew my way out I feel it immediately. Warm sun, fresh air...a cool breeze. I feel my fur stand up tall. It is cold out. I am outside. I am free. Free.

I am outside. Outside of what? I think about Jay. Is he outside, too? I wonder if I will find him. I know his smell. I will try.

I turn back to look at this place, the place where they keep these almost humans. That's what it must be for. The almost humans live here. But where do the almost humans come from? Why do they live here?

I do not know. As I look at this house for almost humans, it reminds me of somewhere I have been before. The walls are tall and solid. I couldn't eat my way through that, in or out. There are long sharp pieces of wire along the top, curving and winding, all the way around. Usually these houses hold animals that the smaller humans and bigger humans can look at. No touching.

These houses don't usually have almost humans.

Do the real humans know that the almost humans live here? Did the real humans build this house? They must have. How else did the walls and the wire get so high up?

Even though I am alone, I am happy outside. I have much more to explore, and new friends to meet. I can go find my most favorite foods if I want, and eat until I am full. I am most excited to never hear that awful sound again.

I don't think I will come back here. This is what makes me happiest of all. As long as I don't get lost in the tunnels, and accidentally find my way back in, I never have to come back. Not ever.

No more tunnels for me.

The almost humans are stuck. Forever? Maybe. Probably. It's nice that I don't have to be an almost human.

It's nice that I'm only a rat.

Darl: Monday, September 3rd, 2012

The newsman reported this morning that the fires continue to burn in the mountains outside Ruidoso. The winds have carried all that smoldering pine these 500 miles, and here at mid-day, the sun that is usually so oppressively bright sits half-hidden, half-dispersed behind a pale smoke screen. The heavy haze hangs, sticks to everything in the same manner it did that time early during my stay. It was close to daybreak when, while we were still sleeping, they fumigated the pods. Overrun with the summer scorpions, they said. Nothing to be done but smoke them out. For hours I curled in the concrete corner underneath the toilet-sink where there was just enough of a cracked seam in the cinderblock for a breath or two of fresh air to weasel in from outside. Hacking and coughing, I covered my nose and mouth with a threadbare t-shirt. I kept my eyes shut so tightly for so long the muscles in my cheeks went into spasms. The tears did not stop streaming for a week. That sort of thing would never fly these days, I suppose.

I rest my forehead on the chain-link and squint out over the landscape of brown sand and scrub that stretches out unbroken until it falls off abruptly at the end of the world like I imagine it must have in the time before Christopher Columbus. It is so God-awfully sweltering today that my spit begins to evaporate just as soon as it leaves my mouth; by the time it hits the asphalt, it's half gone.

I had intended to go for my usual jog around the perimeter of the rec pen. The high winds today, though, have whipped the shard-sharp sands across my bare legs so viciously that fine droplets of blood cling to my leg hairs. Even in these brutal gusts, the smothering smoke is slow to move; it slouches across the terrain in languid currents. Perhaps it would be prudent to just stand still for a moment longer. The deep breaths I take in through my nose fill my lungs with the yellow haze, with microscopic charred embers that have blown southwards across the entire state. I draw in bits of hot ash small enough to pass through the lining of my lungs and slip straight into my bloodstream. Particulate matter, they call it. The smallest parts of trees and shrubs, a few dozen houses and a grocery store, they say. Dumped into my blood, compelled ever forward by the beating of my heart. Minuscule pieces of the northern reaches of the state collect in my elbows and knees, settle in the knuckles of my fingers and toes. This inflammation is a pain that makes me think my insides are glowing orange-purple. I imagine the edge of an overly-sharp knife dragged across the pitted surface of my bare, burnt bones. Scrape, scrape, scrape. Blackened particles fleck off and enter the blood anew. There is a warmth in my organs. It is not the comforting warmth of the tight embrace of my mother or a good woman. It is the suffocating wet heat of a nine-by-five cell filled to bursting with noxious chemical gas at first light on an already blazing New Mexico morning.

I thought that maybe a good run would help to clear my blood. I thought that maybe the runner's high would lessen some of this lingering ache. I was wrong. Particulate matter. Poor air quality.

The tunnels of inch-thick razor wire just outside this chain-link fence are large enough to fit a grown man. They want you to think that maybe you could fit, that maybe if you dressed yourself in enough layers of canvas, you could just kind of shimmy through with a real minimum amount of bodily harm. They want you to try. There was a guy tried that exact thing once. This guy carved himself so badly, especially after taking that deep slice right across the belly, that he stopped halfway through, turned tail, and went straight for the facility's infirmary. The first thing the doctors did when he showed up was sound the prison break alarm. What away to go: all his stinking juices and fluids seeping out onto that dingy linoleum floor, dripping through the cracks, soaking into the building's foundation. I can tell you that when you lose that much blood, everything you see and feel has the edges blunted. You get this deep heaviness like a lead cherry pit trying to break through the bottom of your stomach, but at the same time, you're somehow lighter than air. Everything goes hinky. The light fixtures in the drop ceiling above become both like little stars winking miles away and a roaring fire they hold your feet over to get you to talk. That guy died serenaded by the whooping escape sirens; the searchlight hit the window every seven seconds and swept a blazing trail of brightness across the opposite wall. I bet he thought he was dying in a disco. I bet he thought they were throwing a party to celebrate his untimely departure.

On some days, when there's not this deathly fog hanging about the entire landscape, the sun will strike the razor wire in such a way that it becomes like one long coiling strand of pure light energy. I get this crazy notion like I'd like to run it through my fingers, like I'd like to pull it between my teeth. I'll be out here for a jog and I'll feel my throat go scratchy. I'll feel my chest constrict. I'll get so agitated I'll feel like the only thing that will offer any modicum relief would be to grab out at those strings of light and rake them across my soft body. Does that make me sound loony? The urges have gotten so bad a time or two that I've halted my jog, knelt down, and held my head in my hands. I've pushed my thumbs into my temples with such ferocity that the pain was enough to flip some kind of switch that allowed me to release, allowed me to go limp and breathe again. I've told the head-shrinker about this. She said that I have to fight these impulses for self-harm. She said I am inclined to self-mutilation. She made a note in my file.

But truly, all I'm looking for is a little bit of relief. Maybe if I could run myself through with fine threads of pure burning energy. Maybe if I could leave nothing of myself behind but little bits of flesh that turn shriveled and crispy in the blistering sun; scraps of tissue that become calloused, leathery, and part of the gruesome wire that holds us all in. Perhaps that would be relief.

Miss Laura dropped off a news article for me a few days ago. It was part of her lesson on current events aimed at getting me up to date for life on the outside. The article was titled, "An Explanation of the God Particle for the Rest of Us."

"This is a little abstract, Darl, and not really a need-to-know for good living outside these walls," she told me as she slipped the three loose pages beneath my cell door, "But I know you're

into science, and this one's been all over the news the past few days."

I had to read the article three or four times before I really started to get the gist of the whole thing. God's particles: Tiny pieces of terrestrial matter and planetary fluff that have been around since time began. More minuscule than anything else that's known. Minuscule like you could fit a billion of them inside the 'O' of a penny's "In God We Trust." But still so important that they allow everything in the known universe to acquire mass. They make it possible for all things to get heavy.

I smile and dust coats my wet teeth. Particles of sand and dirt are wedged up along my gums. The particulate matter hailing from the north swirls and drains the world to shades of gray. Is it comforting or disturbing to know that we are, all of us and everything, made of the exact same stuff?

I am fragments of fire suspended in the air. I am empty pieces of flesh left on the razor wire to bake in the sun. I am a single particle stuck along the gums of the universe.

I gaze across the murky landscape that expands forever on the other side of this fence that holds me in. Even if granted my release, after this lifetime, can I become a real part of all that?

The whistle blows signalling the end of rec.

Laura: Wednesday, September 5th, 2012

It is as difficult to get into this place as it is to get out. A big bulk of my morning is too often spent on the wrong side of compression-locked steel doors and electrically-bolted chain-link fences, waiting for the man in the booth hundreds of yards away to notice the little speck of me on the grainy security feed and buzz me through. Teachers don't carry radios; we can't call ahead. Sometimes a good strong whistle will alert the gate-minders, but on windy mornings like this, that long sustained note is just swept off by the gales into the empty desert. I wait alone in the howling silence.

The whole facility was up for an audit last week and they had the inmates working overtime to gussy-up the place. They gave all the hallways a fresh coat of that supposedly rosy, more nauseatingly Pepto-Bismol-tinged pink. I imagine it is the color of intestines. They waxed the floors and planted loads of big, beautiful Yucca shrubs throughout the grounds. After we passed the audit, security got paranoid that the workers had taken the opportunity to bury hoards of weapons in the dirt beneath the new plants. Overnight they uprooted them all and sifted through the mud. Now the shrubs are dried brown and desiccated, piled into the dumpsters behind the parking lot. The gaping holes in the ground remain. The other teachers in the department tell me that this isn't the first time this exact thing has happened. Piles of dead, broken,

brittle things everywhere. This is a strange place.

In the education department, I compile a few folders of work to take over to my students. I pop my head into my boss's office to let her know I'll be stepping out.

"Going to run some class materials out to the units. Be back in just a few," I say and turn to hurry off.

"What are you taking over?" she calls out as I've reached the department door.

"A few math packets for the GED students. Some re-entry and financial lit stuff for one of my outgoings," I answer and take a few cautious steps back into the area.

"Is your outgoing James Darling?"

"Um, yes," I answer, feigning distraction as I look through one of the folders, careful to avoid eye contact.

"You moved him into your re-entry course?"

"Standard procedure," I say, closing the folder and raising my gaze to look her in the eye. "He'll be up for parole at the end of the month and I just wanted to make sure we got the ball rolling in a timely manner."

I had expected some amount of frustration leveled in my direction after ignoring my boss's recommendation that I not grant Darl's request for enrollment. Her mouth, however, is contracted in that way that conveys concern more than anything else.

"He's a murderer," she says.

"Doesn't mean we can deprive him of an education," I retort.

"No, but it does mean that he'll have no chance of parole on this first go round."

"He knows that."

"Do you?"

"I'm just living up to my reputation as bleeding-heart idealist, I suppose," I say and turn to leave again.

"All of us were idealists when we first got here," she calls after me as I pass from the

department.

Out in the high security housing units, the living pods are color coordinated. Each unit consists of four pods: blue, green, yellow, and red. Everything in each pod - the cell doors, the steel stairs and railings, the common area tables and chairs bolted to the floor, even the pay phone tucked away in the corner - are painted a garishly vibrant shade of the pod's color. The inmates have given each pod a nickname according to its designated hue. The names put one in the mind of a greasy dive bar you'd encounter in some half-deserted mining town: Blue Pod is 'Sky High'; Green Pod is 'The Grassy Knoll' (otherwise known as 'Stoner's Paradise'); Yellow is 'The Piss Pod'; Red Pod is 'Hell'. The prevailing knowledge amongst the residents of the pods is that they are painted that way due to a government mind-control experiment looking to assess the effects of colored environments on violent behavior. Even in the few short months I have been here, I have had to disabuse my students of this notion time and time again. There is no convincing them, however, and even I begin to wonder, on occasion, if there just isn't some kernel of truth to all that nonsense.

Once I've made it into the unit's receiving area, I stoop down and holler through a fist-sized hole at the guard sitting behind the inch-thick Plexiglas: "Wonder if I could drop a few things off for some students in Red?"

"Sure thing, ma'am. Just need to bring Green in from the yard and we'll get you right in there," he says smacking his gum and never taking his eyes from the security monitor situated just to his left.

"Thanks," I say and move to the side of the small room. As soon as I've turned my back, I know he is staring at my ass.

The door leading to the yard gives a lurch and grinds open. Eight shirtless men troop in. Some wear headphones around their necks and old 90s disc men on their hips. They all stream sweat. They have spent their recreation time lifting weights in the yard and the veins criss-crossing their arms protrude in an almost violent fashion. The men have adorned themselves with all manner of gorgeously intricate tattoos of Spanish words, Aztec symbols and numbers, knives, crosses, and scythes. The ink swirls across their pectorals and shoulder blades, creeps up the knobs of vertebrae in their necks, branches out at the backs of their skulls, and covers the tops of their shaved heads like hoods. They are the illustrated men.

From this mass of hulking, marked humanity, I am greeted with wide smiles and a chorus of jovial 'Good Mornings.'

"How are you today, ma'am?" asks one of the number.

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine," I say. "How are you all?"

"Well, you know, same old shit, different day," says Cristobal, a GED student of mine.

"That fire up round Ruidoso must be a bitch," adds another of the group. "Even down here, everything's gone all smoky."

I've just started to respond to this comment when two officers step in from outside, each jostling his hands into a pair of latex gloves.

"You know the drill, amigos," says one.

"Aye, aye, captain," says Cristobal bitingly as he and the others drop their athletic shorts to the cement and stand clad only in their boxers with their palms to the wall. The two officers proceed to strip-search the group in front of me. I am not watching, but I know the officers are doing their best to be as brusque as possible, snapping the inmates' waistbands and aggressively cupping their hands between the men's thighs. The officers will usually wait until inside the pods to strip-search those returning from rec, but they have, on more than one occasion, simply stripped the inmates right here in receiving as I waited to be let into one of the pods to meet with students. They want to show the inmates just how little dignity they have left. They want to show me how wrong it is that I, a young woman, have brought myself to this environment. It is a humiliation on all fronts.

I give a heavy sigh and flip through one of the notebooks I have brought with me. I want to show them that I am not even the slightest bit uncomfortable or embarrassed. Though I am fuming internally, I dare not wear an expression that conveys anything save profound boredom. For those moments, the inmates and I are united in the seething sense of silent indignation we feel towards the guards.

Once the ritual has concluded and the group of prisoners has been shuffled into their pod, the door to Red Pod releases, finally allowing me inside. My pulse is still thundering in my ears from the effort of restraining my anger during that little charade just now. The red paint staining everything that exists within this great room does nothing to settle me; it feels as if it is twenty degrees hotter in here. The porter, Mr. Jackson, is the only one allowed out of his cell at this time of day. He stoops in the corner and sweeps a pile of detritus into a small dust pan.

"Ah, Miss Laura," he says straightening up and smiling, "Welcome to Hell. If there is anything I can do to better accommodate your stay, please do not hesitate to ask."

"Mr. Jackson, you've got that spiel down pat," I laugh and begin to feel my mood lighten.

"Just preparing for my impending career as a Wal-Mart greeter is all," he says returning to his work. After a pause, he adds, "Ah, just kidding, Wal-mart'll never take me."

Faces have begun popping into the small window panes on each cell door, curious to see who is visiting the pod this early in the morning. "Hello, hello!" I can hear their muffled cries through the sealed steel doors. I stand in the center of the room and wave.

My students' cells are on the upper tier. My Doc Marten boots make each footfall on the metal steps boom about the cavernous walls of the pod. The knife-proof vest I am required to wear underneath my button-down scrapes against my breasts. Unless I am holding a class inside the unit and my students need to gather in the common area, the cell doors cannot be opened while I am in the pod. For the moment, I will have to be content with communicating with my students by yelling at them through a seam in the bolted doors as I drop off their materials.

I leave the math booklets for three of my students who are studying to attain their GEDs. We exchange pleasantries; they ask if I am feeling better after having missed class last week due to a sinus infection. I spend a few minutes attempting to explain to one student how to divide fractions, but comprehension is hindered on both sides by the three-inch slab of steel separating us. By the time I have made it down the row to Darl's cell, I am hoarse from screaming.

I slide a packet underneath the door and wedge my face into the right-angle where the door meets the wall: "Good morning, Darl. I brought a few more financial lit pieces. This stuff mostly deals with credit."

"Thank you, Miss Laura," I hear his small voice escape through the seam. "Yes, credit: that is something I definitely need to acquaint myself with." I can hear him breathing heavily through his nose.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Oh, you know. I am just that snail slithering along the straight razor," he says. I know they have been playing *Apocalypse Now* over the prison's TVs. The guys have been quoting lines from the movie for weeks. Even still, I have to suppress a shudder when I hear Darl recite these lines.

"Surviving, huh?" I counter.

"You got it," comes the reply from the seam.

James Darling. I'd be hard-pressed to say that he is not my favorite student. At the very least, he is the most fascinating, and the only murderer allowed educational programming in this facility. Due to ever-mounting budgetary restrictions, state rules hold that an inmate must have, at most, ten years remaining on his sentence to take part in education. With sentencing intensifying in the way it has in recent years, it's a rarity to find a murderer who's less than twenty years to the door, not to mention ten. Darl's already been here for thirty years, and as I reminded my

boss this morning, his presumptive release date draws ever closer.

The real oddity of Darl grows not out of his crime, however, but from the fact that at present, he is only 46 years old. Involved in a robbery gone bad as a 16-year-old, in his life he's already spent twice as much time in prison as he had out of it. Topping out at five-foot-four, I tower over him when we stand face to face. He keeps a crew cut and I can see that the top of his head is covered in scars. Thirty years of prison food and sub-standard health-care have turned his skin a translucent yellow and caused all but his two front teeth to fall out. The inmates' standard uniform of green medical scrubs hang on him in a way that makes him appear even more gaunt than he really is. His demeanor is subdued, Zen-like, often soothing. When he smiles, he more exuberantly utilizes more facial muscles than anyone I have ever seen.

When we are afforded the rare opportunity to speak face to face, he is seldomly able to look me in the eye. He keeps his gaze trained on his hands, which he folds, fingers-intertwined, on the desk in front of him. I have noticed more than once that he clenches his fists so tightly during our conversations that his knuckles turn white. I believe it is a relief to him when we must carry on our interactions by screaming through this door. He is exceptionally bright - one of those inmates who has read every book in the prison library twice. When he had finally whittled away his sentence to less than ten years and was allowed to take part in education, he thrived.

I admit I am so fascinated by his situation, intellect, and manner of interaction that I seek out articles and newspaper clippings I think he might enjoy, just so I can bring them to him and we can mull them over. Anyone looking too closely would peg me as one of those woman prison staffers who falls for an inmate. But that is not it. That is not it at all.

A week ago I brought him a print out of an article describing the discovery of the 'God Particle': "Frightening to think that we're all made of the same fluff," he had said a few days later. Brilliant.

Darl: Friday, September 21st, 2012

The day draws closer.

Near on a decade ago I hit the ten-year mark for eligibility for parole. I was a young man then. In the dead of that night I cracked open a Snicker's bar I'd stashed from the canteen and threw myself a little party. I hopped around my room and even whooped a few times. The men in the cells adjacent banged on the walls wanting to know what was wrong.

"Ten years to the day, friends! Ten years to the day and I walk out that door and into the sunset!"

"Crazy mother fucker," said one.

“You ain’t never getting out of here, little brother,” said the other.

I have been preparing for the hearing. I am well aware that it is unlikely that I will be granted parole on my first try, but I do believe I have a strong case for release. I’ve got this hinky feeling like maybe things will go my way. I’ve been standing in front of the mirror, whispering my speech to myself:

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the parole board, I hope it will please you to know I’ve had no major citations for ten years. I’ve abstained from narcotics and have had clean urine analysis for more than twenty years. In the past decade, I’ve proven myself to be an exemplary student, attaining my GED and amassing almost enough college credits for an Associate’s Degree. I’ve completed three rounds of cognitive rehabilitation with flying colors and have my certificates here with me today to document my progress.” I will say these things as I hand over the glossy portfolio containing the record of all my accomplishments. Continuing on, I’ll say, “Included there you’ll also find written recommendations supporting my fortitude of character from the prison pastor, and from Miss Laura, my re-entry coordinator.” I will smile; teachers tell me all the time that I have a wonderful smile. I will close by saying, “I know I did a terrible thing and I can never take it back. But I have served my time according to the law, and I pray that you can find it in your hearts to forgive me and see that I am now a changed man.”

About the whole thing, I guess I am what they call “cautiously optimistic.”

It’s funny, but when I get myself into a rut of thinking that come Monday I might be walking out that door, I can’t seem to stop myself from slipping into all kinds of flashbacks. I am reliving these moments from my time here in such intricately aching detail. It’s like the greatest hits of Hell Pod. It’s like those retrospectives on crappy sitcoms when the character will look off into the distance, the image will go all wavy, and the harp music will play.

When I first got here, I was young and green. Fresh meat, they’d say. Being here on a murder rap gained me an ounce of prestige that would keep me safe only to a point; I needed to click-up, to join a gang. The guys I ran around with on the outside were all brown fellas, but the Hispanic gangs wanted no part of me in here. Though I privately rejected their philosophies, the Aryans were eager to have me, the fact being that the poor man I had killed was a Negro. To ensure my safety, I played the part. The swastika I had tattooed over my heart became infected almost immediately. The skin bubbled, cracked, and wept. The ink leaked from the borders of the symbol and crawled across the left-side of my chest in little tendrils. The medical staff gave me a handful of aspirin to deal with the pain. I lay in a delirium for days, puking into a bucket beside my bunk so fiercely that I tore stomach muscles. That is what I had to do to stay safe.

Another night, decades later, I was curled up, dealing again with a roiling inside my belly. I attributed it to an unusually strong reaction to the prison food. In those days, when we were on lockdown, our only sustenance was a log in the morning and a log in the evening. A fellow in

Hell Pod, a kitchen worker, once told us that they made the logs by blending together flour, egg substitute, imitation meat product, and water, pouring the mixture into bread pans, and baking them in the oven. The resulting little loaves of mush were among the foulest creations on God's green earth, but the alternative was to starve. An hour after choking down the evening log, my insides were writhing. I imagined that, after a week of lockdown, the kitchen staff had run out of some crucial ingredient and had just substituted drywall plaster or fiberglass insulation. Weeks later, I received a letter from my step-sister telling me that my mother had died that night I had been so sick. Though she never tried to see or contact me after I went in here twenty years earlier, my mother's death was devastating to me. I came to believe that my stomach distress that night was somehow connected to the departure of her spirit from this earth. Somehow, it meant that she had still cared for me. It meant that the universe was outraged that she was taken before we ever had the opportunity to see each other in the flesh again.

Tonight, I am consumed with these memories. I lie here on my bunk and can feel the same agonizing pain from hemorrhaging belly tissues and squirming intestines. It is so real that I break into a full-body cold sweat.

The day draws closer.

Laura: Sunday, September 23rd, 2012

Last weekend there was an attempted murder in Blue Pod. The inmates were out for rec when they jumped one of their crew and beat him so savagely he had nearly drowned in his own blood by the time the officers got him to the infirmary. Word is that he was fixing to snitch on a gangster housed in segregation. Whatever the reason, he is now on life support in an El Paso hospital. The officer who informed the education department of the attack said that he could hear the guy screaming from the front gate. The front gate and the rec pen are almost 200 yards apart from each other; he was screaming that loudly.

What's more disturbing? Knowing that one of your students was nearly murdered over the weekend, or that it was also your students who tried to do it? It is the night before Darl's hearing and I can't shake this sick sloshing feeling in the bottom of my stomach. I can't sleep.

I pull a stack of work materials from my bag. I shuffle papers and check that everything is in order for this week's upcoming classes. I flip through a stack of course-completion certificates that I've affixed with gold sticker seals of approval - a nice touch, I think. The certificates are printed on card stock and have a satisfying heft to them. My eyes come to rest on a note a student sent me through the prison mail. He is in the GED history class I teach. Last week a student had interrupted my lesson on Christopher Columbus and the New World to ask what I knew about all this "2012 Mayan prophecy whatnot." Intrigued by the question, I set aside my usual agitation at straying too far off topic and asked him why he wanted to know. "Oh, just something to look forward to, I guess," he replied. We all laughed. The next class I distributed a Newsweek

article explaining, and largely debunking, the end-of-the-world prediction. We didn't elaborate any further on the topic.

Friday morning I received the note from the student. It was written in pencil in the halting, unsteady hand you'd guess belonged to a middle schooler:

Dear Miss Laura, There's a rumor been going round the pods that if the apocalypse happens and martial laws declared the first thing the government will do is drop bombs on all the prisons so they won't have to worry about us running a-muck on top of all the other trouble. Do you know if this is true? Please send reply thru prison mail. Thank you.

I read this note over and over again. These days, everything is so strange. I know I will not sleep tonight.

THE HEARING: Monday, September 24th, 2012

It is early on a Monday morning and the three members of the parole board are bleary-eyed and groggy. In stark contrast to the board's sluggishness, the victim's rights activist sits alert at an opposite table. She drums her fingers on the laminate tabletop and shuffles her feet while flipping through documents in an open folder. Two women sit beside her at the table. Judging by the strong resemblance, they are mother and daughter. They sit stony-faced and stare straight ahead at a spot of peeling paint on the opposite wall. The daughter's eyes drift for a moment to the man sitting alone in a chair at the side of the room. He is situated at right angles to both tables. He is small of stature and sallow-skinned. His eyes are sunken deep into their sockets. His head is bowed and she can see that the skin beneath his thin hair is made up almost entirely of scar tissue. Though he is only 46 years old, any casual observer would swear that he is pushing 60. He sits with his hands folded on his lap, fingers intertwined. A manila folder is trapped between his forearms and the tops of his thighs. For a split second, the daughter's eyes move over the chains binding the man's hands and feet, and then snap back to the front of the room. It is a cramped enclosure and all parties bristle at the proximity of the others to themselves.

The board member farthest to the left checks his watch. "Ok, let's go ahead and get started," he says. "Mr. Darling, we are here today to determine your suitability for release. We'll start with a discussion of your crime and sentence as it stands. We will review your institutional record and program participation. We'll then hear from the parties opposing your parole. Finally, you'll be allowed a chance to speak on your behalf. Do you understand?"

All eyes in the room turn to the chained man in the chair. For a moment he is frozen in their penetrating stares. "Yes, sir," he says after a pause. Then he smiles. He is missing nearly all his teeth and his gums are varying shades of black and green. Everyone in the room shudders because they think he is hideous.

Another board member, a woman, begins to read aloud from the file opened on the table in front of her: “In 1982, 16-year-old James Darling and two others committed the robbery-homicide of 57-year-old Hal Washington. Mr. Darling subsequently pleaded guilty to murder and was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole after thirty years of time served. While incarcerated, he has been found guilty of twelve separate major disciplinary infractions, the majority of which are for failed drug tests and insubordination to corrections officers. Though he has never been involved in a violent altercation with another inmate, Mr. Darling has been positively identified as a member of the prison gang the Aryan Brotherhood. In the past ten years, he has taken advantage of a wide variety of educational programming, including GED and college courses.” As the woman finishes reading, the chained man looks anxiously from person to person, but every face in the room remains impassive.

The board member with the watch thanks the woman. “We’ll now hear testimony from the parties opposing Mr. Darling’s parole,” he says.

The victim’s rights activist raises her chin and adjusts her blazer. “Ladies and gentlemen of the parole board,” she begins, “The only thing you need to consider today is the fact that James Darling is a dangerous criminal who should, under no circumstances, be allowed re-admittance to the community. He demonstrated his murderous impulses at a young age, striking down Hal Washington, a loving husband and father, in cold blood. He is a bigot who, showing no remorse for the racially-motivated murder which he committed, joined the ranks of the hate-mongering Aryan Brotherhood once inside prison. Though he has reaped the benefits of a state-funded education, he has demonstrated his unwillingness to rehabilitate himself time and time again by committing an abundance of disciplinary infractions.” The activist pauses for a moment and sighs. “But I am not telling you anything you do not already know. I will leave it to Hal Washington’s daughter and grand-daughter to fully elucidate for you the reasons why Mr. Darling should never be granted a life outside prison.”

The parole board is largely unmoved by the activist’s oration, but look towards the two women with whom she shares the table. Nobody in the room looks at the chained man. His hands are clutched so tightly together that his knuckles have turned bright white. He is taking quick, shallow breaths through his nose. The skin on his exposed arms, neck, and face is beet red.

The mother clears her throat. She is shaking and there are already tears beginning to leak from the corners of her eyes. “James Darling killed my dad when I was 18 years old. I was still living at home and I was the one who found him that night with the knife still stuck between his ribs. Dead in a pool of blood. Alone.” She is crying harder now and turns to face the chained man while her daughter holds her hand. “My father was a good man. The best man. You took from our home that night a color TV and a wad of cash, but you’ll never know how much you have stolen from us. I count myself a good Christian woman, but even I cannot bring myself to forgive you and could not bear to live in a world where you are allowed to walk free.” She finishes

and breaks down in deep sobs. She, the daughter, and the activist sit embracing each other for several minutes.

The chained man's expression and posture have not changed, though his eyes have gone glassy and his pupils have dilated to such a degree that his green irises have vanished.

When it is the daughter's turn to speak, she steels herself, points at the chained man, and says only, "Because of you, I never met my grandfather. Because of you, my mother has lived with this pain for 30 years." She returns her gaze to the board members. She does not look upon the chained man again, not even when, moments later, he shifts his weight and the folder he has been holding in his lap falls, spilling to the floor a stack of type-written pages and certificates adorned with gold stickers.

The man with the watch speaks again, "Mr. Darling, have you anything to say on your behalf?"

The chained man opens and closes his mouth several times. He puckers his lips in an attempt to speak. He lifts his cuffed hands to his forehead, wipes his brow, and draws in a ragged breath. "No, sir," is his final reply.

A moment passes and the third member of the board speaks for the first time. "Very well, Mr. Darling. It is the recommendation of this board that you not be granted parole at this juncture. We will reconvene this hearing in two years time. We encourage you to continue your efforts to rehabilitate yourself. Thank you to those who attended and offered their testimony. That will be all."

An officer materializes to lead the chained man from the room. He appears to need assistance standing and leans heavily on the officer as they pass through the door. He leaves his papers scattered on the carpet.

Laura: Monday, October 1st, 2012

It is standard procedure for security to put an inmate who has been denied parole on a 72-hour lockdown. This is supposedly to avoid any instances of violence towards staff members from frustrated souls unable to bear the thought of another two years locked in this place. A week has passed before I am able to make it out to see Darl again. In the receiving area I ask the guard to buzz me through to Red Pod. In an uncharacteristic gesture, he looks me in the eye and says, "Why don't you leave the materials with me? I'll make sure they get to the right guys."

"I'd rather go in, I have a few students I need to speak to directly," I reply.

He gives a frustrated sigh, “Suit yourself. But kid, it isn’t pretty.”

I feel myself pale.

On the upper tier of Hell Pod I drop off math packets for my GED students. At the end of the line, Darl’s cell is dark and when I knock on the door I hear none of the shuffling that customarily attends me rousing a student from bed. I wedge my face into the seam where the door meets the wall. “Hi there, Darl. It’s me, Miss Laura. Just dropping off a few New York Times articles about the election that I thought you’d find interesting. I’ll swing by later this week and we can chat them up.” I slide the papers halfway under the door. I wait a few more moments, but hear no movements within. I breathe through my mouth because I am afraid of what I might smell.

When I return to Hell four days later, the papers have not moved.

Darl: Friday, October 5th, 2012

The thing about teachers. The thing is they build you up. The thing about this place, this Hell. The thing is this place isn’t any kind of real. This place is fear, but the real world is hate. Every so often you get a look into the real world. You get a little window to real people that just makes you know you’re still the same monster you never weren’t. Once you know, it’s easy to just let go. Once you know, it’s no big thing to fall to pieces. It is OK to disperse like ash into the atmosphere. It is a relief. Particulate matter.

For every homicide, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there are 94 nonfatal physically violent injuries treated in the emergency departments in hospitals.¹ In 2006, the homicide rate for black males, aged 15 to 24, was 92 in 100,000.² This statistic suggests that a high volume of black males with violent injuries made passes through the emergency rooms of many hospitals serving urban neighborhoods across the United States. The violence that characterizes these urban neighborhoods has consequently begun to characterize the young black males who have been injured by the violence as well. They are typically, or stereotypically regarded as senseless men whose defective characters have led them to make savage and inhumane decisions. It is assumed that these men lack a family and family values, live with an absence of religion and a faith in God, and have no control over their lives—lives with no clear future. Here, it is important to note that the media plays a significant role in this common misconception. Newspapers strategically produce a very skewed version of the true nature of violence in urban neighborhoods; leaving out “tragedies [that are] not considered dramatic enough to report” for the sake of grabbing the consumer’s attention.³ And for the stories that do make it to the public, these reports are typically followed with a “disclaimer” that “police are investigating whether the [incident] was gang or drug related.”⁴ This creates the notion that violence only occurs in urban neighborhoods if it involves gangs or drugs—a very important matter to consider when understanding the rigid stereotype that all young black urban men are gangsters, drug dealers, and “beasts.”⁵

Though violence in urban neighborhoods does often involve gang and drug violence, this is not the only form of violence that prevails. It can be more appropriately characterized as being uncontrolled and unaddressed. The penal system in many of these inner cities fails to exist. When jail sentences are given, they are not perceived as punishment; “We all go to prison at some point,” is a common reaction made by urban men.⁶ Community service requirements are also common for those involved in shootings and violence because imprisoning high volumes of criminals has caused prisons to become grossly overcrowded; there is simply not enough capacity to house more bodies.⁷ The lack of an alternative and effective penal system for the men involved in inner-city violence suggests that there is no hope for change for these individuals, and that producing such a system would be a waste of efforts. As a result, the criminals who do receive these lenient punishments act as a continual force of violence in urban neighborhoods. Their victims typically try to avoid and resist their violence; however, there are a number of pathways that act as precursors that allow this violence to persist.⁸ Arguments between friends can escalate out of control and result in fatality, targets can be formed by those seeking revenge, and

1 Rich, John A. (2009). *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*, p. ix. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

2 Id. at ix.

3 Id. at 6.

4 Id. at 39.

5 Id. at 16. The term “beast” was used by Mike Barnicle, a columnist for the *Boston Globe* newspaper, to refer to young black urban men.

6 Id. at 36.

7 Id. at 35.

8 Id. at 44.

victims are often fatally mistaken for other targeted individuals.¹ That being said, arguments and revenge are not matters that are unique to urban neighborhoods; instead, it is the violence that results from these matters that is particular to this population. The common reaction to this is to blame those living in violent neighborhoods for poor character, lapses in judgment, and savage behavior. However, the individuals are not the sole cause of violence, and the violence that they experience is not as senseless as it may seem.

Violence in urban neighborhoods is inescapable. Therefore, the priorities of individuals are safety and protection—for those who are either involved or uninvolved in gangs and drugs. They achieve protection by means of “being known.”² For the average American, this reputation is established through one’s residence, occupation, and family. However, within the city, reputation is gained by respect, and respect is achieved through violence.³ Having a record of injuring or killing others wards off other attackers; young men with these records are said to have “street cred,” and are the most insulated from street violence.⁴ To avoid being attacked by those who are en route to this status of having “street cred,” young urban men are compelled to act violently to also gain “street cred” and obtain a sense of protection from their neighborhood.⁵ As a result, the distinct and small crowd of gangsters that once characterized the ghetto is no longer the case today; rather, nearly every child is living to the standards of a “thug,” and many have access to guns because they simply do not feel safe.⁶ The gangbanging lifestyle has become “popular and recognized no matter where [one] go[es],” and the implications of this extend far beyond those who selectively engage in violence.⁷

There are in fact a select group of individuals living in urban neighborhoods who avoid violence at all costs. Like night crawlers, they leave their homes for work as the sun rises, and surreptitiously return in the shadows of the night. They wear inconspicuous clothing to mask their office attire as they maintain their invisibility from the rest of their neighborhood.⁸ Despite the inconvenience that arises from this, they remain isolated to protect themselves from the inevitable cycle of violence occurring in the rest of their neighborhood. This distinct division has two strong ramifications. First, the young males that are growing up in the presence of extreme violence see no alternative to this because the only positive examples are isolated from them. Although it is true that a gangster will make far more money than someone working a nine-to-five office job, it is possible to live in the inner city and strive for something greater than resorting to violence; however difficult being “good” can be, there are implicit benefits and possibilities that arise from it that are unseen by the rest of the neighborhood.⁹ Outside communities are also

1 Id. at 78-79.

2 Id. at 48.

3 Id. at 57.

4 Id. at 65.

5 Id. at 65.

6 Id. at 48.

7 Id. at 191.

8 Id. at 58.

9 Id. at 63.

blind to this possibility of being “good” while living within the inner city, which contributes to the running notion that all who live in these neighborhoods are “bad.” Doing “good” requires a strong and resilient individual, and too often hardships and obstacles discourage many from trying.¹

Ultimately, the most significant obstacle to the progress of inner cities as a whole is a strong prevalence of trauma. This trauma originates at the onset of violence, continues throughout the medical-care process, and resumes as the victim returns to the environment in which the violence occurred—if the victim is fortunate enough to survive. The initial experience deems to be so traumatizing, that many victims report envisioning their attacker’s face in their dreams and hallucinations.² In the first moments after their violent attack, they are met by police and emergency care personnel whose primary concern, from the victim’s point of view, is determining the suspect of the bloody crime, rather than focusing on the victim’s welfare.³ Upon arrival at the emergency room, the victim meets the emergency room nurses and doctors, whose sole goal is to stabilize and transfer the patient to the operating room as swiftly as possible. Being an automated, standardized, and choreographed process consisting of the same tests, assessments, protocols, and treatments for each and every patient, there is little room for consoling the patient.⁴ For inner-city hospitals, this process is repeated so often that it can appear more inhospitable than in other emergency rooms. And quite often, the comfort of a caring face is what these individuals need.

As soon as the patients’ wounds have stabilized in the hospital, they are tossed back into the violent neighborhoods that are responsible for their trauma.⁵ And though their physical wounds have begun to heal, their minds are still processing and understanding the pain and fear that is defeating them. These patients are in need of refuge, but hospitals lack the resources to provide this essential facility for them. Just as prisons cannot feasibly house any more criminals, hospitals cannot keep up with the overwhelming number of victims they receive; offering refuge for these victims surpasses the hospital’s role as a medical care institution.

In addition to having endured their own trauma, many victims have to cope with the injury or loss of a close relative or friend. This poses serious implications on the mental and physical post-hospital recovery process. Those who have lost a close companion to urban violence typically return to urban neighborhoods with strong feelings of anger and resentment. Victims often displace these feelings into efforts of seeking retaliation for the pain they are feeling. As a result, someone who may have never intermingled with violence is now contributing to it. For others, the mental effects of trauma are so severe that retaliation is not an option. Victims report feeling numb from the shock they have experienced—there is an absence of emotion in their lives,

1 Id. at 64.

2 Id. at 140-141.

3 Id. at 129.

4 Id. at 131.

5 Id. at 84.

which demobilizes them from taking action, both negative and positive.¹

The physical constraints on taking action are also very much present. Although the victims have been released from the hospital, they are still recovering from serious and painful injuries. Many have stitches, dressings, and therapy that require further hospital attention, but do not have the resources to retrieve this care. As a result, their wounds are left untreated and unhealed; putting them in uncompromising positions as they struggle to feed, support, and most importantly, protect themselves.² Their injuries strip their defenses from them; they are incapable of making the motions that could help them escape or resist an attack. Instead, these victims are forced to both hide within their neighborhoods, and rely on weapons as means of protection. The following excerpt by Dr. Sandra Bloom in *Creating Sanctuary*, writes:

“Like the leg in the cast, the emotions that are bound up and immobilized are unavailable for normal use, thus significantly restricting the range of emotional depth and breadth. When a leg is broken, muscles in the other leg often become hypertrophied or enlarged, throwing the usually well-balanced system out of alignment. With broken emotions, a similar experience occurs because other emotions fill in for the dissociated feelings.”³

As victims of violent crime return to their pre-traumatic lives, they return with a post-traumatic imbalance. The health effects of trauma ultimately fuel the cycle of violence as victims use violence and drugs to compensate for the emotional and physical voids in their lives. As a result, many victims find themselves returning to the emergency room with additional injuries caused by violence. These victims spend great amounts of time within the hospital walls, yet emergency room personnel generally hold similar misconceptions as the rest of the public regarding these individuals.

The tendency of most doctors is to classify victims of urban violence as either entirely innocent, or as hardened drug dealers. This classification is based on the first interaction the doctor has with the patient after surgery. Should the patient be calm, grateful, and conversational, he is placed in the “innocent” category.⁴ But if the patient is reticent, avoids eye contact, and complains, then he is assumed to be “guilty.”⁵ This subconscious classification mechanism has one very distinct flaw: in considering the intense trauma that preceded surgery and the extreme pain post-surgery, is there a single individual who would fit the qualifications of an “innocent” patient? Victims have not had more than a few moments to rationalize, understand, and accept what has happened to them—they are all still in a state of immense confusion and trauma as they have their first interaction with their doctor, and consequently always fit the character of a “guilty” patient. As a result, doctors immediately identify victims of urban violence as drug dealers and/or gangbangers because their only perspective of the inner city is the terrorized victim or

1 Id. at 90.

2 Id. at 137.

3 Id. at 101.

4 Id. at 77.

5 Id.

corpse that emerges from it. “[They] miss the moments of terror and pain that came before [the patient’s] arrival at the hospital” and “seldom saw the deeper scars that remained when [they] left the hospital physically healed but emotionally crippled.”¹ According to common medical practice, an emergency room doctor’s job is considered complete once the patient is stabilized.² This allows them to devote their full attention to their next patient, even though the current patient’s emotional scars will carry him forward to a troubled future. Doctors are often prevented from truly understanding their patients’ backgrounds, which allows for misconceptions to be formed.

This notion that an ER doctor’s role exists until his patient is stabilized is largely a product of the trauma that doctors also face in the emergency room. Patients often bring the hostility and chaos of their violent injuries with them to the ER. This acts as a force of second-hand trauma for the caregivers who are “marked by the trauma that swirl[s] around [them],” but have “no safe place to air that trauma.”³ As a result, the emotional distance they may present to their patients does “not always indicate a failure of empathy.”⁴ On the contrary, this emotional detachment often happens unknowingly. Dr. John A. Rich, in his text *Wrong place, Wrong Time* powerfully concludes the following about a patient:

“I was struck by how much of what I had to come to accept as normal in the course of saving a life, he interpreted as malicious. It had never occurred to me that a young patient in pain who had never before seen the inside of an operating room would interpret the mask that delivers life-sustaining oxygen as an instrument intended to suffocate him. All of the tubes that made it possible for him to breathe and to avoid infection seemed to him to be more menacing than the bullet that put him there.”⁵

The importance of perspective is evident in this rift between caregivers and their patients. The small window of time during which doctors can stabilize their patients does not allow for them to explain the foreign and traumatic medical aperture being forced onto the patient. And the need for doctors to move forward once their patient is stabilized, causes patients to maintain their initial assumptions that these doctors were careless and intentionally hurting them—a caregiver’s utmost concern with their patient’s physical health is not always as explicit as they presume and hope it is.

This emotional disconnect applies primarily to doctors who have practiced for a number of years. Young doctors hold an explicit commitment to their profession; they express values of compassion, empathy, and altruism towards their patients, which makes them more vulnerable commitment to their role as doctors; detachment, self-interest, and objectification have

1 Id. at 96.

2 Id. at 97.

3 Id. at 81.

4 Austin, Paul. (2008). *Something for the Pain: Compassion and Burnout in the ER*, p. 42. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

5 Rich, John A. (2009). *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*, p. 131. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

to second-hand trauma in the emergency room.¹ More experienced doctors have learned a tacit proven to be necessary in order to perform one's job effectively and efficiently.² In many emergency circumstances, the last mode of action that a doctor wants to take is to view their patient as a human being. Being reminded of a family member, child, wife, or friend when a comparable patient arrives to the ER in critical condition can be mentally and emotionally scarring. Doctors dehumanize their patients as a means of protection; to ensure mental health despite the high volume of patients entering the hospital in varying conditions, and most importantly, to ensure that they can make medical decisions for the patient's best interest. The emotional and legal ramifications that arise from making improper life-or-death decisions are so severe, that doctors often need to be outwardly confident in their actions—causing them to appear even further emotionally detached from their patients.

In reality however, many of these doctors are more similar to their patients than they will ever come to admit.³ The vast majority of the patients who arrive in these hospitals are not the menacing sociopaths that many assume they are, and “the doctors and nurses and emergency medical staff who care for these patients are not monsters either.”⁴ The overwhelming number of young individuals who have been affected by urban violence has hardened both medical providers and patients. The implicit biases that both parties hold regarding one another is a reflection of the trauma that both endure on a daily basis. As care providers, however, there is an inherent responsibility to consciously understand this disconnection, determine how to change it, and hold one another accountable to draw this gap together.⁵

This understanding must first begin with the role of the medical caregiver—the individual who shares the largest and closest boundary with victims of inner-city violence—and should progress to include all members of the community. As Dr. Paul Austin poetically states:

“a doctor's demeanor at the bedside reflects who he or she is, but it also reflects techniques that have been learned... Compassion isn't an emotion. It's an action. A discipline... like the aperture of a camera that opens and closes, I'm learning to vary my emotional permeability. Sometimes, a hard glaze is needed to squeak a patient through a tight spot' other times, I need to open up to acknowledge someone's pain, or fear... it takes practice, and I'm still learning how to do it... The effort of opening and closing the emotional aperture twenty times a day is exhausting, but the other options are not sustainable. If my only response was cynical detachment, I'd lose connection with my family, coworkers, and patients. If I remained fully open to the pain and risk around me, I'd be paralyzed.”⁶

1 Austin, Paul. (2008). *Something for the Pain: Compassion and Burnout in the ER*, p. 66. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

2 Id.

3 Rich, John A. (2009). *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*, p. 197. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

4 Id.

5 Id. at 198.

6 Austin, Paul. (2008). *Something for the Pain: Compassion and Burnout in the ER*, p. 293. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

It takes a strong-minded, strong-willed, and strong-hearted individual to become an emergency medical caregiver; it takes even greater strength to provide care to a neighborhood that is overflowing in trauma. Having the goal of stopping this trauma in its entirety—and the violence that precedes it—is not feasible. Using this strength to physically, mentally, and emotionally heal those who have been impacted by trauma, however, can curb the violence that doctors are seeing their patients suffer from each and every day.

AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Grace Austin is a freshman honors student at American University. She is a member of the AU women's rugby team and is in the SPA leadership program. She is a Justice and Law major with an interest in Psychology and Behavioral Neuroscience.

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Sarah Casey is a junior at American University in Washington D.C. where she double majors in Law & Society and Women & Gender Studies. Originally from Afton, Minnesota, Sarah has been involved in community outreach and engagement since high school and enjoys nothing more than getting involved in reform efforts. In the future, Casey hopes to become involved in policy work relating to the criminal justice system. The poems in this collection were written for a class at American University entitled Prison Survival.

Jaim Coddington was born and grew up in Boulder, Colorado. He graduated from American University's School of International Service in December 2012 with a major in International Studies, a minor in Russian language, and university Honors. He is fascinated by literary portrayals of prison survival and social justice, particularly in Russian literature.

Paul Grobman is an honors student at American University currently pursuing a self-made interdisciplinary studies major in Cognitive & Legal Studies with a minor in Law & Society. His interests are in the ways that the fields of philosophy and psychology shape human understanding, which in turn form the basis for all legal systems. Originally from Buffalo Grove, Illinois, he wishes to use his understanding of the foundations of law to educate others and to work to change policy in a way that makes law more just.

Katie Hart is a junior at American University, double majoring in Philosophy and Law & Society. On campus she is the vice-president of philanthropy for her sorority, as well as the sailing team treasurer; off campus she spent the fall semester interning for the Global Freedom Center, working to end modern slavery. After graduating from AU she would like to attend law school, though she is currently unsure which field of the legal system she would like to work in.

Joanna Heaney is an undergraduate in the honors program at American University and is majoring in Public Communication with a minor in Law and Society. Originally from Rhode Island, Heaney came to DC to pursue her interest in government and politics but has developed interest in the more broad concepts of liberty, justice, and individual choice. She looks forward to continuing to study these concepts within the justice and legal systems and to challenging her opinions.

Emily Horowitz is an undergraduate honors student at American University. She is pursuing an interdisciplinary study major in Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics, and Government (CLEG). Horowitz is also a member of the School of Public Affairs Leadership Program. Past written work has been published in The Huffington Post. She is passionate about civil rights and equalities, and hopes to continue her efforts to promote these ideas.

Christine Hwang is a sophomore studying Political Science and Psychology at American University in Washington, D.C. After graduation, she plans to attend law school and focus on a career in criminal justice. She is a strong advocate of women and minority rights and plans to dedicate her life to fighting social injustice.

Laura Jernegan is a senior in American University's School of Public Affairs where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Law and Society. Laura is passionate about establishing a stronger connection between the American public and the penal system and has enjoyed experimenting with public awareness through a creative lens. This is Laura's first creative work but she plans to continue writing short stories about justice issues with the hope of engaging a wide audience of readers.

Sara Johnson is a junior at American University. She is pursuing an honors degree in Art History with minors in Studio Art and French. She is currently interning at the Washington National Cathedral, working in the archives. She moved to D.C. from New Jersey in hopes of working in the thriving community of museums, libraries, and archives and pursuing a graduate degree in

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L. Caitlin Kanewske is a graduate student at American University in the Department of Justice, Law, and Society. She graduated summa cum laude from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In 2011 she was an inaugural participant in the AmeriCorps OARS (Opportunities with AmeriCorps for Reentry Success) program, which aims to facilitate offenders' successful re-entry to society following incarceration. She taught a range of subjects – including cognitive rehabilitation, creative writing, GED skills, financial literacy, and college courses – to inmates at the Southern New Mexico Correction Facility in Las Cruces, NM. Her work with inmates and the criminal justice system inspired her to apply her writing talent to a career in prison reform and prisoner rights activism.

Allison Kroboth is a prisoner at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women.

Tatiana Laing is an Honors student in the School of Public Affairs at American University. She is majoring in CLEG (Communications, Law, Economics, Government) and has a deep interest in creative writing and public policy. She hopes to go to Law School to enable herself to someday take an active role in creating social justice. Laing believes that writing can be a powerful tool in bringing forth positive change in the world.

Ariana Mozafari is a freshman at the American University in Washington, DC. She plans to double major in Justice and Law and Communications, and hopes to someday work to better the imperfect American justice system.

Kaeley Majewski is a senior honors student at American University studying Psychology. After graduation she hopes to continue her education by pursuing a Masters in Clinical Psychology. She has been writing poems and short stories since the age of 11 and has just recently started writing poems about justice and the prison system in America. Professor Johnson has been a huge inspiration for her work.

Tony Malinauskas is an honors Literature major at American University. He is originally from the untamed wilderness of Maryland, but moved to Washington, DC in the hopes that he could become best friends with the president. While not playing volleyball, Tony can be found playing other sports. He hopes to one day write things that make people learn things without giving them that awful "learning" feeling.

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Samantha Oakes is a senior at American University pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Justice. Her love for law is combined with her passion for musical theater. She is originally from

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Elizabeth Rademacher is a senior majoring in Law and Society with a minor in Psychology at American University in Washington, DC. An occasional poet and avid reader, she is passionate about civil rights law and plans to attend law school after graduation.

Randi Saunders is a junior in the Honors Program at American University, majoring in International Studies and Sociology with a focus on health issues. Her studies on intersectionality, identity and oppression have helped to shape her understanding of various social and justice-related issues. Saunders is committed to the advancement of human dignity both in the United States and abroad, and hopes to pursue a research.

Justin Song is a senior at American University, intending to graduate in May 2013 with a BA in Law and Society and a minor in Philosophy. He was born and raised in Ithaca, New York where he found a passion for crew, cycling, and reading. He currently works at the Cato Institute as a research assistant, and his academic interests strongly lean towards human rights; specifically how individual liberties stand in relationship with authority, although he enjoys to compulsively read anything he can get his hands on. Justin likes to stay active, so his recreational interests include cycling, running and rowing whenever he has a chance.

Saba Tabriz is an honors Pre-Medical student at American University majoring in Psychology and Business Administration. Her interests span a number of disciplines, but Tabriz is particularly interested in the human anatomy as understood by science, as well as abstract notions of life, death, and everything in between.

Bryan Yannantuono is a senior at American University double majoring in Political Science and International Relations. His interest in prisons, inequality, criminal justice, and poetry go back to his high school days when he would read the works of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Malcolm X instead of paying attention in class. He is deeply dedicated to community service, founding Students Fighting Homelessness and Hunger, working with inner city youth as a DC Reads tutor, and serving as Deputy Director of AU's Community Service Coalition. As anyone who knows him can attest, he is also an aspiring China hand and will hopefully be conducting research on civil society and philanthropy in Beijing after graduation.

EDITORS

Robert Johnson is a professor of Justice, Law, and Society at American University and a widely published author of fiction and nonfiction dealing with crime and punishment. His short story, "The Practice of Killing," won the Wild Violet Fiction Contest in 2003. Several of his works have been adapted for the stage. His best known work of social science, *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, won the Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

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