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taccernada

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TACENDA LITERARY MAGAZINE

Spring 2010 Edition

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

TACENDA: n., pronounced ta'KEN'da – 'things better left unsaid'

The short stories and poems featured in the Spring 2010 Edition of *Tacenda Literary Magazine* offer a wide array of perspectives on crime and punishment. But more importantly, each of the selected pieces portray, directly or indirectly, the underlying flaws and far reaching consequences of our present-day justice system in ways that are unique, thoughtful, and worthy of praise.

Works like Jaime Johnson's "Little Sally" and Jane Dempsey & Robert Johnson's "How Do You Spell Murder?" force us to contemplate issues of mental capacity and responsibility. We must ponder whether we can really hold men and women accountable for their behaviors when they clearly demonstrate an inability to reason and, ultimately, make decisions maturely.

Similarly, the poems in this collection shed light on the dismal punitive practices on our society. We come to well understand the implications of these practices through Joseph Pelz's vivid descriptions of a world void of emotions and life altogether as a consequence of our ever punitive ways, and Zachary W. Faden's stark depictions of the dark and meaningless dejection that is living, or existing rather, in prison.

And finally, pieces like Shirin Karimi's "Nine Circles" and Rachel C. Cupelo's "There But For the Grace of God Go I" remind us that the pains we experience and the special moments we share with others connect us all as people. And that perhaps, if for no other reason at all, our shared humanity warrants that we revisit some of the destructive policies and rigid and impersonal procedures that brutally demean our fellow men and women who, despite their criminality, are people nonetheless.

As this edition of *Tacenda Literary Magazine* unfolds, the reader is taken on a journey that exposes truths and sparks internal debates about these and other critical issues of crime and punishment. I can only hope that these internal debates then manifest themselves in open dialogue, allowing for the voices and perspectives of others to be engaged as well. For only from this sort of discussion and exchanging of views can we learn and be empowered to change our justice system and society for the better.

Sonia Tabriz
Editor-In-Chief, *Tacenda Literary Magazine*

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Fallen (A City)

Joseph Pelz

Downtown was off color,
birds didn't sing
 and for a brief second
 not even filthy black rats
 could scurry across the street.
As quiet as any country cemetery,
as hollow and lifeless as a morgue
 the concrete and steel edifices
 of our day and age
 become tomb markers of megalomania.
They were a jewel,
the arrogant pride and joy
 of a civilization
 believed in a life eternal
 and unfailing security.
But how does arrogance hurt!
Blind to the suffering
 of the very people
 who like millions of cancerous
 cells ate away at the soft belly.
And as all good things must go,
for delight and merriment
 would be too much
 and far too destructive
 for one greedy city.
It was not a vindictive slight,
nor is it a spiteful scowl
 but more of fate
 pure and sweet
 that scurries across a city street.

Emotionless

Joseph Pelz

It is a haunting thing
 when lights go out
 and skin is enveloped by night.
Blackness is a blanket
 covering words
 and hiding away feelings-
 things we dare not express.
It seems as if the year has held
 with an iron grip
 to a moonless sky.
Behind each shadow
 is a specter of myself
 creeping and lurking.
Nothing stirs and nothing twitches.
Even blood runs like a river of ice
 so cold it cannot even curdle.

Slowly a pounding echoes,
throbbing through the midnight air.
 onto strained ears.
Pupils dilate in fear,
fear of some unknown
 hapless beast dragging steely
 claws across the ground.
Yes, anxious is the pawing
 and hoarse foul breath
 intoxicating with the purest seething.
When the lights go out
 the dim flame within comes on
 in all the primal glory of
 emotion...less.

Pieces of Time

Casey McFarland

I always think about what I can't remember. But I don't really like trying to remember, it makes me feel bad. That's why I don't even bother trying to sleep much. I end up spending the dark time just lying on my back praying dreams will overtake my brain to stop the flashes of the night that got me in trouble. So instead, while everybody else is sleeping (or yelling from scary dreams) I do sit-ups for about an hour (or until I get two thousand or so) then I do pushups for about another hour. This way I'll pass out from exhaustion for a few hours. By the time I wake up the lights are usually back on so I try to read my cellmate's books 'cause she doesn't get up 'til they bang on our bars to get down to breakfast. But sometimes it's just too hard. It's funny how sleep used to be my favorite part of the day. But there's no reason for me to be well-rested now so I just keep my mind busy, keep it from straying to the puddle of blood I saw at my feet. But like I said I don't let my mind go there 'cause there's nothing to know anyway.

I was put here 'cause of 2nd murder 'cause the lawyer guy said stuff about evidence they had me on. He had said it didn't make a difference if I didn't remember cutting Gary's throat six times. He said there were fingerprints and something else of mine in his apartment (it was some letters I don't think were mine). I remember the blood oozing out of his neck onto my feet. I remember his dark blue eyes were still open and that they still looked angry. I don't remember why I was at his place or the knife or really anything else besides that one image that I'm not supposed to be thinking about. I suppose Gary must of just said something that upset me. 'Cause I don't think I would do something like that.

If my cellmate wakes up I'll start doing more exercises. It's hard to find anything else to do besides jumping jacks or my sit-ups and pushups 'cause there's no room for running. Sometimes Cecilia (that's my cellmate) doesn't like when I work out 'cause she says, "You're just moving all the hot air around and making it stuffy," or "For god's sake, you're big enough." That's why at night I do my sit-ups and pushups in my bed, in case she won't let me in the morning. For some reason she doesn't seem to mind it as much at night, maybe it's 'cause she's just trying to relax too. 'Cause I can tell when she's really sleeping and she doesn't sleep that much more than me. Sometimes I wonder what she's thinking about while I'm trying to not think. Other times Cecilia doesn't even have a reason she'll just say, "Knock it off, Jo, you're annoying me" (my name isn't Jo, its Joan, but apparently Jo is cooler or something 'cause everyone calls me Jo now). And I always stop 'cause Cecilia is really nice to me. She lets me eat with her and her friends during chow. But she usually only talks to me when I mess up. Cecilia doesn't really talk to anyone 'cept Evan. And Evan's definitely the coolest one here.

During our one hour yard time everyone goes to Evan for stuff, it seems she always has whatever people need. I don't go to Evan, Cecilia told me that I didn't need anything from her 'cause I was special. And that was fine with me 'cause for the hour I just liked to run, mostly in circles but sometimes I liked to dodge around people like I was playing soccer or something. But we don't have any balls so I just have to pretend. Cecilia yells at me though, she says, "You gotta stop running into people or you're gonna get your ass kicked, I can only watch you so much." So I just run in circles and pretend like someone's chasing me so that I go faster.

Cecilia told me that talking to the other girls was just asking for trouble so I talk to the officer people, but not the girl one 'cause I wasn't sure if she counted as one of us or not. And they were nice to me as long as I always did exactly what they told me to do. So I did because I've seen girls get hit or kicked if they asked questions or didn't do what they said to do.

I worked in the kitchen 'cause they told me too. But I wasn't allowed to cook 'cause they said the stove was too dangerous for me so I washed the dishes. I go to work after every meal and I'm not allowed to leave until I'm done. Most nights after supper I was there longer than anyone else who worked in the kitchen. The officers have to come down and check on me if I take too long. I always seem to take too long no matter how hard I try. One time an officer person actually helped me finish so I could get back to my cell in time for lockdown. I like washing dishes 'cause I pretend that the plates are in a battle against the silverware... the plates always seem to win though.

One time I was going to the Officer Man's office (the guy who's in charge of everybody, even the other officer people) to tell him I didn't finish the lunch dishes but I was going to make sure I'd get them done after dinner but I stopped 'cause I saw Evan was already in there. She was giving him money. She must of been saving for a long time 'cause she had an awful lot of it. Then I saw Officer Man kiss her right on the mouth! I quickly turned my back so I couldn't see anything. My heart was beating so fast that it started to make me feel all funny so I started walking away. I heard footsteps and I panicked so I just stopped right there, frozen in the middle of the hallway. I was really scared that maybe Evan and Officer Man saw me. But Evan just walked by me with a plastic bag full of random stuff: cigarettes, highlighters, a candle, a box of cereal, and a bunch of mini baggies barely filled. She was looking quite happy. As she passed she looked over her shoulder and said, "Yo, Jo, you shouldn't fuckin linger, that's the kind of shit that'll get you hurt." I nodded and turned again just trying to get outta the hallway.

I walked right into Officer Man's office completely forgetting what I had meant to say to begin with. Officer Man looked up from his desk and smiled, "Jo what can I do for you?" is what I think he asked me. I didn't know anymore, I just kept seeing that image of him leaning forward to kiss Evan. And I don't know what he said or if I ever told him about the dishes I just remember being thankful once I got out to the yard for the remaining forty minutes outside. I ran extra fast 'cause my heart was beating so fast that it really felt like I was being chased this time. I must of done something wrong 'cause of how funny I felt and I didn't want Cecilia to find out, but I was too scared to look around to see if Evan was telling her about it. But that night in our cell I saw Cecilia with the candle Evan had had in the plastic bag. I asked her what she was doing with it because it looked as if she was trying to break it in half. She told me to stop being nosey and turned her back on me. I bet Evan told her that I saw Officer Man kiss her; I bet that's why she was mad at me. I shouldn't have been in the hallway.

That night I didn't do my exercises. I wanted to make sure not to upset Cecilia even more. From the sound of things she finally broke apart the candle 'cause I heard her let out a small laugh. But now she was spending her night putting it back together. Sometimes Cecilia confuses me but I know better than to ask too many questions. Cecilia might like to make sure I do things right but that sometimes means she has to hit me to teach me. She's never hurt me though and she usually apologizes saying that she just gets frustrated. I forgive her 'cause I get frustrated too. I can never seem to finish the dishes quick enough. Officer Man seems to be nice to me even though I messed up and saw him kissing. After that he would actually walk me from the kitchen to my cell or to the yard, sometimes even from my cell to the shower. Maybe he wants to make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to do so I couldn't go to his office again. But he's really nice. He helps me finish the dishes after lunch so I can get the full hour of yard time. When he walks me to the shower he stays for a long time though. I don't really like it 'cause I feel like I can't wash all my parts while he's watching me 'cause its kinda icky.

But because I didn't do my exercises that night I kept thinking things I didn't want to think:

Gary's blood.

Evan's kiss.

Officer Man's hand on my leg.

No. None of that happened. Whenever these thoughts come to me I just think about when I was little and I was with my daddy. Those thoughts always made me feel safe and if I could focus my thoughts on just him then I am able to fall asleep. That's what I did that night. I remembered him teaching me soccer and me kicking the ball past him 'cause I was so good. It made me feel good enough to drift away to only dreams I cherished.

But yesterday things went really bad. They moved me away from Cecilia and she said there wasn't anything she could do about it. She looked really upset. I guess she really does like me after all. But now I'm in a really tiny cell all by myself and I can't even see out of it 'cause there's only one little window but somehow the officer people control when it's opened or closed. I wasn't even allowed to go to the cafeteria. I hope tomorrow I get to see Cecilia at lunch but no officer person knocked on my door to wake me up this morning. I was doing sit-ups when some hands pushed in a tray full of breakfast food through the little window. I had to eat in my cell. Lunch was the same thing. It's why I've written so much, they haven't even let me go do the dishes. If they let me out for dinner I'm never gonna get them done in time!

I don't really remember why they sent me here. I was taking a shower and Officer Man had walked me down, making sure I was following the rules. He was watching me again but I had just learned to pretend he wasn't there. I remember that I had run out of shampoo and he said something to me. It was the first time he had ever said anything while I was showering. I think he told me that because I had been good he would get me some more, and he left.

When he came back he walked towards me to give me the new bottle. He looked funny coming in fully clothed and with his big shiny boots still on. He must have slipped 'cause I remember seeing him sprawled out on his back below me. He must have made noises, I'm not sure 'cause a bunch of people came running in. I was still naked so I ran out of the shower to get a towel. When I came back in the girl officer put her handcuffs on me and brought me here even though I was still naked. It wasn't 'til today that they slid in my jumpsuit for me to wear. I was really cold last night 'cause all I had was my towel and it was all wet. I didn't even have a blanket. But I just did exercises all night so I didn't have to think about it:

Officer Man's outstretched hand reaching for my chest.

I didn't even go to sleep.

I didn't want to remember seeing him reaching down to his own pants.

I wonder what happened to Officer Man but I don't really wanna think about it 'cause then I start to feel funny in the stomach. His eyes were the same color as Gary's but they looked more frightened than angry but I don't want to see that. I think maybe Officer Man was bleeding 'cause the water at my feet had turned slightly red while I was trying to finish cleaning myself. I dunno how I keep making mistakes like this. First Gary, then being in the hallway and seeing that kiss, now Officer Man.

I'm running out of space and I'm scared that my thoughts are gonna find me and I just don't want them to get into my brain. But in here it's a lot harder to fight.

Officer Man's head slammed into the tile.

The knife hidden under the sink... above the shower head.

I don't like those things... I won't think about them, I won't, I just won't. I really wish I could go back to my cell with Cecilia. Now dinner time has come and again the hands just pushed through a tray of food for me.

At least I don't have to worry about getting the dishes done anymore.

Burning Fuse in East L.A.

Tim Bemis

Father Time is what they call me. It's either because I've been here forever or because I'm older than most of the prisoners. "Don't look into his eyes, you'll turn into stone." It makes me laugh when they say stuff like that. This place is like a retirement home with bars mixed with every race and age imaginable. I walk outside and breathe in the air, this is the freest I'll be. My long lean body walks along the fence, I rub my white and grey face stubble as I pretend to be just visiting. No one bothers me anymore, and I like that. If only I could never remember the past.

It was 1969 and I was 30. My wife and I were involved in a large drug scene in East Los Angeles. We lived in a small apartment with our son Dennis who was five years old. My wife whose real name was Danielle went by the name of Dandy. She was pale and beautiful, her red hair shined like fire in the California sun. I had a nickname as well, back then I was known as Jimmie Jay Jay. The drug dealer we worked for had given us these nicknames so we would use them all the time and not our own for privacy reasons. Our dealer's name was Fu fu, Fu fu was a short but thin black Women with the largest afro I ever saw, I always wondered how she kept it up because it must have been heavy. Fu fu had us on the streets selling everything. Heroin, coke, shrooms, pills, weed, you name it we sold it. But one day Fu fu gave us this drug we never sold before, it was LSD later known as acid. She told us it was a real trip and to be careful if we were to ever do it. Fu fu explained that it was a visual trip; meaning that you saw things after you took the drug.

"I tried to lick my wall cuz I thought it was giant Chocolate bar. My man locked himself in the bathroom because he thought a giant ape was trying to come in while he was using the John." Dandy and I were always interested in new drugs and since we were going to be dealing it, we thought we should try it. Fu fu gave us two tabs of LSD that were in sugar cubes; she used tongs to put them in a sandwich bag for us.

"You can't touch this stuff. It will go right into your skin, pick it up with something then put it in your mouth."

After Fu fu's warning Dandy and I went home and prepared to experience the unknown. We told Dennis to stay in his room and to not come out, no matter what he heard. We both then made our way to the middle of the living room where we sat facing each other Indian style. I scooped the LSD filled sugar cube with a spoon and fed it to Dandy, she closed her mouth and let the cube dissolve on her tongue as I fed myself the second cube. Nothing happened, we expected the powerful drug to kick in right away but since it was free we had no complaints so instead of waiting around, I began making food in the kitchen. I was putting together lasagna in a pan when Dandy started screaming.

"Jimmie! Jimmie! You gotta see this!"

I finished putting the rest of the cheese on the lasagna, shoved it in the oven and started it in a rush so I could see what Dandy was talking about. When I entered the living room Dandy was under our coffee table like a caged prisoner gripping one of the table legs, I knew the LSD had kicked in for her.

"What's wrong?"

"You don't see it?"

"No."

"Everything's melting Jimmie, the walls, the furniture, the lights, everything! I don't know what to do. I think I'm safe under here but I don't know!"

"It's all right Dandy it's all right. You're just hallucinating."

"No. I'm not. No drug could do this."

I went under the table to comfort her but she wouldn't let me touch her.

"Get away Jimmie! You were out there!"

"What are you talking about? You're going to be fine."

I left Dandy under the table with wondering eyes and gave Fu fu a call.

"Hey Fu fu, it's Jimmie how long is this shit supposed to last? Because Dandy thinks everything is melting."

Fu fu's voice turned into childish laughter.

"She'll be fine in seventeen hours. Until then, make sure she don't jump out the window."

She started laughing again and I slammed the phone down, which gave Dandy a scare. I sat down and watched Dandy crawl around under the table like she was trapped looking for an exit, when my head began to feel hot. I was starting to feel the LSD seep into my brain and I tried to prepare by gripping the arm chairs as hard as I could but it was no use, it was out of my control now.

The room became engulfed with magnificent colors, colors I've never seen before. They were your standard reds, yellows, purples, blues, greens and others of the rainbow but they all appeared more vibrant, something about them was amazing enough to stare at for hours. The chair started to feel like it was floating, knocking me out of my color trance and back to my somewhat controlled reality. My body wobbled like gelatin out of my chair to check on the lasagna, I took a quick glance at the coffee table and saw that Dandy had deteriorated, and I all that remained was a giant spider in place of her. I acted like any human would if they saw a spider the size of a human, I screamed and ran into the kitchen.

"It's gonna eat me and Dennis. It's gonna eat me and Dennis."

I kept saying the same words as I stood in my kitchen thinking what I should do with a head full of acid.

"Wait, it's just the drug. This is normal you're suppose to hallucinate."

I slowly peeked my head out of the kitchen and looked into the living room in hope to see Dandy under the table, scared to death over her melted surroundings. But all I saw was the spider trapped under the table because it was too damn big to get out. The kitchen smoke alarm screamed and it startled my insides, but I ignored it and went back to figuring out what happened to Dandy.

"It must have eaten her, yeah that's it. It must have came through the window while I was on the phone with Fu fu."

I grabbed the biggest knife I could find but then realized Dennis was in his room probably sleeping. I needed to tell him what was going on so he wouldn't get scared. When I opened his door it made a loud creak that woke him up.

"Dad?"

"Yea it's me."

I didn't turn on the light when I walked in I just sat on his bed.

"What's going on Dad?"

"Mommy's gone Dennis."

"What!?"

He jumped up and turned on the light and it burned my eyes. I rubbed them for a minute and when my sight came into focus Dennis was gone, in his place was a clown standing on his bed. His face had an evil look smeared with black and white paint, the clothes he wore were dingy like he lived in a dumpster and he wore a black top hat that reminded me of Willy Wonka's. His eyes widened when he saw the fear in mine but I didn't let him scare me for long. He didn't move when I got up and held the knife close to his face.

"Where's my son."

"Dad, it's me."

I rubbed my face and shook my head when Dennis's voice came out of the clown's mouth. But I knew it was a trick.

"I want my son now! What did you do with him!?"

"Dad, you're scaring me."

The clown began to cry; he got down on his knees and covered his face with his hands. I watched the clown on the bed for a while until he looked up.

"This is the last time freak, where the fuck is my son!"

"It's me!"

I didn't let him say another word. I stabbed the clown in the stomach and watched him as he screamed and cried at the top of his lungs.

"Dad! Why! Daddy!"

The evil clown was still posing as my son; I stabbed him in the chest so I didn't have to hear the voice any longer. I then walked slowly down the hallway and once again hid behind a wall and peeked into the living room. The spider was still under the table squirming and the air was now filled with smoke, it must

have been his poisonous gases. I covered my face with my shirt collar so the poison couldn't get directly into my lungs.

"Whelp, it's now or never."

I ran at full speed towards the spider with knife in hand. It grabbed at my legs when I flipped the coffee table over which made me freeze with fright, I watched it open its mouth and move towards my right leg but it never got the chance to take a bite. My body pulled through and stabbed that son of a bitch in the back spewing dark red blood on my face and clothes. It made a high-pitched type of wheezing sound that hurt my ears so I kept stepping on its head until it stopped. The poison was still in the air so I opened some windows to air out the apartment and then went into the bathroom to clean myself up. When I looked in the mirror I couldn't stop staring at my reflection, I suddenly felt trapped like the spider but instead of wanting to escape the mirror I welcomed it. My face kept shifting, twisting and turning like a turntable whenever it pleased, I didn't know what it would do next so I kept watching the show until I was interrupted by a firefighter. He grabbed my hand and tried pulling me out of my bathroom.

"What the fuck are you doing? I'm looking at something."

I wouldn't leave the bathroom so two other firemen brought me out with force. When we were walking out I saw that the spider was gone.

"Did you guys get the spider? What about the clown in my son's room? Did you find him too?"

Outside there was dozens flashing lights on the crowded street. I wanted to run but the firefighters put me in the backseat of a police car where I attempted to smash the window with my feet, in an angry rage. I haven't been free since.

My trial followed and the media slapped me with the title of the LSD killer. A notorious label, but the prisoners and guards weren't fans of a guy who killed his wife, five-year-old son, and endangered hundreds by causing a fire to his apartment. I suffered beatings, rape, and constant death threats for over ten years but no one ever did me justice, maybe because they all knew I wanted it and found more enjoyment in watching me practically beg to be murdered. I got moved to another prison in California after about fifteen years and by then everyone had forgotten about me. I kept to myself and eventually the LSD killer faded away. Not a day goes by that I don't think about Dandy and Dennis, I can't say sorry because that would be too easy. I'm stuck with this for the rest of my life and everything that happened or happens to me I deserve. I was never angry that I got a life sentence; I sometimes wish I got a death sentence but once again, that would be too easy. I need to feel the pain of my sins every day, I owe that to my Wife and child.

A tired old man fades away
in a place that is only known as hell on earth.
Take away the pain of memories
it is the only thing that keeps me human.
Even in dreams there is no escape
they are filled with the clown and the spider I killed
a long time ago.

Little Sally

Jaime Johnson

I've always liked vanilla ice cream. Made into a perfectly round scoop covered with rainbow sprinkles, all the colors mixed together. Sally likes rainbow sprinkles too. Little Sally and I loved cake and ice cream time, it was our favorite and then maybe we would have a pretend tea party, she really liked to get dressed up in her best outfit, the white dress with the little purple lilacs on the bottom trim that puffs out when she spins around. She had matching white shoes, and a purple head band that would pull back her blond curls leaving a few that would still fall in front of her bright blue eyes and fair, soft skin. She never struggled or put up a fight, maybe because she was the youngest one I ever played dress up with. She looked so pretty in all her flower dresses with the bright pinks and deep purple petals. She wasn't old enough for red yet, red was a sinful color like the devil; the color only hookers wore. As I lifted the dress up onto her stomach, I got a peep at her "My Little Pony" underwear and the small perfectly round mole just below her bellybutton. As I would begin to peel off her pink Barbie socks, she would look up at me with those bright blue eyes and cry, but it was a soft gentle cry, too afraid to yell but needed to cry out. I think she knew I would get mad if she acted out because inappropriate little girls are put in time out. Nobody likes timeout; it's dark, lonely, and damp.

I hate when my ice cream gets soupy and the sprinkles colors start to bleed, leaving a dull color mixture rather than a bright rainbow. The sun never shines in here and rainbows are never seen. I imagine Sally playing in the sun, feeling it, getting the chance to see a rainbow after it rains.

I always think about little Sally time to time, especially today. I remember our first time, I told her if she just obeyed and did what I asked she would get presents after. I gave her coloring books and stickers; we even had a cake and ice cream that night after our special time. She was a quick learner. I showed her videotapes first, and then we would act them out. She was concerned because mommy and daddy never showed her that. She didn't like everything the videotape showed and didn't always like when I touched certain areas.

"Sally this is what you're supposed to do, it's called love", I told her.

"But mommy and daddy love me and.." Little Sally tried to cry out.

"I know Sally but trust me it will be alright," I said with my serious face on.

"Okay Sally it's our turn to do what they did on the videotape."

They always scream and cry the first couple of times; I've even been scratched. Sally was different though when she said it hurt too much, I stopped. I reassured Sally that it was going to get better, and that we'd try again when she was ready. We had a pretend tea party that night, I even got her a new Cabbage Patch Kid doll, you know the one that eats the carrots and celery sticks like a good little girl should do. She needed to understand that candy is only for special occasions.

Three months later I went to go buy Sally a puppy, she cried every night saying she missed Mommy and Daddy. I told Sally that her parents gave her away to me, that they wanted us to be together. Once I got to the pet store I changed my mind. I had already been bathing, and feeding Sally. I bought her a kitten instead; it was cheaper and easier.

I saw Victoria at the pet store; she was a little older than Sally maybe by a year or two. She came home with me that night. She struggled a lot more than Sally. Parents should really keep a better eye on their children. But then I realized I couldn't let Sally see me with another girl; she would get jealous and I didn't want her to question my love for her. I didn't want to but I had to let her go. I drugged her up and left her by the public schoolyard around four am on a misty Monday morning. She looked like a princess with her wet curls resting on her face.

I couldn't believe the horrible things they were saying on the news. That there was a disturbed child molester out there snatching little girls and raping them. I could barely watch, as tears flooded my angry eyes. Don't these people know what love is? Rape, who are they kidding, Sally never said not to touch her, when she said it hurt too much I would stop. I respected Sally. Oh my poor little Sally, I knew I shouldn't have let her go.

Victoria Secret was starting to get on my nerves. I told her she could learn a thing or two from little Sally, Sally never screamed that loud and she appreciated the gifts I gave her. Victoria just ripped out all the papers in the coloring book and snapped all the crayons and threw them at me. I had to tie down Victoria and sometimes even drug her, it wasn't fun when she was unconscious, I like the struggle and fight they put up, to hear their loud screams die down into their soft little whispers of pleases and don'ts. Two weeks later I had enough. We were having our regular afternoon session. Mornings are always movie time and dress up, and nighttime is very special love making. She decided to bite my dick as hard as she could. That day she got punished. We didn't make love, but instead I got on top of her and gave it to her like the whore she was. No one disobeys the master. No cake and ice cream after for her. After I was finished with her I looked at the angel like bed, with the pink poodles on the comforter, they were all stained red, as she moaned in agony. She went without food or water for the next two days and had to stay in time-out. She only came out at night, and once again it wasn't nice and easy, she cried too much so I had to drug her unconscious, it just wasn't fun anymore.

Oh my little Sally.

That's when I decided to put the plastic Wal-Mart bag over her head and pressed the Princess pillow over her face to drown out the screams. I dumped her naked body at a nearby pond, exposing her, so everyone would know she had been a naughty little girl.

I don't like getting ridiculed. They came in and ripped my house apart, found all my videotapes and everything, I got called the worst names and even got spit on. One officer kicked me in the ribs and told me to rot in hell.

"All done with your ice cream cake Williams?" The young, clean cut C.O. said as he interrupted William's daydream.

"It was quite delicious, I saved Sally a piece, but we never had ice cream and cake together, I think she would have liked that, it's a creative idea."

"You're a sick fuck, age fucking seventeen, that girl hung herself, you rat bastard, you understand, seventeen years old," the C.O. said this with such force, it was if he had been waiting forever to let it out.

"Your gonna fry and go to hell kitty fucker, you're lucky no one on this tier got you before this, it would have been a lot more suffering, you sick fuck," said an inmate, as he got the rest of the men on their feet staring out of their cells.

"Dead man walking," every inmate decided to get their last words in as Williams, was walking down the tier.

As the needle slipped in, he thought of her, my little Sally.

How Do You Spell Murder?

Jane Dempsey & Robert Johnson

How do you spell murder?

You can ask a murderer but many won't know.

Really.

Most are imprisoned by their minds, locked away from letters, deaf to the sounds and marks of meaning. Their struggle for freedom can rest on words printed on paper. Each letter tangling in their minds as these mysterious symbols dance on the page and nothing gets done. So a murderer sits and waits. Sits and waits in the cell.

They know cold walls of concrete.

"'D'-'o'-'n'?" He says, expectantly, tentatively, grasping for sense, hoping for guidance.

"No," says the teacher, a fellow prisoner, maybe a murderer, formerly lost to language himself, "concrete doesn't start with a 'd.' It's 'a,' 'b,' 'c' – concrete." Then maybe "d," for denial or despair, he can't help but think.

Twenty-six letters is all we have to demonstrate, pontificate, articulate. Manipulate. Move the world. Know the world. Play the world.

The difference between "show" and "snow" is two sneaky letters dancing around the page, floating around in the mind. As in "show" me the evidence and I'll go free, get to walk in the "snow" again. Maybe. Was freedom ever a concept to men who kill and steal but can't spell and read?

Free. Two distinct "e's" opening up the back of the throat like when you open up a stack of new flashcards, pictures on one side, those damn letters on the other.

Murder. Murder purses your mouth with the rolling of the "r" like the rolling of his eyes as he sees a court order. What is a court order? Where is the order? Order in the schools, order in the mind. Order in those cold walls of concrete.

RX for Hell

Lucy Cook

Each night in her dreams it came to her – a fog, and out of the fog a hand, motioning. She would wake with a scream, sweating, panting. They called it anxiety and gave her another pill for it. But it didn't work because she knew there was something she could not remember, something very important, something terrifying, a dreadful secret that she once knew but had forgotten now.

The child of a single mom who worked as a waitress and then some, Michelle spent her childhood evenings with a series of her mom's friends who would plop her in front of the TV until her mother would come at dawn to take her home. One morning her mother didn't come, though; her body was found a few days later under a bridge, by a bum. She'd been raped and strangled but no one cared too much about a waitress-whore. Michelle was almost 15, so instead of becoming a ward of the state her mother's friends passed her around like they'd always done and no one cared enough to suggest anything else.

Michelle was alone in the world, rudderless, and it only took a gust of wind to send her up the creek without a paddle. By the time she was a high school senior she'd been busted seven times for shoplifting. The worst that had happened was an appointment with the school resource officer and an order to make restitution – a slap on the wrist. She figured that was all that could be done to her until that hot August day when mean old Judge Mary McKenna glared over the bench at her and sent her away for six months.

"You may be just 17, missy, but I've seen you in this courtroom too many times to consider you a juvenile who doesn't know any better. You've just traded six months of your life for that cheap Korean watch. I hereby remand you to the county jail for 180 days." BANG.

"But..." she didn't know what to say but her voice was full of panic. She trembled and nearly fell as the female officer began to shackle and cuff her. Before she knew it, she'd been led through a side door, down a dismal hallway, and stuffed into a small room with a dingy cot and suspicious stains on the walls.

"Kneel down," ordered another CO, a fat, stupid-looking woman. Michelle obeyed, feeling the weight of the steel disappear. When she dared to look around a minute later she was alone in the tiny room, the fluorescent light overhead turning her skin gray and emitting a buzz like a fat old housefly.

She didn't know what was expected of her now. Should she cry? What if she banged on the door - would they come back, tell her it was just a tactic to scare her silly, and then let her go? Michelle let out a cry as the door creaked open. She'd been standing in the center of the room staring into space for how long? – five minutes or an hour – she did not know. Where there was no window to see the sun, where no clock ticked off the seconds, time did not exist, she realized. And just maybe she did not exist any longer.

Hours turned into days which turned into weeks, and when she looked around she'd been locked into a two-story cellblock with 50 other women for almost three months. Her cellmate, Jill, was a sad wretch of a woman. She'd been raped by her uncle as a teenager and the resulting baby was taken from her at birth. Her life had spiraled into a cesspool of drugs, alcohol, perversion, and abuse. Jill had been promised a halfway house, drug counseling, and job training after her one-year possession stint, but none of that was going to happen due to cuts in the state budget. With a longing in her voice, Jill told Michelle all the ways she would go straight when she got out, but she ended with a defeated look and a long sigh of sadness. There would be no program for Jill, no one there on the outside to reach down and pick her up. She expected to end up right back in the gutter.

One day a woman in a periwinkle-blue pantsuit was suddenly standing in the open door of her cell.

"Are you Michelle Johnston?" she queried, staring at a clipboard while she awaited an answer.

"Yes, Ma'am," she responded. She'd learned after her first day to refer to the matrons as ma'am. It didn't take more than one demeaning scene with a guard to learn that.

"Let's go - you're the kitchen help." The stranger backed up, still not looking at Michelle. "This way." After navigating the monotonous maze-like corridors, they reached a navy-blue door with a small window. The woman reached violently past her and poked the door open. "Enter!"

It was a typical institutional kitchen; it could have been a school or a hospital. Quickly, staring at her clipboard and still not glancing at the young prisoner, Periwinkle explained that Michelle had just been recruited to cook lunch every day. She would come at 10 am to the kitchen and she would not leave until the

lunch trays had returned, been washed, and stored away for the dinner shift. "Do you understand?" the woman finally glanced up at Michelle.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. You will work under the guidance of Mrs. Blanchard. She will report any problems. Do your job well and you will be given privileges. Do your job poorly and you will be sorry. Mrs. Blanchard - here is your new lunchtime help," and she disappeared

Mrs. Blanchard looked like a petrified log with legs - she was stiff, wrinkled and covered with age spots. Her hands reminded Michelle of her grandmother's, before she'd died in that grubby nursing home a few years ago, before her mother was killed. They were gnarly and bumpy; not much good for anything but thumping and making her surly. No wonder she needed help, even if most of the food came in prepared and just needed to be dumped out of the gigantic tin cans and warmed up.

Every day, Michelle would slink to the cellblock door, sometimes standing for half an hour before the guard would deign to notice her and let her make the trek to the kitchen. If she was late Mrs. Blanchard would bitch and whack those nasty hands. She was making a dollar a day and since that was her only income, she had no choice but to put up with being treated like chattel.

One day Michelle noticed a large pill bottle in the trash barrel. Not thinking much of it, she continued to work. A couple of days later, another one. The more she looked, the more often she saw one.

Mrs. Blanchard one day stepped out to use the ladies' room and Michelle's curiosity got the best of her. Reaching deep down into the can, she grabbed at the bottle. When her hand wrapped around it, there was a clunk on her knuckle from another hard item. Pulling the trash away she saw a matching bottle. Still more digging revealed more prescription bottles - ten of them, all the same kind of pill. Quickly, she grabbed a knife and cut the label from one, stuffing it into the front of her underwear.

Later, in her cell, she pulled it out and read it. "Zy-prex-a" - she sounded it out in her head. Nope, nothing she'd ever heard of before. What was so much of this doing in the kitchen? She knew that trash barrel was emptied every morning, and she doubted Mrs. Blanchard swallowed down ten bottles of whatever this was every day. The more she strove to understand what was going on, the more it was just out of her reach. There was something about pills, and food, and Mrs. Blanchard, but it would not all connect in her mind. Michelle figured the monotony of jail life had made her thick; she hid the bottle label and tried to forget about it.

Just like every other time the reading cart was left on the unit, Michelle thumbed through the books and magazines half-heartedly. Near the bottom of the cart was a stack of Reader's Digests. Most of them she'd read before, but there was one with a cover in red and white proclaiming "Do YOU Know What These Drugs Do?"

As luck would have it, the article included the mysterious Zyprexa, which was listed as an 'antipsychotic' medication. She was familiar with the term psychotic - anyone who watched the news or the movies had seen the psychos Jeff Dahmer and Norman Bates. There was no one here like that and the one woman who came in violent had been tazed, cuffed, and dragged out, her eyes wide with terror; when she left the unit the silence that filled the void of her screams was palpable.

Michelle, for the first time, looked at her fellow prisoners, really looked at them. She'd been trying to seal herself up and away from the humiliation, the shame, and the pain of being here that she'd never bothered to be concerned about anyone else. But, that woman in the cell across the way, did it seem as though she sat on her bed all day rocking and stared out the window? And that one on the second level, the one that was always getting carried out of her cell and sent to the infirmary for trying to hurt herself - wasn't that one of the nasty side effects of this drug according to the article? And there was an old woman who sat on a bench all day, head tilted to one side, staring blankly into space. Sometimes the other inmates would ridicule her, calling her 'drooly Rudy'. Not violent or loud, she didn't piss her pants too often and she could feed herself, so Rudy was left to her own devices. She looked around and saw inmates who had steadily lost weight, looking almost skeletal, and some that had gained so quickly that the clothes they were given to wear on booking were now bursting at the seams. All were side effects of this drug.

It took Michelle a week of quiet, even sneaky, observation of the unit to realize that her notion, no matter how bizarre it seemed at first, was as real as the peeling green paint on her cell floor. These women, and probably every single inmate of this jail, were being drugged. It kept them quiet and under control. The

guards didn't have to get off their fat asses to do anything, and the warden was probably taking bows for his "incredible" management of the facility where there were no fights, no riots, no violence.

Although alternatives to kitchen food were slim, Michelle did her best to avoid the contaminated food, like snatching fresh fruit and wolfing it down in the bathroom, out of sight of Mrs. Blanchard. She would pinch bits of food right out the package and gulp them down before it was contaminated.

She could feel the effects of her self-imposed detox almost immediately. She was more energetic and became one of the few inmates who spent any time on the limited exercise equipment that was bolted to the floor in the corner of the unit. As the mist in her mind retreated, though, it was replaced with the feeling of being violated, and a righteous rage against those who continued to abuse the helpless women around her. If they'd been raped three times a day it would have been just as inhumane.

She began to hear the COs openly comment on the state of the inmates.

"I guess Rudy's getting a good dose," Michelle picked out one day. A raucous laugh followed the comment.

Another time, as she was making her way to the kitchen, she passed a male CO and a man in a white coat talking in the hallway, making no effort to keep their voices down as they must have assumed Michelle was one of the zombies they were used to.

"Don't worry about it," said the man in the white coat. "There's no way anyone would test for this and it flushes out of the body in 24 hours. On top of that, no one is going to believe the word of a drooling idiot who keep accusing people of rape. She doesn't have a chance. If anyone asks, say she's crazy and I'll back you up with her medical records. She's been complaining of hallucinations and paranoia since she got here."

As her release date drew near Michelle imagined how happy she'd be walking out the door and away from this stinking hole. But the more she looked around at her fellow inmates, women just like her and just like Jill, women who had been given a plain old crappy hand in life, the clearer it became that she would need to act. They were drugged and being taken advantage of in their disorientation; they were playthings to the sadists who worked on the unit. Jill had told her about an incident that had happened a few months before. One of the guards had raped her in the shower, with two more looking on. She tried to get a letter to her boyfriend about it but was punished by having three of them come after her one night. She still bore the scars, both physical and mental. And from what Jill left unsaid, they hadn't stopped.

There was no defining moment of morality, no white light shone upon her and no god whispered in her ear, but if she didn't help, no one would, so she decided her only smart option would be to go straight to the state house on her release and demand a meeting with someone there. She didn't know who, and she figured she wouldn't be believed, but she was so appalled she had to try.

The night before her release she didn't sleep, not for a moment. Part of her expected a guard to show up at sunrise and tell her they weren't ever going to let her go and she would be spending the rest of her life rotting in that pit. To distract her whirling mind, she lay in bed imagining how it would go down the next day. She'd take a bus to the capitol, run up the front steps of the building like Rocky, bust through the doors and immediately be taken to the governor, breathless with the effort. He'd hear her out, nodding his head every now and then and before she'd even finished, troopers would be dispatched to the jail to bust every last one of those despicable sleazeballs.

Just at dawn there was a bang on her cell bars and the guard told her to get ready to go. She was unceremoniously brought to the central holding area, given back her stinking street clothes and just about pushed out into the blinding light by the fat, stupid CO who had originally replaced her identity with a number six months earlier.

She had 23 dollars and 42 cents in her pocket. The nearest bus station was seven blocks away, so she hoofed it. The bus to the capitol left in 20 minutes, but it cost almost ten bucks. She decided to hitch a ride. She'd been doing it for years and never had a problem so she saw no reason to stop now. Besides, she wasn't hitching to a party, she had a mission.

An old guy in a big car stopped to pick her up almost as soon as she hit the ramp to the highway. She told him where she was going and he said he'd be glad to take her there, launching into a tirade about government and how he'd been screwed over and pretty soon all Michelle heard was a buzzing. He turned

off the freeway after what seemed like days, finally shutting his blabbing mouth as he concentrated on the lunchtime traffic. At the third set of lights Michelle thanked him and hopped out of the car.

It only took her 15 minutes to get to the imposing capitol building, but it took an hour to build up the courage to tread the long stairs up to the front door. She knew she was thin and disheveled and dirty, but the anger that she'd been forced to keep under wraps until today was bursting out of her every pore.

Through the door, and a dead stop. Two security guards advanced on her.

"What do you need here?" one asked her, giving her the once-over.

"I have to talk to someone about something horrible that's going on over at the state jail, it's really, really important. Maybe I can see the governor?"

Both men snickered and moved in closer.

"I think you would be better off calling," one of them said, grinning. "The governor is not taking visits today."

"You might want to shower," the other whispered in her ear as he intimidated her toward the door. "Come back later when you are clean and sober."

"You don't understand!" she pleaded. "I MUST talk to someone. Drugs! Drugs in the food! They're turning them into zombies!" she screamed. "Zombies! Like in the movies! Drugs! ZOMBIES!"

"Smelly Michelle, smelly Michelle" she could hear the taunts but not see where the voices were coming from. The words seemed to break over her in colors. Starting in green, then yellow, then turning pink and finally fading to gray. She didn't notice the dried-up drool at the corners of her mouth and she didn't see the guards standing off to one side chuckling as the group of young inmates stuck their tongues out at Michelle and poked her in the back, in the chest, in the face.

"Violated her parole, I heard." the fat, stupid CO explained to her younger associate. "Got stoned or something and went to the state house, said zombies were taking over the world! They had to take her to get her out of there. After her first day back here she calmed right down. Must have been on a bad trip. She'll probably have to go to the state hospital when she's released from here. She wouldn't be safe on the street and no one else would either. Not with a psycho like that around."

Nine Circles

Shirin Karimi

This collection of nine poems represents nine people's private circles of Hell, a reference of Dante Alighieri's renowned section *Inferno* in his saga The Divine Comedy. Since *Inferno* has a different significance for each person, the poems are primarily written as inner monologues with a stream-of-consciousness narrative directed at the invisible audience. With *Inferno* ranging from abuse, a mother being without her infant, noise, and the fruitless pursuit of justice, the final poem represents the prisoner's ascent into the next stage of life, just as Dante leaves *Inferno* for Purgatory.

Monologue: inspired by Kerry Max Cook

When I was young and naïve,
I got a tattoo of a skull on my bicep one night in Tijuana.
I hid it from my parents, showed it off to my friends.
Now I have another tat,
That can never be hid, will never be showed off.
But stares at me with fiendish eyes when I look at myself in the mirror.
That sneers at me when I make love to my wife.
And I think that I am Dante and it is Lucifer
But I am forever trapped in Cocytus
Unable to escape into the next world.
I try to pretend
That it is written in a different language
Since good pussy doesn't sound very appealing in English.
Maybe it means strong warrior or faith heals all, some bullshit like that.
I have a secret to confess.
When I'm in the shower,
(and I know this is stupid)
I try really hard to scrub it off
I take my wife's loofah and just go to work on the fucking brand
Until the water gets cold and my wife yells at me that she needs the bathroom.
Maybe one day it will fade.
I hope.

Just Breathe

He was my first love. I loved my husband (for a brief period of time, before the good-for-nothing jackass left us) but he was my first love. From the minute I saw him, he was up there with the good Lord in my eyes. Angel. I knew that I would never feel love like this ever again. He would have my heart, always and forever. They've injected the first 2 chemicals, one to anesthetize, one to stop his breathing. When he was born, he stopped breathing for a few seconds. I stopped breathing for 10.

The last injection went in. His cobalt eyes were closed and I thought about how I had memorized his every orbit of blue that communicated his fears, his hopes, his failing faith. I tried to see if his body responded in any different way but it didn't. Maybe there was an imperceptible shudder when his soul exited his body. I hoped that he was at peace. No longer breathing but all that I could hope for was eternal peace, that deprived peace for so so long.

I could feel my breath as my diaphragm rose and fell, I could pace it through the Namastes I learned from 20 years of yoga. Fresh oxygen in, carbon dioxide out, a procedure my body has learned and excelled at without fail. But now, he is not breathing. And I don't want to anymore.

Can I hold my breath forever, until I finally expire?

I think I can, maybe if I succeed, God will give me what I want.

So I try, I suck in my last breath,

Sharply, like a sudden injection,

My ruddy cheeks puff out to enclose the precious molecules

They are taking him away now

My last chance

But I still have breath left in me and it is not running out fast enough

My chest heaves, I feel woozy

And I finally succumb and let the relieving air flood my ravaged body

He is gone.

And I have just missed him.

But I'll keep trying to see him again

Life is not life without him

And I stopped breathing when he did.

Aborted Youth

“Grandpa Eugene, tell me a story. Tell me about when you were young.”

“My child, I was just like you. You know how your momma and daddy tell you that you are like a bright star, you can light up anything you’re so talented? Well, you get that from me Charlie. I was the smartest kid in elementary school. Can you believe it, I used to pay people to do their math homework for them? The other kids, they would clamor to get me as their lab partner or presentation buddy. I loved the attention. Always wanted to be in the spotlight, since Larry would beat me at everything. Me and Larry, we would wrestle on Momma and Daddy’s bed and he would always beat me, but I kept thinkin, one day, I’m gonna beat him, I’m gonna be stronger. But anyway, I loved to build model airplanes and I would hang them from my room and Larry knew the way to get under my skin was to take the airplanes down from the ceiling and scatter them all over the trailer. I wanted to grow up and build real planes. Well, when I was 13, I really wished I could build them airplanes, maybe one of them would be big enough to fly me out of that cell. But they didn’t let me have no materials, you know cause of them razor blades and hot glue, they thought I might attack my cellie or those jumpy guards or sumtin. But Charlie, you’re too young to hear about crazy things like this. I was too young to be in that cell. All I wanted was to go and wrestle Larry again but he just became stronger and taller and I’m like this now. Well, I haven’t seen Larry since I came here but your momma and daddy are awful nice to let you come in here and see me. I’m the only one whose grandbaby visits, did you know that? Oh Charlie, they’re ringing the bell now, we have to say good-bye. But that’s ok, honestly, I don’t know what else to tell you. I stopped being young a long long time ago, I don’t really remember what being young was. Just airplanes and Larry and those don’t exist anymore. Just give me a kiss baby. Bye Charlie, I’ll see you in three months.

Scholarly Pursuit

I thought by coming to prison, I could finally work on my-
 No, scratch that, I didn't know what I would work on,
 I just thought I would get the chance to work on something!
 Maybe I would be the next great American novelist
 Someone Updike or McCarthy would write to in admiration
 "Dear Isaac Deepwater, your frank and stirring usage of metafiction has ..."
 Some fawning b.s. that I could feed on for days and days instead of the disgusting porridge for breakfast
 Ok, so if not a novel, a memoir!
 My reflections on life with a coke-addled whore of a mother who would bring me along for the sick old guys
 to "play" with
 That would be a bestseller right?
 So it that heartbreaking subject is too intense for the general population, stream-of-consciousness narratives
 from a prisoner's perspective.
 Hmmmm, that could work, let's try it....
 "Cocksucka, I'mma cut you next time I see you!"
 "You shut the fuck up or you and this wand are gonna be getting real friendly with each other!"
 Oh God, how do you expect me to- "Did you see that Guard, nigga tried to shank me!"
 How can I write like- "You best be getting me my money or yo mouth will be the ashtray for those new
 cigarettes I got yo ass"
 Fuck this, how can I write like this?
 I'm trying my goddamn best here but the noise never stops.
 It NEVER STOPS.
 Ugly words keep circling in my brain so I am in constant pursuit of the appropriate adjective, the right
 metaphor, that perfect dialogue between the protagonist and the enemy.
 Clinking, clamoring, jumbling noise.
 Dissonance in my ears leading to dissonance in my words.

Binding Factors

I was saving this for that bitch cellie, I keep thinking that she is gonna jump me in my sleep,
And it is definitely not worth getting caught by Officer Rodriguez again
But this is a good reason,
Worth everything.
My tongue slips out of my mouth, an awoken serpent emerging from the hole
And takes with it the tiny blade, the sharp part worn down by decades of use among these classy ladies
Cellie's asleep and the guards are paying attention to Romaro and Ellengs, four cells down.
The time is right.
Now.
I slide up my sleeve a little bit and my ghostly skin startles me
I haven't paid this much attention to my body for a long time.
Since they told me.
Now it's just a shell, the life has left, my heart beats mechanically but with no purpose.
But, I can feel the pulsations speed up a little, in anticipation of what I am going to do.
There it is, the branching fork of four blue veins, an inch down from my palm.
They beckon to me like road signs, directing me where to go.
It takes a couple of tries for the blade to cut through skin but once I pierce through, the veins are weak and
submissive.
How many different shades of red can I detect in this palate upon my skin?
Ha, Rodriguez is noticing something's up,
Took her long enough,
I mean, hello, I'm on the ground here, redness covering my body like a viscous blanket.
They are definitely going to take me to the hospital; I've lost too much blood.
And then, I will see her again, two days was too short.
Baby.

Lost, Never Found

The cell is 4 by 6, tiny by any standards except an anthole,
And I'm pretty sure that the ants have it better than us.
At least their tiny legs can take them anywhere,
Not confined to a rec area for exercise.
But the thing I'm looking for is as hopeless as trying to find one specific ant in the colony.
I've scoured every damn inch of this cell, thousands of times, over and over again.
I mean, what else can I do, I've got nothing but time.
This ant is not like the others.
The others make their presence known.
They leave little trails, microscopic prints upon the dirt.
If you look closely, you will find them.
Persistence is the key.
Dedication to the cause is the solution.
But this little ant, it takes more than those two factors.
I don't know what else to do but keep searching the same cracks in the cement over and over again.
Whatever I need, it eludes me.
And I'm not the only one, no.
Everybody else is looking for it too.
Funny, we all have the same name for this ant.
If we ever find it, we can look it straight in the face,
And finally....satisfaction.
We call it Justice.

Eve's Apples

Well, Blanca and I never really got along so they brought in a new cellie. I want to start off on the right foot this time, so I'll try and think of her as a college roommate. Something I never had. I'll be nice and patient. Maybe she'll be nice too, maybe she won't be the shankin' type. I've had enough of those, thank you very much.

I'm a little nervous, I mean, what if she doesn't like me? What if she's an addict and gets me to start doing stuff with her? Shit, my counselor would be real disappointed after a whole year. Well, I shouldn't scare myself, they're opening the door, I'll just extend my hand and welcome her to her home.

Fiona. That's her name. Fiona. Pretty name. Much better than Eve. She's a new fish, she's delicate but not brittle like the others. Her hair is clean and falls to her shoulders in waves, like in *The Birth of Venus*, that was a pretty painting in the book. And she says hello to me, not in a growl, not in a timid mutter, but in a musical rhapsody that I haven't heard for 20 years. Wow, she is young, probably 18 or 19. She looks like an athlete too, not one of those lumbering gorillas on the rugby team, but maybe a gymnast or a ballerina. The way she moves endows the tiny cell with something I've never seen before. I think they call it Grace.

I can't really see the rest of the body on account of her saggy uniform. But the uniform has been recently laundered so it actually looks good on her. She has one of those hourglass figures, I bet. I always liked those, run your hands on those curves like an undulating wave in the ocean, up and down, enjoy the ride. My body?

Pathetic after three bastards and a shit ton of crack. I don't think I am anything to be admired, but her...

Maybe we'll get real close like best friends, girl friends, dare I say, girlfriends? I'll start by giving her an innocent hug after she starts to trusting me. And then...I'll start to linger a little more on the hugs, my hands resting on her toned shoulders, drifting to that collarbone. It'll take time to pick the apples though, can't rush the apple picking season. But once it happens, I know I'll never taste anything as sweet.

Most Likely To Be A Socialite

That was my proudest achievement.
Oh boy, you have no hard I campaigned for that.
There wasn't a party I didn't attend,
A keg stand I didn't do,
A football game that didn't feature my high splits on the field with all the hot players looking at my spanks.
I was present. Everywhere. Everytime. You could count on me.
My poor parents, every month, they faced a \$500 cell phone bill
But luckily, I was the most popular babysitter so I gladly paid them back.
People called me a breath of fresh air sweeping into the room.
All conversation stopped, all eyes were on me.
I had IT, magnetism, charisma. I was the scene.
It's weird now, not having anybody to talk to.
Except you I mean, and you are a really good listener.
People said I was always the best listener too
But I was never a gossip like Becky was, I had values.
It used to be so noisy in the main block, I pretended the noise was music
And I would rock out to my own private dance party
Impressing all the guys (or girls, I should say) with my sizzling moves
But there's no more noise, no more dancing.
I can hear music in my head so I guess that works.
It's getting louder now, my favorite song!!
Do you want to dance? No? Really, don't be embarrassed, it's just you and me.
We'll have a great time. No? Ok, you don't mind I dance do you? I just can't help myself. It's in my nature.

3 Months

I don't mean to disgust you, but I don't think the truth should disgust anybody. Just bear with me through all of this clinical nonsense. Two weeks ago, I felt something in my groin. It was inflamed I guess, but from what? I mean, I stopped fucking guys after Andy got HIV, so how could my groin be getting any action? So I went to the infirmary. Luckily Mary, that hot nurse wasn't there so I wouldn't feel embarrassed about showing her my manly parts. Dr. Williams was real professional and gentle; he wasn't repulsed by the smells or my fraying underwear. He just palpated (I think that's the word) my groin slowly and then said I needed an X-ray. So I went and got an X-ray, pretending that I was being abducted by aliens who wanted my groin, that kept me entertained for an hour. Childish I know, but funny as hell.

Dr. Williams didn't share my smile when I came back. "Ricky, you have Stage IV prostate cancer. At this rate, I would estimate you have three months to get your affairs in order." Those are the only things I remember from the conversation, I pretty much blocked the rest out. I nodded, mute, and went back to my cell since there was nothing more he could do for me. They weren't going to send me to the hospital for treatment since it was Stage IV and I wasn't feeling no pain. Yet. They said they would make me comfortable when the time came.

That confused me a lot. I never thought time would "come" again, time must rolled along on its tracks, no end in sight. But now, I'm given a time. 3 months. I stopped counting months years ago. First the days went, then the months, finally the years. I mean, what good is counting time when you've got life on your hands?

I can feel a smile coming on, the sensation is unfamiliar to me and my muscles are cramped from the effort. Three months... Now I can start counting the seconds and days again. Something to look forward to. My exit date. A one way ticket out of this inferno, no looking back. So, they said God doesn't exist in this hellhole? Retards. They were wrong.

There But For the Grace of God Go I

Rachel C. Cupelo

It was desperately hot, sun blazing, air thick and soupy. He felt as though he were being enveloped by a sweaty sock. He mopped at the rivulets running down his face and neck with a threadbare red bandanna, soaking it in seconds. He'd only just stepped outside.

Of course, there were a few things wrong with the picture, most notably his uniform. It was a July afternoon in New Orleans, and he wore the typical Northeastern costume of jeans and button-down and heavy leather shoes. He was here on business, if that's what you wished to call it, and business or pleasure, he'd spent far too many years on the road not to gravitate now towards looking at least somewhat respectable, no matter the weather.

"Hey YOU!"

He whipped his head around.

"That's right, ye damn coonass! YOU!"

He circled again, and finally saw the older black man hanging out of a door with one foot on the crumbling sidewalk.

"Took ye long enough, youngsta! Why don't ye get yeself on in here?"

Full of questions, he shifted his guitar on his back and walked across the street and through the door. He found himself staring at a dark, empty bar. The only light came from a single bulb over the old-fashioned cash register.

"Sit yeself down, young man."

The old man didn't look his way, so he sat down on a stool facing him. A glass of something cold slid across the polished mahogany bar, its sides already frosting with anticipation.

"Lemonade," said the old man, as though replying to an unasked question. "Ye looked lost and parched, if ye don't mind my sayin'. I'm Reverend."

"Reverend? Reverend What?"

"Just that. Ye gonna introduce yeself, or what?"

"Sorry," he extended a hand. "I'm Danny."

Reverend took the hand offered him. "Nice t'meetchya, Danny. Tell me, what brings ye 'round here?"

Danny took an extended gulp of his lemonade. "It's a long story."

"Youngsta," Reverend motioned around the room at the empty tables, "I ain't got nothin' but time."

"You know, I'm not that much younger than you."

He shrugged. "Just old enough to be your daddy, I reckon."

"Funny you should mention that..."

When he blinked next, Danny found Reverend pouring a sizeable glop of Jack Daniels into his half-drunk lemonade glass.

"Sounds like a story. I like stories, youngsta. I can tell a good one myself."

Danny smiled. "Then you first, old man."

"Be glad to."



Reverend had had an interesting life. He'd grown up in the French Quarter. His father swept the streets and his mother took in sewing to help feed him and his brothers. He'd been fourteen when he'd met the pretty white girl that he hadn't stopped loving since. She became pregnant when they were both seventeen.

They'd known, of course, that the whole relationship, whatever it turned out to be, would cause trouble. It was 1964 in the Deep South. Dr. King had completed his Freedom Walk in Detroit the year before, and the Civil Rights Movement had only just begun to gain steam. The Klan still had a major presence everywhere, and no one thought too kindly about a Negro boy getting some white man's daughter with child.

They met when they could, even after the little boy was born, though both families protested. They protested so hard, in fact, that Reverend began to believe it would be better if he left his pretty little lady alone. He'd ruined her life, according to more than a few, and it would be the honorable thing to let her start over with her tiny brown baby.

He took up with an older white woman with a boy child of about two. While she loved Reverend, she seemed to think her child, his father long gone, was Lucifer's own spawn. That little boy was bloody and bruised more often than not, for no reason that he could see, and it made his young mind protest the injustice of it. He lost it one day and screamed at her, wrenching the child away from her flying hand.

"One more time!" he'd shouted. "One more time and I'll make you wish you'd never laid a hand on him!"

And he'd come home to her one evening, after a long day at the pharmacy counter, and found her on the couch, glassy-eyed and silent, holding her child, head lolling at the neck she'd broken in her rage. Next he knew, he was stabbing a kitchen knife into her body the 47th and final time.

The pretty white girl he'd loved so dearly went to visit him while he waited in the county lockup. "You bastard," she'd hissed. "You messed up."

He remembered his sweaty hands clutching the bars, faced twisted in rage. "And I ain't sorry! I don't have no pity for someone that hurt an innocent child!"

"Fine," she tossed a piece of paper at him. "I'm outta here, for good. You won't see me again."

And he never did. But neither that nor the picture she'd thrown at him - of the family he could have had - made him regret for a second what he'd done to avenge an innocent child.



"Wait a minute." Danny had put down his lemonade glass. Reverend moved to top it off with a lot more liquor than the first time.

"What's the problem, youngsta?"

"Well, you weren't sorry. You *aren't* sorry. You killed someone! Don't you have any remorse at all?"

"Much more now than I did," Reverend confessed. "But a part of me can still justify it."

"No offense, man, but that's not right. That's sick."

"There but for the grace of God go I."

"Excuse me?"

"It's easy to judge people for their faults and their bad choices. That don't mean it's the right thing to do. Put yeself in my shoes, youngsta. Would ye really have done different?"

Danny shook his head, though sadly. "Honestly? Probably not."



And it had taken Reverend years to apply the ancient saying to his own actions. It was the farm that did it.

Angola Prison Farm, as they'd called it then, was a town all its own, with its lockup facilities, officer housing, program rooms, and acres upon acres of money-making plantation fields.

He didn't much like the first warden, and spent more time in the hole than he cared to admit. Reverend didn't do much to help himself, as it were. He seethed with anger at himself and the evil woman who'd, in her own way, brought him to this place. He dodged theft, rape, gambling, drugs, and blackmail. He toiled in the fields for four cents an hour, for something to exhaust him and drain him of his rage.

Fifteen years went by, and a new warden came in. Reverend didn't trust him at first - he was too sincere, *too* likeable - but he proved to be, well...not half-bad. Angola had always been a different sort of place, and Reverend couldn't rightfully say it was the new warden that did it, but the prison farm gradually became a place of hope. The fields still had that aura of Jim Crow political incorrectness, but the men who chose to work them seemed to enjoy the sun a little more. Church became an excuse for a party instead of being viewed as a chore. Not everything came up roses, of course. There would still be executions, harsh words, and, most insidious, the pervasive desire for criminals to be branded and brand one another for their

mistakes. But in the end there was morale and fulfillment, contentment and ambition in attempting something better.

Reverend found God first. He honestly didn't think the Big Guy had been missing, but as he let his rage and his burdens fall away, he found a way to forgive the woman he'd killed, take responsibility for her death, and forgive himself.

A lot of his fellow inmates were illiterate, so he started by teaching them their letters during free time, when most were watching television. By the time he left for the outside twenty years later, his program had grown throughout the prison and into the communities beyond. Reading had always brought something special to his life, something to look forward to and help him get away from his tiny world on the inside. He wrote letters, asking for book donations, putting them first in his own prison library before handing them out in the small prison towns surrounding them. He had owned his actions, his troubles and guilt, and now he wanted to give back. He *had* to give back, and this was his way.



"So...*prison* changed your life?"

"Well, youngsta, it changes everyone's life, but mine, certainly, for the better. I've heard it doesn't do that for everyone, but it done me lotta good."

"Impressive."

"You judgin' me just a bit, I can tell." He said it with a smile; he understood.

Danny nodded, then shrugged. "There but for the grace of God go I."

"Ye think so, youngsta?"

"I know so. I think we're all capable of horrible things. I guess it just depends."

"On?"

"Well, sometimes there's no way to fix or make up for the things we do. But redemption? At the very least, we can try. Even if we can't change the past we can change ourselves for the better. I think that matters more."

Reverend beamed. "I appreciate that, youngsta. You're a smart one. Your pappy must be real proud."

"If he knew me I'm sure he would be."

"So that's what you're down here for."

Danny nodded. "My mother told me she grew up with him down here. Figured he might still be around."

"Well, you'll find him, youngsta."

"What makes you so sure?"

Reverend traced the condensation from their glasses around the top of the bar with his finger, "I dunno. Just a hunch."

Danny had switched to water long ago, at Reverend's insistence. "Can't have ye swoonin' in this heat, youngsta," he'd said.

Danny agreed, gulping it down, the ice cubes smashing into his teeth.

"Well," he replied, putting the glass down, "I'd better get going. Got to keep looking, you know."

Reverend smiled. "Yes, youngsta, I know. And I gotta get this bar opened on up for the evenin'."

He grabbed the glasses then and turned around to put them in the sink, and Danny saw him remove something from his pocket.

"Youngsta, I want ye to have this." Dangling from Reverend's finger, on a chain, was a gold pocket watch. The cover was scrolled and flowered delicately, tarnished by the years.

"It was one of the few material possessions they let me keep on the farm," he said, his eyes scanning it lovingly, as if he could see the memories emanating from it. "I went through hell to keep it from gettin' stolen all those years, and I have no use for it anymore. Thought I'd pass it on, like my pappy did to me."

He placed it gently in Danny's hand. Danny shook his head vigorously, pushing it back toward his new friend. "No, I can't take this."

Reverend smiled. "So many people have shown me true kindness, whether I was on the inside or out. But you, youngsta, you the only one that really stopped to listen."

When Danny walked out of the bar, he found the street as curiously empty as he had left it. The sun had that late afternoon tint, a hazy orange that washed over everything and, though gentler, continued to burn his eyes. He walked two doors down, to an old-fashioned pharmacy, thinking he'd enjoy an evening magazine or newspaper.

The man at the counter looked like he'd been around since the dawn of time, so old his skin had lightened into what was barely brown, nappy curls more white than gray.

"I have a question," Danny said. His own voice surprised him, but thoughts lingered that needed answering.

"Go ahead, young man."

"You worked around here long?"

"Young man," he smiled, "I used to drink my morning coffee with Adam and Eve, if that gives ye any idea."

Danny smiled back. "Then maybe you can tell me how long Reverend's been working at the bar two doors down...Disciples' Corner?"

The old man widened his eyes but continued to smile. "Why do you ask, young man?"

"Well, I just had a nice long talk with Reverend, and I forgot to ask."

He smiled wider. "You did? Yes, well, Reverend gets to chattin' when it suits him. He came from this neighborhood, ye know - he and that lovely little white girl, Almeta. Good children, then. Not sure what happened."

"Almeta was my mother's name - "

"A pretty name, isn't it?" the old man interrupted. "But to answer your question, Reverend got released right after Katrina. I guess they had more pressing things to do than keep an old reformed murderer on the farm another couple decades. The churches he'd been working at during his volunteer days on the inside put up a collection, bought him the building, helped him fix it up. It was all waterlogged and rotted from the storm, and no one worked harder than Reverend to put it back together."

He smiled fondly. "Guilt never done a man better than Reverend. From the moment he walked onto the farm until the moment he walked into that bar, he gave back as much as he could. He'd gone in feeling he'd done the right thing; he probably still believes that. But he understood not everyone agreed, and he made up for it hundredfold."

Danny nodded, in awe. "Well, he never told me that."

"And he wouldn't. A modest fellow, that one. That's why the community mourned so hard when he went -"

"Went? Went where?"

"Why, young man, he done gone to the Lord a whole year ago."

Danny shook his head violently. "No. No, I just spoke to him. That's not possible."

The old man grinned, showing the few teeth he had left. "Sonny, he never chatted anyone up more than in the past year. That bar been closed all this time, lookin' for a new owner, and he ain't leavin' 'til they do. I betchya he called on you to grab a glass of lemonade, told you 'bout some 'a his time in Angola?"

Danny jerked his head up and down in shock.

"But he don't talk to just anyone. He only talks to people he know real well, like me." He beamed then. "I didn't know he had you for a friend, youngin'."

"He didn't," Danny answered. "I've just met him."

"Obviously not. At least, not if he gave you *that*."

And the old man pointed to the pocket watch gripped tightly in Danny's hand. Danny held it up, stroking the scrolls and flowers, tracing their tarnish with his thumb until the surface had been wiped clean.

"He always said he meant that watch for someone special, if he ever came along. He never told me who he meant, but I bet you know." His eyes twinkled. "Go on now, take a look inside."

Danny slowly pulled the edges apart, fiddling with the tiny clasp, to find that the watch also doubled as a locket. On the side opposite the clock was a picture, faded brownish gray, of Reverend, and a woman

with a baby in her arms. The woman was his mother, Almeta. The baby's face was his own, the smile already crooked, one eye squinting when he grinned.

"How did he know?"

The old man shrugged. "Well, that one I can't answer for ye. But know that he thought about ye every day, from the day your mama left with ye, 'til the day he died. He learned a lot on that prison farm, for sure, but the most important things, he already knew."

Danny smiled, thanked him, and placed the money for his newspaper on the counter. The bell tinkled as he walked out the door.

The very next morning, Disciples' Corner had a "SOLD" sign on the door, and the ghost of Reverend never came around to chat ever again...or so the new owner told everyone. But every night before he closed the bar, he poured a dollop of Jack in his lemonade, toasting the place that brought him closure, and bade goodnight to the man he never dreamed he'd know so well.

The Undying

Zachary W. Faden

Its shadow lingers
In the midday light
Cloaking and covering.
Only the curious
Discovering
The carved curves
And cold crevices
Creating a calm
Countenance
Content with Age.

Harboring the hidden
Hallowed husks
Betraying humanity
An inhumane housing
Policy. Planned
Warehouse of men
Without meaning.

The undying
Death house
Donning an air
Unbreathable, unbearably
Bold and brazen
Carries on casually
Casting off cries.

The Great Depression

Zachary W. Faden

When it fades,
As it does,
And always will,
As it's forced to do,
What remains?

The malingerer's lingering link,
The entrenched emotion,
The sole element of humanity,
The great depression.

The maelstrom of malice
Calms, commuted to
Quiet qualms.

The unspoken sobbings
Cease. Silently,
Tears fail to fall.

Pity, guilt, remorse
Become merely words
Never spoken (never felt).

The constant companion,
The champion in the land of failure,
The great depression.

When I fade,
As I do,
And always will,
As I'm forced to do,
What remains?

The malingerer's lingering link,
The soul element of humanity,
The great depression.

After the rope
Tightens, goes taut,
(And I go limp)
(And fade)
The noose's handshake
Slackens.
What remains?
The fingerprint of Justice
Engraved around my neck
The great depression.

Untitled

Zachary W. Faden

A vestigial gesture of goodness,
Revealed a latten layer of civility,
Feared to be a fickle façade,
An empty expression.

They asked me if I would be okay.

A question without answer,
An existential query,
Amusing mortal musings
To a man sentenced to death.

I exhaled, delaying answering.

Who cared about the convict's condition?
What consolation could come from reply?
Why utter the overwhelming?
How to encapsulate the ineffable?

They prepared the straps.

An orchestra to end my oeuvre
A harmony of hardened hands
A melody of leather straps
A crescendo with an anti-climax.

I asked them if they would be okay.

Poor Butterfly

Chris Miller

Poor butterfly
Confined within a rusty cage
Radiance diminished by darkness
Spirit long succumbed to sadness.
Flight is a fantasy
Only entropy remains

This trap, but the latest incarnation of the same refrain.
Orphan of love
Ward of the State
Path predetermined by cruelties of fate
Guilty on arrival
Condemned by magisterial men
Now sealed in his tomb

Nameless product of the mills of justice
Fitting ending for a vagabond
Society craves protection
He can't conform
He just must die
Poor butterfly

Parallel Existence

Gregory Fann

You and I exist in two different worlds,
that'll never cross paths.
Unless you come to me or me to you.

As much as I wish
to break the laws of life,
physiology,
reality,
and the laws of this material plane.

I can't
so to a lot of people out there
I'm dead.
A ghost no longer among the living.

So the only way to communicate with me
is through ink and paper.
Or electrical wavelengths that send my vocals
from my place of banishment. To what you
believe to be
a civilization.

But it's not!
Due to communism,
racism, criticism,
prejudice, and discrimination.
All the things that lead us to anger,
and quicken our own respiration.

In your world
you can feel the warmth of the sun
and the gentle breeze
on a spring day.
Count the stars on Orion's belt
as you and your loved one lay.
Or experience the good and the bad changes
in weather.

As I sit in a world
filled with fear, anger, and hate.
Watching yours and yearning
for all the things that
very little of your people take time out
to appreciate.

Unless I somehow manage to make it out
of my world to you.
Or you unfortunately fall
through the cracks into mine.
Then only memories of my touch,
our conversations, and times we've had.
Is all you'll have of me.

So just as I am
to people out there,
the more time we spend apart,
a mere spirit to you
I soon will be.

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Sonia Tabriz (Editor-In-Chief) is an award-winning author and honors student at American University majoring in Law & Society and Psychology, the Managing Editor of BleakHouse Publishing, and the Editor-In-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. Her short story titled "The Prison Librarian" (with Victor Hassine) and her poem "empty spaces" have received Tacenda Literary Awards for Best Collaboration and Best Poem, respectively. Tabriz's book, *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment* (co-edited with Robert Johnson), showcases many of her original writings. Her fiction has also appeared in *A Zoo Near You*, as well as a number of literary journals including *BleakHouse Review*, *Tacenda Literary Magazine*, and *Admit2*. Tabriz is best known for her fiction and art but has also published works of general and legal commentary.

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Rachel C. Cupelo (Author), originally from Upstate New York, is a graduate of American University, where she majored in Justice and Public Policy studies. Her primary interests in the field include corrections, juvenile justice, and LGBT family policy. She has spent time working for both the District of Columbia Family Court, as well as two nonprofit organizations dedicated to the special needs of youth in the Criminal Justice System. She has been practicing her other passion, writing, for much of her life. She is the proud recipient of the 2008 Tacenda Magazine Literary Award for Best Poem, and the GLBTA Resource Center 2009 Academic Award. Her work can also be seen in *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment*, and *BleakHouse Review* 2010. In the future, Rachel plans to attend law school.

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