

the **PEN-CITY
WRITERS**

Truths and Tales from the John B. Connally Unit

The Pen-City Writers Issue 2

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These original works were created by the students in the Pen-City Writers Certificate Program from 2016-2017 at the John B. Connally Unit in Texas.

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We'd like to thank Elizabeth Cullingford, Warden Ronald Givens, Ann Warwas, Heather Crabtree, Cecilia Smith-Morris, the Windham School District, and the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin for their ongoing support.

And thanks to our spectacular, essential crew of volunteers: Adam, Amanda, Andy, Anne Marie, Annie, Barry, Beth, Celia, Cody, Daniel, Denise, Emily, Emma, Ian, Jac, Jamil, Jennifer, Jessica, JP, Katie, Lara, Olga, Natalie, Rachel, Tony, Uriel, Yvonne, and Zac.

The Pen-City Writers is sponsored by the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Just Another Day

Anthony Johnson

Every time forgiveness is called for means that a personal violation has been committed against me in some form or fashion. I take each infraction seriously, far more seriously than the actual infraction usually warrants, but hey that's just me.

All things prior to my incarceration have been forgiven. Doesn't really seem like much good to hold on to them. Most have had no formal burial, no one around to forgive. I guess my act of contrition was selfish and self-indulgent at best. Although I feel better, I doubt they do; they don't know I even forgave them.

My challenge with forgiveness, though, has taken on new dimensions because of my confinement. This closed environment replays all of the so-called personal violations by the mere fact that I cannot avoid contact with the perpetrators of my vexations. Most likely I will see at least one, if not several, of those I have labeled "Not forgivable with current attitude." Those I deem unforgivable will be put on a proba-

tionary period that could and has lasted up to a year.

Sometimes I forgive because of the length of time. Other times it might be because I'm just tired of harboring the ill effects that come with un-forgiveness. I have, in the past, waited so long that I simply forgot the original infraction and decided to forgive without even knowing what I was forgiving.

Lately I have adopted the ideology of the Christian—to forgive is to be forgiven. In a place that is the embodiment of un-forgiveness, a place that epitomizes the socially malevolent view that “guilty” means one must suffer and suffering is necessary to warrant forgiveness—I respectfully dissent.

In my personal attempt to further dissociate myself from the quotidian aspects of prison life, I commit to forgive more freely, and as my first act of forgiveness today, I forgive those jerks who won't stop hollering over there—undoubtedly because someone couldn't forgive someone else for an infraction of some sort.

A Kind of Stupid

Jose Maria Garcia

I got beat down once, back in the early '90s. It was by four guys who needed my pizzas and pizza money. I can sympathize that their miserable lives compelled them to do so.

For me, I remember coming to with blood all over me and standing. I guess the worst part were the headaches, which all blended into one giant ache. Also, I couldn't see much because my eyes were swollen shut. It was painful, squinting my eyes open.

But it was no big deal. After a week off, I healed enough to get back to work. I had no fear delivering those cheesy delights.

When I was in middle school, I had my bike stolen. I had gotten home and I went inside for a drink, leaving my bike on the front lawn. I remember Dad getting home shortly thereafter.

When I went back outside, no bike. I figured Dad had hidden it to teach me a lesson about responsibility. After looking all over, I finally had to muster the courage to ask Dad where he had put it.

Dad exploded when we knew it was gone. He told me I would have to walk to school from now on. At

that time, school was 1.9 miles away. At 2 miles, it was necessary to take the bus. Dad told me he was not buying another bike! And that was that.

So, a few days after that I was leaving the gym after basketball practice. I walked outside to wait for my sister to pick me up in the family car, a red Mercury Zephyr.

Every other thing in that school parking lot vanished when I spied my orange beauty standing there, the kickstand up. How? And Wow! I walked up to it and noticed some tape added to it but it was unmistakably my bike. Who else would own something this wonderfully ugly?

That was the good and ugly of it. The bad walked up. He was Huge! A monster! It was high school versus nerdy middle school. My sister was keen to inform me later that he was a guy known for getting in trouble.

He asked me what am I doing with his bike? Nothing worked for me just then—legs, arms, brains—but somehow my mouth still did.

“This is my bike. There’s some tape added but I would know it anywhere.” It was like someone else far away spoke it.

There was a pause and I figured I was about to die. But the impossible happened. He didn’t strike my hand off the bike. He didn’t do anything. He just said, “Hey, a guy sold it to me. I didn’t know.” He then walked away with his younger brother, who had also just finished practice.

Just then my sister drove up. “Quick, sis, open

the trunk up and let’s get out of here!” I was still convinced he was coming back to kill me, so I spoke hushedly.

But we made it home. My sister said that guy probably couldn’t afford any more trouble. Still, I learned that day: Just stand up. The good sometimes win the day. The important thing is to keep rolling. Bravery really is just another kind of stupid.

Rabbit

Kevin Murphy

My friend Rabbit is a skinny, animated, wiry, ex-heroin addict. He reminds me of my sister and I think that is why I befriended him. Like my sister, he's done so many drugs that he constantly runs around like he just did a shot of dope.

Everything that he does is straight dope fiend. He will sell everything and anything he has for pennies on the dollar and buy things, usually the same things he just sold, for more than they're worth. He'll spend all of his money and then bum coffee and snacks from me and others. I try to talk him out of it but he still does it.

He's an older guy and he has no life to speak of. All he talks about are the things that have happened within the past few days or hours. Getting a case means that he will tell the story of what happened many times over the next several days. Getting the spoon shook on him at chowhall, not getting the portion that he thinks he should've gotten, will turn into a ten-part telling with something added or deleted with each telling. Seldom do you hear a story from his past, and the ones that you do hear are of him

scoring or doing dope.

He's not a bad guy. He has a good heart. He's just done so many drugs that he's messed up inside, he's changed the balance, the structure of his mind.

Whenever I'm around him I think that I could have been just like him, like my sister. I also think that in some ways maybe I am, that my mind isn't as clear as it should be from all the drugs that I done. If I would have been left to my own desires and choices, I would have done enough drugs that I would be just like them.

A few days ago my friend asked me to write a letter for him. He said that he doesn't write too good and I told him that I'd help him in a few days when I had time.

When I got a day off from my classes, I sat down with him to write the letter.

"I already got someone to write a letter for me," he tells me, "but he messed it up and I don't like it."

I pulled out a few sheets of paper and told him, "It's alright, we can write it again. Who are we writing to?"

"My daughter." And he tells me her name and I write it at the top of the page.

"What do you want to say?"

"Surprise."

So I write, *Surprise*.

Then he says "Mija."

So the letter starts, *Surprise. Mija*. And I can see that this isn't going to work so I take out another

sheet of paper and I say, "Tell me what you want to say." And I write it down as he does.

He starts, "Your mom sent me some pictures of the grandkids but didn't send me any of Justin in his hat with the thing hanging from it and the cape thing. I sent the grandkids a card and I sent one to Justin saying congratulations. Can you send me a picture of him?"

I write, *I sent cards to the grandbabies and a card to Justin for his graduation. Your mother sent me some pictures of the grandbabies but didn't send me any of Justin in his cap and gown. Could you please send me one?*

Rabbit continues and says, "Your mom said that she told you to come with her to come see me and you said no."

He stops talking and I look up to see what's wrong and see that he's choked up and his eyes are full of tears.

He starts talking again and says, "I cry at night when I'm in my cell because I can't believe that you're hating on me. I cry every night when I'm in my cell when I think you won't come see me."

I write, *Your mother told you to come see me and you told her no. I cried when I heard that, it really broke my heart that you're hating on me.*

Rabbit then says, "I thought you were going to have your baby in May but your mother said you were having it in June but I already got the baby's name tattooed on me and it is a beautiful name too.

"I told your mother that I had your name covered

up but I lied. I was mad and I lied to your mom. I would never do that. Your name will be on me forever. You know that I wouldn't ever take it off. I'm sorry that I lied but I was mad and I'd never do that, Mija, you know that I wouldn't."

I write, *Your mother said you were having your baby in June. I thought you were due in May and I already got the baby's name tattooed on me. It's a beautiful name.*

I told your mother that I got your name covered up but I lied, I was just mad. You know that I would never do that. Your name will be there forever. I'm sorry that I lied, Mija.

Rabbit then continues, "I've got a lot more that I want to say to you, to tell you, a lot more that I want to say, and if you write me back I will get someone to write a letter for me because you know that I can't write too good."

I write, *There is a lot more I want to say and if you write me back I'll write you more.*

Rabbit then says, "I love you, Mija, and I don't want to do this anymore and if I get out I'm not going to drugs anymore. I want to be a father to you and a grandfather to my grandkids. I don't want to do anything to come back here. I don't want to do any more time. I want to be a family man. I have been going to church and to classes so I can be better, so I can be a better man. I'm not the same man I was before, I'm a different man now and I want you to know me."

I write, *I love you, Mija, and I'm doing all I can to be a family man. A father to you and a grandfather to*

my grandbabies.

Rabbit then tells me, "I'm sending you a picture of me that was taken the day before Father's Day."

He hands me a picture of himself standing in front of a concrete wall. "Why aren't you smiling?" I ask.

"Because I only have three teeth on the bottom side and two on the top above them so I don't like to smile in my picture."

I hand him the picture and he continues, "I'm getting old, ain't I, Mija? I'm not a young man anymore. I hope that you like the picture. I hope you will send me some too. I don't have any pictures of you and I haven't gotten any of you in a long time."

I write, *The picture I'm sending was taken the day before Father's Day. I'm getting old huh? I hope you like it and that you send me some back.*

Rabbit finishes, "I love you, Mija. I pray every day for you. I'll be looking for a letter and some pictures from you."

I finish it just like that and hand it to him to sign.

"Thanks Cricket," he tells me. "I'm going to get you something from the store when we go."

He doesn't owe me anything and I tell him, not that it matters, I've heard this a bunch of times and he never gets me anything. It's like the letter that I just wrote, he'll never follow through with his promises. My sister is the same way, promising to quit doing drugs, talking about God.

Rabbit's daughter will probably write him back because like anyone who has a Rabbit in their lives, she wants to believe he'll change. She wants what

he'll never give her, the thing that he's incapable of giving.

I know that he isn't going to change, I see him popping pills and drinking hooch all the time, and yet I wrote the letter for him. I wrote it because I think that the daughter should have a father, even one who won't be truthful to her or to himself. I also know that the laws aren't going to change, that we aren't going to get out of here, not the ones of us who have a lot of time. What harm could it do? Who am I to keep a woman from having hope?

Visitation

Carlos C. Flores, Jr.

He knew he must be very still as he waited. Where was his Tio Carlos? Didn't he know we were waiting? the little boy was thinking. The lanky little sparkplug of energy was almost vibrating with wished-upon action. He had to be still. If not, the crazy woman with a face that looked like she was wearing a mask of someone else's skin would come and yell at him with her creaky witch voice. Oh no! his feet started moving as they dangled from the chair. Back and forth back and forth, hopefully the witch lady doesn't see. This thirty minutes of no moving was seeming like an eternity. With only five years of life, it almost was.

She sat there at the table in her very own chair being the perfect little lady. Stunning her 'Lita with stories of all the planets. She was Neptune and her Tio Carlos was Uranus, 'Lita was the sun. She had been waiting for this visit. Why was she in a bad mood the last time? She couldn't remember. This time when they took the picture she would give a big smile. She wore her special hat, that all the ladies loved, and her special purple dress.

Carlos waited in his prison bunk. He was a lit-

tle nervous, Mom was bringing his oldest niece and nephew. For eleven years he would go to visit. His parents and occasionally other friends or family members would go to great lengths and sacrifice to make sure he had a visit every week. One year when the highways were flooded, they called the local news station that plotted them a course. The surreal situation of him having a life sentence for a crime he didn't commit weighed heavy on all his family and friends.

Though he always appreciated the sacrifice, he could not understand why they did it. He told them he would be okay, go ahead and take a few weeks off. He never understood until one day, his comically obese, and even more comically narcoleptic friend, who was more innocent and so of course had an even more severe sentence, explained with simple down-to-earth simplicity, "They don't come for you... they come for *them*, to see their son."

Carlos understood, but he didn't fully appreciate the sentiment until about five years ago when his sister had his first nephew, Atticus. First grandson for his parents, already in their mid-sixties. Carlos always jokingly called him the messiah. A little over a year later, when Atticus's sister was born, she of course became the princess.

Carlos finally was called out to his visit. Athena ran around the table arms out and jumped up into a big hug. "Tio Carlos, I wore my special hat and my special dress and I'm going to smile real big in our

picture,” she explained in her-way-too-articulate, soft, little four-year old voice, breaking his heart all over again.

Atticus gave a perfunctory hug and sat back down, too used to staying still. He scowled and asked “Where were you?”

“They didn’t call me until now.”

The little blond boy with the almost translucent skin deepened the Flores scowl and stared at the officer, “He said he did,” like he was going to go over, all three feet thirty-five pounds of him, and give the officer a piece of his mind. That scowl, so famous in their family. It’s the scowl ‘Lito had when the kids would get a little rambunctious. It’s the scowl Carlos had in the courtroom. It’s the scowl the sister has whenever she is righteously indignant, which is often, as a community activist attorney. It was amazing to see it on this little kid’s face.

The little chatterboxes gave dissertations on the elements and the planets one second and then jumped up into Carlos’s lap the next. From explaining the importance of excavators one second and then trapping his hands to the table the next. With the vending machine fare and the squeaky, extremely advanced vocabulary coming out of the little tots’ mouths (“Forgive me, ‘Lita, I misspoke,” after a faux pas) it was like a tea party with the Mad Hatter in Wonderland. Carlos now understood. He would do anything for those little kids, anything at all to make them smile, and go to great lengths and sacrifice to see them.

I Remember

Calvin Massengale

I remember the smell of earthly air. Air that reminded me of something in my past. A moment. The angle of the sun telling not only the time of the day, but also the time of the moment. The feel of the breeze seemed blissful. I remember looking up and envying the fowls of the sky. I remembered what it felt like to be free.

I remember the taste of fresh eggs and cheese, shredded cheese, with a sprinkle of salt and pepper. Steam slowly rising from the eggs like the ending of a campfire, the cheese melted and stringy, igniting my taste buds like a pink starburst.

I remember laughing, feeling loved and comfortable, with family and friends. A bond stronger than the stench of death. I remember someone telling me blood doesn’t make us family. Loyalty does.

I remember being offended, feeling disrespected. I remember a darkness trying to force itself upon me. Beyond the point of anger and rage. My insides desiring nothing less than the blood of my enemies. Then I remember asking myself if this was the feeling of madness.

I remember not caring about anything.

I remember the first time I saw my daughter. She looked up at me and instantly I came to tears. Her eyes were beautiful and penetrating. It was like she could see into my soul. We hugged and I remember thinking, She has my heart in her hands.

I remember playing football in sunny California, coach making us run miles on the track in the blazing heat, working exercise drills until I lost my breath.

I remembering when I wrote the first draft of my first novel. I was so revved up. I wrote eight pages a day. In one month I cleared over two hundred pages. The pictures in my mind were as real as the pen I'm writing with.

I remember when my son was first born. I used to feed him sauerkraut just to laugh at his funny bitter faces. I remember when he got older and we went to the store, he would watch me drive and then ask, "Daddy, can I drive?"

I remember the day I found God.

I remember meeting the girl of my dreams. She was as beautiful as the ocean at dawn. Her eyes the color of honey. Her lips so perfect they looked like they had been drawn on her. I remember her mean attitude.

I remember spending time with my mother, feeling loved and secure. I remember the affection of a mother in her voice. She never let me down.

I remember growing up in California, palm trees swaying in the sun. It seemed like the weather was always just right for a BBQ. Every girl was pretty and

you could always smell the ocean.

I remember for a week straight eating boxes of Honeycombs.

I remember being so hungry, my mouth watered at the thought of food.

I remember telling myself that I have to be successful. I have to push harder. I have to go the extra mile. I remember hating the feeling of being broke.

I remember going to the movies when I was free. Soft reclining chairs to sit in. Surrounded by sound. I thought I had speakers in my seat. The picture was so big and clear.

I remember taking baths. Ahhh. Just lying back in hot soapy water.

I remember going to the public swimming pool. The sounds of kids playing and water splashing. The smell of chlorine. The feel of water in my ears. Summertime.

I remember how to drive.... I think.

I remember using a cellphone. The beep of the numbers when you press them, being able to walk around and talk or watch a video on my phone.

I remember eating an ultimate cheese burger from Jack in the Box. The best fast food ever. Mouth-watering beef smothered in cheese and ketchup on a soft bun. Oh, I remember.

I remember when I first got into the creative-writing class. I was excited. A bit nervous. Then I remember having a deep hunger for success.

I remember when I didn't have to write all these "remember"s.

I remember teaching myself self-control. It was very hard. I wanted to give in to every fleshly temptation.

I remember lying a lot. Now I have to remember the last time I lied.

I remember wearing different colored clothes. Blue shirts, black jeans, brown slacks, and gray sweaters.

I remember the local corner store. The A.C. would hit your face soon as you walked in. It always smelled like hotdogs and coffee. There were only four aisles, but they packed a bunch of goodies.

I remember going to the local park, playing on the monkey bars, sliding down the slide, and being pushed on the swing, running around on the soft white rocks.

I remember going to parties and BBQs. The loud music. Everybody laughing and talking. More than enough food. Kids playing and making a mess.

I remember not giving up hope.

I remember loving the feeling of being loved.

I remember being a sore loser.

I remember crying until my tears turned into revenge.

I remember climbing trees, griping the branches and pulling myself up, looking down twenty feet and wishing I was that tall.

I remember going to the ice cream truck. Buying chili cheese nachos and a box of Nerds. Snow cones and Lemon Heads. Those were the days.

I remember going to the beach. Boogey board-

ing on the waves. The way my feet melted into the watery sand. I remember always being hungry afterwards.

I remember praying and asking God to not let me get more time than what I have.

I remember the first time I made a million dollars. I was dreaming.

I remember the first time I made a thousand dollars. I felt like there was no stopping my hustle.

I remember begging my kids' mother to let me see my children. I poured my soul out to her and couldn't understand how she could be so heartless.

I remember hating myself for allowing myself to hate someone else.

I remember everything about forgetting about that night.

I remember the first journal the Pen-City Writers made together and telling myself I was never going to give up on our class.

I remember going trick or treating. I hated the pumpkin heads because they were the only thing that scared me.

I remember the cool breeze. Right before winter or right after. It was and still is the best time of the year. It seemed like the only time of year when summer and winter got along.

I remember waking up to the smell of bacon and French toast. The sun shining through the window and gospel music flowing through the house.

I remember summertime as a child. Playing with water guns and balloons.

I remember when I was young. I used to go cut grass for twenty dollars so I could have some money to go to the teen dance.

I remember going to church on Sunday morning, dressed in slacks, penny loafers, and a button up. Halfway through the service, I'd fall asleep.

I remember moving. Packing up all my clothes and putting them in boxes, carrying couches and tables. Taking three or four trips back and forth.

I remember jumping off a diving board, landing in cool water.

I remember listening to the radio whenever I wanted to. I could listen to whatever type of music I wanted to. Turn the volume up as high as I wanted.

I remember playing basketball at the local gym. Hitting jump shots and lay-ups. Showing off my skills for the pretty girls on the sideline.

I remember the first time I got arrested.

I remember when my dad cooked smothered baked chicken, buttered mashed potatoes, BBQ ranch-style beans and cornbread. He made it for me and a female friend I had brought home. I guess he liked her.

I remember flying kites in the local park when I was young.

I remember one time I was helping my grandpa do some kind of construction in the backyard. I told him I needed to use the restroom. I walked off and about the fourth step a nail shot through the front of my foot.

I remember the smell of pigs' feet, chitlins, and

something else that made me throw up.

I remember my first dog. His name was Albert. He was a golden retriever. He grew to be big and stocky.

I remember playing video games. Especially Street Fighter. Whoever lost had to do the winner's homework. Best out of five.

I remember Jessica. She was beautiful. She had braces in her mouth and I just thought it was sexy.

I remember the first time I ran from the police. They chased me through an alley. I came out the other side, hopped a couple of gates and hid in the back of a pickup. They ran right by me.

I remember looking at my dad and saying I hate you.

I remember being addicted to playing chess. Don't waste your life playing chess.

I remember going to the mall with my buddies. We would walk around until we each had a girl and then go eat with them.

I remember the first time I shot a gun. I emptied the whole clip and felt like I could take on the whole world.

I remember telling myself that I would overcome the odds, that I would break out of whatever cage I was put in. That no matter what, I would succeed at whatever I put my mind to.

I remember when I got my first tattoo. It felt like somebody was cutting me very slowly with the corner of a sharp razor.

I remember when I lived in California. I used to

go to the beach just to go to the end of the pier and stand there. The wind would blow and I would stare out into the ocean.

I remember this old school Mexican guy telling me, “Youngster, don’t bring the free world to prison. It will only make your time harder. And don’t take prison to the world when you get out. It will only bring you back.”

I remember seeing a shooting star in the backseat of a car. I wished that my mom would live forever.

I remember not caring about my life.

I remember doing back flips down a big hill. I got so dizzy I started throwing up while I was still flipping.

I remember asking my kids’ mother, “If I ever get locked up, are you going to be there for me?” She said yes. I haven’t received one letter in eight years.

I remember sleeping in a car with a friend because he got kicked out. It was cold, real cold. I woke up with numb feet. I remember looking over at him and thinking... never again.

I remember not being nice.

I remember going on a blind double date with my buddy, Mike. We met up with these two girls at Dairy Queen. When I saw my date, I pulled out my phone and said, “Hello? What? All right, I’m on my way.” Then I told them I had to go.

I remember when I was young. My buddies and me used to get on the roof of my mother’s house and throw eggs over the back gate at passing cars. One guy saw us just an egg splattered on his windshield.

He made a U-turn, came back, and stopped. He jumped out of his car and started shooting at us.

I remember wanting to grow up so fast. Then I remember wishing I was young again.

I remember telling myself, I’m going to write books and I don’t care what anybody has to say about it. I’m going to be the best at storytelling. Then I remember thinking, Now what would be a long good lie...

Having to Be Brave

Terrance Harvey

I was twelve years old. My mother had just had her third child, her first girl. It was just my brother and I for the longest, until Shalon James Lewis arrived in this world. Crazy because the doctors told my mother if she hadn't come in the day I convinced her to— only because I was anxious to see my little sister—that my mother and my sister could've died at birth. My mother told me I saved her life, but I was too young to respect death or what was actually at stake.

Eight or nine months later, I was sitting in one of my mother's friend's houses, holding my baby sister, awaiting my mother's arrival, which never came.

The guy who we were staying with lived in some type of retirement or old folks home, built to resemble neatly kept apartments. We were only supposed to stay with him for four months, so my mother could save up some money, but things hardly ever go as planned. My mother had gone missing for five days, and my twelve-year-old heart was beating with worry. I didn't really feel at home staying with my mother's male friend, so I kept my baby sister close in my arms everywhere I stepped. Not that he was a

bad guy or anything, just that I was protective of my sister. Even though he offered food to eat, my worry about my mother not returning, mixed with discomfort, made me decline his offer every time.

On the sixth day, the older man came into the living room, shaking his head. He said he was sorry but he lived in an old folks home and couldn't keep me there. He seemed genuinely saddened but still told me I had to leave. I think at that point I was scared. I didn't know what happened to my mother or why she left me and my baby sister behind. She had a bad addiction to drugs and had gone to the penitentiary a few times for it, but she'd sworn to never leave us again.

"That's okay," I lied, grabbing my sister's diaper bag with one hand. I swung it over my shoulder and cradled my sister in my arms, walking out. I left my clothes and things because I couldn't carry them on my bike. Besides, not only was I carrying my nine-month-old sister, I had no definite direction to go. My father was absent in my life, but I remembered going over to my Aunt Josephine Harvey's house some weekends. I knew she loved me and hated that her brother was unfit as a father.

Holding my sister with one arm, cradling her in my lap, I pedaled my bike with tears coming down my cheeks. My aunt stayed on the west side and I was on the east. It was going to be the furthest I ever rode. My sister started crying and both of us crying would do no good. I pulled over, wiped my tears, and

fed her outside a store.

My life as a child changed that day. My sister couldn't afford otherwise. The rest of that long bike ride I was determined. My sister smiled up at me the entire way.

I made it to my aunt's house and she was confused as to how I got there. When I told her, she hugged me, crying.

"We're going to church in the morning, Terrance. It's going to be all right," said Aunt Josephine. "Now let me see that baby."

A Mother's Earth

Patrick Glenn Jeffries

Haitian Queen of the Antilles, noble and impoverished royalty. With a beauty that seemed almost dangerous, as though a thousand voodoo curses danced behind eyes that could be loving, tender, confused, hurt, knowing, and terrifying.

My mother. The bridge between myself and countless men, women, and children stretching into a past of a beautiful and convoluted mix of triumph and defeat. I can hear the souls of our tribal beginnings in her voice when she tells stories of genocide and torture so savage and brutal, it makes the tales of vengeful voodoo gods and demons seem like cartoon villainy.

She sits in front of me now, at the visitation table, outside in the bright, warm, and generous spring sunshine. I hold her somehow leathery-yet-soft hands that speak of a lifetime of washing clothes by hand, not trusting our household appliances to do the work God gave us the eyes and hands to do.

I watch the prison guard with an open warning, daring him to cast upon my mother the same glare he gives to us. There is something to be said for the lan-

guage the eyes can speak. Sometimes it is clearer than the spoken word.

I give my attention back to my Mother. She continues the story of she and her father crossing the undiluted Caribbean jungle into the Dominican Republic to barter for tobacco and cigars to sell when they cross back into Haiti.

As she tells the story, in the back of my mind I superimpose my mother and the jungle, seeing how they both can appear mystic, beautiful, and dangerous. Dangerous for those who have no clue how to navigate through the dense, passionate, and unpredictable expressions of her distinct Caribbean, French, African, and Latino characteristics.

“Are you listening to me, papa?” she stops to ask. She can see my wandering mind dancing somewhere behind my eyes. I smile and answer, “Yes mam.” Then I used the break in the conversation to share the playing memories in my head: the rich soil, the earth wisdom she handed down to me, and how I live by it—so she can have some feeling of triumph when the steel mechanical doors slam shut behind her when she leaves.

“Don’t be fooled by kind words and a big smile,” she would always say. “The devils don’t always have long, sharp teeth, claws, and horns dripping with blood, and glowing red eyes. They sometimes have nice clothes, beautiful faces, beautiful smiles, using beautiful words that make you feel safe while they spice you up for their stew.”

“Never talk tough before a fight. Losing a fight is one thing. Looking foolish and losing a fight is another.

You’ll lose all respect.”

“Never fight when you are in the wrong, because you will have no conviction, and you will lose. Only fight when you have no choice and only when you are in the right.”

“Always look a man in his eyes. Even when you are afraid of him. After a while you will see he is only a man.”

“To be truly hospitable you don’t ask someone if they’re thirsty or hungry—you offer them food, you offer them drink. They will not turn down what you put in front of them if they’re hungry and thirsty.”

“Never make excuses for what you know is wrong. If you let one demon in the front door, he will let all of his friends in the back door.”

The guard signals that we have five minutes left. A brief flash of dread passes over her face, which is a shadow of the stunning, hypnotic beauty of her youth. She grabs both of my hands—gives me a knowing nod, signaling the time to pray.

She prays out loud as I pray silently to the core of her being. I ask the brilliant light of life there—giving life to her and the rest of the universe—to burn brighter, harder, and longer, to keep her open to the beauty and magic of life, to the love that connects us, the love that gives us the strength to face the next day. I ask that the power pour beauty into each moment, to make the best of what we have till I can be there with her, making the best and most of her last years.

May her passing be as glorious to her as my coming.

Cathedral

James Beavers

5:30 AM Christmas morning.

I opened my eyes to the faint beeping of my alarm clock. I removed my head from under the blanket and looked out of my cell through the small window at the ground below. The dew of the morning had formed a layer of ice along the ground, the orange glow from the security light catching the ice just right as to sparkle like diamonds with each gust of the northern wind.

I turned off my alarm. Raising my arms above my head I stretched out in the cell, the cold air waking me up. I sighed and moved to make my bed and a cup of coffee. I had thirty minutes to myself before I had to leave for work. I looked around the cell, a sarcastic sales pitch coming to mind.

Four walls, this beautiful two-bed, half-bath is bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and study all in one. Perfect for the newly incarcerated. It provides all the necessities of life in one compact cube.

Built with no hard edges, this home was designed with your safety in mind. Concrete and steel, cleanliness and sterility. Security? Why we offer a staffed

24-hour guard service, free of charge. The finest locks on your doors. Why we even put down a fresh coat of paint.

Shaking myself from these thoughts, I sat back on the bunk. I always loved Christmas time. I can remember growing up loving the season. Of course it is the celebration of my Savior's birth. But the lights, sounds, smells, and the feeling of Christmas was always magical to me. Hell, I can say I still believe in Santa Claus. Even if it is only the spirit of him.

Since I'd been incarcerated, Christmas had been hard. Losing my father to lung cancer the year before was tough. What really made the seasons hard is that his birthday is Christmas Eve. Sure it makes me a little sad because he is no longer around. I still think of all the good times, it makes it easier on me.

I can remember many things about my father. Sitting with him in his room, guitars in our hands, playing along with each other. Running football routes in the back yard. Five years old, sitting in my father's lap, driving the old Buick in the parking lot of a church. The look on his face when I would give him a new ornament for the tree every year. A motorcycle one year. An airplane the next. He would place each ornament on the fireplace and tell stories about each model.

I no longer cry for his death. Tears were never my thing. Growing up in a Baptist house I was taught to be celebratory about death. After all, it is just a continuation of life on Earth. Sometimes it gets to me though.

All these thoughts run through my head as I prepare myself for the work day ahead. I reach down into my locker and put several pieces of candy in my pocket. I had some plans to give out the candy to people. Give a little Christmas cheer.

“Out for dayroom! Workers fall out!” the guard yelled from the front door.

The cell door buzzed and slid open. I stepped out into the dayroom my breath fogging in the frigid air. Shutting the cell door quietly behind me, I nodded to the people around me with a quiet “Merry Christmas.” I put on my forest-green nylon jacket that we get for three months of the year. I sat down at the steel table and laid my head in arms. I waited for the lights to flash overhead, signaling my time to leave for the day.

I reminisced about Christmases past, smiled at the thoughts of my family gathered around the table with the tree casting a multi-colored glow. No one even worried about the exchange of presents, all just enjoying the time we had together.

I was pulled out of my daydream by the flashing lights of the dayroom. I stepped out of the pod and into the hallway, to the front desk, and alerted them where I was going and my housing location.

Same routine, every day.

Stepping outside I was immediately hit with a blast of northern cold air that cut through the layers of nylon, thermal, and cotton straight to my core. This was the coldest winter down here in years, or so they said. The wind was terrible. It felt like I was

wearing no jacket at all.

Built on top of a hill, the unit had no wind breaks of any kind to protect the unit’s inhabitants. It seemed as if it was designed to catch the wind and funnel it toward the buildings.

It was still dark outside. The far eastern portion of the sky was just beginning to glow. Stars hung overhead twinkling faintly. Sadly many of them were blocked out from the light the unit expelled but you could barely make out a few constellations in the night sky. The world smelled fresh, the cold air and the ice-snow mixture of the previous week cleansed the air.

Ice had frozen to the metal links of the fence. The image of a macabre snowflake you cut out of paper as a child came to mind. The halogen lights cut out as the sky began to brighten. The world took on varying shades of gray.

I made my way across the unit to the medical building. I had been working here for a few months, enjoying my job. Simple: clean the rooms and wax the floors, stay out of the way. Stepping through the doors I was hit with the smells of pine oil and antiseptic. I hate those smells. The bright fluorescent lighting made the floor and walls glow with a false light. I walked through the halls to the back of the building where we kept our supplies for the day. I started my daily routine of cleaning the toilets and floors

The morning was passing slowly. I greeted everyone with a smile and a “Merry Christmas.” Inside I

was a Scrooge. I really didn't want to be here. Hell, I didn't even belong in here. Prison was not the place for me. These thoughts ran through my mind, hardening my heart with each passing moment.

I passed down the back hallways and did my personal routine, checking in on the people housed back here for medical reasons. Seeing the old and the young either recovering or just waiting to die gives you a reality check on your mortality. Makes you think, "What you have done with your life?" I was in prison.

I said my hellos to the guys in the back and quickly headed to my little office set aside for the janitors. Going back through the motions day by day I looked forward to my morning coffee break. I mixed myself a strong shot of instant coffee and stepped outside the medical building. Immediately I was captivated by the sight of the fences. It was as if the world had changed with the sunrise. The sunlight hitting the ice at the perfect angle producing a medley of colors on the sidewalk. The colors danced across the dull concrete. The soft tinkling of ice melting was like music.

It was like standing in my own personal cathedral. Just me and the Creator. My heart and mind slowly changed from negative to positive. The colors and the light were melting the thin layer of ice I had placed over my heart.

I stood there soaking in the brilliance of nature, just observing the day.

I finished my drink, stepped back inside to the hall-

way where the inmates were housed. I reached into the pocket of my jacket and pulled out the candy I had stowed away earlier this morning. Moving from cell to cell I set the candy under the door with another "Merry Christmas," my heart feeling the joy of the season.

After my revelation, working through the day was a breeze. Every task seemed to become easier with the passing of the hours. Sweeping, scrubbing, passing out meals. I did every job with a smile on my face.

As I finished my afternoon duties I could not wait to hurry back to my pod. I wanted to take a shower and call the family and give them my well wishes and love.

I stopped by old man Pop's cell, this man I had taken to stopping by often to see if he needed anything. I had been doing this since I started working the building. So aged he barely stood over five feet tall. The old tattoos on his arms had long since spread and blacked out most of his arms, turning into an unrecognizable blob. He had always greeted me with a smile and a wave.

I stopped and knocked on his door. Peering into his cell I saw him lying there on his back with his eyes slightly open. Knocking once again I hollered out, "Hey Pops, do you need anything before I leave?"

He didn't move. I stood there at the window and watched him for any sign of breathing. None. A profound sadness hit me. Christmas day and this man

passes away. At this time of joy and peace his family will receive the notice of his death.

I called out to the nurse to alert them. After all the questions and the cleanup of his cell I was allowed to leave. It's strange to see all the material possessions packed away. A man's entire life filed into a box to be put away until someone could pick it up. Or to be thrown away in the trash.

I returned to the pod, showered, and rushed to the phones. I called my family knowing they would all be gathered together for a Christmas dinner. I waited for the acceptance of the call, relieved when my mother finally picked up. I went one by one with each of my family members, telling them I loved them and cared for them.

With the last "I love you" said to my mother, I hung up the phone. Just in time to head into my cell. I lay back in my bunk and thought about my own mortality, my loss, and my desires. A few more days and the new year would start again.

Another fresh start, another new life.

I Hate Spiders

Peter Smith

"I hate spiders."

Hairy, creepy, crawling, eight-legged, le-ioned-eyed monsters. I listen a bit agitated, but also entertained, as a correctional officer talks about his life serving this beautiful country over in Iraq. He is detailing a phenomenon called camel spiders, the extremely extraordinary creatures he encountered over in the Middle East. I shake my head as I listen to him describe an insect the size of a dinner plate in circumference and a foot tall in height. I cringe as he talks about how he and his buddies combatted the creepy phenomes in pseudo-soccer matches where the spiders were the only balls. I envision giving a spider with the body as big as a dinner plate a good kick. Disgusted I wipe off the blood and spider juice that's not really on my face.

I think to tell him to shut his lying pie hole as I bat away something that was never on my arm. Then the officer starts going off about how the monsters possess a natural anesthetic in their venom that leaves their victims numb before the horrifying bite. The officer assures me if one ever gets a hold of my

colo I would literally lose a butt cheek by the time it's done feeding, if not stopped or killed. Everyone listening balks at this, then out of nowhere an inmate with hair—and according to my understanding, a brain—like that of Albert Einstein speaks up with a whole lot of scientific what the hell. What he says boils down to: When you're a spider that big you eat what you can catch or sneak up on, like a normal spider. "Hence the name camel spiders."

I am down at the infirmary awaiting my chance to see the prison doctor, so unlike a few I am listening by force. I decide to ask the officer a question in an attempt to change the subject. "What were the girls like over there?"

His reply is a halfhearted something about oppressed women not being as pretty as American beauties. Then there is a grumble about trained servants with arranged lives. Then the excitement is back, "Oh dude, y'all have never seen a thing until you've seen these galaxy-sized spiders. These suckers are mean and so freakin' hairy, they have legs like freakin' daddy-long-legs but are bigger, you know?"

"Are there any extraordinary cases of abnormally big ones?" someone asks.

"I don't know, but I've seen 'em as big as two feet tall with spider eyes you can see."

"What the . . ." I say.

"I love spiders, but I have never seen spider eyes with my own two eyes. I would love to be over there. I'll go there just to experience the spiders. What's it like to look in their eyes?" Einstein asks, clearly

fascinated.

"Most certainly alien. It's like encountering a third kind. These things have voices..."

"What in the world? Get me out of here . . ." I start.

"Are you alright? You need to see psyche?"

"No, spiderman, this damn spider talk is the same as being chased by a gang of nasty mothafrickin' spiders. Let me out of here," I say, getting up to leave.

"Aw shoot! You don't like spiders! You're a phobe," the officer giggles.

"Screw you, you're a spider Kobe. And I ain't a spider LeBron. Get me out of here. I hate spiders."

"They're also faster than anything on legs, and have a jumping ability like Michael Jordan. I was a Jordan fan. I hate Kobe," the officer says. He locks me in a killer stare. "I actually love spiders. I can understand why you don't like them. They're bad and you're scared."

"Screw you, spiderman. I hate spiders."

Chaplain Call

Kevin Murphy

“7 bottom,” yells the prison guard from the door of the dayroom.

“Right here,” I call back.

“They want you up front.”

“What for?”

“They didn’t tell me. They just told me to go get you.”

“I need to get my clothes,” I tell him as I head for my cell door.

“Hurry up,” he tells me. He shines his flashlight at my door and then to the picket to get the guard who works the door’s attention, and then back to my door again.

My door opens with a light buzzing sound and I grab my clothes and step back out. As I’m slipping my state clothes over my shorts and t-shirt, my friend comes over and says, “What’s up Cricket?”

“I don’t know. They said they want me up front.”

“Did you get a case?”

“I hope not. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Hell Bro, you know that don’t matter.”

“I know. I sure hope I didn’t. I guess there’s only one way to find out.” And I walk out of the section.

At the front desk I ask, “You call for me?”

“You 7 bottom?”

“Yeah.”

“Murphy?”

“Yeah.”

“Got your I.D.?”

I pull it out and hand it to him. “What’s going on, boss?”

“They called for you down at the chapel.”

The chapel. Well that’s not good. The only time they call you down to the chapel is when someone in your family is sick, has been in an accident, or has died.

Thinking the worst, I walk to the chapel, fighting the panic that seems to build with each step I take. “Oh Lord, don’t let it be my Mama,” I pray as I get to the cage outside of the white metal Chapel of Hope.

I sit down on one of the benches and take a deep breath. I battle with the fear that is growing inside of me. I make myself stay calm as I wait.

“Hey Big Cricket, what are you doing here?” asks a guy who goes to church with me, who’s leaving the mailroom with an arm full of books.

“I was called down to the chapel.”

“Oh, that’s not good.”

“Right, that’s what I’m thinking.”

“I hope it isn’t anything bad.”

“You and me both.”

“Well good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I close my eyes and think, “Okay just stay calm. Whatever it is, it is, and stressing isn’t going to make a difference.”

The door to the chapel opens and I look up and see the Chaplain walk out. I go over to the gate and say, “What’s up, Chap?” with as much cheer as I can muster. “You call for me?”

“Yeah, Murphy, come on in,” he says as he opens the gate.

We walk into the chapel and down the hall to his office. My mouth is dry and I can’t swallow. How can my mouth be so dry and my hands so damp? I wonder as I wipe them on my pants. I close my eyes and repress the fear that is threatening to overcome me.

He unlocks his office and, stepping in, picks up a folder from his desk, and hands me a piece of paper from it. “What is this?” I ask as I look down.

“It’s your Authentic Manhood certificate. I thought you would like to have it.”

I look up at him and I am amazed to see that he has no idea what he has just put me through. I want to be angry, I want to tell him what he has just done to me but the relief is more powerful and as the fear, anxiety, all of what I’ve been fighting leaves me like a balloon being vented, I say “Thanks Chap” and I head back to my building.

I walk back. I feel like I have just missed a bullet and I breathe a big sigh of relief. “Thank you, God,” I silently pray. I look down at my certificate and smile and then almost laugh when I see that my name has been misspelled.

Exteriors: Ten People, Artful Description

Bradley Varnell

He’s stooped with eyes perpetually squinting that tell stories of long workdays in the sun. His slicked-back hair and too-cool demeanor, partnered with a stroll too difficult to imitate, scream 1950s.

If he didn’t walk in circles, mumbling incoherently, avoiding all eye contact. If he didn’t jump away from unseen shadows or shout down unheard voices, no one would know he’s schizophrenic.

Intent and focused, pencil at the ready, he seems to be in another world. Obviously he is. One can only imagine.

Eyes scanning every inch and scrutinizing every moment. Her flashlight streaks from one perceived infraction to the next. Relentless and tyrannical. I worry about her blood-pressure.

The only time he’s not on the phone seems to be when he’s eating, or maybe when the phones are off?

Does he ever sleep? The expressions he makes when he is on the phone are pained and angry. He looks tortured. They must really love each other.

He always sits in front of the TV with his arms crossed, rarely speaking. I wonder if he's really watching those programs or if he's actually running up and down memory lane?

Hair all over the place, he looks like Einstein. When he speaks it's in a rushing cadence, starting high and ending almost unintelligibly.

So pale he almost seems bright and when in harsh light it's obvious he hasn't seen the sun in years. Blue eyes and blond hair tells of his European lineage and probably why the sun has no hope.

As still as a mannequin, brows arched and eyes penetrating. If I didn't know better I'd believe he's staring holes through the chessboard. Slow and deliberate, he appears to have only a single concern in life and that is calling 'checkmate' on his opponent.

He sits alone in his prison cell, making up characters to describe. He yawns because it is 2:30 a.m. He needs to shave, but right now all he can think about is sleep. He hopes the professor doesn't scold him for wasting his tenth 'artful description' on himself.

Painful Days

Steven Perez

The cops arrested him in January 2007. By August 2008, he was on his way to state prison with a murder conviction and a sixty-year sentence. On the week he was arrested he had to handwrite a power of attorney document and get it notarized so his poor mother could get his belongings out of his apartment. She wept while she packed up his property. She wanted him home so badly. Her only child that lived, he had always been there to comfort her and help her when she needed help. Now he was stuck in jail without bail.

Just a week before, she had come to his apartment while he was there. She'd come every Saturday and clean up for him. Now she had to gather his things as if he were a dead man.

When he got arrested, he didn't have much. He lived in a nice two-bedroom apartment on the south side of town. He had a photo album filled with family photos. One of the bedrooms was for his six-year-old daughter, and it was filled with a really pretty bedroom set, all whitewashed wood. Her pretty little clothes and shoes filled the closet. Toys filled her toy box. Her TV sat inside the armoire where the doors

opened. Her baby pageant trophies and several trinkets including her hairbrush sat on top of the dresser in front of the mirror.

Inside her closet sat a big plastic purple box with several leather belts, coozies, purses, wallets, and canvases of leather with the scene of the last supper engraved and painted on them. His father is a leather craftsman. He sold these items for his father. He also had a really nice black Cadillac about five years old that sat in the parking lot.

In the living room, he had a sixty-inch big screen TV. This was right before the flat screen TVs hit the streets. He had two black leather sofas and a cocktail table with a black marble top and four solid dark wood legs that were thick and hand-chiseled with what looked like tiger paws that gently sat on the carpet. That table would take four men to move from one house to another because it was so heavy. He loved that table.

He had a fifty-five gallon aquarium in the living room against the wall. He hadn't had a chance to put water or fish in the aquarium. He had only been living there about two months. He had a glass cabinet where his electronics sat on the shelves—a DVD player, an X-Box, the cable box. In the dining room he had a small oak wood table where he and his daughter would sit down and eat together.

In his bedroom was a walk-in closet full of clothes and shoes. He had a king-sized mattress sitting on two twin-sized box springs where he and his daughter slept together. A makeshift desk held a computer,

a printer, and a fax machine. He also had a three-by-five foot drafting table, a cordless phone, and three cell phones. He had several hand and power tools in the hallway closet. Pictures of him and his daughter sat on the shelves in the hallway.

His mother visits him in the prison and talks to him on the phone on a regular basis. She prays every day that he'll come home soon. It's been almost eleven years since she packed up his things. Hopefully someday soon he'll be able to be there for her again.

The Open Door

Joel Zubiri

It was a day like any other. Me, my ma, brother, and sister were doing our usual weekend thing, if we weren't going to church.

Nothing.

Blissful nothing.

Nothing important, that is. At least me and my siblings weren't. My ma was cleaning, you could hear the vacuum in the next room to the living room. This was a good thing for me. I turned up the TV a little so I could drown out the vacuum and hear the beautiful sound of what I wanted to watch.

And then I heard the fateful sound of tires crunching in the driveway. Like a scratched CD, I inwardly cringed.

It was my dad.

He was coming to visit us.

Which meant he was going to hog the TV.

Damn.

When he walked in through the front door, my brother and sister ran up to him to give him a hug. I knew better. Since I was the oldest he was going to find

something that just "had" to be done.

But a part of me was hopeful, maybe he would overlook it today, I mean it was the weekend...

Three hours later.

It was hot.

I wouldn't have known that earlier, because I was chilling in the AC.

But "somebody" had to show up.

I was wheeling a wheelbarrow filled with bricks back and forth, with mosquitoes as companions.

My task for the day was to make brick "steps" from the front yard to the backyard, just in case it rained and we couldn't use the driveway on the other side of the house.

Man, what a day.

As I was laying bricks for one of the steps, I looked longingly at the AC running in the living room.

I hated this day. Stupid steps. Who needs dumb steps anyway, nobody's going to use them.

And right on cue, as if to rub it in, I heard my siblings and my pa laughing and having a great time.

Stupid steps.

Two hours later.

Finally, I was done.

What a day.

What started off as a chill day became a wasted day. I went in through the front door and they were all

sitting around watching a movie.

I walked up to my dad and told him, “Pa, ya acave,” which means, “Dad, I’m done.”

He looked at me and just grunted.

Man, I could’ve done this an hour ago.

So I sat down and started watching the movie.

It was *Along Came A Spider*. Fitting movie, for what was about to happen.

My dad looked at me and threw me the keys to his truck.

I looked at them questioningly, and he told me, “Go get me my phone from the truck.”

I grunted and mumbled something in return, but got up to do as he said.

As I dragged my feet toward his truck, I took a look at my handiwork. The steps looked kind of crooked, but oh well.

I approached the truck, opened the door, and started looking for his phone. As I searched I spotted his wallet and decided I was going to pay myself.

I did work a couple of excruciating hours. Heh heh.

When I opened the wallet, I stared at its contents for a couple of seconds.

Man, this broke fool ain’t got anything.

So I kept looking for the phone and found it.

I took him the phone and sat down to watch the movie.

One hour later.

My pa was leaving.

Me and everyone else all walked out with my pa to fare him well. Even though I didn’t like that my pa made me do stuff I still looked forward to seeing him.

As we were walking, him and my ma were talking about something, and my ma seemed pretty adamant.

My pa went into his truck and came out with his wallet. He looked at me with an incredulous look on his face.

I got worried and started looking somewhere else wondering what I had done.

He exclaimed, “Somebody stole my money! Joel you left my truck open! And I bet the neighbor kids came and stole my money!”

I looked at him confused and crestfallen and wanted to shout, “No! I looked in your wallet and you didn’t have money!” But if I admitted that, I would be telling him I was going to steal some of his money.

So I simply stared and gaped at him.

I looked at my ma and saw a pained look on her face. My pa was supposed to be giving her child support money.

I didn’t want to believe that my father was lying, so I really began to feel that it was my fault for leaving the truck open. I started to believe his lie because I could not imagine him being dishonest.

But when I saw the look on my mother’s face, a part of me began to get angry.

When he stopped hollering at me that day, I was just glad he wasn’t to make me do something for “leaving the truck open.”

Years later, I was in my cell one day thinking about it and had a moment of clarity.

Man! He was lying!

I brought it up to him at visit and he just laughed.

Well, at least I know I didn't leave the door open.

Ha!

Hallelujah

Jason Gallegos

Santiago Jimmy Garcia was drunk off his wino butt and slammed his car into a bridge wall, but the wall failed him and he took a car drive off the bridge and crashed it thirty feet below.

Tio Jimmy smashed his face into the windshield, crushed his ribs with the steering wheel, and his legs curled up into fragments underneath the dashboard. The guy survived it and lived to tell me about it.

Before the wreck my Tio Jimmy was full of dirty jokes. He drank like a sailor, but the pictures on the wall showed that he'd served in the army. He's dark-skinned. Slicks his hair back with three flowers. Keeps a mustache and a goatee. He stands six foot (pretty tall for a Mexican). He's one of them orale vato guys. He's my mom's half-brother. They have the same dad but different mothers.

I met him shortly before the accident.

After the accident Tio Jimmy came out to be a transformed Hallelujah man. He was out of dirty jokes and developed a super-neta attitude. They say that's what happens when drunk people drive off a bridge and live to tell about it.

So my mother, Maria, says, “Jason is only fourteen and he’s a lost cause. I’m afraid he might be killed on the streets. He can live with you, if you want.”

Tio Gimmy had another Hallelujah moment and says, “Jason, I would like to take you to church so you can find God.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I’m hungry and I would like to meet some girls.”

Off we went in his white pinto that I had the privilege to push down the street while he sat in the car popping the clutch, trying to get the car to start. My penance had begun.

Ashley Road Baptist Church was the name. It was a very small building with a small pointy steeple. No windows. It had an exaggerated parking lot. I walked inside and there were ten short pews on either side of the aisle. Straight ahead was a pulpit and they had one simple wooden cross pinned to the wall above the stage, and Jesus was nowhere to be found.

The old, baldheaded, sweaty, overweight, angry white pastor yelled at me the message for all the wrong I’d done. He swore I would go to the Lake of Fire, so I said, “Yes, yes, forgive me. I’m a sinner. I like free gifts.”

I was given a pretty Bible with my name in fine gold print on the cover. They taped a tiny mustard seed on the first page. My Tio Gimmy took me under his wing and says, “Jason, you will be a singer one day. You will make tapes and be on the gospel radio station. You will reach people your age.” In response I donated my guitar speaker for the music ministry. My

first live performance was at a nursing home.

It was me, my cousin Letty, and Tio Gimmy. We stood idly in the old people’s game room waiting for the in-house guests to start pouring in.

Tio Gimmy says, “Jason, set up the sound equipment.” I placed the small guitar speaker on top of the table and plugged the power cord into the wall. Job done. I turned back around to face the crowd as some were wheeled in on their death beds, wheelchairs, and others managed to drag themselves into the room for the big show.

It seemed that all of the old white folks were staring me down for being on their turf. Like I kicked a soccer ball over their fence and climbed over to fetch it. I was nervous.

Then the ruckus began. Someone in the audience yelled, “Get out of here!” I was ready to fight. They were punching their fists in the air. I was about to run out of the building. Tio Gimmy led us into the song (in Spanish) in the midst of my first racial riot.

I closed my eyes and sang along and swayed with my little body from side to side. I peeked out of one eye to monitor the angry crowd and all the old folks were crying, their bony blotchy arms were raised toward the heavens and they softly swayed their frail bodies.

Our performance was over. After the show I was attacked mainly by the old white ladies. They pulled on my arms toward them with calcified bear-like claws that felt like repeated stab wounds.

“When will you come back?” they said.

An' Then I Saw a Roach!

Jose Maria Garcia

He stealthily scurried down the side of my cell with his silent passage. He thought I did not see him. But I have prison eyes.

I waited until he settled in. I knew I could count on that. Such indolent and perfidious beasts, they repulse me with their ghastly appearances.

Still, I was left with the question of what to do. Just the thought of his touch filled me with mortification. I'm sure if the tables were turned, he wouldn't hesitate to destroy me.

Paradoxically, awareness of our deadly animosity left me with an epiphany. I knew that in this moment in time, in this place, that he and I were inextricably intertwined forever. Brothers in a shared destiny.

I made my move. I scooted under the table. I thought I would find it there. I next tried to get to the locker with its meager stores of food. But the door was secure. A dead end.

Then I heard a rustle of movement.

Too late!

Sparks and motes of infinity danced as they dwindled until all... was... no... more...

The man stood up from his bunk, the viscera of cockroach smeared all over his hand. "Dawg, why roaches always get in my house?" He then rolled over and went back to sleep.

A Lifer's Useless Thought Process

Johnathan Byrd

I used to think. That simple statement sums up over a decade of working toward a concept of no-mind. In prison and in my personal experience, the act of thinking is an enemy that must be conquered and enslaved.

In Stephen King's *Shawshank Redemption* the character Red said, "A man will do almost anything to keep his mind occupied." There is an unfathomable depth to that statement that makes me wonder if Stephen King ever did any time. To short timers, thought is a good and encouraging thing. It is important for them to think of their past mistakes, how to overcome them, and how they can become productive members of society. They can think of a probable future based on the reality of eventual freedom.

A lifer on the other hand has no profitable future, so his mind drifts constantly to the past. I myself have thought over, analyzed, and dissected every memory I possess. The good and the bad. If allowed, these memories will rise up like angry and vengeful ghosts to swallow and consume me. My renegade mind will think over the millions of choices I have

made in my life, always thinking the dreaded, "If only I had done this instead of that." I have thought of every single girl I knew. I think of all the ones I could have known but for some reason I didn't. I think of those reasons themselves. I have replayed my life over and over, envisioning thousands of alternative paths. So many times have I engaged in this pointless and fruitless exercise that the true memory becomes almost impossible to discern from a brighter and happier falsehood.

Even real memories of joyfulness can lead you down a dark and twisted rabbit hole. At the bottom of that hole lies a serpent of despair waiting to wrap its victim up in hopelessness. That happiness will be replaced by the knowledge that through some selfish act you pissed on that happy time. For a lifer to think of the past is to invite a toxic plague into his life.

Thoughts of the future prove to be no better. In Dante's Limbo a near perfect example of prison exists. Men who dedicated their entire lives to thought and knowledge are left with nothing else to do but think and reflect on their knowledge. Their punishment is the knowledge that an all-knowing god does exist but they will never know him. They must live for an eternity knowing their dedication to thought was utterly pointless. A lifer's all-knowing god is replaced as the free world. You know it exists. You yearn for it but will never again be a part of it. You try to forget about it but it seems that the moment you receive a letter from a long ago friend or girlfriend, it

will arrive and instantly you will begin to think of a past that doesn't exist or a fantasy-filled future. These pointless thoughts will appear out of the void to grasp at your mind like tentacles trying to draw you into a crushing maw of emotional turmoil.

Then there are the simple day-to-day thoughts. These are common thoughts that most people think of as mere trifles. As Duguesclin said in Aleister Crowley's "The Stratagem," "A trifle, indeed! What do you know of what prisoners think trifles? The man went raving mad, and for no other reason."

These simple thoughts are the most glib, sneaky, and tricky of all useless thoughts. Many convicts walk up to these thoughts with smiling faces only to be cruelly devoured. A good example is the trap many convicts fall into on their birthdays. They wake up and think, "I'm going to have a good day because it's my birthday." Their thoughts convince them of this based on no evidence whatsoever. I once knew a man who thought this very thing. His thoughts allowed him to forget who and what he was. He thought his birthday trumped the fact that he was a snitch. Later that day the back of his skull was crushed in by an inmate seeking retribution. That was the last time he had any thoughts at all.

I used to think. Now I mainly go through life by instinct alone. I have taken my conscience, civility, and intellect, locked them all in an iron chest and sunk them deep into the murky swamp of my subconscious. Every now and then I allow one to break the surface for a breath but these times are few and

far between. I do not think of the past or the future.

The philosopher Descartes once said, "I think therefore I am." That might have been true for Descartes but I relate more to a verse in the Havamal of the Poetic Edda:

"The unwise man waketh all night, thinking of this and that, tosses, sleepless, and is tired at morn; nor lighter for his load."

My Precious Little Fears

Patrick Glenn Jeffries

Golden brown curls bounce and spring. Delightful yet mischievous giggles bubble up and out of my then four-year-old slice of heaven. As my little Nana jumps up and down on our cheap black velvet couch, I notice her looking at the floor and the ceiling in a way that disturbs me.

Before I can act on my intuition to snatch her off of her launch pad, she flies through the air. The look of pure delight on her face—her arms stretched out in front of her—never leaves as gravity pulls her rapidly to the floor.

In beautiful contrast to her experience, my panic and horror makes me feel as though I'm going to implode as the laws of physics denies us both our freedom of her relentless hold. For I cannot move at the speed of thought, and my little Nana will not stay airborne as she obviously thought she would.

In slow motion, and in impeccable superhero-flight form, my baby girl flies gracefully through the air for a short, very short, moment then... she belly-flops on the hardwood floor. She held herself so erect during her attempted flight her chin doesn't crash into the floor as I thought it would.

She springs up and on her feet before I can reach her. With her hands on her abdomen she says with a strained effort, "I'm ok, Daddy."

Her little diaphragm is locked in a contraction so she can barely breath. I freeze out of relief and disbelief at her composure. The horror of the moment is almost over. I pick her up, holding her close to me gently and firmly.

She is still not crying, she just groans every so often telling me she's ok. She is four now and is no longer a feathery little baby. Her grip is so much stronger now, and she has developed the dense, heavy muscle of an active, healthy child.

She is resting her head on my chest and her golden-brown, angel-soft, curly locks are tickling my chin.

"Are you ok, momma?"

"Yaa," she says with a subtle strain, "I'm ok."

"I bet you won't do that again."

"I don't think so, Daddy."

I'm hiding my concern and panic still because if she can be brave so can I. I sit her down on her feet, holding her face in my hands, her little hands are resting on my wrists, and I kiss her forehead. "Are you sure you're ok?" I ask once more because the panicking, overly-protective father is a terrified child.

"Ya, I'm ok," she says, still a little shaky.

I pick her back up and hold her for her comfort and mine. It is beginning to dawn on me that I won't always be able to protect her from all of the random bogies of life. Something will always slip through the

cracks that are unavoidable when you're not an omnipresent and omnipotent being. I'm shaking as the horror of this thought sets in, with all of the possible nightmares of every parent's fears.

I want to scream with every unmeasurable ounce of my life energy, "No, no, no, she's perfect, she doesn't need the hard lessons in life!!!" My eyes are burning with tears. I've been reduced to the frightened child under the foot of cruelty and fear once again. Then the well-conditioned, defiant, survive-at-any-cost instinct kicks in. *Screw the odds, screw the rules, screw any obstacle or challenge. You put your foot on my neck, you mess with me and mine and you'll be left with a stump. She will be safe, loved, protected. No fear. No pain. No loneliness. I'll make it happen, I'll make it happen.* This resolve begins to solidify in my being. The fear is leaving me. My baby girl is watching me with the open and all-encompassing gaze that can strip most adults of all pretentious notions of a superiority complex. Those lucid brown eyes that always felt like sunshine to my soul, that would trap me into being her servant in some way, bring me back. I sit her down on her feet once more and place my hand on her round belly that is common in children her age. I ask once more, "You sure you're ok, momma?"

She grabs my hand and moves it to her heart center—where I always place it when I sit with her at bedtime till she falls asleep—and says, "I'm fine, Daddy." I wink and tell her that she scared the Jesus

out of me. She chimes in with a high-pitched, overly dramatic voice also common in little girls her age, "I scared the Jesus out of myself, Daddy." We both laugh, then I remind her not to let her mother or her grandmothers hear her talk like that.

Dad

Carlos C. Flores, Jr.

The same smile I see in the mirror. The face that wears the same scowl of consternation that I, and the little wriggling children in my lap, enjoy. Age is starting to wreak a little havoc on my Dad. We are sitting in a prison visitation room as we have done most weekends for the last eighteen years. The next generation, my niece and nephew, squirm in my lap as we talk about A&M football, basketball, and the weather.

My Dad has always been my hero. Like I guess it always is for little boys, if they are lucky. A deep voice and the scowl I'm so proud of made him the perfect authority figure. Growing up a "Wait till your Dad gets home" was enough of a threat to allow him to enforce disembodied discipline. There were also more of the tender moments. I remember being in church when I was still in grade school, guiltily thinking about my most recent mischief causing caper. He gave my little knee a squeeze and gave me a big pride-filled smile—just happy to be my Dad.

There was a mini-rite of passage when I was sixteen. He had a recent gallbladder removal surgery

and he was very weak. I almost carried him upstairs. I realized that I needed to start doing more for my family. I needed to start being a man. But I still needed my Dad. Our relationship changed, we talked a lot more and got a lot closer.

Dad was born with cerebral palsy. Probably a gift of forceps use during his 1942 home birth. We were always told a drop of blood got on his brain. It culminated in him not having control of one of his legs. He limped through life. He never complained about it, never blamed anyone. He let it slow him down, but it never stopped him. As all his able-bodied cousins and mentors fell out of school, he pursued his degree and became an architect. We only talked in depth about his condition twice. Both times taught me more about him, and about who I wanted to be, than anything else.

The first, we were watching X-Files or some UFO conspiracy show. He loves those, and always has. This one day, he told me why. With a conspiratorial voice, like he was revealing a long secret, he seemed to feel guilty about saying it. As if by saying this thing he would be ungrateful for all Grandma and Grandpa had done for him. As if by saying this he would not appreciate his wonderful wife. As if by saying this he would not be strong for us. In that moment I appreciated the way he shouldered the burden of his birth. In that moment I saw the vulnerability and the complexity of the man. In that moment I saw that it is okay to not always be strong. "I always used to dream that they would take me, and fix me," he

said.

The second time I think I started the conversation. I was curious and was trying to help him out and wanted to understand his condition better. He was telling me about the surgeries growing up. Telling me about how he fell and broke his leg on the steps of the academic building at A&M. Telling me about how Grandma was appalled at the conditions at the late-40's State School for Handicapped Children, and didn't let him go. Through all the hardships, for all the things denied him, he only always looked to what he did have, to what he was blessed with. His only regret was "I wish sometimes, that Dad had a normal son."

Now he is starting to have more trouble. As he stands to hug me we both jokingly say, "It's a miracle," like we always do, now that he is more reliant on the wheelchair. This hug his arm is really bothering him, too. As he sits back down and loads up my little nephew and niece, and my mom wheels him out, my heart breaks as I think of all the times he's fallen and I'm not there to help him. My biggest regret about prison is that I wish my Dad had a normal son.

Splintered Dreams

Jose Maria Garcia

I'm sitting at my steel desk. It's a feeble place to put thoughts together. Maybe it's all that garish rust facing back at me. Drives a fancy guy like me crazy.

I look at my hands. There's some kind of dinosaur growth taking place on the back of my thumbs. So I take a razor blade, a bare one I broke off our state issue one, and go to work.

A gnarly node is caught on paper as it falls.

I'll be doing this for about five minutes. 300 seconds of extreme care. An infection would be a pain. It's a filthy environment in here, no matter how much cleaning we do. Can't make a poodle out of a chihuahua. I like poodles, the big ones. The second wife used to breed some nice ones.

And I ramble back into the memory trap. Thinking back to when I used to work freely. A nice job. You might say it was a dream of one. But even then, at the end of the day—actually night for me, since I worked on the dark side (not evil, cabron, the night shift)—it became just a job.

I'm back at home. During the school week, I carry the kid back and forth. A more fulfilling task that, being a bus. Or maybe more taxi, huh? She deserves

a limo, she's a good kid. I imagine she still is. Except for the kid part. That's got to be gone right?

"Hey kid, you want to get an ice cream?"

"Sure, Dad."

We're leaving the school, mid-afternoon. I remember a couple of times, or three, a substitute teacher looking askance at me. Maybe it's my sharp face. Or the bigger build of back then, more jaguar-like. I would glower out, "I'm Bella's dad," as Bella begins her run to our car. The state servant displays reticence to release her to me but Bella comes back for me. She says with a smile, nonchalant, "That's my dad!" With my Daddy Man status verified we are off.

She's a trip. Lively mind. A lot of times I don't even get to suggest ice cream. "Let's go to Chuck E. Cheese, Dad!" Sometimes I could talk her into Cici's Pizza and her rote order of pasta and white sauce. Or maybe I steer her into Fuddruckers or some other restaurant that sells beer. I never drink beer but I figured the food to be better. Perhaps I think it more adult. Am I rushing her, wanting it all for her?

But before all that, I'm thinking right now about Finger and Mr. Hand. These guys are kins of the Mock Monster. You know that guy. This is where dad throws up his hands in a fierce parody of claws and slow-menaces the kids. Which throws the "victims" into a bunch of happy screaming. Sometimes the children even manage to take that monster down. Terrible fun.

Maybe Mr. Finger (and Hand, don't forget him!) are an outgrowth of playing lonely. I used to make

ships out of leaves and shells. I also turned the garden hose on to imagine a great river as the rivulets and rills wended from clumps of mud and became high fantasy. That must have been a fantastic waste of water. I think about that now, remembering a high water bill or two of mine. Mom must have really loved this terrible child. God. I think she knew what it was to be lonely...

I pare more off my thumb. Another tick collects. I touch the nodule tenderly. How monstrous it feels.

I remember driving with one hand. I would start dancing my hand around and Bella would notice him. I wouldn't call it a shriek of delight but she would say, "Hand-Hand!" Then I would tap her on the shoulder or give a gentle tickle or two as she would laugh.

Then she would talk to Mr. Finger. I would bob and weave his nailhead in her vision and she would chatter as she pleased. I thought it was a bit funny. She was more animated in conversation than if I just came out and asked, "How was school?" Then I would get, "It was ok."

But with Mr. Finger, she could talk about Hannah or whichever friend du jour of that time. Mr. Finger would wiggle sagaciously and dance or wave to let her know his interest. Then we would get to whatever destination we had decided and Mr. Finger and Hand-Hand would wave their goodbyes as our next adventure began. Fun times.

At my trial, Kathryn, the last good wife, testified. When the lawyer asked her what was one good

thing I could be remembered by, she said, “He was a good dad. A really good dad.” I believe I was and am grateful to my second ex for saying so.

I’m not sure how to end this. I’m in prison. Except for family, I do pretty much the same thing I did out there. I keep to myself and stay cordial with these criminal types. I can’t say I’m not one. I’ve got my convictions. These guys in here are an interesting bunch.

But time wends away. My kids are gone, erased in some perverse way, a bonus punishment in the State’s Eyes. I suppose. Along with their normal business of breaking our souls. Seems a waste. If we only had a way to fix the damage, splint guys together.

TICK

Time’s up. Mr. Finger and Hand-Hand wave — Bye-bye.

Walking With Mercy

Terrance Harvey

It was a little after 8:30am and the triangular-shaped dayroom was fairly empty. This was the older prisoners’ time for relaxation and peace. All the chaos was still sound asleep.

I loved the mornings. I could actually hear myself think, and for me, that’s a writer’s dream.

Scanning the dayroom I saw four other people out with me. One, a Mexican dude with a head-piece of tattoos covering his entire scalp, stood in front of the TV beneath an industrial-sized fan, watching Supernatural.

Another, sitting at the other table on the opposite side of the dayroom, watching ESPN, was a black guy built like Terry Crews; matching dark skin and bald head. Behind him, a white, thirty-six-year-old man, army fade and Irish red beard, was watching the highlights of the sports world as well.

On the black painted bench, next to the black painted phones, a bald, brown-skin black man with beady eyes sat shaking his head. He was much older than most of us in the section, possibly sixty-two, but in great shape for his age. His movements were

elderly-slow and just watching him rub his bald head, something was heavy on his mind.

Everyone said the old guy was crazy and hateful and I had to agree, since his face was always squinched up like the guy on that Keystone beer commercial. He had one bitter-beer face.

I collected my belongings from the table, and then I got up and walked to the bench, sat down next to the crazy old man. He turned his head in my direction. "All these good open seats round here, and you sit at this one?"

I laughed in my mind. It was official. Dude's mind was in a straitjacket. "Nah! I just wanted to speak with you a little bit."

"Damn it!" he muttered, shaking his head. "Now here I thought my act was being bought... keeping you away. You ain't fallin' for it, is ya', huh youngsta?"

The look on my face showed my uncertainty. "Nah... I fell for it, and I believe I'm still falling."

He laughed for the first time. I cautiously scooted to the end of the bench, looked at him questioningly.

"Don't know what YOU scootin' fo'," he laughed. "You're the one who wanted to speak with a crazed man. Maybe I'm the one who should be doing the scootin'."

I had a light laugh to myself, thinking, maybe he wasn't totally crazy.

I told him about my assignment for Pen-City Writers and he sighed. "Well, guess I got one story for ya." He pointed at my nose. "Just don't let anyone

know I'm sane."

I nodded, thinking, Shhh... you don't have to worry about that.

He then went into deep thought. A smile stretched across his face. He began his story.

"I was eight years old. Remember this here like it were yesterday. My father had brought me a runt of a pig, told me it was out back. I loved Mercy with all my heart."

"Mercy?"

"Yeah." He laughed, leaning back on the bench. "That's what I named him. Anyway, Mercy and I became the best of buds. I fed him in his own bowl away from the other pigs, even put his name in black paint on the front of it. We were so close we actually wallowed in the mud together." He laughed joyfully. "I had this rope tied to Mercy's little neck and would walk him everywhere I went."

He showed me his open palm, and I saw where a nail had scarred his skin. "That's happened when I was building Mercy a pig house to sleep in. That was my friend." He smiled. "Well, as time went by Mercy started gaining weight, getting real strong. Mercy talked to me you know? He was the happiest oinker alive. One day, my father woke me up.

"Boy, go get that pig of yours!"

"Now I didn't know what the hell was going on," he said, shaking his head, staring back at me. "But I was happy Dad wanted to see ol' Mercy. He never asked about him before so... I go get my boy Mercy, tie the rope around his fat neck and walk him happily

up front. ‘Mercy!’ I said to my pig. ‘Come on, Dad wanna see you.’

“Coming around the corner of our house, my brother was standing on the wooden porch shaking his head. Now I thought he was just jealous of me and Mercy’s relationship since him and I argued night and day.

“The truck in the dirt driveway was running, so I thought we were takin’ my Mercy for a ride to town, but when my father seen me and Mercy, things got weird then.

“‘Boy, tie the pig to that there bumper real good,’ said my father, tossing the other end over the thickest tree branch above us. Instantly, I was confused. Open hands out in front of me, I shrugged my shoulders. ‘But why you wanna do that?’ I asked, wrinkles in my eight-year-old forehead.

“‘Boy hush up and do what I say!’

“So I tied my friend to the back bumper of Dad’s rusty brown truck. ‘But why are we doing this for?’ I asked, looking at Mercy, sniffing the dirt driveway, then to my father.

“‘Hush up boy! You wanna eat don’t cha?’

“Now I was really confused. The wrinkles on my forehead deepened as I shook my head. I didn’t wanna eat Mercy. I told my father I wasn’t hungry anymore as he walked around, got into the truck, slamming the door.”

The old man looked at me, and shook his head.

“Man youngsta let me tell you. When he smashed that gas pedal and my Mercy was yanked up into

the air by his neck, squealing, I ran to my father’s truck, latched my tiny hand onto that damn chrome bumper, pulling with all my might. I was barefooted. The rocks of the driveway beneath me were piercing the soles of my feet, but I didn’t care. My friend was strung-up.

“Tears poured out my eyes angrily as I started hitting my father’s truck like a baby silverback. ‘Let go of Mercy please! Let him go! Noooo noo!’

“My father jumped out the driver’s seat, telling my brother to get me off the back of the truck. When my brother laid his hands on me I hit him square in the got-damn nose.”

The old man balled up his fist, looking at it with pride.

“I hit him good too. He stumbled back and fell on his butt, hurting himself. Blood rushed out both my brother’s nostrils like bank robbers. Next thing I knew my father had snatched me up, carrying me underneath his armpit like a kicking and screaming bedroll. I was kicking and screaming for Mercy. He took me inside and gave me the whippin’ of a lifetime. Said his father whipped him the same way for disrespect. I believe his father done the same to his father.”

The old man shook his head. “Anyway, it all came from slavery. I’ll NEVER whip my children,” he said. “That night we had dinner and I didn’t know if it were Mercy sitting on the saucer or some other pig but I tell you, I wasn’t eatin’ it! Nope! I sat there, arms crossed, watching my father and brother feast

on possibly my friend's life. My mother and father got into an argument about how my father did Mercy in front of me, so her arms were crossed as well. From that point on I knew who the REAL animals were. People.

“Now you can call me crazy and hateful all you want. Just know that I'm NOT blind, not a fool. I don't like people too much. I know the truth and I deal with it how I deal with it.”

At that point, I was speechlessly sad by his piece of history. I was stuck in a trance, thinking about the misunderstanding I once had of the crazy, hateful old man sitting next to me. It wasn't much I could do besides apologize for something I had nothing to do with, but my innocent judgment of this man told me my apology was indeed necessary. Ignorance commonly lies on the surface and I wondered why the truth is always hidden.

Immediately I was as big as an ant, questioning myself. Who are the real animals? I then looked back at the old man, understanding the bitter-beer face he wore again. This time, I understood. He hadn't forgiven such a powerful figure. His father's face rested on everyone else's shoulders and honestly, the dayroom in prison could get quite animalistic. The old man's hand wasn't the only thing scarred, for the unforgiving child in him had an even bigger one.

The Rhythm of the City of New York

Patrick Glenn Jeffries

He waited for twenty years to come to New York City, he tells me in a clipped and thick Slavic accent. City of lights and home to the lady liberty, he exclaims as he claps his hands together and throws his arms out wide, holding his head back as though he were embracing the city and the sky.

She is singing her song of freedom my friend—can you hear it? he says with the kind of hysteria common to lottery winners.

I hear it, I feel it, my man, she's got her own rhythm, I say. Enjoy it my friend, it's a great American pastime. 103rd Street and Astoria Blvd. I stand on the sidewalk. The smell of exhaust mixes with the smell of the Chinese takeout restaurant and the joint I just smoked.

I slip the headphones hanging from my neck onto my head. The music feels like a garment of clothing matching the mood of my high. I throw up the deuce to my Slavic friend who is eyeing the joint I just handed him with concerned curiosity as the synthetic ambient sound mixed with the steady bump tis bump tis bump tis of the four-to-the-floor, 128-beats

per-minute grabs me. The city becomes my own music video. My casual movement naturally falls in line with the beat.

The simple rhythm of walking becomes a dance through the random undulation of pedestrians. I anticipate the breaks and gaps in the moving crowd of morning commuters on the sidewalk on their way to whatever vital function they provide for the city.

I move with liquid fluidity as I weave through the people. The crisp cool air makes everything smell vibrant. The woman in front of me and her perfume seems to match the high-pitched cadence of the keyboard spiraling higher bringing the beat, rhythm, and melodies to an apex till there is a drop. A sharp yet melodious shift begins a new cycle of rhythm, containing new elements in the constant bump tis bump tis, in my head.

Eight paces ahead of me I see a man sitting on a piece of cardboard in worn but functional coat, pants, and boots. His tattered and ragged appearance does not touch the gleam of life, hope, and dauntless optimism in his eyes. Everything is in rhythm. I reach into my pocket for the extra five. Three paces. We make eye contact, he pumps his fist in time with the beat, catching the rhythm from the bobbing of my head. He smiles, I grin. I drop the five in his cup at the same time as the drop of the beat.

The hand that dropped the five becomes a fist, our knuckles make contact, bang! A thanks and a welcome is communicated without a word. A few pedestrians caught up in the playful energy of me and my

homeless friend pump their fists, bouncing ironically to the sound in my head. I give my attention back to the woman who smells like sensuality, joy, and life.

Her well-toned legs trap me momentarily in the throb. Ahh... but I'm a rhythm junky and the music pulls me back just in time to be elevated by a reverberating dream. A lulling vocal enters the audio tapestry of sound, asking me if I can feel it—I can.

The nice smelling woman in a long jacket and short skirt with the kind of legs that makes my breath catch turns to find my appreciative smirk. I cock both my finger pistols and shoot, bang! letting her know she's got it. She smiles, pure sunshine; she gets it. She adopts a playful scowl, cocks her single finger pistol and shoots, bang, bang! I stagger but never lose the beat I am moving on. 103rd Street and Corona Blvd. The L train #7 to Flushing or maybe Jamaica Queens. Who knows, plans can change in a New York minute, thumping out 129 beats in each one of them, and I'm lost in her rhythm. The rhythm of the city. . .

Friday Night Madness

Anthony Johnson

Mother made us get in bed before it was dark almost every Friday night. I had figured out her plan. Cin and Bren, my sisters, were still too young to fit the pieces together. They would fuss for the longest about it not being bedtime. Mother would have to threaten them within an inch of their lives before they'd get in bed and stay there.

I was old enough to understand that she was just trying to protect us from the monster that came out after dark on Fridays.

I knew the monster drove a 1964 four-door Chevy Impala because the sound of the engine and the slamming of the hollow metal door in the quiet stillness of a dark country night are the same sounds I heard my stepfather's white 64 Impala make every morning when he took me to school.

I may have been old enough to understand what Mother was doing, but no way could I understand what was transforming the driver of the 64.

I learned to drive when I was nine years old, and yes, the 64 seemed to transform me into something I was not. Behind the steering wheel, I was a scared

nine year old, but when I was bragging to my friends, I was a wild and reckless teenager. I guess that I was still too young to do full-blown monster. Probably needed more experience.

Oscar (my stepfather) and Harvey (his drinking buddy) logged thousands of miles in between the ditches and bar pits around Black Bayou. They would always take Harvey's old blue Ford pickup truck, and as would be expected, they always returned with something they either found, borrowed, bought, or killed.

It was a beautiful September day. I was turning ten years old, double digits; I was growing up. I had caught my first fish, killed a bunch of swamp rabbits and white tail deer. At the rate I was going, maybe, just maybe I wouldn't always be the redheaded step-child Oscar referred to.

Saturday morning—my birthday! Mother had baked my favorite cake (three-layer German chocolate with shredded coconut). Man! This was like once-a-year special. I got two pieces of cake on my birthday. I couldn't wait to blow out the candles.

The monster didn't drive that Friday night. I wasn't sure that Saturday morning why, but I was glad.

I was sitting on the floor with my sisters watching the Bugs Bunny and Friends cartoon show—the Coyote had just run full speed into a wall that had been painted over by the Road Runner—when I overheard

my mother tell Oscar to leave if he was fixing to start drinking beer that early in the morning.

He didn't waste a minute. Two seconds later he was in front of the TV telling me to get dressed.

I had already learned (the hard way) that when my ex-marine stepfather gave an order, do it. His favorite saying was, "When I say jump, you ask how high." I cautiously glanced at Mother, it was a risk, but for some crazy reason (like my birthday), I thought she would object, but her look said: not happening.

Dressed and out the door. Oscar told me to get in the back seat, I did. I was always carefully afraid of him, he was unpredictable.

Oscar turned right on Highway 71 going north. He could be going anywhere, I had to pay attention. I'd been dropped off before. Harvey lived on the road going to Rodessa. I was hoping he'd go there.

Passing Harvey's road made me get that sick throw-up feeling inside. The trees were passing by too fast. He was in a hurry to get somewhere. The road that goes down to the bottoms was where I prayed we didn't go.

After the turn and about halfway to the bottoms, I thought, Why don't God ever answer my prayers? Was it because I'd had bad thoughts?

The black dirt of the river bottom has a smell you never forget. Miles and miles of plowed earth, row after row of dried cotton stalks. In September the cotton had already been picked twice, no profit was left. A few locals would move their families from

their homes to camp out by the cotton fields to pick the scraps. Oscar said it looked like buzzards picking at the ribs of a dead animal carcass.

No one was in sight as Oscar pulled over by a trail that led into the woods. My heart was beating in my ears so loud when Oscar started honking the car horn that for a moment I thought my eardrums had burst. Three aggravated blasts from the car horn—a pause—three more blasts—another pause—one long, impatient blast, and then without a word he sat there staring out at the overgrown path.

I was replaying in my mind the time before when he'd dropped me off. It was closer down to the river. It was the first time I'd been to the bottoms, it was all new to me. For the next two days I experienced many firsts—the worst was being thrown out like a dog; then reality silently taking hold of me, being gripped by the dark; then the first night's hunger, thirst, and the sounds that surrounded me like a damp fog. The second night wasn't much better. I made it home early on the third day, Mother fed me some leftovers, my sisters hugged me . . .

I snapped back when an old black man wearing faded bib overalls stepped out of the woods and onto the trail.

My mind was running wild. I was thinking Oscar was going to make sure I didn't come back this time.

As the old man got closer, he didn't look black or even brown like Mr. Lee, he looked dark blue. My

eyes were just starting to water up when the old man asked Oscar, “Who dat cha got with ya?”

Oscar said, “This is my wife’s boy. It’s his birthday so he’s gonna ride along with me and Harvey.”

Oscar told the old man what he wanted and the old man disappeared back into the woods. Maybe five minutes passed, then the old man was back and with him was a younger version of himself carrying four six-packs of Country Club malt liquor in a green potato sack. I figured out right then what a bootlegger was, and the service he provided for the gentlemen of the community. I was so relieved to find out bootleggers didn’t eat “little white boys.”

So we were going to Harvey’s house. It seemed like his plan was for them to do some drinking and for me to tag along for the ride.

It was my birthday, I didn’t want to be riding around all over God knows where, no, I wanted to be home blowing out candles and picking shredded coconut out of my teeth.

Harvey’s wife, we called her Aunt Bertha, had the biggest breasts I’d ever seen. I was just the right height, too. When she hugged me, my whole head fit perfectly right in the middle. She always hugged for the longest, not a problem for me, but I always wondered if that extra little bit wasn’t really for her—I mean, I was adorable at that age.

After we left Harvey’s, my nerves had settled (thanks to Bertha). I was again feeling like a birthday boy, anxious to get home to the cake.

Today, I guess because I was around, they decided to cruise the 64 Impala. Oscar was driving, and in no hurry to get wherever he was going. I was in the backseat sitting in the middle, so I could see the speedometer—15 mph, Goodddd!—my sisters would eat all the cake before I got back home.

Their conversations, varied as they were, didn’t really involve me—an occasional “Yes Sir” or “No Sir” was the extent of my echoed exchange.

Two hours—two six packs; I first noticed the change in their speech patterns. Oscar was using cuss words I’d never heard of. Harvey was laughing at everything. He was bent over, laughing at a dog chasing the 64, it really was not all that funny! I still didn’t have a clue where we were going, but my second observation was that we were never going to get there. Our cruising speed was now topping out at 10 mph, downhill. Dogs had long stopped chasing us, and between the two of them, we were stopping every 43.2 feet, so one, if not both of them, could pee.

The breaks got longer and longer, not because it took either one of them longer, it’s just the stories got longer, more detailed. Personally, I think they were lying to each other.

I had convinced myself there was no more birthday cake, all gone; Cin and Bren had ate it all—I guess that in that moment of self-inflicted agony, I said out loud something about not wanting any “damn” birthday cake anyway. What I’d said was not what Oscar heard—what Oscar heard was me say that

this wasn't much of a "Damned Birthday!"

What happened in his head, what triggered his outburst, I'll never know. What I do know is that he was transforming into the Friday Night Monster right before my eyes. Some things were said, they were directed towards me. No mistake about that. The rage was not Oscar. The slurred speech, yes. The red bloodshot eyes, yes. The person yelling at me, telling me to get out of the car, no.

Harvey wasn't laughing anymore, his blank stare said he didn't know what was going on. I could tell Harvey had never met the Friday Night Monster—the Monster that bothered little girls, beat little boys and his wife. I'll be truthful, I never met the "Friday Night Monster" on Saturday, and I was afraid of what was to come.

As I was getting out of the back seat, still somewhat bent over—the Monster slapped me behind the left ear—didn't see that one coming, the next two were more what I was accustomed to. Stand up straight—look him in the face and take it. If I fell down and didn't get back up, that was a sign of being a coward. I only did that once, it was before I knew the rules to the madness.

No matter how hard or how many times, I always got back up. Sometimes I got back up because it gave my mother and sisters more time to run, sometimes it was me being defiant, and sometimes it was just easier . . .

The Component of All Living Things

Kevin Murphy

Living in Galveston, as a child, I spent a lot of time on the beach. I've swum in its waters, fished in its depths, crossed its vastness, skied, surfed and boated across its surface. I've ridden its waves and currents, ingested gallons of its salted bitterness. I've walked along its shores, collected the treasures that it had puked upon them, and I've lost some treasures to it. I've been there when it glowed an eerie green along its tips and edges, and I've walked along it at those times and left footprints of the same glowing ghostlike green behind me.

Sticky, sweet, salted air would blow from across it and coat the windows of houses and cars so that you would have to rinse them daily to be able to see out of them. It rusted everything it touched and shortened the life of cars, trucks, and everything made of metal. A corrosive breath that sighs across the island day and night, consuming slowly all things made of iron.

Its waves eat away at its shore taking the sands and reducing the island by inches each year. Jetties have been placed to slow the effect, sand dunes built to keep the shores from being blown away, slabs of con-

crete piled along its edges to hold the beaches in place.

Hurricanes and storms change the island and surrounding waterways yearly. A seawall stretches across the island's front for 26 miles to protect it from the waters that are violently thrown and surged upon it. Houses beyond the protection of the wall are built on stilts and stand spider-like above the land waiting for the waters to come, the hurricanes and storms to do their worst. Some stand afterwards untouched while others lay scattered across their yards and legs.

For years I lived surrounded by these waters. I ran to them and from them, looked at them and across them. I've watched the oil rigs dotted along its horizon. Little dots that would glow in the night like stationary fireflies. Ships, sailboats, and shrimp boats pass by in the distance and just past the breakers. The shrimp boats with their wings spread, ropes stretched out from their tips, and clouds of seagulls following in their wake gorging on the leftovers.

My mother moved me from there when I was a teenager and my world changed. No longer was I surrounded by water, no longer was there a taste and feel of salt, the smell of fish and sea. The waters were changed to fresh clear waters, the taste of salt and bitterness was gone. The density was replaced by lighter, freer quality which felt foreign when I was in it. The gulf replaced by streams, ponds, rivers, and lakes. The fish were smaller and were fried instead of baked and sautéed. The bait was different and the poles smaller. The water was no longer the source of the wind, storms no longer blew in from them, hurricanes just meant that

there would be a shortage of milk, bread, and gas, as people fled from the beaches, along the escape routes that flowed through the heart of the place I now lived.

Time caused me to change, to become accustomed to the waters, and lack of them. Of the feel of the new world that I was living in. My clothing changed, gone were the shorts, flip-flops, coral necklaces, and coconut oil, replaced by boots, blue jeans, and the smell of backwoods Off.

I never really thought about the way life was for me living on the gulf, surrounded by its waters or the effect of water at all for that matter, of the way it shapes us and our surroundings. How water is what we are all made of, how it's what holds us together, how we can't be or live without it. How it fills us and sustains us.

Water has relieved me from heat and thirst. It has cleansed me from dirt and sin. It has carried me and drowned me. It is life and death and without it there would be no life.

I have been back to visit the waters of my childhood many times over the years. I've smelt its salty air, swum in its shallows, collected its teeth-like shells. I've visited its shores but no longer do I see it as I once did, in passing and indifference, now that I know it what it is, the foundation for everything that is, the giver, the sustainer, the redeemer. I sit in awe before it and its greatness.

I raise a glass of it, saltless of course, and toast a toast to it and drink deep of it, and I am filled by it and I am thankful for it.

The Pen-City Writers

James Beavers was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. Before his incarceration, he actively pursued a career in music. He originally joined the Pen-City Writers as a way to express himself creatively in the bland environment of prison. Some of his favorite authors include Robert A. Heinlein, Gabriel García Marquez, Herman Hesse, Kurt Vonnegut, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Johnathan Byrd grew up in Tyler, Texas. His favorite authors include Bernard Cornwell, Jim Butcher, and Charles Bukowski. He has become a recent fan of Chad Kultgen. His favorite book is *A Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess.

Of all the labels **Carlos C. Flores, Jr.** has earned and valued, or been shackled with and chafed under—Son, Brother, Friend, Tio, Chicano, Mexican, American, Student, Class Clown, Leader, Teacher, Toughguy, Felon, Convict, Inmate, Homie, Dungeon Master, Artist, Woodworker—only Writer has ever let him explore what it means to be Human.

Jason Gallegos has had two stories published in *Vice Magazine*. He considers the art of creative writing stimulating and uses this craft to dance wildly on the

imagination. If he can cause a laugh to shake the reader's belly, then it was worth the writing.

Firmly ensconced at the John B. Connally Institution of Prison Education, **Jose Maria Garcia** was guilty of plagiarizing a report on Argentina in fifth grade. He took the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and switched all the big words for smaller ones. He got an A. Otherwise he has been an honest and decent citizen but for one last free act. He dreams of butterflies and daughters, and whiles his time away reading—with, of course, the occasional D&D game thrown in.

Terrance Harvey is currently working on a four-book series called *Torn by the Slums*, and plans on making his mark in the literary world. A loving father of two, Terrance works every day to shape his craft. His undying love for his children keeps him writing.

Patrick Glenn Jeffries is a racially, culturally, and sometimes theoretically ambiguous off-ender, born of a beautiful Haitian mother and a German and Welsh father. Patrick is a loving son, father, brother, uncle, and friend, who wishes to introduce the world to his beloved life principle (of never-ending new beginnings) by way of creative expression and the not-so-ambiguous compounds of pen and ink.

Anthony Johnson, a.k.a. AJ, like you, bleeds, cries, heals. What you feel, he too feels. Love or hate him, but join him for the conversation. He is writing to find life again, a life of worth, of meaning, of value. A special thanks to the University of Texas at Austin English Department, Professor Deb Olin Unferth, Scott, Andrea, Rachel, Celia, Denise, and Olga.

Calvin Massengale is working hard to become an author. He writes from a sobering yet humorous point of view that reflects his journey through life. He'd like to thank the Pen-City Writers class for their love and support.

Kevin Murphy, a.k.a. 1449699, a.k.a. Cricket, was born in May 1969 in a little town in east Texas. He now resides at the J.B. Connally Unit. During his stay at the city behind the fence, he has done all he can to change. Through being part of the Pen-City Writers he has found his voice and a way to reach others. He's now able to tell his story. He was a runner-up for the Insider Prize, and has had a story published in Vice Magazine.

Steven Perez was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1978. While incarcerated at the Connally Unit, he prepares post-conviction appellate papers for inmates and himself to file with the state and federal courts. He enjoys writing fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and screenwriting.

Peter Smith was an avid reader as a child, and he loved sports. Both are constants in his life today. As an adolescent, he was an aspiring rap artist, performing under the moniker Young Woo. Today he's thirty-five and dreaming of making the world better with his crazy pen.

Bradley G. Varnell is a writer and poet, though sometimes he questions that. He has written a memoir, *Teach Me How to Prey*, and a chapbook, *Shrouded in Black*. He credits Courtney Bone—without her, there'd be no light—and quotes e.e. cummings, “Trust your heart if the seas catch fire, live by love though the stars walk backward,” for the rest.

Joel Zubiri is currently serving a life sentence in a Texas state prison. His first time picking up a book and actually reading it was when he first stepped into a prison cell. He hasn't looked back since. His most inspiring literary moment came when he read Brandon Sanderson's *Way of Kings*, “Life before death; strength before weakness; journey before destination.”

