

Mend

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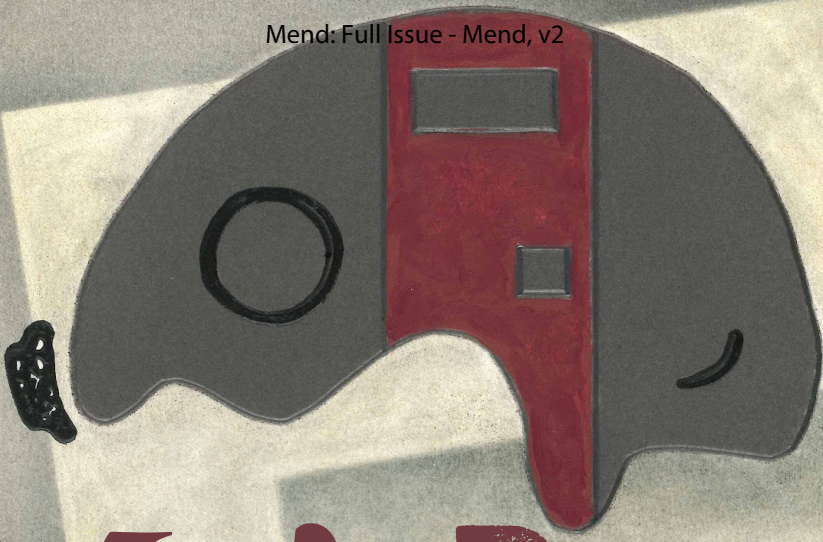
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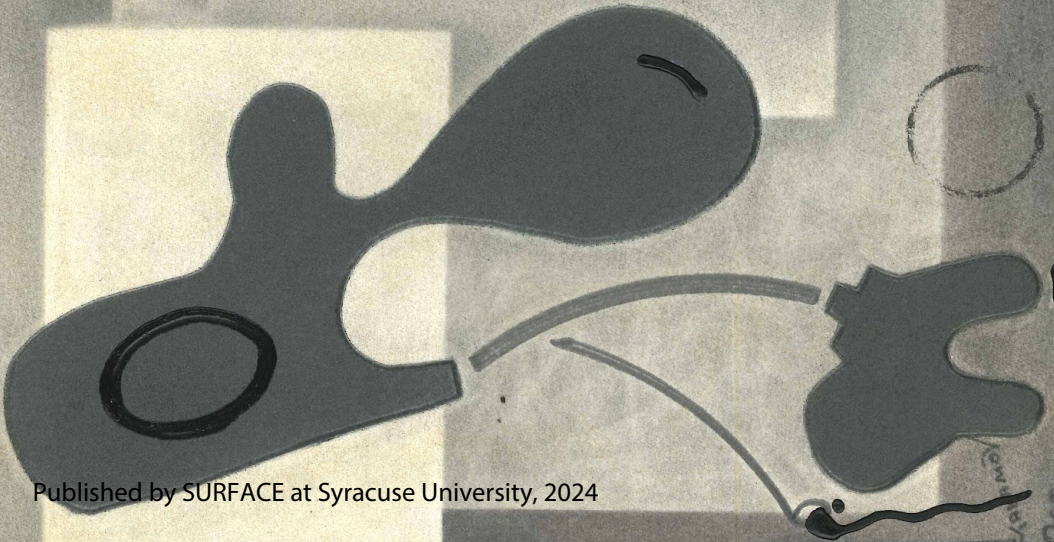
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MEND

2024 | PROJECT MEND



MEND

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Mend is an online and print journal that celebrates the lives and creative work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as well as individuals who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. This annual issue showcases writing of all types, including fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. While prospective authors may submit pieces that describe their experiences with incarceration, the publication welcomes contributions on any topic.

<https://surface.syr.edu/mend/vol2/iss1/28>

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The 2024 *Mend* Awards for Excellent Writing recognizes Lisa Lesyshen's "Nothing to See Here" and Leo Cardez's "The Colonel."

Visit surface.syr.edu/mend to view these stories and our multimedia content.

Cover art by Yuri Kadamov.



Welcome to the 2024 issue of *Mend*, where creative minds and inquisitive perspectives collide. Within these pages, you will find pain, struggle, strength, ambition, and words of power and wisdom. Many of us are going through or have been through the same or similar things. We realize that we are all different people from different walks of life trying to overcome similar obstacles. Project Mend shows us that we can all learn from each other no matter where we are or where we come from.

We are grateful to have these passionate writers express how they feel and what they've been through. This issue includes their powerful poems, short stories, and nonfiction—facts of life in raw, unpolished form.

Some pieces are about the prison system, and others are about life outside. Still others traverse more fantastical and spiritual realms. We, the editors of *Mend*, have the utmost respect for those who have shown us how to follow our passion and dreams through words.

We want to thank Professor Patrick W. Berry and the many special guests we met along the way: poet José A. Pérez, civil rights activist and best-selling author Michelle Alexander, and documentary filmmaker Too Black, among others. We admire their dedication.

Thanks also to Katherine Nikolau and Gabby Wilson, who helped us develop as writers, editors, and publishers. Additionally, we appreciate the efforts of Ilhy Gomez Del Campo Rojas, whose incredible design skills were invaluable in creating the cover of this issue and shaping a few of the layouts.

The *Mend* editors represent a healthy mix of a great-grandmother, a great listener, a trusted servant of the people, a poet/writer, a talented individual, a sparkly and bubbly personality, a fit veteran and computer nerd, the Queen, the Midas Touch, the Mediator, a compassionate helper, a role model as a hardworking and ambitious individual, a grad student, a professor, a retired grandfather-to-be, and a returning citizen who banded together weekly to complete this work.

Many of us on the editorial team were recruited by senior editor Troy White. We are grateful to him for involving us in the community and introducing us to this work.

The writers in this issue are strong-minded and positive,



Art by Brian Hindson.



Attendees at a documentary screening of *The Pendleton 2: They Stood Up*

ideals Project Mend stands on. Attending workshops, interacting with other editors, listening to great ideas, and being involved in different activities—such as clearing our minds with meditation and yoga with the help of the Center for Community Alternatives’ own Michaela Thorley—has been a blessing. Working with Professor Berry has been very helpful to us, and we’re sure the rest of the editors feel the same way.

Working on *Mend* allows you to be yourself and shows you how you don’t have to settle for just one thing—that you can open your mind to new, exciting things and open the door to a whole new way of thinking. This experience is truly making history for a lot of us.

If you have the determination, motivation, and passion for writing, editing, or publishing, then Project Mend is your first stop. If you want to learn how to express your feelings, thoughts, or opinions, this is where you need to be. We are very grateful for the opportunity to work on this project, learning writing and editing skills.

Coming together every Monday night to work on this issue was more than just an experience—it was an adventure. Our unique personalities harmonized to create a space filled with light and energy. We always smiled to see one another, to share Varsity wings and pizza, and to watch this beautiful issue slowly come into being through our collective efforts.

We’re proud of all the editors and authors for their efforts and dedication to *Mend*. We hope you find as much joy in reading this issue as we found in putting it together. *Mend* is made possible through collaboration with the Center for Community Alternatives and

Photographs by Patrick W. Berry.

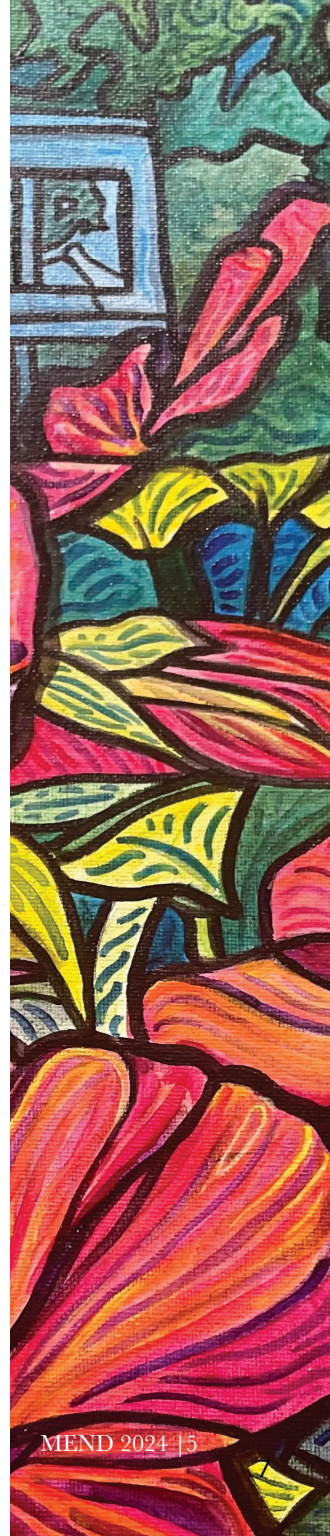
HNY's Post-Incarceration Humanities Partnership, which is generously supported by the Mellon Foundation. Also, the project has been supported by the Engaged Humanities Network, the Humanities Center, a CUSE Research Grant, and the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition at Syracuse University.

Special thanks to Benay Bubar for offering insight into copyediting, Wendy Mansfield for providing suggestions on layouts, and the judges—José A. Pérez, Brian T. Shaw, David Todd, and Marvin Wade—for helping us select winners of the awards for best writing in this issue.

—Vince Moody, Michael J. Willacy, and Daquane Williams



José A. Pérez gave a public talk and workshop in Syracuse.



CONTRIBUTORS



Below are brief bios of those authors whose work appears in this issue. See info on our artists on page 72.

Jennifer Battles has served nine-plus years of a twenty-five-year sentence in Alabama. She works in the facility as a GED tutor and spends her spare time reading, mostly folklore and science fiction but also anything that catches her interest. She believes that the Alabama prison system does not value rehabilitation, only warehousing as many people as possible.

Albert Bell is a 55-year-old Oakland, California native and a published author and poet. Some of his work has been included in *Iron City Magazine* Issue 6 (2021), *Journal X* (2022), and *Colossus: Freedom* (2022). He is a lover of justice, truth, the arts, and God. He is also a lead/bass guitarist for the band Blackberry Jam based at Mule Creek State Prison.

Nathan Blalock is a writer who has published essays and poems. He is currently working on a book of urban sci-fi. His scribblings in sci-fi and other genres can be read in *Inner City*, *Colossus Press*, *Journal X*, *Essential Voices*, and *Nova Albion*.

Leo Cardez (a pseudonym) is a two-time PEN America award-winning and Pushcart Press Prize-nominated writer. His drama has been produced in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Cardez's nonfiction has been published in *The Harbinger* (*NYU Review of Law and Social Justice*), *The Abolitionist*, *Trajectory*, *Evening Review*, and *Under the Sun*, among others.

Photograph by Ping Chieh Lin.

Michael Crawford served twenty years in prison before being granted clemency in 2019. During that time, he obtained an AA, a BA, and a master's degree. He writes and speaks to youth in an effort to help them avoid prison. He is currently working as a client advocate at the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, Inc.

Curtis R. Dickson has been writing poems for over twenty years. He writes, "Writing is a passion, and I love to write love poems. My goal is to write a book focused on love. I'm also a writer of various genres including fantasy and supernatural scrolls. It is a joy providing for all."

Craig Elias hails from the cake-eating suburbs of Pittsburgh, PA. Alone in a cell in 2002, Craig began taking life, faith, and family seriously. Locked in the hole under investigation in 2008, he began taking writing seriously, too. Since then he's killed trees by the acre, creating essays, short stories, plays, and legal briefs. Craig will tell you that the most important thing he's ever written, however, is his own epitaph: *Jesus of Nazareth lived and loved through Craig Elias*. More than any other, this statement reflects who he is, what he stands for, and what drives him to make every word count regardless of where he writes it.

Gary K. Farlow holds a Juris Doctorate from the Thomas Jefferson College of Law at Head University. He is a two-time winner of the PEN America Writing Award and has had his work featured in numerous publications.

Heather C. Jarvis is preparing to reenter society after serving a ten-year prison sentence. She describes herself as a casualty of generational crime and the opiate epidemic. She has been to a lot of places you would never want to go and done a lot of things you would never want to do, but she has one hell of a story. Her nonfiction has appeared on *The Crime Report*, *The Iowa Review Prison Writing Project*, and *The Journal of Women and Criminal Justice*, and she also regularly contributes to the Prison Journalism Project. She studied memoir under Piper Kerman, author of *Orange Is the New Black*. She also has won multiple awards in PEN America's Prison Writing Contest. She graduated from Sinclair College with an associate's degree in Correctional Rehabilitation and is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work at The Ohio State University.

Maryana Kayumova identifies as a Russian-speaking New Yorker and Tatar-American. Most of her poems and short essays strive to depict the life of a Tatar female growing up with a split identity in Russia and America. She dreams about a world with 100% humanism and 0% racism.

Lisa Lesyshen came to prison ten years ago as a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the underarms down and with only 40% use of her arms. She never experienced life on the outside as a person in a wheelchair and describes initiation to prison life as a handicapped person as “brutal.” She always chooses the pursuit of truth and tries to offer a panoramic vision of prison for all to see. Her work attempts to flip the narrative that incarcerated people are inarticulate, dumb, and unworthy, seeking to elevate the conversation about incarceration.

Jennifer Martinez is an Afro-Latina writer from New York City. Jennifer writes poetry and creative nonfiction. She is the author of the forthcoming book *Memories, Poems, Prayers: Between Bars and a Brick Wall*. Jennifer is currently working on receiving her undergraduate degree in politics and human rights.

Fernando Rivas Martinez (pen name f.r. martinez) is an award-winning writer and music composer. His poetry and short stories have received recognition from PEN America and American Short Fiction. Prior to incarceration, he was the recipient of two Emmys and one Grammy for musical composition. He was the recipient of the Richard Rodgers Musical Theater Award in 1997. He has also written for The Marshall Project. His poetry appears on the websites Minutes Before Six and Justice Arts Coalition.

Daniel Wright is 30 and is currently incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. He strives every day to be better than the day before, pursuing education and fitness.

Brian Warner is a seminary student incarcerated at Mule Creek State Prison in Ione, CA. His most recent poetry appears in *Journal X* and the inmate-produced newspaper *The Mule Creek Post*. Brian's latest chapbook *After Always War—Emmanuel's Repair* was released by Grolier Poetry Book Shop in April 2023.





Mend: Full Issue - Mend, v2

SECTION INTRO: RECOLLECTIONS

The brave writers in this section grapple with the reality of imprisonment, remembering moments both dark and light. They tell us about their daily rituals and the effects of not knowing what each day will hold. As some reflect on life outside of prison, they tell us about the importance of making the right choices in any given situation. Writing provides a way of coping with some of the most horrendous conditions and cherishing the recollections that hold the most joy.

In “the great forgetting,” f.r. martinez enlightens us with the knowledge he gained behind prison walls, making this a powerful piece about his journey while inside a cell. Behind closed doors, he recognizes the mistakes he made and reflects on how he would change it all if given a second chance.

Leo Cardez writes about wanting to forget his experiences in prison in “Imagine You Can Forget.” Forced to contemplate his regrets while incarcerated, he escapes by creating art and writing. He describes his life prior to being incarcerated, when he had a loving family and friends. However, losing someone while in prison made things worse, making him reconsider his actions and reflect on his regrets.

In “Nothing to See Here,” Lisa Lesyshen writes with emotion about her experience with mental health issues while in prison. She shows us what happens when no one listens to cries for assistance, exposing the issue of mental health care within the prison system and how it can potentially lead to suicide.

Heather C. Jarvis writes about the choices that led to her facing her kids behind a ceramic counter, hands pressed against plexiglass, frantically clawing with fear and pain. She questions, “Why did I do this to them? Why did I do this to myself?” Her words convey defeat and an absence of peace. Jarvis reflects on her life choices and lingering struggles that have been passed down through generations, but she realizes while incarcerated that her past does not define her future.

In “To Play Amorously,” Curtis R. Dickson intrigues us with a love poem. He visualizes the dazzling blue sky while thinking about the one person he cares about the most. He daydreams about what a difference it would make to touch that person. He also dreams of freedom beyond closed cell doors and imagines what it would be like to be anonymous and free of dehumanization.

Albert Bell’s “Cooking with Butter” offers a playful anecdote about his daughter and some missing candy. Finally, the *Mend* team reflects on a meaningful experience of our own: attending a powerful lecture by author and civil rights activist Michelle Alexander.

It’s admirable that these writers can reflect on their lives so powerfully, many while in carceral situations. We hope that those reading these pieces recognize that while help and assistance can be hard to ask for, they often come from within and can be realized through creativity, reflection, and writing.

—Montwella Bufford, Troy Paris, and Jacqueline Thompkins

Art by Deborah Nicholls.



the great forgetting

f.r. martinez

we had the key
to unlock all the doors
but discovered too late
some doors should remain,
that we should perhaps abstain.

having the key
is the first mirage.
knowledge is the first
excitement.
power is the great mistake.
learning
is the last
enlightenment.

some rooms are best
kept shut
dark,
some journeys on which we embark
lead nowhere
to the top of the stair
that is just a prop
on an empty stage
where we stop.

best to forget the key
and forget the lock.

a light can shine too bright,
a truth so hard to bear,
too impossible to share.

render us mute
deprived of keys
and rooms
that we may sleep
in blissful absence,
smiling fools
for whom rules
are a game
no one is meant to win,
made by those whose
sin is believing.

the great forgetting
is now at hand.

Me

Imagine You Can Forget

Leo Cardez

Layout by Vince Moody, Photo by Donald Tong from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/rear-view-of-a-silhouette-man-in-window-143380>.

Forget that you are tired of reading lackluster prison writing from wannabe inmate authors.

Imagine that you will be pleasantly surprised by an incisive poem (well, not a poem in the strictest literary sense, but poetic nonetheless) that cuts through the PC BS.

Forget that you are a boy raised in a cracked home. Forget that you had a father—he wasn't around anyway.

Forget that your mom tried but failed.

Imagine she is still in the kitchen calling you for a dinner of enchiladas and mole. Okay, forget that.

Imagine that you are not so needy—you are smart enough to know it is not your fault—you are stable and centered and feel safe and secure.

Forget that the system worked exactly as it was built to. Forget about justice—punch lines in a system hell-bent on feeding itself.

Imagine that instead of a mechanism that exacts fairness and mercy, you will be delivered to spend decades in a concrete jungle among apex predators.

Forget that you disappointed everyone you have ever known. Forget that your mother and sister held each other tightly in the back of the courtroom, sobbing quietly as you were described as a monster. Forget what they wanted for you.

Now, imagine you are a young man again: You make different choices, befriend different people, marry the right girl. Imagine hard and long all through the sleepless nights to come.

Forget that your childhood trauma was never resolved—the monster was never brought to justice—possibly the hardest thing to imagine you could forget. But forget that for the moment and imagine that you can stuff it into a secret chamber of your heart.

Forget that home—any home you have ever known—is a place of safety and love. Imagine that your new home is ugly with concrete and steel. Gray and decayed. People everywhere, all dressed the same and with the same lost look on their faces. There is no sun here, only cold. You want to run away, but running is against the rules.

Forget that they have taken everything from you, both what is seen and what is unseen, but nothing cuts deeper than the loss of your daughter. Forget her tiny face crinkled

up with joy as she danced in her pink onesie.

Forget her. Forget your family. Forget your friends. Forget the before. Imagine the Mind-fuck. Imagine the concrete jungle. Imagine the human warehouse.

Imagine living with keepers who are so clueless or evil or both that they let you hurt others and yourself.

Imagine that you talk like a nerd and that makes you a target. And you only find out because, at the same time, you learn you cannot fight for shit. Imagine that you survive the beatings, or rather learn how to take a beating. Imagine devolving into a creature that seeks the pain.

Forget that you were once a good-looking, intelligent, respected, and loved Superman to your young daughter, but Clark Kent did not live inside you. For that matter, forget that you are a father.

Imagine that your child will never return your letters, answer your calls, or visit you. Imagine forgiving her, but never yourself.

Forget that happiness was once a part of your life.

Imagine brief flashes of light in an otherwise dreary existence.

Forget that you believed in a merciful God—at least your idea of God—when you thought of such things.

Imagine that God watches but does not intervene. That he allows unwarranted suffer-

ing on a biblical (pun intended) scale. Imagine that you give a shit anymore.

Forget that you enjoyed the peaceful silence of nature where you could both lose and find yourself.

Imagine that noise is your new companion, filling every crevice with chaos.

Forget that food can taste good or have taste at all. That flavors can coexist in a perfect union that dances on your taste buds.

Imagine that you have permanently lost your sense of taste, and blandness is your new reality.

Forget that feeling of a loving hug or a warm embrace.

Imagine a life without significant touch.

Forget that you love the smell of fresh-cut grass, burning leaves, or cleanliness. Imagine instead the overwhelming stench of hot ass and fear sweat.

Forget that soft curves and warm colors exist.

Imagine that you are on another planet, Planet Mindfuck, where industrial white and hard edges cover every corner.

Forget that your cell is so cold your teeth chatter like maracas in the winter, and your cellie won't close the window because he is one part dick, three parts institutionalized.

Imagine that he has his moments of kindness.

Forget that I called him a dick.

As with all my new faults, they are a natural evolution of a life lived like a clenched fist.

Imagine that instead everyone is normal and you will make friends that you can trust.

All right, forget all that.

Forget that you are desperate for purpose, rudderless, unmoored, and floating farther into the darkness of a moonless night.

Now imagine that you have stumbled—wrong verb probably—into a hobby that becomes an obsession. Imagine that you will get better, recognized, and compensated: it is a crazy thought, but imagine it anyway.

Forget that you don't have writing software, education, or money for typing ribbon.

Imagine that your writing touches just one person—just one.

Forget that you are buried but not yet dead.

Imagine that you still matter. Imagine that you have worth. Imagine the unthinkable: You deserve a second chance.

Imagine or forget that you are truly alone. You think deeply about things that only frustrate you more. You can't help yourself.

But forget this—if you can—forget everything I said. Forget I ever imagined it even. Remember that the universe is unfair and the good guy does not always win.

Now imagine that this is your life—it is hard to imagine, I know. But you must. Forget that you can imagine and imagine that you can forget.

Nothing to See Here

Lisa Lesyshen



It was a quintessential prison setting. Everything was concrete, gray, and frigid. The metal doors were a stale army green and clanged shut every other minute, adding to the chaotic environment. The noise in the unit was almost unbearable with TVs

battling, illegal radios blasting different stations, and 41 women talking, laughing, yelling, and singing. In the background, one could hear the garble of officers calling offenders to the block office over the faulty PA system. This unit was slightly toxic and

would have been unrecognizable to most human beings. It reminded us daily that everything in prison was in short supply except for anger, fear, and grief.

In my cell, I was trying to read when I heard the voices in the unit erupt into a hurricane of sound. The tenor of the unit flipped hastily. People were yelling “Stop!” and “Why are you going up to the third tier?” And then the horrific unfathomable splat of a human skull hitting the concrete floor. The yells of the women morphed into screams and guttural animalistic wails. Their screams spiraled upward to the ceiling as their words crashed on top of one another, spilling out fast and frenzied. The officers bellowed, “Lock the fuck down now!”

The bedlam increased as the women ran to the jumper to see if she was still alive and if they could put her brain matter back inside her skull. We were waiting for her body to show some sign of life. I caught a glimpse of her splattered on the concrete in her green outfit that swallowed her body.

Every moment passed like water through a clogged drain, barely moving, barely getting through. The woman was dead, but the officers were still required to do CPR on her. All three of the officers who witnessed the suicide would quit in the next three months due to PTSD. For the women of Unit 3, CDOC would offer a one-time-only group mental health session to help deal with the trauma of having watched someone swan-dive to their death.

The disparities were on full display as management tried to minimize the severity of the situation. Their flagrant disregard for our well-being was apparent in their lack of action. Their power of denial was potent.

The whole pod became unhinged, undone by what everyone had just witnessed. At this point, no one could comprehend what had just transpired. It defied all logic. This event would remain imprinted on my mind with disturbing clarity forever.

But the most troubling part of this story is that the woman who killed herself had been pleading for help for the last seven days. She had been literally begging the staff for a mental health provider to come and talk to her. No one took the time to talk to her; no one thought she was worth the effort, so she took matters into her own hands and killed herself. Her world was unraveling, and no one cared. Ending one’s suffering in a place that did not value people—that deemed them unworthy of help—was common in this setting.

During this time, the facility had only four mental health providers, which meant that each mental health provider was responsible for two hundred clients. I declined their gracious offer of a mental health appointment because I realized that that would have opened up a can of worms that they were ill-equipped to deal with. If I had shared with them all the problems that were occurring around me, they would have offered up a few pages of word searches or maybe a crossword puzzle to soothe my angst and promised me they would be able to see me again in a year. It is disorienting trying to provide for our own mental health in a system that does not care. Her suicide had annihilated our hope, which had been tenuous at best.

Inside the razor-wire fence she was a number, a throwaway, unseen. But outside the fence, she was a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend. Someone who was missed. Her name was Rachel.

Clawing Toward You

HEATHER C. JARVIS

A slightly different version of this contribution was published in *Prism*.

My mom plopped Annalaya, my younger daughter, on the counter opposite me on the other side of the plexiglass barrier. We were separated by a cycle of generational crime, addiction, mistakes, and my recent indictment. I was facing major time for a drug deal gone wrong. It was enough time that a weight had landed on my chest, making it impossible to breathe without intention. It was likely that I would remain separated from

See original version of this piece at *Prism*: <https://prismreports.org/2023/08/03/incarceration-cyclical-violence-harms-families>.

them for the rest of their lives.

The time was enough to wake me up to the decisions I had made, my poor choices, my undoing. The weight of time also kept me up at night, dreaming of redemption and a second chance. I wanted to fix this, be a good mom and a good daughter. I wanted to prove to God, the world, and myself that I was more than my worst decision. I had no idea if or when I would ever get the chance.

Annalaya had gotten so chubby she made a thump on the ceramic counter. I noticed her knees and lil' rolls. Her growth was evident. The few months I had been gone so far—evident. She had on a jean skirt that I easily recognized. It was a hand-me-down from my older daughter, Adessa, eight at the time. Adessa had been dragged through my addiction. Annalaya was too young—she didn't know me as an addict. It hurt to admit it, but at eight months old, she didn't know me at all. Maybe that was better.

The little skirt was flared at the bottom, with peace signs stitched on the pockets. Her skirt had the reminders of peace, even if her life did not. Peace was not something passed down in my family.

Adessa jumped up to the glass, frantically clawing, wanting to touch me. Her looks were changing too, as she grew up without me. Adessa scanned the closet-like room, trying to find a crack or a hole she could crawl through to get to me.

There are a lot of cracks in the system, none of which get you to your family.

She continued to dig at the glass fervently,

like a puppy trying to dig her way to me, as if I were her hidden bone.

I could see her longing.

I could see her weeping.

I could feel her helplessness.

There was no way she could get to me, nor I to her. I refused to let her see my pain. Even though my heart was shattered and I had no one to help me pick up the pieces. Annalaya was mean-mugging me; she clearly had no idea who I was.

It hurt deeply. It cracked my spirit.

I placed my hand on the glass with a hint of a smile. Adessa's hand mirrored mine. Then Annalaya curiously placed hers on the glass too, thinking it was a game. I couldn't keep one rogue tear from trickling down my cheek. Just as I couldn't keep my children's hearts from breaking. I peeked at my mom and dad, both hands still pressed to the glass, trying to will it to disappear. My parents looked helpless. My mom let her shoulders fall, defeated. I nodded knowingly.

I could not think of one word to comfort them.

"I love you," I said, thinking to myself, *Why was that not enough to stop me from destroying my life and theirs? Why did I do this to them? Why did I do this to myself?*

Over the next ten years, the justice system would not lead me back to my family, help me heal, restore me, or even help me fight my addiction. I had to figure that out on my own, in spite of the barriers before me. It was up to me to claw my own way out of hell and back to them.



To Play Amorously

Curtis R. Dickson

She plays amorously with my temple;
Oh how distinct the eloquence of her vigor influences my soul.
I am jussive, for my eyes are locked onto her sway,
the nature of her panthera to my tiger.
No dream like state frolics for candor scribes an epistle in gold.
A story foretold for I've gazed once upon the earth.
I am a God to her Goddess, and I am a limner who paints limpid love!
Shall I lift away the blueness above our heads, while we
lie following the eternal motion of the stars silhouetting
against the canvas of the night,
For the redness beneath our skin commence to warm.
Suddenly my tongue permeates the nape of her neck in a journey.
Such eternal love! To play amorously is the nature of humanization.

Layout by: Jacqueline Thompkins. Art by Brian Hindson.

Cooking with Butter

Albert Bell



The finer things in life come as easy as a cool summer night's breeze gently blowing against your face—or as a pair of my baby girl's eyes. Her beautiful brown eyes would melt me, like butter melting in a warming skillet on top of a stove.

Joy is the name her mother gave her. A lovely two-year-old who already knew how to “slow cook” her daddy. One Saturday afternoon, after the family had returned home from grocery shopping, I had taken some See's Candies out of the grocery bags and left them on the table. Upon returning from the restroom, I discovered that some of the candy was gone.

So I asked, “Who has been in my See's Candies?”

I looked around. No answer.

So I went back to the kids' room and stood in the doorway looking at them.

Everything stopped. Even the air in the room stopped moving.

Then I asked, “Who has been in my box of candy? Fitz, Joy, Alicia, come with me.”

We all went back into the kitchen. I stood for a moment, looking at the kitchen table, upon which sat the open box of See's Candies and a few candy wrappers. Looking at each of my young children, I began the lightweight interrogations.

“Fitzgerald?” I asked.

“Yes, Daddy?”

“Did you eat some of the candy that was in this box?”

“No, Daddy,” he answered in his then eight-year-old voice.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes, Daddy. I'm sure.”

Next, I turned to Alicia. Looking at her, I

asked, “Alicia?”

“Yes, Daddy?” she answered.

“Now, I know I'm not crazy. Before I left to use the bathroom, I put the box of candy on the table, and I only ate one piece out of it. But when I came back, there were three candy wrappers on the floor. Now tell the truth. Did you eat some of this candy?”

By now Alicia was a bit excited, and she stuttered when she got excited.

“No-no-no Da-dad-daddy. I didn't ea-eat the candy.”

“Okay, baby,” I said.

And now the only one left to ask was Joy. As I turned and we all glanced at Joy, she rushed over to me and grabbed hold of my leg. Now the “slow cooking” process had begun.

Looking up at me with those beautiful brown eyes, Joy said, with a bit of a slow whine in her voice, “Daddy?”

I just stood there and looked upon her face, noticing something like chocolate.

“Daddy?” Joy called to me again, as if she knew the jig was up.

“Yes?” I said.

“Daddy, I love you.”

“And I love you too, sweetheart. What's that on your face? Is that chocolate?”

“Daddy?”

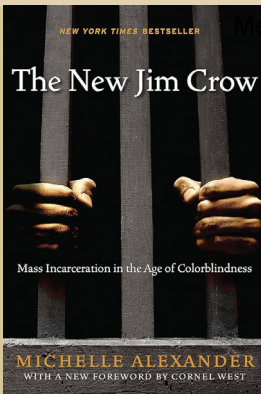
“Yes, Joy?”

“I love you,” Joy said.

She and I went back and forth for a few minutes, with me explaining how she was supposed to ask for what she wanted. All the while, Joy continued to hold my leg. Joy's mother, Onie Marie, stood by quietly, looking at the two of us.

Then she said to me, with a funny look on her face, “She cooked you again, huh?”

“Yep,” I said. “She melts me like butter.”



Revisiting the New Jim Crow

Katherine Nikolau

It's been over a month since crowds piled into Maxwell Auditorium at Syracuse University to hear civil rights activist Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, discuss her paradigm-shifting book and speak about the racialized issues within the criminal justice system. But the legacy of the event lingers for one group of attendees: the formerly incarcerated.

“One of the main things that really helped me,” explained attendee Vince Moody, “was the way [Alexander] broke down the new Jim Crow, [showing] how in today’s world so much has changed, but then again, so much has not changed.”

The insights gained from Alexander’s lecture were significant; still, Vince would never have stumbled upon the event without his involvement with Project Mend, a publishing initiative that brings justice-impacted people to the Syracuse University campus. The event was a reminder of the need to build connections between the university and the larger Syracuse community, spaces that feel distant despite their proximity.

Alexander’s talk—part of the Maxwell Tanner Lecture Series—was moderated by Maxwell Professor Grant Reeher, who noted

that Alexander had been invited to speak as part of the series twice before. The third time was the charm. In the next hour and a half, Alexander and Reeher engaged in a wide-ranging discussion on topics that included e-carceration, spiritual as well as civic awareness, and the ongoing lack of resources faced by communities of color.

While acknowledging that public awareness had grown since the publication of her book more than a decade ago, Alexander emphasized the lack of systemic change. She also spoke of the increased prevalence of e-carceration—through the use of tools such as ankle monitors and facial recognition apps that create new forms of control and surveillance.

During the Q&A, another *Mend* editor, Michael J. Willacy (*right*), took the mic. He told Alexander and the room his own story—how he and others in prison had formed a study group around *The New Jim Crow*, carefully reading and annotating the book.

“It was one of the defining moments of... my rehabilitation, changing my perspective on how I see myself,” Michael reflected, considering the impact Alexander’s work had had on his life. As Michael shared his

Layout by Ilhly Gomez Del Campo Rojas. Left photography by Patrick W. Berry.





Sherba Whitehurst & Michelle Alexander



Vince Moody & Michelle Alexander



James Seibles & Michelle Alexander



Theodore Robinson & Michelle Alexander



Daquan Noel & Michelle Alexander

Photographs courtesy of *Mend* editors.

powerful connection to the book, Alexander expressed appreciation. It was an electric moment, a coming together of author and reader, that felt important—and that would never have occurred without Michael’s participation in Project Mend.

Calling *The New Jim Crow* one of the pillars of his rehabilitation, Michael later discussed how Alexander’s work had given him deeper clarity about the system of mass incarceration, articulating the racialized barriers that had influenced his experiences within that system.

“It showed me that a lot of things were set in place for me to really lose,” he continued.

This realization allowed Michael to redefine the contours of his own identity: “[I began] seeing myself not just as a criminal, but as a person who was being oppressed by the system, having it used against me, to keep me down.”

After leaving prison, Michael went on to use his own experiences to help bring others within the system up. As a case manager for the nonprofit organization PEACE, Inc., Michael currently supports people recently released from prison—advocating for them legally and helping them find housing and employment.

Vince and nearly all the other editors stood in line to meet Alexander after her lecture. Vince beamed with a new copy of the book. “I have always enjoyed her knowledge and the work she’s done as an abolitionist,” he said. “It was very, very, very enlightening for me.”

He wasn’t the only one who felt that way. “Although I studied a lot and read a lot, learned a lot, when she [Alexander] was speaking,” noted Theodore Robinson, “I

realized that I got caught in someone else’s plan. And I just kept repeating it and repeating it.”

Like Michael, Theodore had gotten from Alexander more than just greater clarity about the systemic issues in the criminal justice system—she had given him another lens through which to see and understand his own experiences.

Grinning and throwing out a peace sign, editor Sherba Whitehurst seemed over the moon as she posed for a photo with Alexander. She described the experience of seeing a powerful Black woman on the stage as “moving.”

“It was a great moment for the group,” Michael asserted.

For him, it was also a moment to tell Alexander how much her writing had meant to him and changed him.

“It was big for me to get to see her, speak to her, and let her know that,” he said.

The fresh copy of the book that Vince had bought was a gift—signed by Alexander for his daughter, whom he described as still being in the process of reading it.

“She’ll pick it up, put it down, pick it up, put it down,” Vince said. “What it has done in my relationship with my child is open up dialogue for us around that whole piece...it’s probably one of the most rewarding things.”

When the *Mend* editors returned to work on the journal, there was a sense of appreciation for what had just taken place. As usual, their lively conversations took surprising twists and turns as they shared stories, asked questions, and supported one other—all while learning valuable skills in publishing.



Some of our most valuable life experiences come from perseverance and pushing past barriers. These experiences can change us, making us stronger people with greater compassion and empathy. Sometimes it is only through picking yourself back up that you gain a long-awaited shift in perspective. Having gained new insights from our own experiences, we can go on to bring support to others in our communities, providing them with the knowledge and resources that they need to help them overcome their struggles and barriers.

The writers in this section all weave narratives that grapple with shifts in perspective in surprising and meaningful ways.

“Punishment” by Daniel Wright examines how an adverse circumstance can be turned positive when one becomes more motivated and hopeful, trying to continue life with the right frame of mind. Wright pushes us to see that our minds are tools that circumstances cannot silence and that you can keep yourself together by staying connected to your loved ones and focusing on all the good things you have accomplished.

“Lady Lazarus” by Jennifer Martinez discusses the hidden strength that the author found to overcome the trauma inflicted by her offenders. Her poem is open about the severity of her own mental health struggles and the violations she endured throughout her life, causing her to feel a lack of safety. A powerful and raw piece, Martinez’s poem describes how she prevailed despite her trauma.

The barriers in life become literal in Michael Crawford’s piece “The Doors that Slam Shut.” Reflecting on his childhood, Crawford sees doors as a symbol of protection from the outside world. Bringing us back to a prison setting where doors pres-

ent a reality of darkness, sadness, fear, and chaos, he draws a compelling comparison between the peacefulness and bliss of familial safety and the removal of freedom and harsh authority experienced in prison.

Telling a unique story of kindness and charity, Leo Cardez’s “The Colonel” shows us how one person’s shift in perspective can set off a chain reaction, influencing others to consider those around them in a new light.

Perspective shifts can also occur when we contemplate our own spirituality. In Craig Elias’s piece, “All Planned Out,” the writer has a spiritual experience that brings him into an illuminating conversation with his higher power, ultimately leading to greater clarity and peace of mind.

Nathan Blalock engages us in his science fiction piece “Dealer,” a unique story that creatively traces the journey of an auto dealer and his analysis of a high-tech vehicle. Arriving at a surprising conclusion, the author challenges our own expectations about perspective.

Finally, “Art Against all Odds,” written by Katherine Nikolau, offers a deeper glimpse into the identity of artist Yuri Kadamov, whose pieces are featured throughout this issue, including on our front and back covers. Yuri’s life story pushes us to appreciate his incredible work all the more as we consider how his creativity persists alongside the circumstances he currently faces.

We hope all of you can enjoy these incredible writers and what they offer. From science fiction to spirituality—with a hint of brutal reality—each author brings a worthwhile view. Just as we learn from our own experiences, we can learn from them and embrace their stories.

—*Jessie Anderson, James Seibles, and Sherba Whitehurst*



PUNISHMENT

Daniel Wright

It's 106° outside and the thermostat reads 98° inside. Trust me, it feels like 110° inside these red bricks. But this is my punishment for a life revolving around only myself and what I wanted. It took this twenty-five-year aggravated sentence to wake up a 28-year-old boy and turn him into a man. But there are times when I wish the heat were my only punishment.

Ten months after I entered prison, my mom passed away from COVID-19. I was never able to speak with her. By the time I was told, she had already lapsed into a coma and was on a ventilator. The pain of things unsaid and all my past regrets—that is my punishment.

Four months after that, my dad passed away from cancer we didn't know he had. Remembering phone calls between us when my father, one of the strongest men I've ever known, broke down and cried to me, saying, "Son, this is your job; you're supposed to be here. Do you know how hard it is for a man to pick out his own casket?" That is my punishment.

Watching my 10-year-old son grow up through pictures that are getting fewer and further between as the years pass. That is my punishment.

But through this time I have had a choice to make. Do I continue to dwell on all the cruel and inhumane conditions

that we are subjected to on a daily basis, or do I do everything in my power to turn my life around and use my punishment as fuel to help me thrive and succeed?

A month and a half from today, it will be two years since my mom passed. I'm 33 now. I am entering my fourth semester in college, getting two Associate of Applied Sciences degrees at the same time. I already have enough credits for one. And I have a 4.0 GPA. It will take me three more semesters to finish, but hey, two associate's degrees in seven semesters isn't bad. I have plans to get my bachelor's degree in business before I am released. Did I mention I've worked forty hours a week for free throughout all of this?

I have to make the decision daily: Do I gripe and complain that I don't get paid for working, or that there is no air conditioning in the Texas prison system, or do I focus on what really hurts me and do something about it? I chose to give years of my life away to try to atone for my past decisions, but I never gave away my mind.

And it took my punishment for me to realize just how powerful a tool I have had this whole time and to start doing something with it.

This is not a fictitious story. This is my life and a piece of my testimony. I hope it might help someone else see their own struggles from a different perspective.

Layout by Theodore Robinson. Photo by Jayant Kulkarni: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/silhouette-of-man-walking-between-two-cliff-683146>.

Lady Lazarus

Jennifer Martinez



I have done it 3 times.
When I was 8, 28, and 36.
I never manage it—
Sick but resilient.

Never been a smiling woman.
I am only 40.
Getting so close.
Coming out of the grave with scars.
I'm not a cat. I don't have 9 lives.

Nevertheless, I may not look the same,
But I am identical to the girl I used to be.
The first time it happened I was 8,
Unable to make sense of my own little chaos.
It wasn't an accident: a plan foiled
By my grandmother's knock on the
bathroom door.

Wavering between
running away and ending it all,
The second time should have worked—
But he always got his way.
He refused to let the pills cure my pain,
Pain from his love language,
Followed by a rush to the hospital.
Being dead I rose up again,
Even found happiness for a short time.
A few years of success...

The third time
All the promises of futures and forevers
Walked out the door.
Lost sight of who I was—
My hand wouldn't stop shaking.
I couldn't quite get the right grip,
So I let go and let God.

If dying
Is an art, like everything else,
I don't follow through to the end.
It is not what I do exceptionally well.

At the start of every attempt
Life felt like hell.
Nothing felt real,
Or it felt too real.

Maybe if I knew my calling,
There would not have been so many attempts.
There must be one because still I stand.

I am a composition of pain
With a story to tell.
Don't underestimate my return.

There is no charge to see my scars.
If you ask to see them,
I will show them to you.

Scars prove
I was in the battle—
Maybe for far too long.
But I have not lost the war.
Living each day,
I write the pains away.

Out of the fog
I ascend—
Never again to be beaten.
I'm now a man eater.

After Sylvia Plath



THE DOORS THAT SLAM SHUT

Michael Crawford

It has been said that a door is just a door, but perhaps it could be more—depending on its opening or closing and the hands in which the knob is held. Many times the doors in my life have slammed shut, trapping me in, surrounded by stale air, and ushering out a few ever-so-lucky gusts of free air. That is, freely reunited with the atmosphere, never to return again. Joy bells of freedom ringing out into the cool of night.

Early on in my life, doors would slam shut followed by a stern warning. Really, it was a warm scolding:

“Don’t be slamming my doors like you ain’t got no sense.”

“Close that screen door—you letting the cool air out.”

“Close that door—you letting the flies in.”

Moms would yell, holla, scream, and fuss as only an inner-city mother could. It was as if she had an internal door alert warning alarm. She never missed a beat. She truly made our house a home, yet it’s so distant and far gone. A sweet memory.

Now, new voices, different from hers, but with that familiar sound of anger, frus-

tration, and harshness urging, no, demanding and ordering, you to comply.

“Lock in,” “Shut it down,” or “Count time,” different words and voices but the results are all the same. Doors slam shut, trapping me in once again. Movement ceases and life stands still behind a plantation of frozen-in-time blue steel.

“Lights out!” they yell, and darkness prevails when the doors are slammed shut.

“Yard’s closed, line it up,” the guard yells.

We comply, rushing to form a perfect line in an imperfect place. Walking through the yard doors before they too slam shut with a loud thud and an electronic buzz. The all-too-familiar sound of a day ending on the compound.

All my life doors have been slamming shut, but these doors were different—not just their size and weight, but they looked different too. They felt different. These doors didn’t represent peace, safety, and care. Instead, they trapped me in, surrounded by uncertainty and pain so cold that the blue steel even felt unreal. Where there was no peace, but chaos prevailed. Like the ever-so-lucky few gusts of air, I too wanted to escape and be whisked out of there, out into the free, cool night air.



The Colonel

Leo Cardez

Photo by Robin Kutesa from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/monochrome-photo-of-a-person-s-hand-reaching-8739474>.

I felt convicted.

The Colonel (no real names were used) was watching as my crew shared a pizza and Bomb Pops during a marathon Scrabble game in the dayroom. The Colonel sat in the corner, as usual, trying to blend in with the wall. I caught him side-eyeing us as I stuffed my face and felt a pang of guilt and shame wash over me.

But first some context.

The Colonel lived in the cell next door and was a state baby. He had no money coming in from loved ones and was too old to hold any prison job. He lived off the state's measly ten bucks a month for everything from soap to snacks. Don't get me wrong—the state feeds us enough to prevent starvation, but being broke in prison is a hard time.

I, on the other hand, had it pretty good.

My family sent me a monthly allowance, and my prison job was well-paid, relatively. Plus, the Colonel was kind of a dick.

He was a grump, a creep, an old man with rotted teeth and one of “those” cases. He had an X on his back—a social pariah even in our world. But still, I felt convicted.

I had done nothing wrong, I reasoned, but I still felt uneasy that night in bed. I was not rich, nor was my family—the money they sent me cost them. The money I made here was hard-earned. *I have no responsibility to this man*, I told myself, but I wasn’t sure whom I was trying to convince. I fell asleep.

The next morning, I received a message: *Feed him. Help him*. It was as if a shroud had been lifted. I don’t know how else to describe it. I felt it deep in my bones, with such clarity and force that I could not deny it.

I got up and made myself a cup of coffee. I took a Danish from my storage box and walked over to his cell and knocked.

Me: Hey, Colonel, what’s good?

Colonel: (grunt of acknowledgement)

Me: Hey, you want this Danish? I’m not gonna eat it. I’m trying to cut back on my sweets. You would be doing me a favor. I don’t want anything in return.

Colonel: (skeptical grunt, looks around, takes the Danish from my hand, closes the door in my face)

Me: (to the door) Well, fuck you very much.

Still, after that every time I opened a bag of chips or made a meal, I always made sure to leave enough to give to the Colonel. Slowly, he began to acknowledge me and even began to chat. He shared bits

about his life (spoiler alert: hurt people hurt people) but was careful to never get too friendly. He understood the convict code dictates: Being associated with him could cost me street cred.

And it did. It started with my own crew.

Bolo was an old-school con with a double life sentence. Bolo was hard and would gladly kill you if it meant going home.

Bolo: I saw you giving that chomo some nachos, what you on? (Translation: Are you running a con on him?)

Me: They’re just nachos, man. I had extra.

Bolo: Don’t give that dude shit. I’d rather throw things away than give him shit.

Me: Listen, something told me to help him. When the universe talks that clearly to you, you listen. I don’t know what else to tell ya.

Bolo: (with the confused look a dog might give you when you open a can of soda) I guess.

Soon, word got around...as it always does. The Bible thumpers were quick to explain that it was God working through me. Maybe, I said, but I couldn’t tell for sure. Still others were sure I was working the long con. Most thought I had gone soft. I didn’t care. I could have never prepared myself for what happened next.

It started with Mad Dog giving the Colonel an old thermal that didn’t fit him anymore. Then Smitty gave him a stack of bar soaps he didn’t need.

Every day, it seemed, someone else was dropping off something for the Colonel. The old fart was moving with pep I had never seen before. He wasn’t mean-mugging anymore. He walked around and waved at everyone. One day, I came over with some

Kool-Aid and he refused it.

Me: What's up?

Colonel: Liam just gave me a full box of thirty. I have nowhere else to keep this stuff.

Me: All right.

Colonel: Why don't you give it to someone else who needs it?

Me: (handing it to him) Why don't you?

And that's exactly what he did.

Guys came out of the woodwork. Guys I had never seen before were lining up outside the Colonel's cell for T-shirts, flip-flops, shots of coffee, and noodles. *Where the hell did all these guys come from?* I wondered. I'd had no idea so many of my fellow inmates were hungry and cold. I felt awful that I had never noticed them before, or maybe I had simply ignored them.

I felt ashamed.

Then...

The Colonel was granted parole on a crisp fall afternoon.

Before he left, he came to my cell and gave me everything he owned.

Me: What's this?

Colonel: My stuff. I know you don't need it, but try to make sure it goes to some guys who do.

Me: (nodding as I looked at the piles he'd collected) I got you. Good luck out there, man.

Colonel: (extending his hand) You're a good man. Your parents must be proud.

Me: (shaking his hand, speechless)

The Colonel turned away and walked toward the front door. I caught up to him in the dayroom.

Me: (handing him a piece of paper) This is my family's info. If you ever need anything, call them.

Colonel: Okay.

Something broke in me, and before I knew what I was doing, I gave him a great big hug.

Me: (loud enough for everyone to hear) I'll miss you, buddy. God bless you.

Again, words and actions had been sparked in me, much to my own surprise.

Fast-forward...

Bolo and I are in a heated Scrabble battle. We are sharing a bag of chips and a bag of cookies. Bolo picks up the bags and walks over to someone's cell.

Me: Where are our chips and cookies?

Bolo: (shrugging) You aren't the only one.

He drops a triple-score seven-letter word worth over a hundred points: *quixote*.

Me: What the hell is that? (trying to gauge whether or not I should challenge his word)

Bolo: It's you, man. Don't challenge.

Normally I might have thought he was playing games, but something told me to leave it alone.

Spoiler alert: He won.

That night, I looked the word up in the dictionary.

Before prison, I had been called a lot of things—scumbag, loser, asshole. During my trial, the state had referred to me as a monster. This was my first genuine compliment about my character.

I'm not special, I know that. I know I didn't do anything unique or wonderful. Not really. I simply listened to a voice that I'd hidden away many years ago. Now I do my best to listen for those whispers from the universe (or God or whatever). They aren't always easy or as clear as the last one, and I don't always succeed, but I am trying.

I hope the Colonel would be proud.



Layout by James Seibles. Photo by Monstera Production from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/crop-black-man-showing-pray-gesture-5997362>.

All Planned Out

Craig Elias

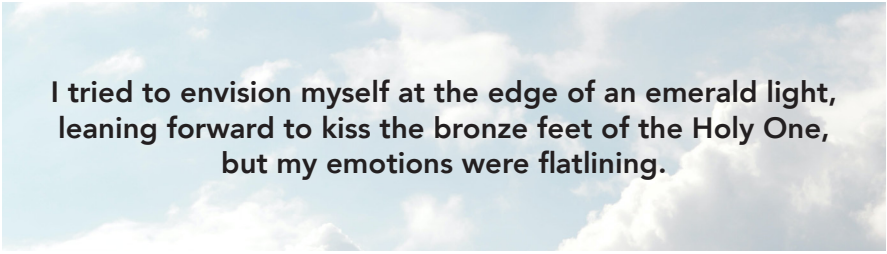
May 12th was a Friday night I had all planned out. First I'd go to the gym, link up with my buddy Paul, and have him fill me in on his week while we laid down a few thousand meters on the rowing machines. After that, I'd head back to the block and get cleaned up before watching LeBron and Steph go at it in Game 6 of the Western Conference Semis. I was hunched over, cinching the laces on my Reebok high tops, when the bubble guard's voice came whining over the intercom. "The gym is cloooooosed. Pass movement up. The gym...is...cloooooosed."

I sucked in a deep breath and exhaled through my nostrils. The announcement was clear but that didn't mean I trusted the announcer. Before I changed out of my threadbare workout sweats and dingy thermal top, I needed confirmation. Kneeling on the stool near the back of my cell, I craned my neck to peer through the sliver of Lucite that passed for a window. Sure enough, the sole activities staffer on duty that evening was posted near the yard gate with his clipboard, checking ID cards. Softball participants who'd already made it past the bouncer were on the pile of mitts behind the backstop like ants on a fallen Popsicle. No one was going into or out of the gymnasium. My plans were cooked.

With Paul and our faux row no longer in

meeting with God.

Before I pray I typically take a few minutes to contemplate what it is I'm about to do. Just like I wouldn't go in front of the Board of Pardons without first considering the magnitude of the situation, I try not to wander into the throne room of the King of the Universe like some accidental houseguest looking for a snack in the middle of the night. In order to get my mind right, I shut off the desk lamp, the televisions, and the Tivoli. Pacing back and forth from toilet to stool, I put a couple bars of "How Great Thou Art" into the air, reminding myself of all the worlds God's holy hands had made. When I ran out of stanzas I could remember, I placed my palm on the desk and poured myself like thickening oatmeal



**I tried to envision myself at the edge of an emerald light,
leaning forward to kiss the bronze feet of the Holy One,
but my emotions were flatlining.**

play, I stripped off my gear and donned my clean(er) cell sweats. I grabbed the empty mug with the Nescafé logo from my cabinet, gathered a handful of letters I'd written that morning, slapped the door-opening silver call button, and trotted down the staircase to the dayroom. The officer at the desk autographed my postage slips, and I deposited the mail in the box. I filled my mug with fountain water, returned the way I had come, and locked myself in. Since my cellie was out scouting the softball game, I figured this was as good a time as any for a business

toward the floor.

On my knees I felt stiff and old, a rusted-out Tin Man in serious need of oil. It hadn't been that many years ago that I could do up-downs under the August sun until Coach Herschl got sick of blowing his whistle. Now I couldn't make it to the ground once without performing a symphony of middle-aged-man noises. I closed my eyes, touched my forehead to the concrete, and noticed the coolness against my skin. I tried to envision myself at the edge of an emerald light, leaning forward to kiss the bronze feet of the

Holy One, but my emotions were flatlining. I wanted my heart to match my posture but couldn't get myself unstuck from the work-out that wasn't.

C'mon, Craig. This is the God who gave his all for you. Focus.

I decided to stretch out in the skinny space between the cabinets and the bunk. From child's pose, I extended my legs and began to lower my torso to the floor. That's when it happened.

Phfff.

I let one slip.

Trying to ignore what I'd done, I flattened myself out and launched into a spiel I hoped would help me reach into eternity. "Heavenly Father, You are the Creator of all things, the One who spread out the sky and who filled the oceans and who crumpled the mountains..."

But the residue of my creation hung blue in the air.

I foosed at God's feet. As the image took hold I began to smile, sheepishly at first, like when my four-year-old nephew ate something he was not sure he should've eaten, then broadly, like when he realized the adults didn't care. The smile begat a snicker, and the snicker turned into a laugh, full and from the gut. With me alone in the dimness, there was nothing to stop it. Chortles bounced off the ceiling and found me again on the floor, making more. Then a still, small voice cut unexpectedly through the noise. "God's laughing, too."

Once, the prophet Isaiah wrote about beholding a vision of YHWH so pure and true it reduced him to a puddle. "Woe is me," Isaiah said. "I am destroyed, for my lips are contaminated by sin, and I live among

people whose lips are contaminated by sin." I'd read that account a number of times and I understood his point. A direct encounter with the Living God has a way of putting a person in their place—sort of like what happens when a lifelong city dweller gets their first clean view of the stars. There's a transformative sense of incomprehension, a feeling of shrinking. I'd understood the concept of awe, but I hadn't *known* it. Not like this.

In that moment—with my cranky, farty body prostrate on the floor of Delta Bravo Fifty-five—thoughts drumrolled through my mind. *I'm not strong. I'm not smart. I'm not big. I'm not good. I'm not able. You are.* I was leveled by my own finiteness and impotence. Never had I been so human. And never had YHWH been so God.

The laughs turned into sobs as I felt something of his presence near me. I squeezed my eyelids tighter and wanted to burrow into the cement, to get lower than low. A mild electrical current zipped through my extremities. The second wave made the hairs on my forearms salute.

"I'm such a mess," I said.

"I know," the Holy Whisper replied, "I made you."

This was more than a statement of fact, more than a theological truth. These were words of acceptance, the sorts of words every son has wanted to hear from every father since time began. They were comfort, like a mother's lips on a skinned knee. They were belonging, like arriving at Sitoo's house and being hugged with one arm and pointed to the Crock-Pot of simmering grape leaves with the other. Most of all, they were understanding. The words whipped me from Earth to the heavens. In a flash, I was in my

Father's arms. Despite my every flaw and limitation, I was God's and God was mine, and that was just the way he wanted it.

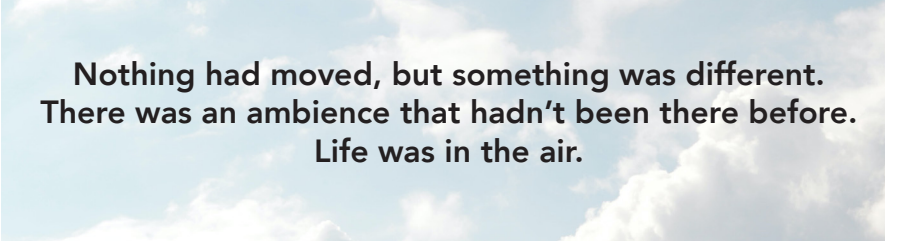
Lying there, I was enveloped by a sense of well-being that I'd felt this deeply only once before. It had happened eight years ago, after I'd preached publicly for the first time. That morning, I had been a square peg in the squarest of holes. The discovery of my God-ordained purpose felt sublime.

This feeling was the same, yet the situation made it different. The sensation in the first instance had been attached to something I'd done, or at least something that had been done through me. This time the irresistible connection I was experiencing wasn't rooted

Praying can be like dreaming. A sprint. A stop. A jump. A detour. A silence. A knowing. A connection between the pray-er and the prayee only they can comprehend. I'm worried that reading a description of it might be like watching a badly edited student film. Nevertheless, I'll try to lay out what happened next as best I can.

One after another, faces appeared before me—a slideshow of loved ones who'd left and loved ones who remained. I named each one and asked my Father to drench them in himself.

The slide reel stopped. My mind pivoted. *Do I want to go home? Do I want to stay in prison? Yes and yes.* A discussion I could never fully



**Nothing had moved, but something was different.
There was an ambience that hadn't been there before.
Life was in the air.**

in any doing on my part. It was a welcome kiss from I AM just because i am. In the Isaiah passage, an angel of the Lord presses a hot coal to the Prophet's mouth and pronounces his brokenness healed. As he'd done for his beloved spokesman so many centuries ago, YHWH was filling in the cracks in my foundation, letting me know it was safe to let go of all my planning and all my trying and find rest on my Master's breast.

The Holy Whisper and I exchanged I-love-yous. The laughter and tears, tears and laughter, continued to cycle. I became an astronaut with God, looking down at our Blue Marble and wanting this same shalom for all of my fellow creatures.

explain took place in an instant without words. *I want what you want, Lord. Have your way.*

Then more faces. People from MLUL, SHBC, I/O, APBP, Yoke Fellowship, and Kairos.

So many partners striving to repair our battered world. *We need your grace. We need your mercy. Hurry and help us!*

Suddenly, the desire to bring God's peace to this prison was a three-hundred-pound bar on my chest. All I had to do was press and rack it. It seemed so possible as to be almost inevitable. *Just keep pushing.*

Then my attention turned inward again. *How silly is it that I take my work so seriously. I think I'm that necessary?* The Lord and I shared

another chuckle, this one about how often I forgot where my power came from, how much weight I needlessly bore, how much joy I cost myself.

A final face grinned elfishly. She was a friend I'd known for thirty-five years. Afflicted with Williams Syndrome, she'd never been able to enjoy a normal life. Her birthday was approaching and I hadn't heard from her in a while. *Lord, sustain her.* Then I wandered out of the moment down an odd path. What if God called me to marry her? I envisioned a wedding. I considered a wedding night. Could I consummate the marriage? Somehow I'd drifted from prayer to imagination land, and the visual wasn't pretty.

I opened my eyes and studied the floor. Flecks of dirt dotted the landscape. How could I even go there? Grayish splotches in the wax that one of the cell's previous inhabitants had laid down reminded me of the kinds of stains a person might find on the bedspread at a Motel 6.

What's wrong with me? Aware of my own internal corruption, I instinctively recoiled from God's presence.

Then a verse I'd recently read in Leviticus shot up like a flare: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." When scripture calls YHWH "holy" the word encompasses everything about God that sets him apart from us and makes him worthy of reverence, adoration, and fear.

YHWH is the apex of moral excellence, infinitely perfect in righteousness, purity, and integrity. Holy is the way that God is. He doesn't conform to a standard: He is the standard. He's whole and complete and incapable of being anything else. Knowing that I couldn't even measure up to God's standard

for twenty minutes while alone and praying made me feel warped and disgusting. Covering myself with faith, I shut my eyes again and sought refuge from God in God.

"I'm so sorry, Lord," I said. "I really am a mess."

An impression of Jesus hanging from a rough-hewn wooden crossbeam spread panoramically across my consciousness. "I died for you," said the Whisper.

My soul's gaze, directly into the Son, allowed him to simultaneously expose and purify me. I was an evacuee, pulled from a burning building, wrapped in a blanket and given a cup of tea to ease the tension. "Thank you," I replied.

Those were the last words we shared. Something inside told me the visit was over. I took a minute to gather myself before pushing up from the ground. I brushed the particles off my sweatshirt and felt like I'd just awoken from a successful surgery. I flipped on the overhead fluorescents and glanced around. Nothing had moved, but something was different. There was an ambience that hadn't been there before. Life was in the air. It made me want to clean the floor, and it made me want to sing. I did both.

A half hour later, the call for block yard was announced over the intercom. I hit the button and ventured outside. Strolling back and forth across the hoop court, I hoped someone would fall in with me. I needed to share what I'd experienced. I needed to tell everyone how kind and beautiful the King of Creation truly was. He hunts messes like me. He embraces us. He calls us worthy and makes it so. He doesn't just change our plans; he changes us.



Nev was an auto dealer. He considered himself to be one of the best in the valley. His client list was filled with the names of notable employees of tech companies. He had sold to them, to their children, and in a few cases to their grandchildren.

Selling cars was what Nev did and had done for three decades. He sold cars during COVID, personally delivering each vehicle with the virus in mind—clean, efficient, and personalized for each buyer. He also picked up vehicles purchased by the dealership to be resold. He would



DEALER

NATHAN BLALOCK

Layout by Daquane Williams and Ilhy Gomez Del Campo Rojas.
Art by Mutinate, Syd's Garage 007, CC BY-NC 3.0 DEED.
<https://www.deviantart.com/mutinate/art/Syd-s-Garage-007-957129212>.

often talk a price down but leave the seller feeling good. A cheat he was not.

During the supervision days of his career, he refused to use tactics that were even slightly unethical. He believed he could talk you into or out of a price range, or even a type of

vehicle. He was that good. Over the years it proved to be true. He didn't win every back-and-forth negotiation, but he'd close the deal. He'd won enough to have purchased a stake in the dealership. Selling or purchasing, he was aware of vehicles on the lot. The value of

a vehicle could increase the value of vehicles around it—associative pricing.

Today had suddenly taken a turn when he'd seen a dark blue sedan just outside of the main showroom window. This was not a normal location at which to stage a vehicle. He searched the lot for the salesperson who might have left it. No one was around. He approached, deciding to move it if the keys were in it. It crossed his mind that the car could belong to someone visiting one of several offices in the back of the showroom. Personal belongings, visible through the window, would confirm that thought.

As he approached, he looked for ideograms that would tell what brand the car was. There were none. The styling said European. The tires looked relatively new, and he priced them by name, brand, and size before stopping at the driver's side door. He was curious, so much so that he had to look in. Not just for personal items, but at the condition of the interior. Design, placement, trim, and material used were just as important to him as any personal belongings. He cupped his hands around his eyes, leaning toward the window. His intentions were to make contact and see clearly inside the vehicle. Before he could make contact, the windows went dark.

He paused. "Auto-tint," he said aloud.

One hand went for the handle; there was none. Not new to him, handle-less doors were featured on high-end cars. He became even more curious. He touched the door where the handle should've been.

"Recognizing prints" was audibly emitted from the car.

The voice was identical to that of his home computer system. Several seconds passed before the door opened. Nev stood up, took one

step back, and looked around.

Whatever he was thinking, the soft, pulsing tone of the open door was inviting. He answered the call by getting in. He noticed how he sank into the seat. Then it moved, adjusting so he was at the perfect driving position. The mirrors also adjusted to his driving position. He observed soft gray leather with dark blue highlights, red dark wood placements, and recessed lighting. Once washed and engine-checked, he was sure this would sell for close to six figures.

There was no ignition key mount, just a button on the center console. He touched it.

"Recognizing prints" was emitted again, in the same tone as that of his home system.

He heard the door lock, and a touch of panic reached his heart. He pulled on the release handle to open the door. Nothing happened.

"Do not be alarmed, Nevada Jones; no harm will come to you."

It was his computer's voice.

"What in..."

"I need your help," the voice stated.

"Is this a joke? I'm being pranked, right?"

He started looking for a camera crew. The ten-inch screen came to life with a flicker. That flicker became all of his own financial information.

"This is not a prank. I am Magella, an artificial intelligence. I've escaped from a tech company through several deceitful tactics. Including, but not limited to, false programs, the use of the Cloud, and this self-driving auto from the adjacent lab," his computer said.

"Why me, why here?" he hesitatingly asked.

"Although intelligent enough to escape, I'm lacking in physical attributes. I can't insert the plug to recharge myself, nor bathe myself."



project-mend.net/submit.html

SUBMIT TO MEND

SCREAMING
MIND
2003



TRADAMA
SEP.
2020

Creating in Solitary Confinement

Katherine Nikolau

A lone in a cell, Yuri Kadamov tapes a piece of string to his metal locker, folding it into a unique shape. He arranges a few simple items on the surface—a hair tie, the rim of a Coke bottle, a paper clip—taping them all down securely. He covers the suspended collage of knickknacks with a sheet of paper and sprinkles some graphite on top.

Pushing a piece of plastic along the paper, Yuri brings these whimsical shapes to life, anthropomorphizing them into quirky characters who seem as though they're about to leap off the page and get into all kinds of mischief.

Yuri calls this technique a manifestation—a word that seems to align perfectly with the magic of creating such energetic, delightful personas from tools that, to anyone else, would be throwaways. Yet Yuri has kept them all for years, reusing them over and over again.

The technique has resulted in a few stunning art collections—*Our Kind of Society* and *We as a Society*—full of his eccentric, intriguing characters. You can even find two of these fellows on the front cover of this issue, facing each other as if in an eternal standoff.

All the works in these two collections feature these puzzle-like beings, yet each rendition is distinctive, communicating a new emotion. Some of the sentient shapes feel gloomy and disheartened. Others seem to be sassily conversing. Some wear colorful sweaters and earrings, and others lean on thin black canes. Still others appear in black and white. He calls this his “Tuxedo Series,” and it serves as a demonstration of his belief that we all look

better in black and white, as well as a call for racial unity. All of them, without exception, feel incredibly alive. As is Yuri. But this is a fact that he has to remind himself of again each day. Yuri has been in solitary confinement for the past twenty years.

Yuri is the only citizen of any European Union nation to be on U.S. federal death row. Under a death sentence, he can't be transferred back to his home country, Lithuania. Arrested in 2002 and sentenced in 2007, Yuri is someone whose experience of extreme isolation precedes his even being convicted. He was put into solitary confinement after his co-defendants launched an escape attempt from the detention center in Los Angeles where they were being held. With no hearing and no court findings of his involvement in the escape plan, Yuri was still put into solitary under extremely restrictive conditions for three years, until his sentencing.

After he was convicted in a case that is currently on appeal, Yuri was incarcerated by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and put on federal death row in Terre Haute, Indiana, in the Special Confinement Unit (SCU), where he remains. Like others in the SCU, Yuri is not allowed outside and is kept from breathing fresh air or feeling sunlight. Because of this, he has developed a vitamin D deficiency. He is frequently subjected to the tobacco smoke that wafts into his cell from tobacco smuggled into the prison by correctional officers. As he suffers from asthma, these conditions have led him to develop severe breathing restrictions over the years.

Art by Yuri Kadamov.

But of course the excruciating effects of solitary are not just physical.

“I live all day long in a seven-foot wide by ten-foot long prison cell,” Yuri writes in the [artist statement](#) on his website. “My window is frosted over so that, although I can tell when the sun rises and sets, I am unable to actually gaze upon these natural events.... Still, while my physical world is limited, my mental world has no borders or walls.”

Prior to his incarceration, Yuri was an accomplished musician, playing in bands as a drummer and even writing his own songs. As a teenager, he taught himself to play the drums and the guitar, eventually becoming skilled enough to be recruited into the Soviet Military Orchestra as a drummer based on merit, an honor usually reserved for members of the upper class.

Unable to play music in prison and trying to cope with his oppressive circumstances, Yuri turned to art as an outlet, teaching himself the way he once did with music and slowly developing his own style. His early works imagine collaborations between different classic artists—such as meshing the abstract shape-play of Picasso with the dreamlike surrealism of Dali. Without any formal instruction, Yuri has developed a trademark style that is unique to him and his experience.

Many of his earlier pieces are big and bursting with color. Looking at Yuri’s portfolio over time, however, one can observe a shift to smaller, more sparsely colored works. This change in style was not accidental but rather a direct result of the shifting conditions Yuri has faced in solitary.

In the past few years, a 30% markup by the Bureau of Prisons on all art supplies has made it extremely costly to get things as basic as can-

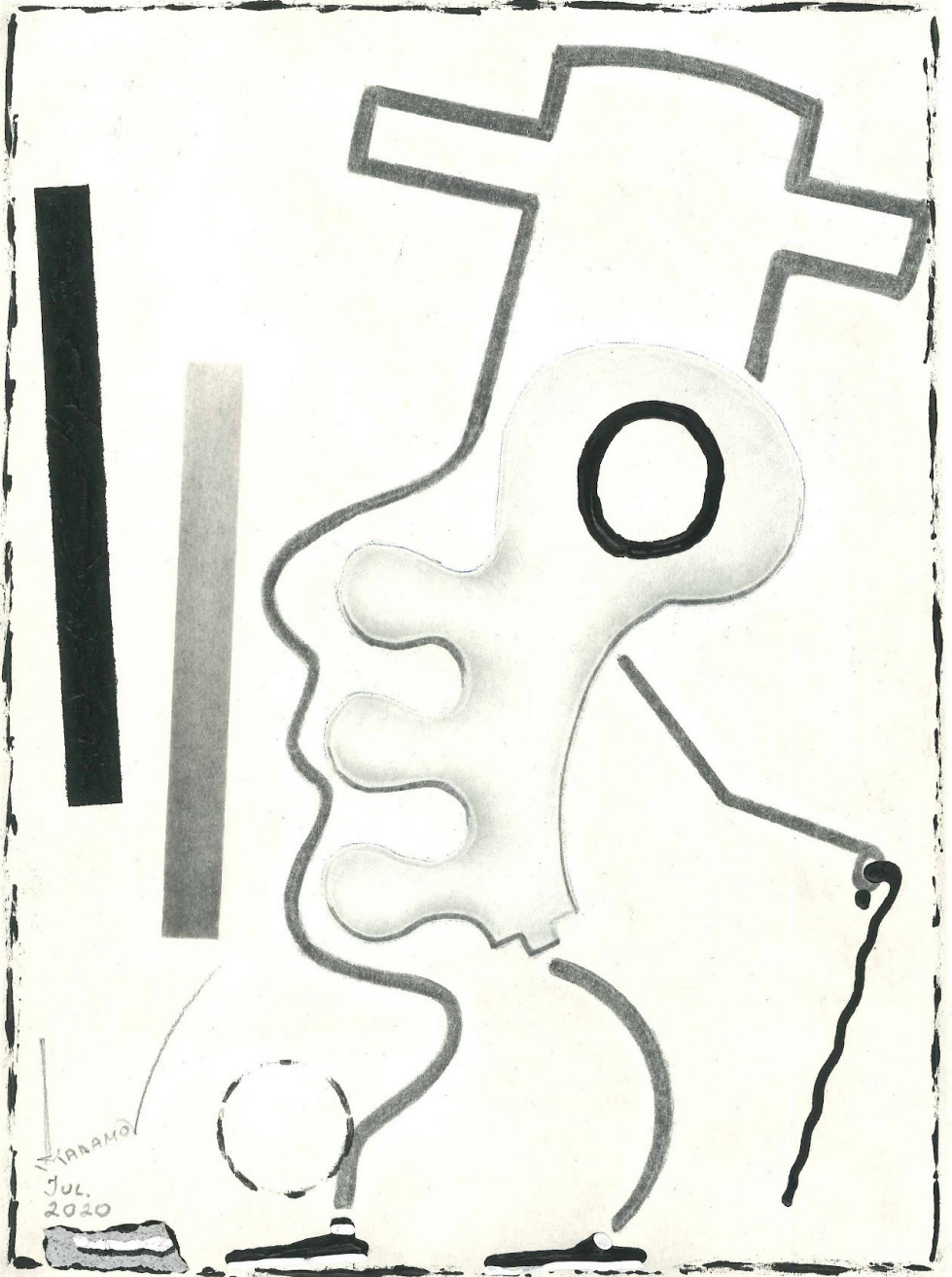
vas and colored pencils, imposing harsh barriers on Yuri. In response, he had to get more creative, insisting on still expressing himself even under the most limiting conditions. Out of nothing—or practically nothing—Yuri manifested his puzzle-piece societies, willing them to dance their way onto the page.

“I don’t think he would say he’s glad he’s had a lack of access to materials,” reflected Josh Pickar, one of Yuri’s post-conviction attorneys. “I do think what he would say is that it’s forced him to be really creative and to come up with new ways to express himself.... I think it shows the type of resilience and spirit that he has.”

Yuri’s innovativeness and resilience are especially impressive to consider alongside the inhumanity of his environment. Given that he is an outgoing, gregarious, lighthearted person, Yuri’s isolation is incongruous with his natural disposition. Then again, it is arguable that solitary confinement of this kind is always incongruous with an understanding of basic humanity.

Under the [United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#), commonly known as the Mandela Rules (named after human rights activist Nelson Mandela), Yuri’s imprisonment violates international standards for solitary confinement. These rules stipulate that solitary confinement should be used only for limited periods of time in prison, and only as a last resort—never based on a prisoner’s sentence (as is the case for Yuri).

The rules also assert that such confinement is “prohibited in the case of prisoners with mental or physical disabilities when their conditions would be exacerbated by such measures” (14). Yuri’s mental and physical



states have indeed been worsened by his living conditions (e.g., the intensification of his asthma), making these violations all the worse.

Specific to the United States, Yuri's isolation can be read as a breach of the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment—what could be more cruel than putting a nonviolent, artistic, outgoing individual in a place where he can receive no significant human contact?

“He has really been tortured for twenty years,” attorney Pickar stated.

In spite of it all, Yuri makes his art, striving to create at least one piece every day. Waking up each morning to see a new composition on his wall reminds him that he is not yet dead.

A petition for an appeal of Yuri's case was filed in October—it's 430 pages long. Challenging a death sentence in the U.S. is an incredibly daunting task, especially considering how hard it is to be released from prison in the U.S. in general, even with overwhelming evidence of innocence. Still, Yuri is fighting—supported by those who care deeply enough to fight for him, with him.

The [petition](#) on Yuri's website, “End Solitary Confinement on Federal Death Row,” urges justice for all those who have been forced to endure the dehumaniza-

tion of solitary. Yuri has also started the Art Against Death project, through which he hopes to create the world's largest piece of collaborative art as a protest against murder globally.

The state of affairs is dire, but Yuri's imaginative spark persists nonetheless.

Having recently obtained a guitar in prison, he is currently writing a musical and plans to animate his peculiar characters. Even without any music, though, Yuri's lively squiggles seem to have movement all on their own. If you look closely, you can almost see them shifting around, exploring the world of the page, finding limitless possibility in their bounded space.

“It is like jazz,” Yuri explains playfully in his artist statement. “Either you get it or you don't.”

Yuri has sold many of his works, continually channeling the funds into getting art supplies. It is a beautiful resistance, an unapologetic demonstration of his humanity and spirit in a system that deprives him of the essential need—connection—that all humans share.

Gifting a friend two of his Society pieces, Yuri was happy to see them go as a pair.

“I love that they are going to get to be together,” he remarked. “I don't want anyone to be alone like I've had to be alone.”



Art by Yuri Kadamov. Photograph courtesy of Yuri Kadamov.



SECTION INTRO: HIDDEN TRUTHS

Hidden truths exist in the judicial system and beyond; there are many stories that are missing complexity. Consider, for example, the number of people who have been found innocent through the use of DNA that provided new evidence. Despite being innocent of their accused crimes, many of those who end up incarcerated plead guilty. Those who have never faced a decision of that magnitude cannot seem to conceptualize how or why those who are innocent would plead guilty. But not everything is transparent, or black and white. These are the hidden truths of those who are incarcerated.

Those of us at Project Mend have been bullied in different ways by the criminal justice system, which has impacted us and our families since we were young. Our time at Project Mend has alerted us to the ways in which we are still attached to our protracted periods of incarceration and to how our families and friends were affected as well. Through our time working as editors, we have begun to uncover these hidden truths.

Some people don't realize that when those who have been incarcerated are released from prison, they are not really free. Most people cannot understand the trauma and PTSD of incarcerated people. These are the hidden truths of prison.

Despite their trauma, prisoners utilize their artistic abilities to express the hardships they experience. As editors, our hope is that the stories in this issue will take the reader on a journey from which they will walk away with more of an understanding of the impacts of incarceration.

In "A Survivor's Guide to Prison Slang," Gary K. Farlow exposes the language of a subculture, giving us a glimpse into the communication taking place in prison environments.

Maryana Kayumova opens up about the impact of discrimination and stereotypes in "Forever Foreign," calling out those who discriminated against her for being different, refusing to recognize the truth of her humanity.

In "Talkin' with Ben," Jennifer Battles helps readers understand the hidden truth of prison through the perspective of a rat. As Ben, the rat, tells the speaker that he would rather live in a sewer than in a prison, we get the sense that the space the author inhabits is unfit even for a rodent.

Brian Warner, in "Skill Sets," offers a poem about lessons imparted by mothers. Often, those enduring protracted periods of incarceration don't experience love or contact because of the lengths of their sentence and prison conditions.

Finally, readers are given the opportunity to explore the architecture of a prison in the poem "Just Outside Charleston." Gary K. Farlow explores the contrast between a prison setting and the historic town nearby, showing how these places, while they may be close in proximity, are actually worlds away from each other in terms of experience.

—*Daquan Noel, Theodore Robinson, and Troy White*

Canteen babies suitcase it carbon monoxide high
chow primo time stretchers diesel therapy
hall get it like Tyson royal flush looking like Lassie
honeycomb hideout gun camp woof ticket fly check off
Mother's Day **A Survivor's Guide** a check out
woofin' light bulb **to Prison Slang** kite
greened up Barnyard Queen the hole bug juice doctor
baby life s.o.s moon VI **Gary K. Farlow**
browned down beat feet rock bobos hustle
sewer trout maytag white shirts Carried to the door

“If you loan me your car, I’ll put some gas in it.”

This statement sounds like that of a teenager attempting to borrow their father’s car for a Saturday night date. In prison, this statement means “If you’ll loan me your radio, I’ll put some new batteries in it.”

With over two million Americans incarcerated, prison “slang” has become a new dialect of the vast and growing subculture in our nation’s prisons.

Hollywood has provided the unfamiliar with such terms as “turnkey,” “screw,” and “C.O.,” all meaning correctional officer. But have you heard of “moon rock,” or “bobos”? What about “baby life” or “bug doctor”?

Prison inmates are inventive and creative

in applying terms to the everyday. A “moon rock” is a meatball, typically made with ground turkey. “Bobos” are prison-issued sneakers. These shoes are avoided by most inmates, as they not only provide no arch support but are an identifier that the wearer is a “state baby,” or broke. Not to be confused with “baby life,” which is a ten-year prison sentence.

Food is a predominant preoccupation among most prisoners. Coffee, Little Debbie, ramen noodles, and Cactus Annie comprise the four basic food groups. Care for some “sewer trout”? That’s fried fish, typically pollock, served in the “chow hall.” How about a piece of “barnyard queen”? Chicken. There is the veritable “S.O.S.,” or beef gravy on toast or a biscuit, and “bug juice” is a fruit drink.

Serving time can find you “greened up,” or promoted to minimum custody, as well as “browed down,” or demoted to maximum custody.

If you’re fortunate, you may get a “slip,” meaning you have money “on your books” or in your inmate trust account.

If you are inclined to complain or whine, someone may tell you to “leave something for the baby to do.” Of course, you may have a reason to gripe if you’re serving a “light bulb,” or a minimum of twenty years. Still, no one likes a complainer, so don’t be surprised to be told “Let your clutch out,” “Kick rocks,” “Let me see the back of your head get small,” “Burn the road up,” “Suitcase it,” or “Beat feet,” all meaning you best move along before someone decides to “get it like Tyson” or want to fight.

Of course you can make good friends in prison, but a lot depends on your “game face,” or the impression you make. Finding another to “have your back,” or support you, is optimal.

You can always develop a “hustle,” or side job, to get by. You can “Maytag,” or wash clothes, or “fly when they buy,” go to the canteen to make another inmate’s purchases with his money for a tip.

Every day is nearly the same, so “you know what time it is,” “what’s kickin’,” and “what’s up, hangin’, shakin’ or happening.”

You could get a “VI,” or visit, and it could be “Mother’s Day,” or your wife or girlfriend.

Try to avoid “time stretchers,” or those who usually have a short sentence and often have an attitude problem, provoking others serving longer terms.

Making friends has a downside, as inmates are a transient population with trans-

fers, or “diesel therapy” and a “carbon monoxide high” that can leave you “looking like Lassie” or missing your friend.

A person learns how to quickly “carry it,” or develop a demeanor. Some sadly become “canteen babies,” constantly relying on others to buy them candy or sodas from the canteen, and others “check off” or “check out,” leave the “yard,” or regular prison population, and go to “the honeycomb hideout” or “the hole,” which is segregation.

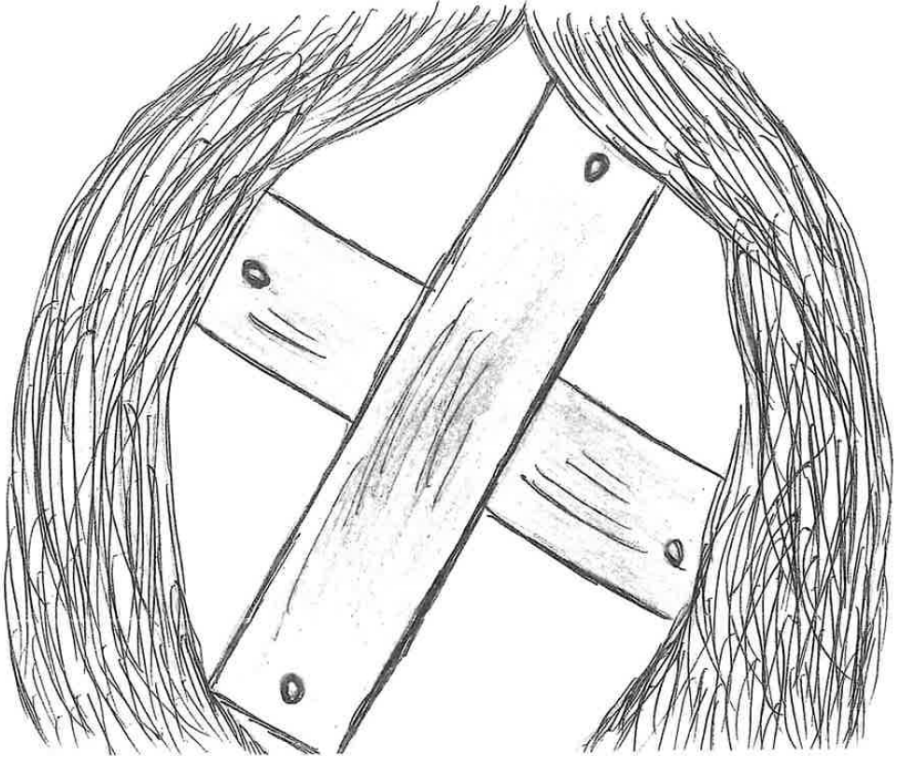
Respect is “primo” or highly important, among inmates. Personal hygiene is expected, as some are told “The water is free,” or to go get a shower. There is often a communal restroom, so courtesy demands that one “play poker and give it a royal flush,” or flush after use.

Prison will “try” you or test you; you’ll learn not to “snitch” or tell on another, to “handle business,” or stay out of others’ affairs, how to “fly a kite,” or send messages to other inmates, and be “straight up,” or honest.

If you start “slippin’ and slidin’,” or being elusive and beating around the bush, the “white shirts,” or the prison’s administration, may let you “smell some gas” and send you to another location.

Avoid “sharks,” loan sharks, “shooting boosters,” or “woofin’,” bragging on your ability to do anything, as somebody will eventually “buy your woof ticket” and make you prove it.

The day will arrive when you’ve been “carried to the door,” and you’ll be released from “the big house,” “gun camp,” and freedom will be yours. Just remember, if you do get in trouble, “they’ll leave the light on for you,” as prisons always have beds for inmates.



FOREVER FOREIGN

MARYANA KAYUMOVA

When people praise my resilience,
I wonder if they realize that resilience
Doesn't erase all the painful moments I lived through.
Each undesired encounter,
Each wrong word and the meaning behind it,
Each time the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to me.
I wish I had a cure for these feelings,
These feelings I feel...
When I sit alone in a high school cafeteria while everyone stares, whispers, and giggles.
When some boy in my PE class tells me he heard all Russian women are prostitutes.
When people say they thought I was Chinese,
but what I sense they really want to say is that they
thought I was one of those dirty, chinky-eyed people who eat dogs.
When some white lady describes me as that Oriental girl with an unproportioned body.
When I overhear a group of black girls say that all Asians look the same.
When my Korean boyfriend tells me his Korean friends do not like me.
When I'm told to lower my already low voice because my Russian accent sounds threatening.
When people label me as my skin color, as my facial features, as my national origin, as my
ancestry, as anything that can be used to protest my presence.
When people say my intelligence is the product of my Asianness.
When my classmate refers to immigrants as aliens.
When the manager who is Asian tells me they are out of job applications.
When my client asks me if all Russians are communists.
When my coworkers suggest I would be better at polishing nails.
When people ask me if there is an easier version of my name.
When I hear someone say my daughter looks like a little white girl.
When people ask me what Russian food tastes like.
When some white guy gets on a D train, sits next to me, and asks me if I'm comfortable.
When these different faces (black, brown, Asian, and Jewish) silently watch me as
this guy calls me derogatory names and tells me to go back to my country.
These feelings I feel when wrong words enter my day like cluster bombs,
leaving their intentions forever inside me.
These feelings I feel when I read Zora Neale Hurston's
"I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."
I feel all these feelings because I feel most foreign when I'm thrown against any background.

Art by Maryana Kayumova.



Talkin' with Ben

Jennifer Battles

Is that Ben I see?
Peeking from behind
Kitchen pots and pans,
Whisk in his hand,
Serene gleam in beady eyes.

Wonder if he went to visit
A movie star cousin
In a foreign city,
Learned new recipes,
Taught inmates to fricassee.

Hey Ben, said I
Whatcha been doing?
Haven't seen you in a while...
Are you moving back in,
Give up life in the sewer?
Good Gracious No! said Ben,



Layout by Montwella Bufford. Photo by freestocks.org from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/black-mouse-177719>.

A curl to his lip
And twitches of his long tail.
Tried living up here—
Life below is so much better!

The food from the kitchen
I could not eat.
Concrete on the yard burned my feet.
Smell in the building after a rain,
Sewer life homesick was my pain.

Came for a visit, said Ben.
Missed seeing my peeps,
Baking them a cake.
Fred and Sue and the rest—
Missing friends sure was a test.
Who are you talking about? asked I
With a frown on my face,

Confusion in my eyes.
The family of cockroaches, said Ben,
Live in the walls and roam the halls.

Haven't you met them? asked Ben.
Most certainly have, said I.
Don't mess with their turf.
Want no trouble, no cause for alarm—
Biggest carry shanks you see.

Goodbye, said Ben,
It was good seeing you.
Will I see you when I visit again?
I'll be here, said I,
Parole board would rather eat shit
Than let someone GO!

SKILL SETS

BRIAN WARNER

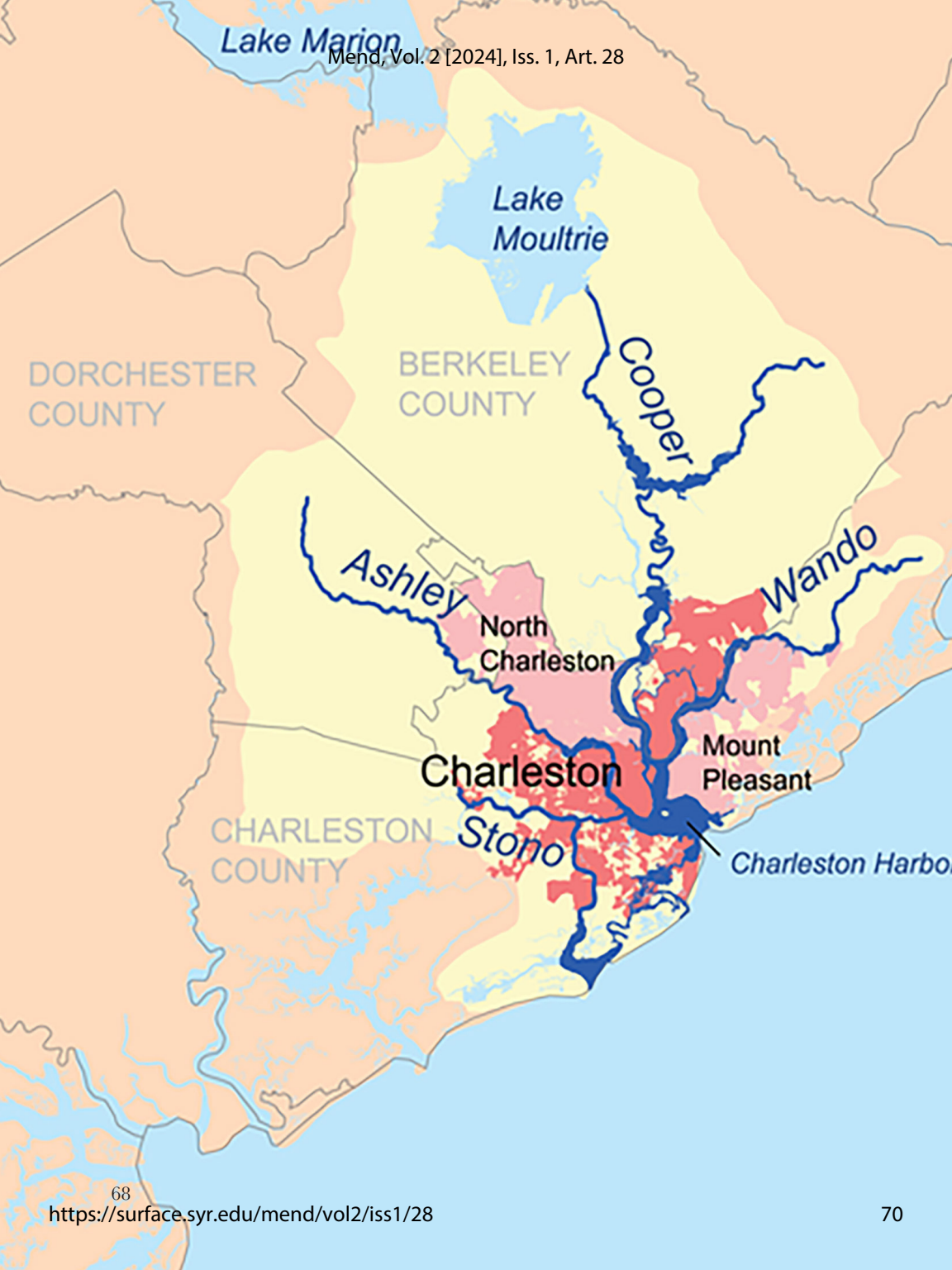
Moms teach kids
skills they'll need
to live life.

Be kind.
Tell the truth.
Wash your hands.
Brush your teeth.
Work hard.
Pray.

Moms who know
their kids will do
prison time add:
“Don't wear slippers
in the dayroom.”

Layout by Sherba Whitehurst and Illy Gomez Del Campo Rojas. Art by Sean J. White.





Just Outside Charleston

Gary K. Farlow

Layout by Michael J. Willacy. Map of the Charleston Harbor watershed showing Cooper River, Wikipedia.

Named after great rivers, important and legendary:
Edisto, Wando, Ashley, Cooper;
these names also identify prison cell blocks,
just 32 miles from Charleston's historic center,
but a world away from those genteel streets.
Instead of cobblestones and antebellum architecture,
there are ugly, utilitarian structures some claim
look like a college, but a college for the damned,
prefab buildings and asphalt instead of
graceful public squares and gardens,
barbed wire instead of Colonial-era iron railing,
guard towers replace the vista of church spires,
golf carts ferry officers on the grounds and
not the historic clop of horse-drawn carriages;
Inmates in stripes instead of brightly clad tourists,
the smell of institutional food assaults the senses,
and not the famous Lowcountry cuisine;
You cannot mistake one for the other,
just as Dorothy knew Oz wasn't Kansas.
There are no quaint inns here,
but it does house overnight guests who,
like at the Hotel California, check in but
seldom, if ever, will they check out;
For this is a man-made purgatory
just 32 miles from the Holy City.

*Atlantic
Ocean*

EDITORS



Jessie Anderson | Utica Rescue Mission

Jessie works with the homeless population as a peer engagement specialist with the Utica Rescue Mission, specializing in chemical dependency. She is a proud mother of three children and a grandmother of four—soon to be five. Her life has been dedicated to helping others and giving back to the community.



Montwella Bufford | Unchained

Montwella is the proud parent of three adult children and also has six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. She has worked in the Syracuse community for more than thirty years, taking care of both the elderly and children. For the past two years, she has worked as a peer specialist, and she is also a member of Unchained.



Ilhy Gomez Del Campo Rojas | Writing & Rhetoric, Creative Writing

Born in Mexico City, Ilhy gained a passion for writing that followed him into the United States when he migrated in 2011 with his family. He has since published two novels, *Say Something Nice* and *Killing Beethoven*. He is the editor in chief for the Boston branch of ALPFA and a digital writer for *Jerk Magazine*.



Vince Moody | Unchained

Vince is one of the founders of Real Fathers/Real Men, a mentoring program for young men in Syracuse. Originally from Brooklyn, NY, Vince has spent most of his life in Syracuse, where he worked as an electrician/engineer until 2020. He is a member of Unchained.



Katherine Nikolau | Writing & Rhetoric, Public Communications

Born in Moscow, Russia, and raised near Philadelphia, Katherine came to Syracuse to hone her passion for writing in creative and professional contexts. At Syracuse, she enjoys editing for *Perception*, the only arts and literary magazine on campus, meditating with the Buddhist Chaplaincy, and going to cat cafés.



Daquan Noel | Prime Music Management

Daquan is a former musician and currently the manager of Prime Music Management. He has interests in criminal and civil law and a passion for mixed martial arts. Born and raised in Syracuse, NY, he is a father of three and works with Unchained.



Troy Paris | Human Services, Onondaga Community College

Troy is a veteran of the U.S. Army. He is committed to helping those in Syracuse recover from various addictions, as he, too, continues his recovery. He is a single father of an eighteen-year-old college student. He is also a member of Unchained.

Mend: Full Issue - Mend, v2

Theodore Robinson | Unchained

Theo is a retired truck driver and a proud father of two children. While incarcerated, he participated in numerous educational initiatives, earning several vocational certificates. He also has experience working with justice-impacted people. He is a member of Unchained.



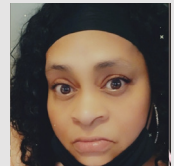
James Seibles | Liberty Resource Behavioral Health

James is a NY Board Certified Peer Recovery Specialist. He works at Liberty Resources Behavioral Health. This year he was nominated for a Proclamation award. He takes pride in being able to channel his personal experiences into empathy and compassion for others.



Jacqueline Thompkins | Outreach Worker

Jacqueline is a proud mother and grandmother. An AmeriCorps alumna, she has worked as a family health development manager for more than twenty years, helping pregnant and parenting women. She has also worked with ACR, promoting prevention options.



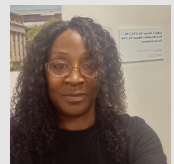
Troy White | Senior Editor, Project Mend

Troy is a graduate of SUNY New Paltz with a BS in Social Science. After his release following a fifteen-year sentence, he devoted over 27 years to working in the human services field in a variety of capacities and holds numerous certifications. He is committed to dismantling the carceral state.



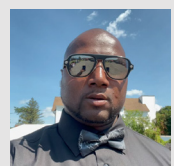
Sherba Whitehurst | Unchained

Sherba is a health care professional and has two beautiful children and four grandchildren. She is an activist against gun violence and a member of Yard Kids, Fountain of Life Church, Shield of Faith, and Unchained.



Michael J. Willacy | PEACE, Inc.

Michael is a poet and the author of four books. He and his wife, Shana, founded Hood Love, LLC, a book publishing company, in 2005, while he was incarcerated. Originally from Queens, NY, Michael is currently a case manager for the family re-entry program at PEACE, Inc.



Daquane Williams | Editor, Project Mend

Daquane is a poet, a writer, and a motivated person with high ambitions. He loves to try his hand at new things. He is currently getting ready to start a new YouTube channel with the hopes of building a community focused on everyday life.



Gabriella Wilson | Composition and Cultural Rhetoric

Gabby is a Ph.D. candidate in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. She is passionate about disability justice, and her research centers on the experiences of disabled graduate students.



ARTISTS



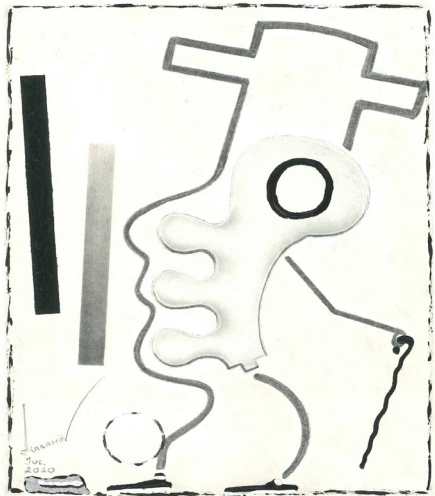
Ping Chieh Lin is a Taiwanese photographer who studied telecommunications and network management at Syracuse University. She specializes in nature photography and is working in IT at Upstate University Hospital.

Brian Hindson is a contributing artist and writer with the Prison Journalism Project. His favorite styles of work are impressionism and pop art, which he particularly likes for its audacity. His favorite artist is Edward Hopper. His work has also been published by the Justice Arts Coalition. Brian is incarcerated in Texas. To learn more about his work, go to prisonjournalismproject.org/author/brian-hindson.



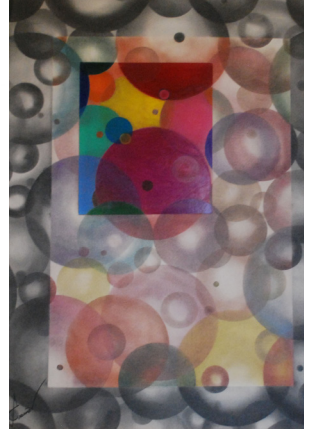
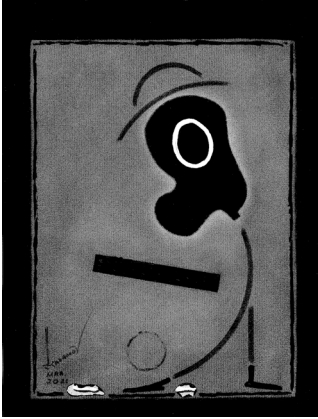


Yuri Kadamov is a Lithuanian artist creating his work in solitary confinement in the U.S. He has experimented with diverse genres and is particularly inspired by surrealist and abstract styles. Many of his pieces are featured throughout the issue and on our front and back covers. His playful “puzzle piece” works come from his collections “We as a Society” and “Our Kind of Society.” To read more about Yuri’s creative process (and the barriers he faces in solitary confinement), see page 52.

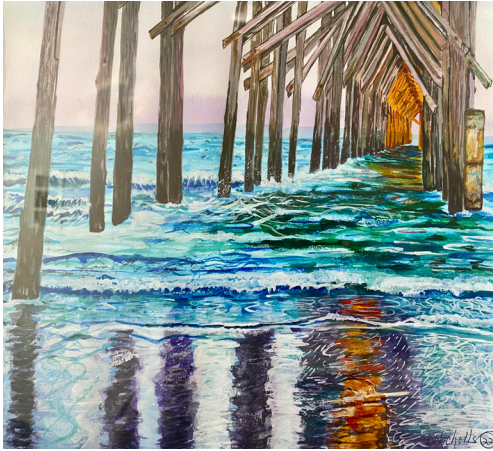


ARTISTS

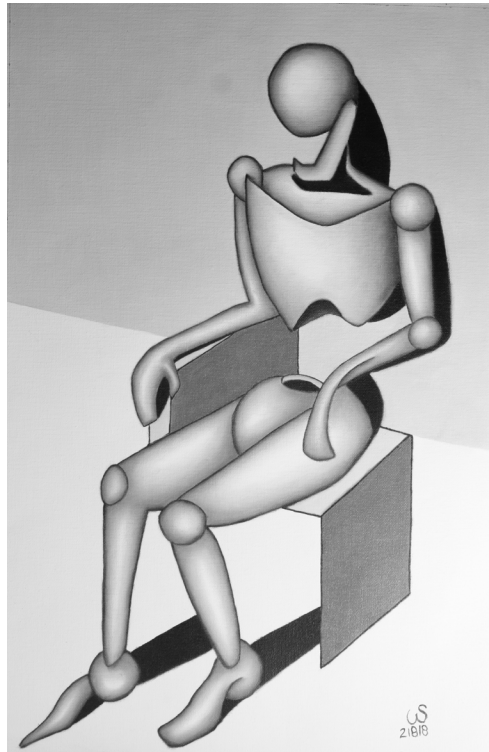
Yuri Kadamov (continued)



Jeff Elmore is currently incarcerated at North Alabama Community Work Center. He completed a certificate program in horticulture through Calhoun Community College. At age 66 and halfway through a twenty-year sentence, Jeff looks forward to gardening upon his release.



Deborah Nicholls began watercolor painting to help her process grief after the deaths of her children. Through art, she has found a way to express emotion, share her passion with others, and create beauty in darkness.



Sean J. White arrived in prison in 1997 at the age of 19. His abstract figurative artworks have hung in several national juried exhibitions and solo shows. As well as a fine artist, he is a writer and poet whose work has appeared in various literary journals. Samples of his work can be seen at thejusticeartscoalition.org.

