I am stressed, anxious and in need of a release. It has been three days now. Someone in the know informed me that it will happen today, soon.

Of course, nothing is ever certain in a place like this. I tighten my shoelaces, and adrenaline pumps through my veins like a high-speed freight train. I'm pacing and fearing the worst when I hear it. First, the crackling of a radio comes to life, then the words on the overhead speaker, "Yard call! Yard call!"

I'm off, down the corridor stairs, through two electronic exit doors out onto the recreational yard. A handful of others are behind me, with varying levels of motivation and enthusiasm. I pause, take a deep breath, and a calmness begins to wash over me like a cool ocean wave.

For a moment, I close my eyes and become my other self — my more-human self. I plug in my headphones, adjust my shades, and suddenly I am alone, just another person going for a run. I run with music, never silence. The silence is a vacuum, allowing darkness to seep in, weighing me down as it slowly fills my mind. My body is craving a physical punishment. So I run.

I begin to jog. As my legs loosen up, my stride lengthens and I pick up the pace to a steady run. The wind is on my face — the sun beckons, providing strength, and my feet pound out a familiar rhythm on the packed dirt. I notice the others, only glancingly, lounging on the benches, walking, standing at the chain-link divider talking to other pods. I do not know these people. They certainly do not know me. We are simply individuals whose circumstances have led us to the same place at the same time.

I keep running, feeling lighter with every step. The tethers, binding me in regret, begin to snap one by one: my impulsiveness; my more-human self.
Write for Prison Journalism Project

WHO: First-time and experienced writers who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, family members, corrections officers, prison educators and others involved in the criminal justice system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

WHAT: Submissions under 1200 words. No more than ONE STORY or THREE POEMS per submission. Please submit only your best work.

Facts in your piece must be information you gathered firsthand, not speculation or information that you’ve obtained through someone else. We cannot accept stories about individual cases or that are accusatory about a specific person, group or institution. We do not publish academic research papers, religious sermons or work not intended for a general audience. Any data that is mentioned must be attributed to a source. We reserve the right to exclude portions of your work that don’t conform to this policy.

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We cannot re-edit a story once it is published, but if you would like your story taken down for any reason, please submit a request. If an error was inserted in the editing process, we will create a simple one that says where you are incarcerated.

Every year, we receive a large backlog of submissions, but we consider each one. A photo to go with your bio. If that’s not possible, we will use a graphic of your initials.

With appreciation,
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countries

3

prisons

175

writers

520

stories

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- Headline:
  - Online: $75
  - Print: $100
- Byline:
  - Online: $50
  - Print: $75
- Photos/Art Only:
  - Online: $25
  - Print: $50
- Front page:
  - Online: $100
  - Print: $150

When you submit your piece, you will be asked to include a short story or a few sentences that describe your artwork. No more than three art-works per entry. Artwork cannot be returned.

AUDIO STORIES: A recording of yourself or an interview with others, no more than two minutes in length.

WHAT TO SEND SUBMISSIONS

Secure, Corlinks and GTL Getting Out/Connect Network: pip@prisonjournalismproject.org

NOTE: GTL Getting Out is for messages only, submissions must be sent via USPS.

PJP: New account: James Pane at forwriters@prisonjournalismproject.org

E-mail: submissions@prisonjournalismproject.org

PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

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remembering a childhood of sweetness and violence.

BY CARNELL WINGFIELD JR. | Carnell Wingfield Jr. writes from Kern Valley State Prison, California.

my failure as a daughter, a friend, a human; hardest of all, the recent passing of my mom, who was my one true champion. So I run.

As the miles go by, my thoughts clear, and I enter a meditative state where nothing can penetrate the tranquility. I do not have to focus on each step along the path, worn down by the thousands of conflicted souls before me.

Eventually, what seems like only minutes has become an hour. I watch the officer make his way to unlock the gate. My time is coming to an end.

I can make one more lap, and this one is my favorite. I sprint — well, nothing so graceful. I tear along the perimeter holding nothing back. Everything is a blur. My eyes fill with water, never tears. My arms are pumping, chest heaving, legs flying behind me. I feel nothing. No pain. No remorse. No grief. I am suspended in time. So I run.

It hasn’t always been this difficult to get outside. But like the rest of humanity during this devastating pandemic, we had to accept change. What used to be an amenity taken for granted has now become a contentious matter between staff and inmates. Quarantines, staff on sick leave and a total separation of pods have relegated us to one hour a day recreational periods. That is, on a good day.

Initially, it all seemed tolerable, necessary and temporary. As time went by, staff shortages increased, and just as in the real world, recreating was the first to suffer. Administrative complacency set in. As time passed, my family was made on her life. She was shot five times, but survived. The next thing I heard were gunshots. As soon as the ice cream truck was spotted, an attempt was made on her life. She was shot five times, but survived. Soon after, the Suiciders jumped on the truck and took a couple of shots at the driver. He wasn’t so lucky.

That was the end of the ice cream trucks — and, pretty soon, the end of my life. None of them lived to see their 17th birthday.

This story has a strong sense of place because of Wingfield’s expert use of specific details from his childhood — PJP Intern Wyatt Shyam

Guns, Ice Cream and the End of Innocence

Remembering a childhood of sweetness and violence.

Do you edit or write for a newspaper or newsletter published at your prison? Please send us a copy of the publication to PJP’s Chicago address (15501 South Ave., #204, Chicago, IL 60617). We’d love to hear from you. To get your story published, please send us your story and/or your permissions form.

This holiday season, what are you most grateful for?

What is your favorite holiday movie and why?

Without hesitation

Balanced at the rules

As I sit in their faces

I took my liberty for granted

And had it rescinded

Wound up bound in chains

Like those from whom I am descended

I thought that picking up a gun

Made me big, made me brave

Now looking back on it

All I made me was a slave

This is a short but powerful poem, comparing incarceration to slavery while also acknowledging the writer’s own responsibility — PJP Director Teresa Touch

WE’RE MAKING LISTS

Online readers love lists, and we want people who are incarcerated to also be a part of the pop culture conversations outside. That’s why we are collecting very short responses to the four questions below. These will be used in our social media, newsletters and online publication to engage people and bring in more readers who will read your stories. Send via email, your next submission or your permissions form. Details on page 2.

• What is your favorite holiday movie and why?
• What is your favorite holiday tradition outside prison?
• This holiday season, what are you most grateful for?
• What was your favorite song in 2022 and why?
Behind the Scenes of My Pre-Quarantine Workout

BY KORY “HUSSAIN” MCCLARY  Kory “Hussain” McClary writes from New Jersey State Prison, New Jersey.

Since COVID-19’s 2.0 hit, New Jersey State Prison (NJSP) has been shut down. No yard, no gym. Now, I’m stuck in my cell all day. And I hate exercising in my cell. But I have to find the energy to do it because if I lay around any more I’m sure I’ll turn into Play-Doh. Today’s workout worked a little bit. But my cell is still not the Big Yard.

In the Big Yard, my favorite area is Quad Three. It’s the perfect yard — small, with some weights, a pull-up bar and a dip bar. It sits in the corner where the guard tower looms, which provides those who need shade in the dog-heat of some relief. My spot is at the end of the basketball court, away from the pass-stretch corner where the toilet sits, and out of the shade of the guard tower. In the summertime, I embrace the sun. In the winter, I embrace the cold.

I don’t start my workout until each quad is filled and locked. I wait so that I may speak to whomever I need before I begin. I like to work out uninterrupted, and, as of late, by myself. While the cages fill with energized and rowdy guys, I circle the yard, gathering my thoughts and the scattered weights I plan to use. If I stop to talk to someone through the gate, my conversation is brief, no more than “Ayo, what up?”

Killa and his partner, unlike me, start their workout as soon as they step in the yard. They move fast and have an exercise for each corner of the quad. They’re their own competition. “They go hard,” Killa says.

In the song “Lyrical Exercise,” JAY-Z says, “Y’all ain’t ready to workout.” Anyway, when I reach my spot, I put my gloves on. Then I start working in my all-white cotton lycra high-top sneakers, light gray sweat suit, tan wool skullies and shades. The shades make me feel like I’m invisible. Here, someone is always watching.

My close friend TARIQ can go hard on the workout, but he doesn’t. He’s always trying to count my money (workout), talking about how he’ll drop me off (in other words, make me quit). But he can’t. He won’t ever admit that I dropped him off. I’ve got witnesses.

Anyway, when I reach my spot, I put my gloves on. Then I start by sprinting across the basketball court. I touch the gate, run back to my spot and touch the ground. I do this five times, increasing my pace as I go.

As soon as I touch the concrete on the fifth rep, I grab two 45-pound dumbbells and begin toe touches: 20 reps of toes to knees, then right into 20 reps of toes to waist. The sprints and the toe touches combined makes up one set. I take a quick breath and go back to the sprints.

At this point, I’m in the zone — stress in the form of sweat trickling down my neck, ideas flowing, plans being made. Everyone else in the yard is tuned out. But I’m still on point, well aware of everyone’s routine. If the slightest thing goes awes, I’ll stop on a dime.

This time when I reach the gate I touch it and sprint backwards. I force myself to breathe easily: air into my nostrils, stress out of my mouth. Miami Mike usually runs laps around the yard for nearly the whole duration of our time outside. I often wonder if I have the stamina to last with him.

I stop at my spot and lift the same weights. This time I do a complete toe touch, toes to the sky. If I wasn’t awake before, I am now. Without dropping the weight, I lift the dumbbells to my shoulders, tightening my core while keeping my forearms perpendicular to the cement. I do 10 reps of front-each marches, making sure that my knees touch my elbows.

I walk a lap to mentally switch the exercise. When I’m ready, I stop at the same spot, take a deep breath and begin again. I do 10 reps of burpees. The faster I go, the lighter I feel. From there, I go straight into my next exercise: sidewardinders. I do 30, take a quick break and go back to the burpees.

Some guys in the Big Yard do a set, talk for 10 minutes, then do another set. I call that work inefficiency. It’s not burning, the job is not getting done. I need to burn off stress, burn this plan into my brain and, of course, burn calories. I need to look good when I get out of here.

The more that I think of my freedom and my family on the other side of that ancient stone wall, the harder I go. Sometimes, I get a whiff of the fries being cooked at the McDonald’s across the street. It’s just more motivation.

I walk another lap and I’m back at my spot. I switch to ab exercises. I don’t get up until my stomach is burning. When I do, my back is dirt-stained. I love it. How can a dude be stainless after a workout?

Aftewards, I walk a lap and stop at the pull-up bar. For my final exercise, I do 10 sets of 10 pull-ups. The first two sets I do behind the neck. As soon as I jump down, if nobody’s next, I jump right back up. The next two sets are overhead wide-grip, followed by two overhead and shoulder-width. I walk a quick lap for a breather. Then I finish with two sets of underhand wide-grip and two sets of underhand close-grip.

It sucks sitting in a cell all day. It’s hard to get a complete workout. Who wants to swear on their bed, or on their legal mail? Until the yard is back, I’ll be right here getting fat.

THE ANATOMY OF A STORY

1. The anecdote about Tariq and Killa and his partner reminds us that no one is ever alone in prison, and that someone is always watching. The Killa anecdote tells us about the competitive environment of the prison (“I’m their silent competition”). And the Tariq anecdote is funny (Deadpan: “I’ve got witnesses!”). But McClary doesn’t go too long with either paragraph. This story is about his workout, and he doesn’t lose focus.

2. This is what we were looking for when we ask for more details. We want readers to be able to see the scene when they read your sentence.

3. Excellent kicker (i.e., “I like to work out uninterrupted, and, as of late, by myself.”)

4. Notice the specificity of his descriptions. “High-top sneakers” is so much more visual than “shoes.”

5. The short punchy sentences this paragraph gives us an energetic rhythm that works really well within a story about working out.

6. Paragraphs 2 and 3 offer a good description that enables the reader to truly visualize the setting. It engages most of the senses: sight, touch (the sun burning) and smell (the toilet). Readers get sound (the deadbeat) in the next graf. It’s just the right amount of detail.

7. “EVERY TIME I USE TO FEEL FREE AND AWAKE WHILE IN THE BIG YARD, I USED TO WRITE THIS PIECE.”

8. SHARE YOUR STORY

Today most stories about prison are written with an outside perspective. Prison Journalism Project has an online publication for incarcerated writers and others who know the system from the inside to take the power of journalism into their own hands, to learn the craft of journalists storytelling and to share their stories of life behind bars.

www.prisonjournalismproject.org

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PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

SHARE YOUR STORY

THE PJP team annotated this article to give you an idea of what we thought worked really well and how we would further develop this piece to make it more journalistically relevant.
How I Became a Prison Poet — And So Much More

Reginald Dwayne Betts in conversation with PJP.

Reginald Dwayne Betts is a poet, a lawyer and the founder of Freedom Reads, a non-profit organization transforming access to literature by installing mobile libraries in prison housing units. For more than 20 years, Betts has used his writing to explore the world of prison and the effects of incarceration on American society. He is the author of a memoir and three collections of poetry, including the American Book Award-winning collection "Felon." Betts received a 2021 MacArthur Fellowship and a 2019 National Magazine Award for his New York Times Magazine essay “Getting Out,” which chronicles his journey from prison to becoming a licensed attorney.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about how you started writing?

I became a writer as soon as I was in prison. I was sitting in a cell thinking, what am I going to do with these nine years? And I told myself, "I will be a writer," because I imagined I couldn't be an engineer from a prison cell. I was wrong about that, but I didn't know. And I figured I would always have access to pen and paper.

At first that just meant keeping a journal. Then later, I read Etheridge Knight — he made me believe I could be a poet. It's really difficult to be something that you cannot see. His work was the first tangible example of somebody who had been in a cell like [me], and was publishing alongside Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Claude McKay. And so at that point, I think I became a poet.

Q: Why poetry?

For me, the poem was just an obvious move. You could hold a whole world in 20 lines. Although over the course of a novel, people say things that stun you, and you may carry a whole novel in your head, but not the way you can carry a whole poem.

Q: Were there specific sources of inspiration while you were inside?

This is a good story. When I first started sending pieces to magazines, I would ask for advice. I would say, if you don't want to publish this, that's fine, but it would be great if you give me some feedback. One editor told me I was doing too much, and I should maybe just work on describing where I was.

I did that, and I ended up getting that poem published. What I learned was a lot of beginning writers think we're smarter than we are. We think the world is rooted in the sh*t we think, the opinions that we have. What that editor made me do is focus first on what I was seeing ... Start by noticing anything well, and you move from noticing well to describing well, and then you find those moments where you gain insight and wisdom from what you describe. That became the way I write. And I think it still is.

Q: What are some ideas or themes that writers inside today might want to consider writing about?

There are as many ideas to write about as there are hours in a day. We know very little about what it means to live in prison. So we often focus on the violence of incarceration, on the sorrow of incarceration. There's very little work done on the glimpses of joy. There are other opportunities. I'm not a professional athlete — [but] some of the best basketball players that I've seen in my life I've actually seen ... in prison. I think there's been very little written on that ... And I think there are a lot more imaginative ways to critique the system than exist now.

We are still trying to find a point where we are ready to school the incarcerated, to afford them the right to be treated seriously enough so that people can tell you when your work is not good. I think a bit of patronizing goes on. ... Start by noticing anything well, and you move from noticing well to describing well, and then you find those moments where you gain insight and wisdom from what you describe. That became the way I write. And I think it still is.

Q: What are some ideas or themes that writers inside today might want to consider writing about?

There are as many ideas as writers about how you might recommend? I'm 41, and so when I started writing, the people I was thinking about were Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton. And I'm still thinking about those folks. But you also have to be reading a new generation of really talented writers. Natalie Diaz, Major Jackson, Roger Reeves. Tyehimba Jess. Adrian Matejka. You should be reading Japanese haiku. As a practice, you should understand what it is. You can't be writing about incarceration without reading, John J. Lennon. You want to be able to take the time and reading translations, work from other cultures. You got to be reading the Dostoevskys and the Wole Soyinkas.

There are more writers that you should be reading than any one person can name. In Gabrielle Zevin's book, "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," she says, "We read to know who we're not, we read because we are alone." We read because we know that by reading, we make ourselves a little bit less so. I saw somebody reading "Blood in the Water" at the bookstore yesterday, and I said something to him. And he said, "This is such a fantastic book, I'm reading it for the second time." This was some random older white guy whom I might not assume I had anything in common with. But that book on the table led us to have a two-minute conversation. I remember him a year from now just because of that interaction. You read to discover who you are, and you read to discover who your kin are. So, what we should be reading is probably as limitless as, you know, our joys and our suffering.

Q: Any other advice you would give to inside poets who are just starting out?

One thing I didn't learn how to do in prison was pitch to a magazine. I think that's a really powerful thing to know how to do. It helps you organize your thoughts and have a sense of what you want to write.

I would have liked to know that you don't have to be tied to one genre. I've written about my family. I've been able to write pieces in memory of Bill Withers and Michael K. Williams. These are things that I didn't ever expect to do. I think that you should open yourself up to the unexpected. It's important to remember that what you may end up doing five years from now is likely going to be unimaginable to you today. But you want to develop skills so that when you decide to do it, you've got the skills to do it.
My Ukrainian Correspondence Saved My Life

How a letter became a legacy.

BY CAMERON TERHUNE | Cameron Terhune writes from the Correctional Training Facility, California.

When I was 25 years old, I finally decided to stop trying to kill myself. I had already been in prison for several years, chipping away at my 100-years-to-life sentence. It was perhaps the darkest time in my life. I had just landed back in a regular prison cell after bouncing around various suicide cells, prison mental health wards and other places that I should never remember.

If I were going to live, there ought to be some purpose beyond my past and the terrible poetry and collages I cobbled together from soap, tape and toothpaste.

Several months later, my life changed. I got a fat envelope from a man named Lubomyr Tymkiv, curator of the Museum of Mail Art. He had enclosed several half-completed pieces of art, which he asked me to complete and return or share with others.

I also enclosed some random bits of Ukrainian ephemera — book receipts, magazine clippings, stickers, calendar pages, doodles, trading cards and so on. The envelope was covered in canceled Ukrainian stamps and postmarks in Cyrillic. I was enthralled.

Lubomyr also sent me a note encouraging me to continue contributing to the Mail Art network. I learned that this was a global, interconnected web of artists, woodcarvers, painters, stampmakers, zine writers, sculptors and bookbinders. Using the addresses he provided me, I sent art and mail to everyone.

Over the months and years that followed, I made new friends all over the world: Germany, France, Canada, Argentina, Spain, Australia, Lithuania, Denmark, South Africa, the Netherlands, Italy, Russia, Taiwan, even Iran.

I continued to correspond at the pace of the postal service and the prison system — a letter every few months or so, jam-packed with art. The irony of the postal service and the prison system — a letter that continues to this day.

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I continued to correspond at the pace of the postal service and the prison system — a letter every few months or so, jam-packed with art. The irony.

- Cameron Terhune writes from the Correctional Training Facility, California.
Opinion

Restorative Justice Circles Help Many Address Violence, Trauma

People form many kinds of communities inside prison. Some are groups of negative, misguided individuals still looking to live in the same ways that led them to prison. And then there are those driven by a desire to reduce the harm they’ve caused, looking to reshape themselves and the way they move in the world.

I’ve been a part of both. I’ve remained behind these walls for nearly 20 years. In the beginning, I refused to accept responsibility for why I was confined: taking another human’s life. I always had an excuse for how that night played out, and I rarely held myself accountable.

As the years wore on, I distanced myself from the more negative influences in prison and drifted away from the toxic masculinity and the role it played in our lives, towards those who were working to transform themselves from who they once were: individuals suffering from extreme trauma who found an outlet in destruction and pain.

One day, I learned of a concept that was new to me — restorative justice. I found a community who believed all humans had value, including me. The idea had been introduced to me in a book and attempted to work as best as I could to earn some perks. These perks include clean clothing, weekends off and more desirable shifts.

I came into the system shocked by the abuse imposed against a population that is already extremely vulnerable. There is a system that determines who can get a “good job,” such as maintenance. It is designed to make some feel better than others. It’s a carrot-and-stick game to keep some of us in check.

People who come to prison after committing crimes and having hurt others feel the lowest of the low. Most will grab hold of anything that makes them feel worthy, even if that means accepting a “good job” that isn’t actually that great.

As an act of defiance against this manipulation, I have refused to accept these offers. I’ve been a part of both.
Northwestern University Holds First Graduation at Illinois Prison

Through education, incarcerated men found their voices and became leaders.

BY ANTHONY ELHERS | Anthony Elhers writes from Stateville Correctional Center, Illinois.

Over the years, Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum security prison in Illinois, has gained a notorious reputation, especially for violence. However, as a sign that things are changing, Stateville held its first associate degree ceremony on April 20, 2022, for the Northwestern University Education Program (NPEP), an associate and bachelor’s degree initiative of Northwestern University. In partnership with Oskbon Community College and the Illinois Department of Corrections, the program aims to provide a high-quality liberal arts education to incarcerated students.

Filling a vital need

NPEP is the only top-10 university in the nation to confer its own bachelor’s degree to incarcerated students. And it fills a vital need by being the only degree-granting program in Illinois to provide a full liberal arts curriculum — humanities, fine arts, social sciences and STEM courses — to incarcerated students. The program was the brainchild of founder and director Jennifer Lacey, a professor in Northwestern’s philosophy department.

I was fortunate to be in the first cohort and to receive my associate degree with honors. Many of us had never experienced a graduation ceremony or had people be proud of us for our accomplishments. More importantly, we have never had the chance to be proud of ourselves.

In our caps and gowns, we and the faculty gathered together for the ceremony. The sight of their sober dignity made us aware of how important this moment was. Each one of us reflected on the obstacles we had to overcome to get to this point. I was homeless at 15 years old, and I remembered reading books by the light of a streetlamp.

Fellow student Jasin Caravos said, “I thought I was going to die in the streets, and no one cared one way or the other. Seeing how many people do care and are proud of me makes me feel like I can do anything.”

The entire process had been challenging from the very beginning.

The admissions process was very selective. More than 300 people applied to get into the program. We had to write an essay on what education meant to us and go through an interview process. Out of 300, only 20 men were selected. The classes were demanding. We learned from the same professors as students outside, took the same coursework and were held to the same expectations.

The transition from coting in a cage to having homework and classes was hard, but it was also extremely fulfilling. I saw my cohort find their voices and express themselves in positive ways.

Men who were normally quiet began taking charge, helping those who were struggling. Corzell Cole, a recently released student permitted to join us for the graduation ceremony, was a perpetually positive voice, helping those who were struggling. Corzell Cole, a recently released student permitted to join us for the graduation ceremony, was a perpetually positive voice, helping those who were struggling.

Everyone in the cohort graduated with a grade point average of 3.5 or higher.

Impact from COVID-19

Two years ago, the pandemic changed everything. We went on strict lockdown, and classes had to be taught by correspondence. It was difficult for everyone. The professors had to change everything about the way they taught. They arranged for our studies to be done independently and gave each of us individual tutors, since there was no classroom setting.

The program even took our mental health into account, assembling a wellness team who opened our eyes to new ideas like yoga and meditation. As the pandemic raged along, boy, did we need it. Studying in this prison at the best of times is tough, but being totally isolated from each other and the classroom was an unbelievable struggle. We held our education as an anchor in a shifting sea.

More than 30 men died of COVID-19 in Stateville. I lost 11 friends, including my best friend and cellmate James Scott. Continuing my education after his death was one of the most difficult things I had ever done. Thinking of his encouragement and knowing he would want me to keep going helped.

When we walked across the stage, several guys spoke about the difficulties of the pandemic.

“I didn’t think I could do it, but I couldn’t give up on becoming a better person,” my friend Shareef Heming said. “I thought of James, and how proud he would be of me, of all of us!”

The NPEP second cohort also attended our graduation ceremony. One student said, “You guys are the trailblazers. I can’t wait to walk across the stage and feel what you guys are feeling.”

For me, graduation was a triumph. I had been told that, as a long-term offender, it wasn’t worth being educated. When you hear those kinds of words, you begin to believe them. Northwestern saw the intelligence and worth in us.

Everyone in this cohort has become the best versions of themselves. All of us have goals that once seemed like a dream but now seem attainable. The men of NPEP are upstanding members of the community here, and they are striving to be upstanding members of the outside world. Programs like NPEP are what rehabilitation is all about.

It is with profound humility and happiness that I can say I am a college graduate.

What is striking about Elhers’ piece is the emotion conveyed throughout. Amid the dark backdrop of the pandemic, Elhers and his peers found light through education. Elhers’ meticulous approach to writing, from powerful quotes to inspirational flashbacks of the struggles that he had faced, makes readers feel like they are along the journey with him. — PIP Editor Mason Lyon

BY GEORGE T. WILKERSON | George T. Wilkerson writes from Central Prison North Carolina, North Carolina.

Upon entering prison I was immediately assaulted by the overwhelming clam and clamor that reverberated off concrete, steel, and Plexiglas: men had to holler to make their voices heard above the din: dominoes and cards slapped the stainless steel table; the loudspeaker in the ceiling blared statistics demands; pneumatic doors hissed — banged open and shut; and like a vacuum stuck on industrial-grade toilets and central air whooshed.

Body tensing; I thought. I can’t live like this... years later we were locked in our cells for evening count when a hurricane knocked the electricity out.

As the central air died down, utter quiet rose in the blackness. I felt like I gained a superpower. I heard guys breathing in their cells, their personal air crawling through the cracks around our heavy iron doors. I heard tinny music chirling out of someone’s earbuds. I heard blood thumping through my body. My cheap sponge earplugs had never silenced prison like this. I tensed, needing to pee suddenly. How reliant had I become on prison’s incessant racket? I realized.

I didn’t want others to read the tell-tale sounds of my piss — so I held it in, cramping. Privacy in prison is priceless and sounds betray a lot about us, our functions, our actions. A thick stream splashing heavily in my toilet might entice one man’s fantasy, or perhaps spark his envy. The noise had to come to serve as a privacy curtain blocking my cells’ doorway, an impenetrable blanket that cloaked my unguarded movements, an invisible hand shielding my mouth when I shared furtive words in the dayroom. And something else: the sounds had established a rhythmic baseline, the heartbeat of prison life. Being ever present and familiar all these years, the noise comforted my need for stability. Its sudden absence now terrified me on a visceral level, as if the natural order of the universe had been violated, for a few minutes I laid there fighting my rising panic. What if it never came back? oh god I heard someone mutter, “sooohh shii...” mirroring my sentiments.

A moment later the power flickered on, the air crank back up, and life sputtered back to normal. When our cell doors opened we poked our heads out, tentative and curious about how others had responded. We glanced at each other and laughed unlazily, trying to hide our obvious relief, trying to shrug off our discomfited feelings — but I couldn't tell him.

I wasn’t the only one who felt the fear of being enveloped by darkness, alone, with only primitive sounds of breath and blood and soft bodies echoing through space that was wrapped in Plexiglas, steel, and cold concrete.

This poem is a masterclass in evoking place through sound. Wilkerson captures prisoners’ assault on the senses — and on the ears in particular — with vivid descriptions: the howling of angry men, the static blaring of loud speakers, the hissing of pneumatic doors. These concrete details combine to establish an emotional atmosphere that is unbearable and unbearably. But a surprising narrative pivot, midway through, complicates the story, bringing a profound poem to a greater one. — PIP Editor Mason Lyon

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