When I Left the Women's Prison, Health Issues Followed Me

PJP staffer JoyBelle Phelan writes about age and health after prison; despite reentry success, she struggles to get out of bed on many days.

--- read the full article on PAGE 7

PRISON IS NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

DEMENTIA DIABETES
HYPERTENSION HIGH CHOLESTEROL
FATTY LIVER OSTEOPOROSIS
ARTHRITIS
KIDNEY DISEASE INCONTINENCE

Prison doesn’t need a retirement scene. But boy, does it have one.

BY WALTER HART | Walter Hart writes from SATF and State Prison, Corcoran, California.

Crime is a young man's game, but prisons aren't.
The prison population of people 55 and older has tripled over the last two decades. The same trend holds true where I'm incarcerated, in California. My state has gone from having people 55 and older make up 3% of the prison population (4,900 people) in 2000, to 16% (20,353 people) in 2019, according to the latest available data by the state.

At 61 years old, I am a member of this graying prison cohort. I've been incarcerated 17 years, so I wasn't always a part of the prison retirement scene.

There are now so many old men in my facility that I sometimes wonder: Where are the young ones? This has to be because of the long sentences tossed around like confetti 20 years ago. Laws are slowly starting to change; in 2018, California instituted elderly parole.

... continued on PAGE 3

One Topic, Many Possible Audiences

This visual story illustrates how you can shift your storytelling approach depending on what audience you want to reach.

My Boys Have Become Men

The PJP team annotated this article with notes on what we thought worked really well and how we would further develop this piece to make it even more journalistically relevant.

Memory Lane Is Full of Potholes

This personal essay offers a compelling portrait of an influential neighborhood and era, and it does so through the lens of two very different perspectives. PJP writer Reginald Stephen invites readers to see the trouble with memory and grand narratives as well as the possibility of transformation over time.
The Prison Journalism Project is an independent, nonprofit, national initiative. We work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people impacted by incarceration to train them in the tools of journalism and help them reach a wide audience through our public publications as well as through collaborations with mainstream media. We believe that the deep reforms that are necessary to fix the U.S. criminal legal system can only happen by shifting the narrative. Intentional, responsible, and well-crafted journalism from within the incarcerated community can break stereotypes, increase transparency and drive change.

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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 legal system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

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

Read our Submissions Guidelines for more information.

Categories
REPORTED NEWS AND FEATURED ARTICLES: Articles based on reporting and research that tell people about things that actually happened.
ESSAYS: Essays and memoirs about something you experienced.
OP-EDS: Opinion articles and commentary with a thesis, argument or call to action.
POETRY: No more than two submissions per entry.
ART: Drawings, sketches, paintings and other art that illustrate scenes of prison life. Please include a short story or a few sentences that describe your artwork. No more than three art works per entry. Artwork cannot be returned.

WHERE TO SEND SUBMISSIONS
Prison Journalism Project
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The ideas offered overlapped well with PJP’s current work. We noted that writers are thinking about people-centered feature stories more than any other kind of story. Stories of community and personal development, commitment, love, family and sacrifice were top of mind.

Many thanks to those of you who took the time to share your thoughts.

With appreciation,

The PJP Team

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I see your locker and raise you a shoebox.

In my Florida prison, I must keep everything I own — state-issued and personal — in a locker that measures 18 inches wide, 24 inches long and 10 inches tall. With every call from correctional officers to “get in compliance,” I have to arrange my room to make it look as tidy as possible.

Someone used to mean a scramble to jam everything in my locker. Finally! A chance to use my excellent Tetris skills. I’ve sacrificed valuable objects to the “smashed in the locker” god, sometimes hiding an expensive map I closed the door on. But now, after 12 years in prison, I’ve come to the conclusion that the best way to fit all the things I own into these diminutive lockers is to just get rid of everything.

When you own nothing, everything fits.

I laugh now at the fact that I ever thought I needed so many things. Who needs three pairs of pants when you have only one pair? I’ve kept two pairs of socks because I have two feet. What about underwear? I’ll keep three pairs in case of a surprise strip search or some kind of car crash (I’ve heard you don’t want to have dirty underpants for that). What about books? I’ve given up on many things. Who needs three pairs of pants when you own nothing.

I have headphones and a cup.

In some respects, I am lucky. Everything I value doesn’t have to fit in my locker. My family answers my calls. I can access my bank statements and pictures on my tablet.

But it’s hard to tell if these changes are due to a new morality in the air, or because of the strain placed on aging in prison. But maybe without the stress of bills, a mortgage, traffic, mass shootings and inflation, you can actually gain a few years of life.

So what do I actually own? I haven’t found a way to convert our physical documents into digital ones. No laundry cubbies to store state-issued uniforms. Each personal item must fit in a box. Someone whose whole universe must fit in a box?

I have a writing manual that was a gift, and a shower bag filled with medication and coffee items.

NOTE: This piece is an imaginative response to Brian Hinton’s visual story “The Locker,” published in PJP, PrisonLife, vol. 2, issue 1. Like the original, this version offers a lot of telling, concrete details. Bueno makes this piece her own by adding a layer of dark humor. This is a good example of an author taking inspiration from an earlier work and putting a unique spin on it.

NOTE: There are many reasons we found Hart’s article effective at introducing the trend of granting prisoners. He uses stats at the top of his story to establish the trend. He lives up to that data with nice turns of phrases, like “prison retirement scam,” and “tossed around like confetti.” Hart’s creative prose keeps the story engaging and gives it momentum. In the middle, when many stories slow down, he brings in real-life examples of older people living in prison (insulin shots, arthritis) to contextualize this issue, before transitioning to a final anecdote. By ending on a video visit with his grandchildren, Hart shows us how personally devastating his familial separation has been for him.
One Topic, Many Possible Audiences

How you tell your story will depend on whom you want to reach.

In this Learn section, we want to show you how you can shift your approach to a given topic, depending on what audience you'd most like to reach. We've annotated a story by Chanel Burnette for a local audience that was co-published on PJP's website and with Charlottesville Tomorrow, a community-driven, online news organization that serves the Charlottesville, Virginia area just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Below we'll demonstrate how the same topic -- family visitation -- can be reframed according to other target audiences.

Bottom line: We want to help you think about yourself and your prison community as part of a larger community.

- An event that is happening locally. A good example of this is a piece by PJP contributor Anthony Ehlers, published in the Chicago Reader that centered on a recent mayoral election. Ehlers introduces himself as not just an incarcerated writer but as a fellow Chicagoan who cares about his city, especially its underserved neighborhoods.

- A prison-related policy or issue that impacts people at the local or state level. This is what Burnette's article, on the opposite page, does. She discusses a state-wide program that used to provide support to incarcerated mothers, as well as Virginia's complicated visitation policies, which impact all Virginians with family members incarcerated in the state.

- An event or an issue that people care about locally as well as nationally, like a holiday. Chanel Burnette's piece is about the struggles of being incarcerated in the holiday season. We could imagine this being part of a Mother's Day package in a local or even national paper. For an outlet outside of Virginia, we might want to reframe the current story by using emphasizing policy concerns in Virginia and adding more description about motherhood while incarcerated.

- An issue of particular urgency facing people nationwide. A good example of this is the piece we annotated in the Learn section of the last PJPinside (vol. 3, issue 1): Patrick Irene's New York Times op-ed on how inflation impacted his life in an Idaho prison.

- Something happening in your prison or local community that is indicative of what's happening in other prisons or communities around the country. PJP's "Agony in Prison" series is a good example of this kind of national trend. Our cover story this issue is rooted in the experience of aging in a California prison. If the piece added the experience of two other people from two other states, it would be a national story, showing how widespread the challenges and issues are.

- A piece that connects to major national news happening at the national or international level. This is what Ryan Moser's "Earthquake Baffles Community, Culture for Hanalei" (PJPinside vol. 2, issue 1) does. It's an article about how people inside Everglades Correctional Center, Florida -- many with family in Haiti -- reacted to the 2010 earthquake on the island. Cameron Lenihan's personal essay about his connection to Ukraine (PJPinside vol. 2, issue 2) is another example of a piece that could be interesting for a national or even international publication, since the war in Ukraine is currently a big news story all over the world.

- A piece explaining how an issue of outside urgency will impact the members of your prison community directly. Some examples of recent executive or legislative decisions that could matter to people inside your facility include things like the reinstatement of Pell grants or President Biden's loan forgiveness program.

- A piece offering solutions to problems people inside face around your topic of interest. From organizing initiatives to making rehabilitation more feasible for incarcerated people, offers a way for incarcerated people to create a path to freedom.
My Boys Have Become Men
An incarcerated mother's last holiday visit with her sons was in 2018.

Programs to connect families have changed since then.

BY CHANELL BURNETTE
Chanell Burnette writes from Virginia Correctional Center for Women, Virginia.

The last time I saw my older son, he was already taller than me and so handsome. I can only imagine how much taller he is now, and my youngest son too. I have also written to my boys every single week for 15 years. I know many of these notes may not have been read, but that will never stop me from sending them. Older prisoners, who watched their children reach adulthood while they've been incarcerated, have told me that my children will appreciate the effort and dedication as they grow older.

On Mother’s Day this year I wrote to them: “Each person in this life teaches a critical point where personal growth is essential. This journey was just that for me. However, as a mother, it is my duty to ensure that neither of you follow these same steps into a desination of such adverse magnitude. I never want for either of you to experience the harsh realities that await people behind these walls. So I will do my best to prevent this from happening. This is not the future I envision for you two.”

I landed in prison for a second-degree murder conviction. I have lived through unbelievable stretches of time trapped inside of these walls, when my children faced enormous difficulty. When my son was in jail, a sense of profound helplessness set in. The deepest despair a mother can experience is knowing that her child needs her and that there is nothing she can do to help. But I endured, and with my help so did he. What I hope for him and his brother is that they deal with their emotions in a healthy way. Keeping them pent up inside only causes pain and frustration can lead to toxic outcomes.

During the last series of visits through MILK in 2018, we were allowed six all-day, in-person visits with our loved ones in which we played games, made crafts and ate together. We had so much fun enjoying one another’s company and basking in the warm spirit of Christmas. There was a real sense of home and family.

Prior to the visit, we moms had decorated the visitation room with all the Christmas decor we had created. We had a real tree with a homemade fireplace, and even a sleigh! Many of us took our pictures in front of these festive decorations. We also made gifts for our children: painted T-shirts, socks and special hair accessories. The prison administration came and sorted through our belongings and gave us approval to take them into the visitation room, where we placed the gifts under the tree before our families arrived. When it was time, we all sat in a circle and presented the gifts to our children just as we would at home on Christmas morning.

When the children opened their presents, the smiles on their faces were priceless. They were definitely not expecting that celebration. Many tears were shed. Tears of excitement, happiness and joy. Tears of pain and a deep sense of longing for home, rooted in family traditions and love.

It’s a shame that MILK ended and if I had a magic wand I’d bring it back instantly. I’d make it easier for loved ones to visit, and for people inside to spend quality time with friends and family who make the trip to the facility. While I will soon return with my children on the outside, my heart breaks for all the mothers who remain inside, locked away from their families.

MILK, apparently a popular and effective program, plays a central role in this piece. We imagine that’s why Charlottesville Tomorrow was so interested in it.

The program was shut down, as we saw below, but the writer does not say why. In some cases, PJP editors can help explore answers to questions you can’t find on your own.

Another option would have been for Burnette to track down and interview an old contact with the program. You should always strive to answer any questions you anticipate readers asking in your story. That will also make the editor’s job easier, which means your story will move through our process more quickly.

Facility-specific details like these – and the ones below – are interesting and effective for outside readers. It is especially important for a local audience to know these kinds of details so they can relate to the story.

We’ve also included a block of text that makes a point about the significance of the paragraph by bolding the first phrase. This can be a helpful way to draw attention.

In online publications, sentences like this are “hyperlinked” to the specific studies they reference. That means readers can click on the words and be taken directly to the source online, so readers can look at it themselves. Hyperlinks are resources that reinforce credibility. For print publication, we could improve the credibility of this sentence by adding the name of the researcher and the date the research was completed: “Research by University of Virginia’s Elizabeth Coleman, conducted in 2017, found…”
Taking the News Inside
Lawrence Bartley in conversation with PJP

It’s an understatement to say Lawrence Bartley has accomplished a lot since he was paroled from Sing Sing, a prison in southeast New York, five years ago.

Bartley is the publisher of The Marshall Project Inside, which produces the media organization’s publications intended specifically for incarcerated audiences. That includes a recently launched video news series, “Inside Story,” and News Inside, the print publication of The Marshall Project. News Inside received the 2020 Izzy Award for outstanding achievement in independent media.

Bartley is an accomplished public speaker. Bartley has provided content for CNN, PBS, NBC’s “Nightly News,” MSNBC and more. He also serves on PJP’s board of directors.

We sat down with Bartley to learn more about his path-breaking work in the journalism industry.

Q: Tell us about your start. How did you get involved with The Marshall Project?

I was incarcerated at 17. I did 27 years. And when I went before the parole board, I went five times in seven months. It happened that way because of a series of appeals and deadlocked decisions. It was a tough process emotionally.

A friend of mine suggested that I write about it. I didn’t want to at first, but I ended up doing it because I thought that it would be helpful for someone else who wasn’t a writer who was going through the same thing to say, “This is my story too.” The Marshall Project published it while I was inside. When I got released, they invited me to come talk to their staff about parole. And I did. They offered me a job a few days later. And I took that job, as a communications associate.

I was fresh out, seeing the internet for the first time. I was seeing all these articles about criminal justice that would have saved me tons of research and headaches. They would have been relevant to move the course on my behalf, or in my college papers. I figured that if I could curate some of those articles and put it into a print format, and use my knowledge of policy and procedure to get it into prisons and jails, then that would be great. And that’s exactly what I did.

Q: What is your position today?

I’m the publisher of The Marshall Project Inside, our products that go into prisons and jails. It includes News Inside, a print publication, and “Inside Story,” a video series I co-created with Donald Washington and am currently partnering with Vice News to make.

Eighty percent of “Inside Story” content is long-form or investigative journalism written by staff writers at The Marshall Project. Twenty percent is written by currently incarcerated people or people with touch points to the system. These pieces (from the “Life Inside” section) offer a slice of their lives as it relates to incarceration.

Q: What prepared you to hit the ground running in this job?

I didn’t know much about the journalism industry, outside of being a consumer of news. I never thought of going into journalism. The fact that The Marshall Project published criminal justice journalism, and I had lived in the system for 27 years, made it relevant for me.

When I was in prison, in order for me to cope, I was involved in everything: theater programs, college, the incarcerated person’s government called the IOC. All of that prepared me to do this job.

You have to actively work to make projects happen inside prison. And actively working on making a thing can send you to solitary confinement if it isn’t approved. So learning to work around, spending time to figure out how to solve a problem, helped me in my job. It gave me the vision to see what I could do with News Inside when other people thought that was such a daunting task.

Q: What can our readers do to prepare for being successful in this industry when they get out?

In one of the coming episodes of “Inside Story,” there is a guy who is a [professional] comedian. He used to talk sh-t while he was in prison. A person might think, “I’m just talking mess inside a prison yard, people laugh and whatever.” But that can become a career.

It’s all about recognizing what you’re passionate about. Just keep doing it. That applies to work in any industry.

In episode 2, there was an individual who worked in a prison mess hall. When he came out, he started cooking on the outside. And he went on the cooking show “Beat Bobby Flay,” the professional chef. And he beat Bobby Flay. Now he’s one of the most successful chefs in the country. And he hires formerly incarcerated people. So I would say, hone those skills. If you’re in a job, don’t think this is your be-all and end-all. Go in and say, “I’m working on this for a minute to get my skills up. And then I’m gonna find another opportunity to show my skills.” And then go for the opportunity to beat Bobby Flay.

Q: Do you have tips for readers who would like to contribute to The Marshall Project?

I hear this a lot from incarcerated people: “I was wronged. So I want to write about how a person like me gets wrong by the system.” But a lot of people have had that same story. So I wouldn’t write about that.

In “Inside Story” episode 6, there’s a piece from a person in solitary confinement who had to “fish” for a living. People on the inside know what that means. If I don’t eat meat and a person over there would prefer to trade it for their fruit from breakfast, I can’t hand it to you. But I can create a line out of thread and put it on a hook and throw with a weight. And then you drag the line to make the exchange. The piece explained that whole process and what it means to people. When I first read that draft I was like, “Wow, this is a great story.” I remember so vividly — solitary is a dark place. When we used to fish, it became like a marketplace. This writer was able to bring that to life and we published it.

So that’s my advice. Find those little situations that you don’t think people outside know about and write about them.

Q: Any last words of advice?

Learn to network. You shouldn’t not talk to a person because that person is a different race than you, or because you don’t like what that person said to somebody two months ago, so you got a perception of that person. That shouldn’t be a reason to block yourself off. People have information. When you start talking, ideas spark and you might have all you need right there.

We created “Inside Story” because we noticed that 3 out of 5 incarcerated people have some form of literacy issues. And we also know that some people prefer to get the news by watching it. The show offers quick news pieces, investigative journalism, spotlight sections featuring successful formerly incarcerated people and animations of the “Life Inside” stories, voiced over by the writers, whenever possible. I’m the executive producer and the host. It’s the first series of its kind. And I’m proud of it.

News Inside goes to 859 prisons and jails in 44 states. “Inside Story” gets distributed through television, DVD or prison tablets to approximately 1,200 prisons and jails in 48 states.

Two covers of News Inside, the print publication of The Marshall Project.
When I Left the Women’s Prison, Health Issues Followed Me

Despite reentry success, I struggle to get out of bed on many days.

Two days a week, I drive to a chiropractor to adjust my spine. Twice a month, I receive massage therapy from the technician at that same office to try and relieve the unrelenting pain in my lower back.

After nearly a decade of sleeping on a metal bed frame with a 3-inch foam cushion inside prison, I now have lumber scoliosis. I essentially have a C-shaped curve in my lumbar. This condition is most frequently seen in children, but the degenerative version occurs most commonly in adults over 65 years old, according to the American Association of Neurological Surgeons. I’m 69 years old.

Behind bars, I didn’t get outside a lot. I wasn’t exposed to much sun or wind, and my skin is clear with few age or sun spots. People who meet me tell me that I don’t look my age. Most of my friends who are still inside also don’t look their age.

But physically, it’s a whole other story. People inside don’t get proper nutrition, exercise, rest or health care. According to Prison Policy Initiative, people in state prisons suffer from chronic health problems at a disproportionately high rate compared to the overall U.S. population. On top of that, correctional health care is difficult to access, low-quality and expensive.

The ramifications endured years beyond prison, getting in the way of our ability to be fully productive and well, as I’m discovering.

Many incarcerated people in prison as fitness buffs, but many women inside are just as passionate about taking care of themselves. At La Vista Correctional Facility, my prison in Colorado, CrossFit was huge. We had access to a yard with a track, and in nice weather it was crowded with runners and walkers. The gym offered yoga, Zumba, picklesball and leagues for softball, volleyball and basketball.

But the abnormal medical care works against those efforts. People tend not to talk a lot about physical infirmities in prison because it’s dangerous to be seen as vulnerable, emotionally or physically. That’s why so many people inside aren’t suffering.

I had to wait more than a year for an electrocardiogram for a heart murmur, and only after submitting multiple requests. When I was finally approved, the nurse didn’t know how to use it, and I never got the results. One of my roommates had a fracture in her shin that went undiagnosed for more than a year. Unsurprisingly, it turned into a break, and even then it went untreated for close to two years. She received her much-needed surgery only after she was released from prison.

I had another roommate with a 48-year sentence who was obese and had serious joint problems as well as a foot injury she developed in county jail before her conviction. When she entered the prison system, the authorities decided not to treat what they viewed as a preexisting condition. They also gave her a job that required her to be on her feet.

It took her close to five years to get knee surgery. Afterwards, she was given crutches and told to not put weight on it. There was no physical therapy.

The lack of women’s health services was appalling too. I haven’t had proper breast cancer screenings because my breasts were too small to fit into a mammogram machine. An ultrasound was not authorized by the insurance carrier. The last Pap smear I had was in 2015.

Every incarcerated person’s worst fear is to die inside prison alone.

I get it. Medical staff in a correctional facility aren’t paid well, and I imagine it’s soul-sucking work, especially during a pandemic. Medical care is often contracted out, and staffing shortages have impacted correctional facilities throughout the country.

Incarcerated people are also on some variant of Medicare and, just like outside, insurance companies don’t want to pay for anything. My roommate with the fracture was told multiple times that the insurance provider wouldn’t approve the referral to see a specialist because she was too close to being released.

I got out of prison in December 2020. By most accounts, I’m considered to be a reentry success case. I have a full-time job at a university and a part-time job at Prison Journalism Project. Until recently, I’d been taking a full course load at a community college. I have a husband who adores me.

But my health issues have followed me out. Many days, I struggle to get out of bed. Sometimes, I can’t walk upright due to the pain in my knees or down my sciatic nerve. Getting up and down stairs is painful. When I sit for long drives for my work, my plantar fasciitis acts up.

I’ve gained 60 pounds since I got out, which does miserable things to a self-esteem that has already been beaten down. I am not happy with how I look, and I’m concerned about intimacy with my husband and how he sees me. I don’t like how clothes look on me. I feel ugly and slow.

I know I would have more energy and feel better about myself if I became more active. But I’m reluctant to go to the gym because I don’t want to be judged for not moving well.

These days, my head has started messing with me. Who am I to feel OK? Who am I to try to move forward with my life?

I might be physically free, but part of me still feels imprisoned.

When I Left the Women’s Prison, Health Issues Followed Me

BY JOYBELLE PHELAN

Two days a week, I drive to a chiropractor to adjust my spine. Twice a month, I receive massage therapy from the technician at that same office to try and relieve the unrelenting pain in my lower back.

After nearly a decade of sleeping on a metal bed frame with a 3-inch foam cushion inside prison, I now have lumber scoliosis. I essentially have a C-shaped curve in my lumbar. This condition is most frequently seen in children, but the degenerative version occurs most commonly in adults over 65 years old, according to the American Association of Neurological Surgeons. I’m 69 years old.

Behind bars, I didn’t get outside a lot. I wasn’t exposed to much sun or wind, and my skin is clear with few age or sun spots. People who meet me tell me that I don’t look my age. Most of my friends who are still inside also don’t look their age.

But physically, it’s a whole other story. People inside don’t get proper nutrition, exercise, rest or health care. According to Prison Policy Initiative, people in state prisons suffer from chronic health problems at a disproportionately high rate compared to the overall U.S. population. On top of that, correctional health care is difficult to access, low-quality and expensive.

The ramifications endured years beyond prison, getting in the way of our ability to be fully productive and well, as I’m discovering.

Many incarcerated people in prison as fitness buffs, but many women inside are just as passionate about taking care of themselves. At La Vista Correctional Facility, my prison in Colorado, CrossFit was huge. We had access to a yard with a track, and in nice weather it was crowded with runners and walkers. The gym offered yoga, Zumba, picklesball and leagues for softball, volleyball and basketball.

But the abnormal medical care works against those efforts. People tend not to talk a lot about physical infirmities in prison because it’s dangerous to be seen as vulnerable, emotionally or physically. That’s why so many people inside aren’t suffering.

I had to wait more than a year for an electrocardiogram for a heart murmur, and only after submitting multiple requests. When I was finally approved, the nurse didn’t know how to use it, and I never got the results. One of my roommates had a fracture in her shin that went undiagnosed for more than a year. Unsurprisingly, it turned into a break, and even then it went untreated for close to two years. She received her much-needed surgery only after she was released from prison.

I had another roommate with a 48-year sentence who was obese and had serious joint problems as well as a foot injury she developed in county jail before her conviction. When she entered the prison system, the authorities decided not to treat what they viewed as a preexisting condition. They also gave her a job that required her to be on her feet.

It took her close to five years to get knee surgery. Afterwards, she was given crutches and told to not put weight on it. There was no physical therapy.

The lack of women’s health services was appalling too. I haven’t had proper breast cancer screenings because my breasts were too small to fit into a mammogram machine. An ultrasound was not authorized by the insurance carrier. The last Pap smear I had was in 2015.

Every incarcerated person’s worst fear is to die inside prison alone.

I get it. Medical staff in a correctional facility aren’t paid well, and I imagine it’s soul-sucking work, especially during a pandemic. Medical care is often contracted out, and staffing shortages have impacted correctional facilities throughout the country.

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Memory Lane Is Full of Potholes
Decades spent in prison have shown me the narrative of my life was just that — a fiction.

BY REDELL STEPHEN
Reginald Stephen works in Green Haven Correctional Facility, New York.

I grew up in the Harlem and Washington Heights neighborhoods in New York City. During the end of the 20th century I started getting arrested. I was a dullard, impressionable, lower-class Black youth. I was ignorant of the structural impediments of race, class and my own complicity in the destiny awaiting me.

Now, with most of my life behind me, I lament the passing, we respond with, "Oh word?"

There are a lot of dead young people in our reminiscences. After hearing the news of a childhood friend's death, we turn our nickel-and-dime transactions into kilogram brokers. We were renowned for big dope deals and as well as aggravated. We emerged from the same communal space, took shape and found its trajectory. Both of us spent most of our lives incarcerated.

My neighbor often walks me down memory lane. He has a romanticized view of life Uptown. My own view is souciantly naive. My "hood" is where I am embarrassed by what I now understand is the case especially for those of us who began this journey as teenagers.

I am not impressed by those who lived a ghetto-fabulous existence. I am embarrassed by what I now understand to be my mindless pursuit of material trinkets. Most of us here were motivated by material deprivations, gain or both. Why else do we show each other photos of stolen moments with pretty girls in clubs, poppin' bottles or posing in expensive cars with dubious ownership, like a proof of a former glory?

Prison has its own set of peculiar and onerous rules, customs and culture. It is a kiln in which most of us get hardened into something our mothers never intended or imagined. Here, 21-year-olds sentenced to 50 years hardened into something our parents never intended or imagined. 20-year-old sentenced to 30 years hardened into something our parents never intended or imagined. 50-year-old sentenced to life hardened into something our parents never intended or imagined.

But this isn't how I saw myself back then. None of us are now locked in cages. We were too cool, too hip, too insouciantly naive. My "hood" is where the narrative of my life, and of countless other Black and Brown men, took shape and found its trajectory.

Mike, in the cell next to me, is also from "Uptown." He is a couple years older than me. Both of us are in our 60s. We emerged from the same communal ethos. Both of us have spent most of our lives incarcerated.

But my reality returns; for the moment, in here I'm stuck. Tired of reading stuff, you can only do so much before it gets old and your heart feels cold. Cuz if no one ever desires or inquires of something new. But facts are locked in a cell waiting to be cut these hours, days and years have felt like hell. And just another blow to my doma is that I no longer receive mail. Making me feel like I’ve been forgotten and对待 bottled down.

NOT: A tomb, a maze, towers and rubble, “this place” takes on an imaginative shape. As these two poems grapple with abandonment, their poems speak that tangled-for-reconnection — Knorr’s rhythms, rhyme and patterns pull the reader through “Buried Alive,” and Howard’s frank command of conversational language in ‘Forgotten, Tired’ makes us feel like she’s sitting right across the table.

Buried Alive
BY AARON M. KINZER | Aaron M. Kinzer writes from Allentown Federal Prison, Pennsylvania.

Under the rubble of American justice there I lay. Doomed to the tombs of where I stay.

Under the umbra of trade statutes crumble on my head. Policies pound away like steel that forms my bed.

Under the towers of state statutes crumble on my head. Policies pound away like steel that forms my bed.

I see the white hats and bucket lines as I peak from behind the pile. Wondering if ever anyone will again see my once-bright smile.

Under color of law red tape forms limestone layers A thirteenth amendment slave unfreed by mamans prayers.

Somebody come for me. I’m pleading out for help. Am I just another face at the bottom of the well?

Existing in this carceral state, my zip code’s not hard to find. Reincarnated as property of state, not dead but buried alive.

Forgotten, Tired
BY LATANYA "LOTT" HOWARD | LaTanya "Lott" Howard writes from Logan Correctional Center, Illinois.

I’m tired of this cage they got me in. It’s like one big maze. I hate this place at times; it has me in a maze, leaving me frustrated, agitated and as well as aggravated. Wish I could span a blunt and get out too. But my reality returns; for the moment, in here I’m stuck. Tired of reading stuff, you can only do so much before it gets old and your heart feels cold. Cuz if no one ever desires or inquires of something new.

Buried Alive
POETRY
VERSUE FROM BEHIND THE WALL
DEADLINE TO SUBMIT IS JUNE 1, 2023
THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW Seeking submissions for a special issue that will honor the 50th anniversary of “WOMAN: AN ISSUE,” which published prose, poetry and visual art by women globally, including luminaries Angela Davis and Audre Lorde. The special issue will honor that legacy while also reexamining the question of womanhood through a gender-expansive and trans-inclusive lens. We are interested in submissions from trans women, queer folx, poverty-born women, incarcerated women, disabled women, BIPoC women and others. Submissions may be personal essays, stories, interviews and poems about womanhood as it relates to modern times. No more than 7,000 words for prose, or up to 6 poems for poetry. Please mail work to:
The Massachusetts Review, Photo Lab 319, UMass, Amherst, MA 01003. Deadline for submission is June 1, 2023.

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