



CONCRETE

Perspectives

beyond the wire

v o l u m e 1

Concrete Perspectives: Beyond the Wire

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***Why were human beings created?
Because God loves stories.***

Traditional Jewish Saying

Prologue

Most Friday mornings during 2002, a small group of inmates and victims of crime gathered in the library at the Iowa Correctional Facility in Newton to read and write together. Together we read and wrote and wept and laughed. We have read *Bird By Bird*, *Writing Down the Bones*, *The Things They Carried*, *The Shawl*, *Charlotte's Web*.

In these writing workshops, we have sought words that will describe our lives here on this earth. We have written about how hard it is to love when a person is in prison and how much it hurts when a child is murdered. We have written about a pair of boots, the wearing of which was as good as two shots of whiskey and about the death of a foster father ("I wish you had left us a number to call"). An African American inmate wrote that when he was a little boy, "I thought black and white kids were all created equal." We've written about the kitchens of our childhood and what was in our refrigerators (to a person, there was Kool-Aid), and we've told stories we've told a million times before.

Eudora Welty wrote that literature should show what being human is all about: "to love, to conquer, to outwit and overcome the enemy, to reach the goal in view. And in the end to find out what we all wish to find out, exactly who we are and who the other fellow is, and what we are doing here all together." Our work together in the library at the Iowa Correctional Facility at Newton has done just that.

In this odd fellowship of those who have committed crimes and those who have been harmed by crimes, we try to do what Welty has said is the work of writers – make feeling felt and reality real. We find that we are after all, each of us, simply human and simply trying the best we know how.

Here - thanks to Humanities Iowa, the Graphic Design Program at the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa and the National Endowment for the Humanities - are some of our writings. Special thanks go to Professor Ab Gratama, University of Iowa, and his grad students for their help with the graphics and layout.

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Randy Ekstrom



This program has opened the windows and doors allowing light inside where darkness has prevailed for so long. We are able to look outside and people can now look inside. And the views are meaningful.

Age 43

On Writing

Writing is a tool of the soul. On paper, I can place all of my emotions, experiences, dreams, nightmares, thoughts, hopes and wishes without really baring my inner self to others, except upon my own choosing.

For those people who say they cannot write, I disagree. Everyone writes. They just don't always realize it. Some of the best pieces of writing are excerpts of letter, diaries, journals, notes, speeches and, yes, even e-mail. Everyone's writing is different and unique. But it all has value and importance. Every word you write is a piece of your soul, showing itself to the world, waiting to be read.

Not everyone will receive critical acclaim or acquire fiscal solvency through writing. And despite our way of life in this country, I don't believe money or fame are the proper goals for writers anyway. Not if you want to write with the honesty, purity and freedom of thought that should be your inspiration. Some of the best reading I've ever done is from works that are found on dusty shelves in the dark reaches of the library, shoved aside, hidden from view by the stuff from the bestsellers' list. To look for and find those hidden treasures is akin to unearthing an ancient Mayan city. After rummaging through the jungle, you find the one book that strikes a chord deep within you. You slowly, lovingly uncover it, examining every word with breathlessness and religious fervor, from the front cover to the very back. You revel in its depth and glorious wealth of history. You get a rare glimpse into the soul of another.

For me, writing is like art. There are infinite styles out there and it's all subjective to the reader. You put your entire being into words. Your essence comes alive, every part of you exposed to the daylight. Old wounds have the scabs ripped off, sometimes most painfully. Yet, with the pure and cleansing breath of fresh air, they begin to heal. Love and joy can be expressed in ways that your tongue could never master. Like a single red rose in a white vase, you can share every heartfelt emotion for a loved one with the words that pour out from the deepest reaches of your being.

As I write, ink flows freely from my pen, spilling its guts onto paper for all to see. Sometimes, it's like the sap of a sugar maple, slowly oozing out, one drop at a time, into a bucket, only to be collected later and thrown together with other words, hopefully creating a sweet-tasting concoction which goes well with hotcakes and coffee in the morning.

There are times when my words run through my writing instrument as if they were life-saving blood, rushing through an IV tube, squeezing its worth through a tiny pinhole in my arm, giving life back to me, reviving me from the darkness of despair. As the words flow with such driven ferocity, I can feel the refreshing fervor of life well up within me. Although there are spattered drops of ink that have strayed from their course, the life-giving words have done their job. I am saved once again.

You must exercise caution, as well. Your words can be used as a tool of destruction, cutting and slicing away at those with whom you feel contradiction. It may be of help to cast those feelings out, like browning apple cores. But you should turn those remnants into compost, using them to grow new, healthy life. Out of the soggy, rotten waste, flowers can be made to sprout, giving off sweet perfumes and extraordinarily beautiful colors.

Do not be afraid to write! No matter how it turns out in the end, even after numerous rewrites, you will feel exhausted, yet satisfied. The experience of writing can be many things. It can be a ten-year journey through the rugged hills and valleys of your life, with all the difficult crossings you've had to conquer, with brambles scratching your ankles, tree branches swatting you dead-on in the face, all the while combatting the blood-sucking mosquitoes and biting black flies that want a taste of you.

It can be a train ride, with life racing past you as you peer through the windows, trying to take in every sight, as you are rhythmically bounced around in your seat, waiting for the porter to open the bar, your tongue already tasting the morphine of gin and tonic.

When I write, I go through a gauntlet of emotions, being whacked about the head and shoulders as I pass. In the end, I am tired, bruised and beaten. And I am relieved to have finally reached the end. Sometimes it takes every bit of inner strength to reach that point. Other times, I am able to muster the stamina of a marathon runner and make it through with little pain and a smile. But, no matter which way it goes, after it's over, I still have that wonderful feeling of accomplishment. Even if I don't have the energy to perform a victory dance afterwards, my soul is, once again, at rest, savoring the serenity within. At least until the itch returns, not receding until scratched. Then the wonderful and, sometimes, painful journey begins again. And I love every living, breathing moment of it.

Randy Ekstrom

Playing Catch

The odor of pine was overpowering as the boy sat in the tree, perched comfortably on a narrow branch. Sap oozed out from underneath the bark, gluing itself to skin and clothing, unnoticed.

This was the youngster's thinking place, his place to be alone. The whisper of the wind as it rustled through the pine needles was soothing, as is a mother's calming voice to her infant. The tree swayed gently back and forth, not too roughly, but just so. The sunlight flickered in harmony, its warmth and light bringing ease to his spirit. As nature cast her healing spell upon him, he reflected on the reason for his anger.

He felt abandoned – his mother had promised him that he could go to town with her if he finished his chores in time. He had meant to get everything done, but he had gotten distracted. He had been picking up his toys in the back yard when he heard Rex, the old red hound dog, barking. Remembering that he was supposed to feed him, the boy ran over there to see what all the ruckus was about. Ol' Rex had seen him and just wanted some company. What else could he do? Dogs need someone to talk to, just like people do!

After rolling around in the dirt playing with the old hound, he noticed old Homer, the yellow beagle, looking at him all lonesome and sad-eyed. So, naturally, the youngster had to go visit the aging dog and see what was bothering him. While running his small hands over Homer's fur, he noticed the lumps of wood ticks buried under the skin, all swollen with blood. Pretending to be a veterinarian, he meticulously plucked out each and every one, squashing them into the dirt, so they couldn't do any more harm to poor ol' Homer.

Seeing the empty food dish by Homer's gray, wooden house, he remembered his chores and took off for the garage, where the dog food was stored.

On his way, he noticed a ladybug trying mightily to swim across a mud puddle. He stopped to watch the struggle, fascinated. The water was simply too much for the tiny red beetle. He scooped her up in his hand and gently placed her on the furry end of a foxtail grass plant, so she could rest and warm herself in the sun. He would have to do something about that puddle that she had so valiantly tried to cross, though, so others like her didn't have to suffer the same difficulty.

He thought about building a bridge, spanning from shore to shore, but there was no guarantee that bugs would know what it was for and how to cross it, so they didn't drown on the way home. He decided to create a drainage canal leading away from

the puddle. He looked around for a digging tool and found an old broken piece of board. It would do nicely. He meticulously dug and plowed, directing the water out to the gravel driveway, where it slowly spread out, disappearing into the earth.

Satisfied with his work, he returned to his task of the getting the dog food. As he walked into the dark coolness of the garage, his eyes slowly adjusted, taking in every detail. There was an array of things stacked up and hung within. The musty smell seeping from the wood of the old building made his nose wrinkle.

Though he wanted to climb up onto the stool by the workbench so that he could see what mechanical mystery his dad had been working on lately, he fought off the urge, as a flash of responsibility sparked in his mind. He had to get the dogs fed. Then he'd be ready to ride into town with his mom to get groceries.

Picturing the section in the back of the small grocery store where the candy and other treasures were on display for all young eyes, he closed his eyes and let the images of bubble gum, chocolate bars, sugar bits and baseball cards dance in his head. He could almost smell the tantalizing perfume of all that candy, the delicious odor wafting out from the slick wrappers, pulling him to them. Sighing deeply, he opened his eyes. Time enough for that later, after he actually got there.

Seeing something shiny on the edge of the workbench, curiosity got the best of him. Was that something new? Looking around, he started for the stool. He wasn't supposed to play around in the garage, especially when it involved his dad's tools. One look wouldn't hurt anything, though. As he put his foot on the bottom brace of the stool, something rubbed against his leg, causing him to jump, yelling loudly. Looking down, he saw that darned ol' gray and white barnyard cat scurrying off. Just as well. He didn't have time to waste messing around with that cat, especially if it was going to be sneaking up on him like that. He had work to do, after all.

Tipping the heavy bag of dog food forward, he slowly filled the old tin bucket, making sure not to spill any on the dirt floor. With the weight of the bucket tilting him to one side, he took the food first to Homer, then to Rex. Both buried their snouts in their dishes, ignoring him once the food had been delivered.

Miffed, he returned the bucket to the garage and started towards the house. Then he remembered his grandmother liked it when he brought her pine cones on their trips to town. She

would use cotton, construction paper, glitter and other bits to turn the cones into comical little characters to be hung on Christmas trees.

Running back to the garage, he grabbed the tin bucket and went to the front yard where all the towering pines grew. For as long as he could remember, the trees had littered the yard with their cones. They came in all sizes, from the small, smooth ones, light brown in color, to the big, dark ones with pointed seeds that would cut your bare feet if you stepped on them. They were the right size to fit into a boy's hand, becoming a makeshift baseball, if needed. Or, in this case, future holiday decorations. Setting the bucket on top of the needle-covered ground, he picked up the largest ones he could find, launching them into the air, using a variety of [tosses] hoping to land them within the waiting confines of the bucket.

Hearing the front porch door slam shut, he remembered the long-awaited car ride. Grabbing up the bucket, half-full of cones, he ran towards the house. His older sister and brother were there, all dressed up, standing beside their mother. Frowning, she told him that he couldn't go along this time, because he hadn't finished picking up his toys and that it would take a month of Sundays to get him cleaned up in time.

The boy tried to plead his case, telling her how things just kept popping up, sudden-like, distracting him from his chores. It wasn't his fault. As a last-ditch effort at changing her decision, he showed her the pine cones he had collected for his grandma. Wouldn't she be disappointed if she didn't get them?

Reminding him that it was still summertime and that Grandma had plenty of time to get the cones from him, she reiterated that he hadn't picked up his toys from the yard, as he promised he would.

Hot tears of anger ran down his face as he dropped the bucket and ran around the corner of the house. His mom yelled at him to not wake up his father from his nap, unless it was important, because Dad had to work that night.

Hearing the car doors slam, followed by the growling motor as the car eased from the driveway onto the gravel road that ran in front of their place, the boy ran to his tree. Climbing easily up into it, he wound his way through the branches, narrowly avoiding the pokes and jabs its sharpened twigs thrust at him.

It wasn't fair! How could they leave him behind like that? As the gentle breeze rocked him, his anger slowly faded away. It was quiet and peaceful sitting in the tree. He could see glimpses of the road through the pine needles, as the tree

danced slowly in the breeze. Perching up there always made him feel as if he was part of the tall tree itself. As the tree moved, he swayed with it. The creaks and moans were somehow reassuring. The serenity that came with being alone was always refreshing for him. He could dream wondrous daydreams and think clearly without the noise of others burdening his thoughts.

The boy started when his quiet was broken by the sound of his dad's voice below him. Peering up into the branches, the father frowned and asked the youngster what he was doing in the tree.

"Just thinking," the boy replied.

"Care if I come up there?"

"Okay, I guess."

The man started working his way up the tree, but soon became lodged, with the branches moaning under the adult weight. With twigs poking into his skin, he asked the boy what was wrong that made him want to sit alone in a tree, thinking.

"Nothing."

"Well, how about coming down? We'll throw the ball around, okay?"

The boy almost fell out of the tree. His father always seemed to be working, so there wasn't much time for playing. Usually, throwing and catching the baseball was done only by the brothers. Their dad would take them out for excursions in the woods, teaching them about nature. Or he would take them for rides on his motorcycle. Sometimes they would all go camping at Blackhawk Lake on rare vacations. But baseball was an interest not shared between the boy and his father. How could anyone pass up a chance like this?

Scrambling down through the intertwining branches, the boy nearly beat his father to the ground below.

"Get the ball and your glove, all right, son?"

"You bet!" the boy replied with a grin on his face.

Throwing the worn baseball between them, the afternoon seemed to race past. As the ball slapped into the leather of his glove, the boy soon forgot that he had been angry at all.

After a while, they heard the crunch of gravel as the boy's mother and siblings returned home.

Excusing himself to get ready for work, the father left the boy standing in the yard, holding the ball.

"Better get the rest of your toys picked up, son," he called from the porch.

Fade to Yellow

As life's blood leaves the tips
of the slowly withering plants
Colors fade to yellow,
losing their brilliance.
As blossoms fall
and seeds protrude from
Their drying husks
in the cool autumn air,
The sap's flow
steadily earthward,
To the roots
is a race with time.
The cycle is near its conclusion
another few months of growth,
Propagation and soon, death,
fulfilling its role – its destiny.
Not knowing if it was
successful
Or if failure will prevent its
future.
The hard, yet beautiful
Odyssey of life
Carries on, carries on,
Always forward.

Dance of Green

Like a light green mist
the crops seem to float
above the full ground
as if waiting to settle.
A massive, growing fog
only moving ever so slightly
when the wind
pushes it around.
As the sun
works its magic
upon the newly-born
carpet of corn,
The mist settles in
taking root
grasping the earth
tentacles clinging tightly.
Holding on for dear life
as the wind tears at it
trying to dislodge its
life-and-death grip.
Yet the plants all sway
in the wind, eurythmically so,
showing their chlorophyll
and growing.

Randy Ekstrom

Daylight Savings Time

In an unceasing biannual ritual,
we attack time itself, as if we could somehow
manipulate it to fit our needs.

Like a mighty army in the midst of war,
we move forward, retreat, and move forward again,
never giving up the fight.

Working like ants, our day is seemingly endless,
our tasks never seem to be completed,
our dreams never fulfilled.

We unerringly search for the perfect schedule,
one that allows more freedom of personal time,
time for pleasure and fun.

Twice a year, in the wee hours of morn,
we busily run around adjusting and setting,
each and every timepiece in our realm.

Anxiously peering at the best and most accurate,
we await the moving hands to reach the apex,
so we can finally do the dastardly deed.

As if planning and coordinating our lives,
we perform this ritual with all seriousness,
silently yelling "Mark!" to ourselves.

Let the battle for longer daylight hours begin!
We must strive to keep darkness at bay
as long as humanly possible.

There are many battles fought for each and every equinox,
wise generals setting their timepieces and alarms,
far in advance of the appointed time.

Those who have a need for near-perfection wait up,
pausing with fingers posed over the clock buttons,
ready to pounce upon the enemy.

The unprepared soldiers never give it a lot of thought,
soundly sleeping through the twilight hours,
only to rise an hour early or an hour late.

In this struggle of man against Mother Nature,
human arrogance can never accept defeat,
in this maddening race to conquer the unbeatable.

Often forgetting that we are merely humans,
creatures subject to the whim and ways of Nature,
we seem to always be losing this war with time.

Randy Ekstrom

Barb Link

Being a participant in the Creative Writing Workshop at the Newton Correctional Facility was an eye (and heart) opening experience. I came to see the inmates as more than just a name in the newspaper or a picture on television. They are human beings with hopes, joys, fears, regrets...just like me.

The White Shoes

Think for a minute, of all the pairs of shoes you have worn in your lifetime. We really take them for granted. We walk all over them. We start out with those little booties our new parents so excited put on us, and soon we're into a brand new pair of shoes for our very first day of school. How proud we were of those shoes. We probably even slept with them the night before the big day. Between then and now, there have been many shoes. Some we don't even remember, but a few of those took us on unexpected journeys or big adventures.

I suppose my most memorable pair of shoes was my nurse's white duty shoes. Over time, there were many, many pairs. For years, they walked the halls of nursing homes. Sometimes they would retire for six months or so, but then they were taken out of the closet to start the journey all over again.

The saddest journey one of many pairs took was down the hall of a nursing home to the room of a frail but alert eighty-year-old woman. The white pair of shoes was accompanied on the sad mission by a pair of brown wingtips. The task was to tell this old mother that her son had died. Part way down the hall, the brown wingtips stopped. The occupant of the shoes said, "I can't do this," and turning around, the brown wingtips retreated down the hall from which they had just come. Finding themselves deserted, the white shoes paused and continued on – alone – to deliver the sad news.

Twenty some years later, the shoe was on the other foot. Another pair of shoes had the sad duty of telling the occupant of the white shoes that her son was dead – murdered – and the job hadn't gotten any easier with the passage of time.

Barb Link

Written in memory of Dennis Link

Paul Ribble



*I owe the freeing of my spirit to
Anne, who graciously forced me to
write about my thoughts and
feelings for the world to see and to
Evelyn, who invited me along for
the ride. Thank you!*

Age 38

How Things Change

It is 1985, and I feel like I have finally made it. Fresh out of college, I'm earning \$42,000 annually as the youngest district manager for a promotional company. Alcohol, drugs and sex aren't interfering with my ability to function... yet. I've got unlimited money and few responsibilities and feel powerful and free. I decide to spend the day shopping for clothes at Rosewood Mall in Minneapolis. While wandering around, I come across a display that stops me cold. Right in front of me is a pair of boots that appear to glow.

They are soft gray Italian leather, with a two-inch layered walnut heel and a slightly tapered toe. They sit atop a glass pedestal with a light positioned directly on them. They look perfect in every way. The brand name is Armani, but that doesn't matter. It's the look I am after. The solid upper has no design, and the arch is the perfect height.

There is no haggling or shopping around. The boots sell themselves. The minute I walk into the store, I know I'll buy them, and \$375 later I walk out of the store feeling as though I'd just gotten away.

The special thing about these boots is the way I feel when I put them on. Like I'd just had a couple shots of whiskey. When dealing with women, I'm just a little more charming, my jokes a little smoother, my eyes a little brighter. While wearing these boots, I get my first major promotion, and I hit the dance floor with real confidence — laughing, moving to the music and feeling like a part of the beautiful crowd for the first time in my life. My slacks fit better, watch looks nicer, and cologne smells classier. I am certain those boots will take me somewhere very special.

But I interfere with the plans those boots have for me. I add several more shots of whiskey to the warm glow from the boots, and I go from charming to lewd, from smoother to ruder, from bright eyes to red eyes, from promotions to demotions. Once again, dancing is something other people do. My pants are just pants. My watch just registers the time. And my cologne goes from classy to cloying.

This started as a tale of where these boots took me, but it ended up as the story of where I took those boots. The end of my boots is as much of a story as the beginning, which is to say, not much of a story at all. While out drinking and looking for someone to hook up with, I went into the ladies' room to smoke a joint with a stripper who had just finished her set. About midway through our budding relationship, the bouncer snatched me up by the neck and threw me into the street.

Alone and angry, I went after a parking meter with a roundhouse kick, venting all the righteous rage a coward could muster and leaving the heel of my boot in the gutter as I hobbled to the next bar. Just one more step in the long walk to the prison that ultimately set me free.

Paul Ribble

I Miss You, Angie

For conversations lost,
For sunshine in a smile,
For light in the dark of
An untouched heart.

Fiery temperament,
Easily sparked
Pressing me, forcing me
To set you apart.

For death without dying,
For mourning without loss,
For pain, anger,
Mental chaos...

For eyes that called me
On my lies
Light and beautiful
So full of life.

For rushing blood,
Through my veins
For quickening my pulse,
For relieving my pain.

I miss you...

Paul Ribble

Theron Montgomery



For me the class has been the clear water pool of emotions into which I've been allowed to cast my stone of accountability through written expressions that have sent ripples of healing through the hearts of victims.

Age 27

Down and Out

Sometimes I just want to SCREAM and SHOUT,
I'm down, but I'm not out,
I grew up with much love and support,
Now a robbery conviction has caused my family to abort.
Leaving me to FIGHT and make DUE,
I can't even call the house, unless the blocks are going through.
Sometimes I just want to SCREAM and SHOUT,
I'm down, but I'm not out.
For SEVEN YEARS, I've watched my life go by and by,
I've listened to people tell lie after lie,
And at night when I'm alone, sometimes I cry and cry.
WHY...did one mistake have to cost so much?
WHY does everyone except my mom refuse to stay in touch.
Sometimes I just want to SCREAM and SHOUT,
I'm down, but I'm not out.
I've grown beyond my years, on the inside,
Managed to leave the stereotypes DEFIED,
Grew closer to God when my grandmother died, learned to swallow my PRIDE,
Roll sometimes instead of ride.
But still year after year my parole is DENIED.
Sometimes I just want to SCREAM and SHOUT,
I'm down, but I'm not out.
Tell me is it,
The high gas prices that are the reason I can't get a visit?
My mother has been THE WORLD to me,
With no real support from anyone else in our family.
But bitterness would only keep my mind locked up, long after they set my body free.
I'm DOWN, but one day I'll be out,
Then once again there'll be plenty to talk about.
That's when I'll shout, MOVE AROUND,
For when I was down,
You didn't bother to help me out.

To the families who have forgotten their incarcerated loved ones
Theron Montgomery

Destination of My Destiny

The cold hard streets, of concrete,
are where my feet,
have carried me.
From the yellow brick building on the Southside, I would walk in my shoes to Whittier
Park,
then run back home before it got dark.
My shoes have tracked dirt into my mother's home,
and she took her shoe and kicked a bruise into my tail bone.
I've run in my shoes from the police,
they chased me, and caught me, and refused to cease,
beating me until they broke a piece,
of my humanity,
and I hobbled home in one shoe down a path of insanity.

I've walked in my shoes down roads of violence,
I've walked away from my responsibilities in silence.
My shoes have taken me to so many places,
but where I most want to walk, is into the hearts of the victims of new cases,
and stand changed, reflecting the smiles on their faces....
because of what I've used to replace this....
Old thinking that kept me standing in shoes covered with mud and stuck in grime,
with the new thinking that will help prevent me from ever committing another crime.
Which would hold me,
to a path I can walk on.....free,
toward the Destination of My Destiny.

Dedicated to the hearts of victims
Theron Montgomery

A Letter from Mom to Me...

I carried you for nine months in the womb of my soul,
a diamond shining from the deep black coal.
I cooked and cleaned,
you grew and gleamed,
I worked and dreamed,
you explored the seams
and learned the meaning of things.
I tried to teach you who you were as you struggled to find yourself,
so calm and peaceful, concerned with everyone else.
Then you found an image you thought would bring you status and wealth
in spite of my warnings that it could be a threat to your health.
I could no longer compete,
with the gangs in the street.
You still seemed so kind and sweet.
but to your true activities, I remained asleep.
You couldn't hide it all, but you tried to,
yet I always managed to know more than you thought I knew.
I told you, such a life could only lead to the grave or jail,
it has been nine years and you're still being held,
sometimes I feel like I failed.
'Cause you were so smart, you were supposed to be...
Now I realize what you've become is much more important to me.
Son, one day they'll set your body free,
and you'll see,
very clearly,
that this experience was necessary to give you the key,
so you could be.....I love you, Son, Hugs and kisses, your Mom

Dedicated to my best friend and biggest supporter, my mom, Velma.
Theron Montgomery

Imagine

I've heard it said, you can't miss what you never had. But I certainly disagree. Because I have a 9-year-old little girl whom I have not yet met in the flesh. But I see her in my dreams. When I look at her picture, a longing pain wells up deep inside of me. And that's when I begin to miss her. I miss her hugs, her kisses, although I've never had them, because I've had them, I can imagine.

When I talk about her over the phone with her mother or with my good friend who she happens to know as Dad,

I get sad,

And sometimes mad.

But I'm glad,

She at least has more than I ever had,

In the way of a dad.

I listen to stories of how she acts, walks and talks. And I begin to miss hearing her say certain things. And I miss seeing her do certain things. Even though I've never heard her say them or seen her do them. I have seen them done and heard them said. So I can imagine.

It breaks my heart to think of all I've missed and all that has been already done.

But I manage to hold the pieces together with thoughts of what's to come.

I miss taking her to the park,

Tucking her in after dark,

Seeing the spark . . .

In her eyes. I haven't done these things with her yet. But I have done them. And I will, God willing, someday do them with her, so I can imagine.

Dedicated to Vanti

Theron Montgomery

Dan Clayton



To those who have helped us along we would like to say thank you for moments spent giving us an enlightened array of wording and mind. For twisting the perplexities and quaint possibilities that have brought us an understanding of prose and poetry.

Age 26

Ballad of Broken Wings

You were an angel to me
Who wrought pity on my soul
Wrapped me up in your wings
Taught me to fly again

When I was down and feeling low
You lifted me up higher and higher
Why'd you let me go?
I can't make it on my own

On mending wings
I could touch the sky
With this broken heart
I can barely fly

My angel has left me
To fly on my own
And it's hard enough to fly
On mending wings

Dan Clayton

W.J. Raymond Jr.



*Open up a book and you open up
your mind, open up to creative
writing and you'll find directional
literature produce.*

Caged Creatures Mistaken Identity

Within the cage they say that the monster is contained.
Don't get too close, for who knows?
What's this? There's nothing more than
a mere mortal contained within the cage!
Hold on, wait a minute!
What's this that I see as I look closer?
A tear? A tear from cloudy eyes from that which is
contained within a cage?
From further observation I've concluded,
that for me this mystery is to be.
This is not a monstrous creature at all that's
contained within a cage.
It is simply someone's
father, mother, daughter or son...

W. J. Raymond Jr.

John Berry



*This class was many things to me.
A vacation of sorts where I got to
travel from place to place as the
others shared their stories and
very lives.*

Age 36

How to Clean a Fish

“Johnny, get your pole before it gets pulled into the water!” shouted his big brother. Scrambling over to where the pole leaned at a 45-degree angle to the water, the tip bouncing up and down spasmodically, a sure sign of great things to come, Johnny quickly forgot about the frog that had so captured his attention to the point that Johnny had been temporarily oblivious to the original goal of the trip to the pond. As he grasped the pole in his five-year-old hands, now trembling with excitement, he could feel the mysterious weight pulling on the other end.

Johnny had hardly been able to sleep the night before. After all, his dad had told him that the three of them were going fishing! How proud and grown up this had made him feel. He had seen his father and big brother go out together, rods and reels, tackle boxes and nets in hand several times and desperately begged to go but had been denied because he was “too little.” But now he reasoned he must have become big enough. Visions of catfish as big as he was tall paraded in front of his mind’s eye as he daydreamed and practiced his casting technique with the hookless practice lure in the backyard, setting the hook every time the lure became snagged in the dry, brown summer grass. And that night as he drifted off to sleep, they swam in his dreams as well.

Johnny bounced out of bed at 4:30 a.m. and immediately went to his brother and then his dad to wake them. He felt like it was Christmas morning, and he was about to unwrap his gifts, only it was June not December, and it was already one of those hot, humid Iowa mornings when the air is thick and hard to breathe deep into the chest. Johnny could have cared less about the weather though. It was his first fishing trip, and a little heat or humidity can never slow down a five-year-old boy on the cusp of something so incredible and new. Today he would not be opening gaudily covered presents but white Styrofoam cups of worms and green tackle boxes.

While his dad drank his coffee, he observed his son with a wry smile. Back and forth Johnny went from the basement to the car with the gear. He was making two trips to his brother’s one. Soon everything they would need was loaded, and they were *finally* underway. It had taken all of 20 minutes to wake his dad and brother and load the car.

“Who do you think will catch the most fish today?” the father asked his two young sons. “Me!” they simultaneously screeched at the top of their lungs. “Who will catch the biggest one?” Again the same enthusiastic response from both boys. Johnny

thought of the giant catfish he’d dreamed of the night before with just a touch of trepidation. He felt invincible before any fish with his brother and dad nearby, but that was a *very* big fish he had in mind. Big enough to take a bit out of a small boy even.

Before long they arrived at the pond. Johnny was as quick unloading the car as he had been loading it. He scanned the surface of the pond, squinting in the glare from the already bright morning sun. He couldn’t see any fish yet, but he knew they were there because his dad said so. Besides, he could *smell* fish in the air. He took in the discarded strands of fishing line and noticed some old lead sinkers lying here and there and made a note to himself to gather those up as soon as he had a chance. He also took a keen interest in the old campfire stones in a ring near the spot where they were setting up and the fish skeleton bleached white from the sun framed in a background of dark, brown mud. Across the pond was a stand of old willow trees still dark and full of shadows and secret places. He wondered what sort of animals lived there...

“Do you remember how to tie your own knot?” asked Johnny’s dad. Johnny quickly came to his dad’s side and eagerly showed him the seven-point cinch knot he’d been taught to tie. “Good job!” declared his dad, filling the young boy with such pride that he felt as if he would burst.

After baiting his own hook and rebuking his big brother to let him know in no uncertain terms that he could do it himself, thank you very much, Johnny attempted his first real cast. With his brow wrinkled and lower lip clenched tightly between his teeth in furious concentration, he reared back and then brought the rod and reel forward, letting go of the casting button of the Zebco 202 at the last second. His huge smile of satisfaction as the line, sinker and hook zinged from the reel and described a nearly perfect arc landing with a satisfying plop towards the center of the pond told it all. He had done it! He was really fishing! He stood momentarily watching the ripples expand from the landing point of his cast. For a moment, he wasn’t sure of his next move. His dad then stepped forward and sunk a V-shaped twig into the ground and suggested that Johnny lay the pole down, propped in the V of the twig. “Then you can watch for a twitch at the tip, and you’ll know a fish is biting,” his dad explained.

For the next several minutes, Johnny watched with his entire being the tip of his fishing pole for the slightest movement. “Be patient,” his dad advised. “You’ll never catch anything,” his

brother goaded. When Johnny hadn't seen results in the first few minutes, perhaps three or four, he reeled in his line and looked at his bait. Still there, so he let fly again. Johnny's eyes soon began noticing that there was movement in and around the "seaweed" and algae growing in the shallows of the pond. Then he saw it: a huge bullfrog that seemed to be observing him from its place of relative safety several feet from the shore on a log jutting up from the depths. Forgotten for the time being were the pole and even his dad and brother, who watched him try to manipulate the long handled dip net over the frog. If it weren't for the log being so big and well planted, Johnny might have gotten it. As it turned out, the frog was long gone into the safety of the deeper water, something Johnny hadn't bargained on.

It happened quickly. First one quick jerk on the line, and then the fish was hooked and began to angrily pull away. Hearing his brother's cry of "fish on," Johnny sped over to his pole and picked it up forgetting to set the hook the way his dad had showed him. It didn't matter. The fish was doomed. Johnny's brother offered to take the pole from him and was about to do so over his protests, but his dad wouldn't allow it. As Johnny cranked on the reel, he wondered what the weight on the end of the line was. It felt pretty heavy. Maybe one of those giant catfish? As he brought the fish in, the line seemed to actually cut through the water, first one way, then another. What was it? Then he could see it: not a giant after all, but not so tiny either. "Keep the tip of your pole up high, Johnny," said his dad. In seconds, his brother had dipped into the water and netted a two-pound, yellow-bellied bullhead catfish. Johnny was ecstatic, and the look on his dad's face confirmed a job well done. Even his brother was looking somewhat pleased, although a little begrudgingly. The bullhead was completely unappreciative and made several attempts to flop his way back into the water and might have made it, had the hook not been still in his mouth.

When they arrived home, the three made their way into the house – putting the gear away and their catch into an old wash tub in the basement next to the washer and dryer. As they sat around the kitchen table drinking hot cocoa, Johnny's mom congratulated him, and his dad wondered aloud, "Who will clean all of those fish?" Most of the talk was beyond him, but he heard the part about cleaning fish, and an idea quickly

formed. As the grownups continued to talk, he slipped away to the basement and started in on his newest, self-appointed task. He knew just what to do and was eager to show his mom and dad and *especially* his big brother that he could complete this job as well. He knew where everything was situated, and in no time was underway. Taking the big box of laundry detergent that sat next to the tub, he poured about a fourth of it into the water, and on second thought poured a bit more. After all, he wanted to do a good job! Then taking the scrub brush from its hook on the wall, he began scrubbing down the fish. Soon the tub was overflowing. "The higher the bubbles, the better the job," he thought.

As his brother made his way down the stairs to take a look at the fish, Johnny scrubbed a little harder to make sure there were plenty of bubbles for his brother to see. His brother took a couple of steps toward the tub and began furiously yelling for their parents. "Dad, Mom, Johnny is ruining the fish! Come and see!" The boy was shocked and then terrified as his parents hurried down the basement stairs to see what had happened. The uncertainty of the situation, and his brother's disdain and anger confused and frightened Johnny, and he began to cry. "I was just cleaning our fish," he whispered up to his dad between sobs. He felt very small. He'd only wanted one thing, to please his dad and make him proud of him. Now it seemed as if he had ruined everything. At least according to his brother. As he waited for his dad's response, he expected anger, maybe even a swat, but he was even more confused when he saw his dad and mom look from the soapy tub to him and then to each other and begin to laugh – first a little and then long guffaws of deep belly laughter. Soon he was laughing too, although a bit uncertainly, since he didn't quite understand the laughter. He knew for certain that his parents weren't mad at him and that was enough. Even his brother's wrath was temporarily forgotten as his parents continued to laugh and give him affectionate pats and words of encouragement.

Johnny went to sleep that night a very satisfied little boy, knowing that his parents loved him and that things were well with the world. Just before he drifted off to sleep, he remembered that he'd been the one to catch the first fish, and in spite of the confusion in the basement, he knew how to clean a fish.

John Berry

Gary Titus



*“Here I come to save the day!”
This was the call of the cartoon
superhero Mighty Mouse. Anne
Scott, a petite, diminutive, woman
with a squeaky laugh, brought a
writing workshop to this prison
and saved the day of many of the
inmates who got involved. Her
passion for writing and
encouraging nature were a blessing
to me. I will never forget this
experience or my new superhero,
Anne Scott. Thank you Mighty
Mouse!*

Age 33

Dear Brother, I'm Gay

"Titus, get up, and get your mail," the guard barked as he set a letter on my cell bars. The letter was from my little brother, Dale, younger than me by twenty-eight months. I had not heard from Dale for some time, so I anxiously grabbed his letter. As I read Dale's letter, my hands started to shake, and I had to sit down. I just could not believe this letter was from my little brother.

"Gary, I am writing to tell you I am gay," Dale started his letter. "I know I will never hear from you again because I'm gay, and I hate you for that."

I came to prison in 1988 for the robbery and murder of a gay man. As a teenager, I was a gay basher, someone who took pleasure from harassing gay men. There was an area in Des Moines, Iowa, known as the gay loop, where gay men and women gathered to meet, socialize and hook up for sexual encounters. A friend, who stumbled on it some time before, drove me to the area to show me the outrageous people and things they did there. We returned on occasion to steal from these people or pick fights with them, because of their being homosexuals. Preying upon gay men was a way for me to feel powerful. These people were sick or disturbed for choosing to have sex with other men, I thought.

"What if you ran into me at the gay loop?" Dale wrote.

"Would you have beat me up and harassed me, too?" I was stunned by Dale's letter. I cannot remember if I felt angrier at his telling me he's gay or at his attacking me for my past. Had I thought about his letter more, maybe I would have seen his pain and realized how difficult coming out to me was for him. Instead, because of my selfish feelings, I reacted all wrong.

How could a man in my family of alcoholics and bigots be gay? Dale wasn't a sissy. I searched our childhood for signs that my brother would grow up to be gay. Nothing jumped out at me, though. Our parents divorced when Dale and I were 12 and 14. Shortly thereafter, I moved away to live with our dad, leaving Dale to live with our mom and five-year-old sister, Amy. Could growing up in a house without a male figure around have turned Dale gay?

It took some time, but Dale and I did manage to work through the problems I had about his being gay. As upset as I was, I told him in my reply, "Gay or not, you are still my brother, and I will always love you as I did before. Maybe some

day I will be able to understand why you chose to be gay, but right now I cannot." Dale forced me to open my mind about gay people. That I was willing to learn kept the communication open between us. Through letters, phone calls and Dale's occasional visits to the prison, I started to realize how ignorant I had been about gay people.

Dale taught me that being gay is not a choice people make any more than being straight is a choice for me. He forced me to look at my ignorance of gay people head on and see how wrong my stereotypes were. Gay men are not sissies. They all don't dress like or want to be women. Living with only females does not turn a boy gay, either.

Dale wrote his coming out letter to me in 1992, when he was twenty. He died of AIDS on June 30, 2000. After several years of battling through different medications, while the side effects destroyed him, Dale chose to stop the HIV treatment altogether.

"My quantity of life is outweighing my quality of life," Dale told me. "I just want to be happy for a while before I die." Though I knew stopping treatment would speed up the HIV taking over his body, I had to respect him for such a brave decision. I wanted my brother to have some happiness, even if that meant my time left with him would be short.

My brother was a great guy. He played the trumpet and sang in the Seattle Gay Men's Choir. He was also very good with computers. He was the same man he was before coming out, only happier. My brother was cool.

Dale and I grew very close as I learned to accept him as a gay man. We learned a great deal about and from each other, and he helped me to grow emotionally. I was amazed to learn Dale had been hiding his sexuality since he was five or six years old. He also talked about how hard it was growing up with Dad and me always using the words faggot and queer in making fun of gay people.

My past as a gay basher was very difficult for Dale to deal with. My crime was a high profile case, and my victim was well known in the gay community. Charged with a hate crime, I received an enormous amount of attention both inside and outside the gay community. Because Des Moines has such a tight knit gay community and because he was my brother, Dale struggled for acceptance.

“I met a man for dinner one night,” Dale told me a few months before he died. “About halfway through the date, he asked me my last name. When I told him, he excused himself to use the restroom. I waited fifteen minutes for him to return, then went to check on him. He’d left the restaurant. The next day, I talked to the friend who introduced us and learned my date was afraid I was going to bash him because I was your brother.”

Dale’s been gone for two years now, and I miss him all the time. We were fortunate in a way, because we were able to say

goodbye before he died. I apologized for being so ignorant about gay people and causing such pain and difficulty in his life. I thanked Dale for opening my mind and making me a better person. We became brothers in every sense of the word. I am comforted that there was nothing left unsaid between us when Dale died.

Dale was a proud gay man, and I am proud to call that man my brother.

Gary Titus

Joey Slater



We hold our dreams in the palm of our hand, the only thing stopping us from attaining them...is pulling them in.

Age 20

I Mi\$\$ You

I miss your crisp touch
Your big face
With your beautiful green eyes
You told me you trust in God
Not religious though
Matter of fact
They say from
That's where evil grows
You gave me the finer things in life
When I first met you
I'd seen you around
You'd been passed through many hands
But I would wash you when you were dirty
You kept me out late
Hustlin' just to see you
But now you're gone
I thought you would be faithful to the end
Damn girl
You were like my best friend
Now I'm locked up
You're nowhere to be found
You musta' taken an emergency trip outta' town
You don't write
Nor do you call
And on my books
There's nothing
Nothing at all

Joey Slater

Cheri Kelaher

I came into our class with a desire to learn and a need to heal. I found intelligent, compassionate, caring gentlemen. I had a wonderful time writing and I am healing. Thank you!

Age 51

Show No Fear

It happened over a period of time, ten years prior, but the memories are vivid.

It was a frightening experience, but one I could not say No to. No matter how I tried to avoid it, or the number of diversions I created, nothing could spare me from the inevitable. It was my destiny.

It began with the words that evoke fear in the strongest of adults: "Mom, I got my permit." My heart stopped momentarily, but I kept my composure. Show no fear. My mind worked quickly, creating a strategy. A remote area sparsely traveled. It was a dangerous assignment, but I was ready.

An Excedrin Migraine, a full pack of cigarettes, a fountain pop, a clear mind and, oh yes, don't forget the Prozac.

I gave my daughter a heads up. Today would be the day. Seat belts firmly in place, we set upon our journey.

A large cemetery would be our point of origin into a new dimension. As she slid behind the wheel, I saw my life flash before me. Had I chosen the location poorly? The turning of the key, the hum of the engine. Oh Lord, I prayed, does she have to put the car in drive?

The car lunged forward at a rapid speed. I very calmly suggested to my daughter to let up on the gas. Moving at a safe speed, 15 mph, we were on a straightaway, but a curve was coming soon.

I gripped the door handle, judging the distance, the speed and the angle of the curve. I thought, "She's going to take out a headstone." It was a near miss, but she over compensated, and we were heading for a tree...

Cheri Kelaher

Welcome to the Mental Ward

Ethan Graham's Omni Centric Institute

We want your visit to be a pleasant and safe one. For that reason, we have created a list of dangerous items with corresponding explanations why these are not allowed at our facility:

- No Mirrors. It could be dangerous to look at yourself too closely.
- No Curling Irons. Heat created by curling irons has been found to misfire neurons. That's our theory, and we're sticking to it.
- No Walkmans. Dual Diagnosis. You could strangle yourself. Also we need to control information from the outside world.
- No Pens or Pencils. You might poke your eye out.
- No Personal Drugs. We need to control your drug intake, but don't worry, we'll have plenty for you here.
- No Nail Clippers or Nail Files. You might be tempted to saw through bars on windows. Also in the past we had to restrain an obsessive-compulsive from giving his roommate a pedicure under duress.
- No belts or clothing with drawstrings. That's a given.
- No cigarettes. We want to measure your level of anxiety while you are withdrawing from nicotine.

When you arrive, you will have an initial five-minute psych evaluation, resulting in a complete diagnosis by our resident doc.

We encourage our guests to interact in our occupational therapy department. If you can cut and paste, you're good to go.

For your safety, we have installed cameras in every room. Our lawyers have assured us that we are not violating your civil rights, in accordance with court case number S-01532, now pending.

We reserve the right to search your belongings upon entry to our facility. We do random searches as we see fit.

We feel that confidentiality is of the utmost importance, but we're not making any promises.

The length of your stay may vary according to your status as an independent payee or your individual H.M.O. plan.

Manifesto

We will never discriminate. We welcome those from schizoid to paranoid personality disorders, whether real or imagined. Using Maslow's hierarchy of need, we will bring each guest to the fifth level, which is self actualization. If time allows.

Disclaimer: Result may vary according to your willingness to see it our way.

Cheri Kelaher

John Romeo Jr.



Writing is a release. The workshop meant to me an ability to express my humanity with those who share my passion. A wealth was learned and shared.

Poets

Many poets have tried
To capture life
In the few words that they write.
Never captured.
Never caged.
The poet tries and tries
Until life gives way.
When his pen stops
We discover his journey,
When we discover our life
In his writing.

Mama

What did you want for me, mama,
Before I chose for myself?
What secret dreams did you pray, mama,
After you gave me birth?
Who were you once upon a time?
When innocence touched your cheek,
And how, mama
Could it not touch me?
I have grown into a man, mama,
Who sits in a prison cell.
And I think about the life that I wanted.
I know that wishful life well.
So many times I've walked that road
Down to my first memory.
And there you are, mama,
Patiently waiting for me.
I know of all the places I went wrong
And of all I could have done.
But mama...
I never learned to be your son.
Allow me to be your son mama,
And to offer you myself.
And tell me, mama, what you wanted
Before I chose myself.

John Romeo Jr.

Jermaine L. Jordan



Stupid Old Shoes

These stupid old shoes are killing my feet. If I don't sit down, I swear I'm gonna fall over. Momma always said, "Two things you should always buy the best – that's your shoes and a bed, because when you're not in one, you'll probably be in the other."

I should have listened to her....These stupid old shoes, nothing like they were when I bought them – eighty-five bucks, I paid, at JC Penney's.

I was so happy. I had never paid more than forty or fifty bucks for a pair. But these were Nike Air! Yeah, they looked good. Shoot! I looked good! All the homeys asking how much they cost, all the ladies checking out the clean white leather, I guess they think if the shoes are clean, the guy must take care of himself or something.

Yup! Look at 'em now. That rip on the toe, geez, that must have happened last summer when I was walking back from the park. Out of nowhere, Mrs. Ramsey's Doberman was on my heels: "Feet don't fail me now..." I must have taken that fence in two steps....All of me made it, except for the toe of these old shoes. Yeah, I busted the air bubbles on the heels during that three-on-three basketball game up at Gates Park. We whipped the top dogs and ran the court all day. Those old shoes pulled through.

What the heck did I do with the strings? Oh yeah, I used them to tie down the hood on that old Pinto out back. I guess I lost the insoles after putting in the Odor Eaters. Boy, those things stopped working the same day I got 'em.

Yeah, old shoes, we've put in some miles, haven't we? Well, I guess I could cut off the backs and keep you as house shoes. After all, I've put you through a bunch of crap, sometimes literally. Geez, thinking back, I guess it would have been rather difficult doing any of those things without you. Shoot! Here I go getting sentimental about a stupid old pair of shoes. 'Course nowadays, kids'll kill you for 'em. Guess I don't have to worry about that with the likes of you. Well, looks like we're stuck together...stupid old shoes.

Jermaine L. Jordan

Pat's Backpack

As I arrived at the nursing home the residents were awaiting my arrival. Most of them were frail and in wheelchairs. That smell of mothballs and medicine filled the air. I felt as though I'd stepped into a time machine. They all seemed to live in the past more than the present. I could hear the music of the Roaring Twenties piped into the day room from what sounded like a phonograph. It had the familiar hiss and scratchy sound of the needle on the record.

Our introduction was tentative at first. This was my first day on the job, but they soon warmed to me. It all seemed hopeful. That's when I noticed him. He was a frail man, small in stature. He moved slowly. No, he scooted. First the cane, then one feeble step, slowly but steadily. He had on an old Cubbies cap, a gray sweater, navy blue polyester pants, and he had on a backpack for no apparent reason.

"That's old Pat," said a little old lady with a pleasant smile. "He's crazy! He's crazy, I tell ya! Nutty as a fruitcake!"

She twirled her long, thin finger around, as if she were making imaginary circles around her ear.

"He's cuckoo," she said.

By now, all the residents in the day room were looking at Pat. They pointed and jeered at him with rude comments.

"Hey, Pat," said one of the rude old men. "Did you ever pay back Jesus the denarii you owed him?"

Ha, ha, they all laughed.

Then another chimed in, "Yeah, Pat, you're the only guy I know who takes two hours to watch '60 Minutes.'"

And: "Pat, when God said, 'Let there be light,' you hit the switch."

It went on like that until Pat was out of the day room.

One of the nurses told me Pat had been at the nursing home for two years. He never socializes, only talks to his backpack. His wife died prior to his arrival at the facility. My heart immediately went out to Pat. And I was determined to find out what the deal was with the backpack...

After a few long months, I had finally gained Pat's trust. One day while attempting to clean Pat's room I asked, "Why don't you take off your backpack, Pat?"

"I'm a pack rat," exclaimed Pat, reluctant to take it off even as he showered. While trying to no avail to get that ridiculous backpack from Pat, I shared about my mother's passing, and how I hated to get rid of any of her things, even things I had absolutely no use for.

That's when Pat spoke.

"It's my wife," he said.

"What's your wife, Pat?" I asked.

"The backpack," he replied.

"The backpack is your wife?" I asked.

"No! She's in the backpack!" he said to me, as if I were the nutty one.

I was beginning to get a little uncomfortable. I think it was finally starting to sink in: This guy was out there. Yup, the light was on, but nobody was home. The elevator clearly was not going to the top floor.

"Um, Pat, how do you know she's in the backpack?" I asked.

"She told me!" he said emphatically.

"She told you, now?"

"Yup! Just before she left, she said, 'I'm in the backpack. Help! I'm in the backpack!'"

He started crying, and then he said, "I'm afraid if I open it, I'll lose her forever."

Then he opened the door, as if to say, "Leave now."

So, feeling terribly confused, and a little heart broken, I left.

I thought to myself, "All that's left of Pat is in that backpack. The past forty years of his happy life." And I began to wonder what kinds of things I carried in my own backpack. The behaviors I've wanted to get rid of, the self-pity I felt because of my own past failures, my judgmental attitude.

That night, I asked my supervisor how Pat's wife died. Turns out she fell into their pool out back of their home and

drowned. She yelled, "Help! I'm in the back! Pat! Help! I'm in the back, Pat!"

See, Pat is hard of hearing and had a hard time dealing with the fact that he probably could have saved his wife, if only he had could have heard her cries for help. Somehow, as a coping mechanism, Pat has turned these words around to say, "I'm in the backpack!"

The next day, I arrived at work with a different opinion of Pat. And I wanted to tell him that I understood. To my surprise and bewilderment, when I entered his room, he wasn't wearing his backpack.

"Pat, what happened?" I asked.

He was sitting on the bed with a pile of trinkets and papers, a Bible and other knickknacks.

He spoke. "This was my favorite recipe of banana nut bread. I remember the Palm Sunday when she pressed these palm

leaves in between the cover of this little Bible. This handkerchief still smells like Vanilla Fields, her favorite perfume." He held the handkerchief up to his nose. "This box of letters? I wrote her faithfully from our kitchen table, then mailed them back to the house for her. Our courtship never died." A contented smile crossed his thin lips.

Then he stood up and walked over to me. He scooted with his cane, one feeble step that seemed like an eternity as I waited with anticipation of what he might say. There was a calmness around him like I'd never known before. Then with a tear in his eye, he kindly gazed into mine and spoke. "I've carried her for two years, though she'd already passed on. Store up for yourself treasures in heaven, for that is where you'll find my backpack."

That is when I realized you really don't know a person until you know what is in his backpack.

Jermaine L. Jordan

James Pieschke



Collecting an Errant Thought

A person once asked himself, "Am I ambivalent?"
His answer? "Well, yes and no."
I decided to ask myself, "Is this, too, my sentiment?"
Well, maybe not and maybe so.
Was this answer right or wrong?
I'm shaking my head 'yes' and nodding it 'no'.
My opinion of whether I am or not changes consistently.
Because of it, I have a headache (THIS BIG) literally.
But a thought, you see, is not a thing, but a thing you cannot see.
You can understand that figuratively,
It would have been a better thing had this thought died in infancy.
While scratching myself reflectively,
It suddenly occurs to me,
This irritating thought has an air of great stupidity,
But I'm sure that it could be surpassed
By discussing the relative merits of abstinence and sobriety
With a lecherous lush who would only stare aghast,
Bearing testament to my success
As a failure, a moderate achievement at best.
If succeeding as one is the test
It might give me cause to boast
If doing so wouldn't violate the rule I follow most:
Nothing in excess—
Including moderation... Which leads me to another thought,
One I've thought about a lot.
Trying is the first step towards failure, and once you realize it,
You'll see that if at first you don't succeed,
Before you fail at it concede,
And positively quit.

James Pieschke

Why I Hate Goodbyes

Before you left, there were some things that I said.
I'm writing this to make amends.
To tell you the truth, I wish it had been me instead.
Whether I deserve it or not kind of depends.
Fate is cruel, we loved you so much.
It was you who we looked to for guidance and such.
I suppose that you're up there looking over us all,
But I wish that you had left us a number to call.
Life without you is almost too much for Gair to bear
And wherever you are, we wish we were there.
I saw it sometimes when you played the piano.
It didn't compare to your Christmases, though.
We had one that year to honor your name,
But it was the last we truly celebrated because it wasn't the same.
I'm finished with this goodbye, it's getting depressing.
Rest in peace, Ron, you were truly a blessing.
I've said what I needed, so I guess that I'm done.
I love you Ron,
Your Bastard Son

James Pieschke

Turning the Other Cheek: Matthew 5:38-41

In the book of Matthew, Jesus says, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, don’t react violently against the one who is evil. When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your cloak as well. Further, if someone conscripts you to go a mile, go an extra mile.”

I challenge the fighting Christians who say, “This teaching is unrealistic,” and I challenge those who say, “We should put up no resistance to evil.” They’ve both got it wrong. Both interpretations, in my opinion, are nothing less than magnificent stupidity.

Three case studies from the life and times of the first century Palestinian Jews to who Jesus was speaking:

[Case #1] What new insight was awakened in people’s minds when Jesus suggested this response to a conflict between two opposites in the social hierarchy? “When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well.” If you want to gain insight, you’ve got to understand two rules concerning bodily assault in Palestine during the first century.

[Rule #1] Only the right hand may be used during a physical confrontation. In Palestine, even today, nobody is allowed to touch another person with the left hand because it is ceremonially unclean. The left hand was restricted to use for unclean activities only such as washing the privates or going to war.

[Rule #2] If the person you’re going to assault is beneath you in the social hierarchy, you were expected to deliver a backhand slap with the right hand. If the person was considered your social equal, you were to administer a beating by way of a forward strike with a closed fist.

In a world where you are only allowed to use the right hand, a backhanded slap could only mean a strike to the right cheek. Jesus was speaking to slaves, wives, anyone on the lower rungs of the social ladder, who knew well the experience of being put in their place by a superior. In first century Palestine, a person who has been admonished by way of a backhand slap was expected to drop his/her face in shame, to acknowledge their transgression, but what does Jesus suggest? After receiving that backhand slap to keep your head up. Not only that, but to turn the other cheek. This is where the flash of insight, and humor, begins to take place. Remember, the person is expected to use his/her right hand only. How is they to use the same method to

strike the other cheek if they can only use their right hand? If you were to strike the left cheek, you would be forced to deliver a forward punch. But that would be virtually acknowledging the other person as an equal. The whole point in delivering the backhand slap in the first place was to put the person in their place. What’s a domineering person to do? What Jesus suggested was that instead of docile passivity, you were able to throw them off guard, and in doing so, force them – just for a moment – to consider you as an equal.

[Case #2] “When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, give him your cloak as well.” Again, if you want to acquire the same sort of insight that was awakened in people’s minds in the first century, you must understand the rules regarding dress that were strictly enforced at the time. People only wore two layers, a shirt, which was the undergarment, and a cloak which was the outer garment. In Jesus’ time, if a person ended up naked, the shame, the dishonor, was not on the person who was naked but on the person who looked at the naked person. (Genesis 9:22-24/Noah’s son and Noah’s nakedness) Even more, the shame and dishonor was directed towards anyone who would cause another person to be naked. The people to whom Jesus was speaking were probably laughing. Do you see the role-reversal that was taking place here? This isn’t passivity; it is active, disarming, creative, and practical. It was designed to enable the debtor to maintain his/her dignity, and at the same time allow the creditor to see the error of his ways while still being able to escape shame. If a creditor were to cause someone to be naked, even if the person owed a debt to him, he would effectively become a social outcast.

[Case #3] “When anyone conscripts you to go a mile, go an extra mile.”

There was a practice during the Roman occupation of Palestine in the first century among the Roman army in which a soldier could force a civilian to carry his gear. Roman soldiers almost always traveled on foot, and the least that one could do for Rome’s protection was to carry a soldier’s pack. But there was a strict limit: The civilian was only required to carry the pack for one mile. Soldiers who forced civilians to carry a pack for more than a mile were severely punished by their superiors. Rome knew that the abuse of the common people under their “care” could result in a riot or an uprising against the government.

Another fact: Roman roads had a marker for every mile along the road. Here in the United States we do the same.

The purpose for doing this in Rome was so that there would be no question as to where the mile began and where the mile ended. And what did Jesus propose? That a civilian not drop the pack but keep on walking. It has even been documented by the ancient historian Josephus and others of the same era, that a Roman soldier was one time punished for forcing a civilian to carry a pack for five miles.

The punishment? The soldier had to go a week without rations.

Imagine the kind of situation this would put a person in. In each of these three situations, the dominant person, the oppressor, gets the wind knocked out of his sail. But it doesn't happen by way of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. It happens nonviolently, creatively, in a way that disarms the oppressor and gives power to the oppressed. The truly ingenious part of it all was that it did so without violating the laws and standards of the times.

Jesus understood something. Peace with justice would never come if people on the underside tried to fight back against impossible odds. But Jesus also realized that it would never

come if people on the underside were simply passive and accepted the protection that the occupation of Rome in Palestine provided. You see the Jews in first century Palestine did not want the protection of Rome. But they also knew at the same time they could do little about it especially by way of violence.

Jesus knew all of this as well and determined to do something about it.

I once read somewhere that if you accept things the way they are, you then are an active participant in making them worse. Undoubtedly Jesus knew this. Maybe it wasn't in the prose of those esteemed authors such as Yevtushenko, Solzhenitsen, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X who throughout recorded history have used the power of the public to sway the powers that bind. Maybe it was divine revelation. Or maybe, just maybe, it was simple logic. The kind of logic that is no doubt hidden somewhere in the collective consciousness of the human race. And maybe, just maybe, the world would be a more perfect place if we only began to pay obeisance to it.

James Pieschke

Wilfredo Diaz



My Spiderman Tennis Shoes

I wish I could take my Spiderman shoes running a few laps around the track. When I run with these tennis shoes, I feel like I'm not here. I don't know how to describe it, but it's like I have wings on my feet. Once I was told by another inmate that I look like Spiderman with these shoes. I thought, "What? My tennis shoes look more like a thunderstorm in the sky." Anyway, the other inmate sometimes jokes and says to me: "Spiderman doesn't take his shoes off or his mask, except to eat like in the Burger King ad. Okay, then when I have run a few laps, I begin to feel tired, and it is as if my mind gets into this half-awake state. In my head, I begin to immerse into fantasies or into daydreams, and other times I get images from the past and go back in time and begin imagining things as I run. But the thing that I like is that it is like I'm nowhere or get transported into another place, not here. It is like my shoes carry me, yet I carry the shoes. It feels like I get a second wind, and I feel that crossing over into this state feels like taking my mind off the exercise, and I feel like I am in another world. If there are some people running around me, I see them, but I'm not there. I like those moments. I have discovered that I'm proud of my tennis shoes.

Wilfredo Diaz

William Taylor



To Forgive Is to Love: To Love Is to Forgive

They say I entered this life broken in pieces. [Osteogen
Esis] Imperfect
But I was really protected by the many....blessings,
From above,
Channeled through a mother's love.
Which should have been enough to keep me on a path str
Aight,
But I chose a fate, that would soon make, me a ward of
The state.
But it's not too late....to do, what I have to, & it
Starts with me saying, "Mom, I love you!"

I can remember, you keeping me warm as a child in
The cold months of winter....Kwanzaa in December, & your
Ability to see through the pretenders. My guiding light
From childhood through to my teens....you helped me
Dream. You are such a special human being....you make
My heart sing. Quick to put me in check if I got out of
Line....showing me how to shine, supporting in all you d
O, & so I have to, say that "I love you."

My (9) nine year sentence, for theft by deception has torn
a rift in our reception. & so I make this confession.
I know I've let you down, time & time again. But you're
My mother, "I love you," & I just want another chance to
Begin.

To show you I am forever grateful, in spite of the daily
Pain in my life that has urged me to be discontent.
But with my respect for you & determination to make
Amends, I remove the anger from within, so I can
Work to begin, an appropriate & righteous path you can
Be proud of, that will never end. "Yo amor tu" Te amo
"I love you" Your Son, "LL"

William Taylor

Jamon Winfrey



*I was a man lost within a sea of
tears, tossed here and there,
drowning in my own despair.
I was lifted from my sorrow and
grief by words and thoughts,
a blind man gifted with the power
to see new life opportunities
through the thoughts and
dreams of others.*

Age 28

To Me

Whatever happened to you? I can remember when the world shone bright within your eyes. When every day was an adventure just to be near you.

I can still recall the last time you were in love, even though it seems a million years ago. You were so full of life then, but this new you I can hardly recognize.

The bounce has left your step, the stars no longer shine in your eyes, and your voice is so full of pain that it breaks my heart to hear it.

I want that old you back, that man who loved life even at its lowest moments, for this new you I can't even stand to look at.

"Do you hear me?" Give me back that old you. I want to wake in the morning and have a smile there to greet me. I want to go to sleep and find warm arms to hold me when the nightmares come (for they come far too often).

I want to love again and be loved, want that old you back in my life, and I would do anything.

All that can be said has been said, and still I feel you nowhere near. Guess that means you're gone, and I'm stuck with the new guy. Still though, there's the TV and latest covers of magazines. I guess I'll go lay down and fall in love with myself all over again.

I Am

To understand me you must understand that I am the poem not the poet, the song but not the words.

I am what you cannot see, not a face nor a body, but a collection of memories.

I am not happy nor sad, not good nor bad, I just am what I am, both child that I was and man that I am.

I am not the river nor the rain, not the flood not its pain, not quiet or loud but barely a sound, neither knock nor pound, not up or down, but round and round.

Not the piano, barely a key in life's mysterious melody, so place aside what you think that you know about me, and understand this: I am that you cannot see,

I am...

Jamon Winfrey

Are You Listening?

Quiet! Listen! Do you not hear that, the noise of silence ten times louder than any train wreck could ever be?
Does not the beat of your heart echo in your ears? Every breath taken vibrate upon your soul?
Don't thoughts live and die?
Are they not born and reborn within the corridors of your mind like stampeding elephants running here and there?
"SHHHH," for there is part of this quiet I would like to share with you.
Do you hear it coming?
Like a million birds about to take flight, like a horned orchestra, like a thunderstorm rushing across your mind?
"Listen, it's almost here, the wonderful noise of a new thought. Isn't it beautifully magnificent?"
P.S. AREN'T YOU GLAD YOU LISTENED?

Angels...

Who said angels need wings? Can't that person in your life who gives inspiration, teaches compassion, offers comfort, molds by actions and deeds, whose love is manifested by the very peace they bring be angels?
Who said angels need drop out of the sky? Why can't they just walk out of the house, step into a car and drive into your life?
Need they be surrounded by heavenly light? Why can't their smiles offer the same warmth, their words dry your soul and set your heart on fire?
Who said angels are accompanied by music? Why should they not drive us to create our own or to hear the music of the world that surrounds us?
Who said??? Certainly not I, for my every Friday is blessed by angels.
I'm still trying to find a way to tell heaven, "Thanks."

Jamon Winfrey

*The Writing Workshop touched the divine in all of us—victims, inmates, and community.
What a privilege it was to share in the experience!*

Martha Norell, community member

For more information

If you'd like to order a copy of *Concrete Perspectives: beyond the wire*, please contact Betty Brown.
Proceeds go toward reprinting and funding future writing workshops.

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