



Hell, Inc.

HIS CELL of mine is bigger than a coffin, but not much.

Without straining, I can spread my arms and touch both side walls simultaneously. I can touch the cell bars with my toes and reach back at the same time to touch the rear wall with my fingers. I lay corpselike on a plastic mattress that is so narrow, my pinkies fall off both ends when I rest my hands by my sides.

This cell's much smaller than a chimpanzee gets at the zoo, but animals live free of ideas such as guilt and punishment.

This cell's so cramped and claustrophobia-inducing that everything clamps down and collapses and presses in all the way to my skin's surface until all I have is an internal life.

I wear the cell more than I inhabit it.

I can stand up in here, but I can't stretch—I'll bump into something. Not enough room here to pace. Not enough room to do push-ups. Barely enough oxygen to fill my lungs.

My bunk is made of steel. My clothing drawer is made of steel. A tiny writing table and seat are both made of steel. A small steel shelf drilled into the wall juts out at face level over the toilet, so I have to arch my head backward while pissing to avoid breaking my nose or knocking out my teeth.

Even the walls are made of steel, but a steel so thin that they bend when inmates in the cells to either side of mine get in their bunks, making a sound like a giant soda can being crushed.

About three feet outside the cell bars, another steel screen of bars and fencing runs along the tier, preventing me from pushing someone to their death or jumping to mine. A good twenty feet beyond that are the cellblock windows, outside of which is welded yet another web of steel bars. And beyond that are the penitentiary walls, thirty feet high and lined at the top with electroshock wiring.

Those tall, tall, rain-stained cement walls. The demarcation line between me and real society. Real citizens call this place Oregon State Penitentiary, but convicts call it "The Walls."

A few very tall trees peer in over the walls like judgmental patri-

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archs, but that's about all I see of the outside world. I can look up and catch glimpses of a purplish-orange sunrise, then lower my eyes and see the walls.

Boxed up inside a cell...which is enclosed within more bars and fencing...which is further encased within more steel bars outside the windows...all of it penned in by giant cement walls...I'm unpleasantly reminded of those gag gifts which are delivered in a huge box...but once you open that box, there's a smaller one...and a smaller one...until the "gift" is encased within a matchbox.

I forgot to mention there are two of us inside this matchbox, two angry bumblebees stuffed in a tiny steel cell of this mammoth honeycomb.

From the small landing area at one end of the cellblock where the guard enters his monkey cage and pulls the steel lever which pops my cell door open, you can get a sweeping view of this Felon's Valhalla.

Forty cells along each tier.

Five tiers high.

Cells on one side, windows on the other.

A shiny gray floor runs straight down the middle to the opposite wall. My first glance of this massive, airy chamber immediately reminded me of a cathedral, with the gray floor a church aisle leading to the bare altar at the other end.

Sheets of dusty sunlight, gusts of cool wind, and even a spray of rain filter in through the open windows, reminding me that natural elements exist beyond this basilica of glass, steel, and cement.

Little sparrows sometimes squeeze through cracks in the cellblock windows and fly around this enormous room. And then they get out—I think, because I don't see them anymore. They come and go, and who knows what happens to them?

My wings have been clipped. If I had wings, I'd be able to fly over those walls. I'd be able to fly away and get clean.

I can never get clean in here. They won't let me.

You're only allowed to shower twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, so I get used to having a three-or-four-day crust of dried sweaty dirt clogging my pores. The shower bell rings louder than a firehouse bell, my cell door clicks open, and I join the beeline down into the muggy basement to get my twice-weekly change of clothes, this "new" set of clothes that has been worn by a hundred guys before me.

The shower bears all the naked humiliation of a communal delousing. I undress myself elbow-to-elbow with other inmates along a

hundred-foot wooden bench and then turn to face the showers—fifty or so nozzles packed within the same hundred feet. I squeeze somewhere amid this subterranean waterworld beneath a meek warmish aerosol spray, sudsing and shampooing myself along with forty-nine other criminals, elbow-to-elbow again, all of us spraying one another with foamy airborne filth, and the guy next to me could have an open cut and be spraying infected blood on me, and I'd have no idea until the test results came back positive.

The water washes down our bodies into a tile-lined drainage ditch teeming with cloudy, soapy water, my liquid sludge mixing with everyone else's.

And even though I wear plastic flip-flops to avoid contracting jungle rot from the shower floors, my feet still come away covered with inexplicable, ineradicable strawberry fields of red dots.

I towel off...elbow-to-elbow...and get dressed...elbow-to-elbow...and as I leave, I pass another hundred guys in a beeline waiting to wash off all their dirt.

And then I come back to my dirty cell.

Back to this protozoan hodgepodge.

This jambalaya of filth.

I get new bed sheets only once a week. I sleep under itchy wool blankets that only get washed four times a year. I've been in this particular cell five months now, and the piss-coated scuffed-cement floor hasn't been mopped once. In county jail they'd come by with mops twice weekly, but not here.

There's a battered old straw broom in the cell, and I try to sweep the floor daily. I scoop up a full cup's worth of dust every time I sweep. And every morning there's another swarm of dust bunnies populating the floor. It's as if they breed. I don't know where the dust comes from, only that it keeps coming back. The air vent's always clogged with a mossy gray dust blanket, so I know I'm breathing lungfuls of the shit, and who knows what sort of carcinogenic crystals inhabit my lungs like microscopic death pollen?

Death is never too far from my mind here.

A few months ago I was gathering up my bed sheets for the weekly sheet exchange and as I stood up, I slammed my eyebrow into the HARD steel corner of the bunk above mine, ripping open my flesh and spurting blood all over the cell. I immediately dropped the sheets and grabbed the small cylinder of powdered bleach cleanser on the floor near the toilet, mixed some powder with hot water on a washcloth, and began soaking my open gash with liquefied bleach.

This place will infect you.

I'm terrified of letting *anything* here come in contact with my bloodstream. A third of the inmates in Oregon Department of Corrections are infected with the deadly Hepatitis-C, so odds are good that if I don't have it, my cellmate does. And Hep-C isn't like HIV—it can live for weeks after being exposed to the air. It can live on sinks and tabletops...and the steel corners of bunks. My cellie usually bleeds when he shaves, so his blood could be all over the cell.

About a tenth of the nearly two thousand inmates here are said to be HIV-positive. That averages out to one future immolated AIDS matchstick every fifth cell. At the joint I occupied prior to this one, there was a sloe-eyed, HIV-positive inmate who bragged to everyone about how he'd jack off and squirt his goo all over the walls and floors of the communal showers. The warden, aware of sloe-eye's medical condition, threatened to charge him with attempted murder if he got into a fistfight with anyone, but still this guy picked fights with people daily.

Soon after I was transferred here I ran into Jericho, my cellie from back at the Intake Center. He had lost about a hundred pounds and looked like a puff of thinning hair atop a chicken bone—"all sucked-up," as convicts say of the emaciated.

Jericho told me he recently contracted a "super-virus" strain of HIV from sharing a needle in a phone booth out in the yard here, but I don't think AIDS develops that quickly, and now I'm glad I didn't let him suck my dick back at the Intake Center.

A few months ago I was sitting between Jericho and another inmate on the faded wooden bleachers out in the card room. I commented on the palpable tension between Jericho and the other inmate and, joking, I asked Jericho whether he thought the tension might be sexual.

Just like a bitch, Jericho reached over and dug his long fingernails into my neck, scratching me. I politely excused myself and then scurried around to other inmates, asking if Jericho had broken the skin on my neck. Most said they could see pink scratch marks, but it didn't look as if the skin had broken. Well, maybe...it was hard to tell...but probably not.

Back in my cell I emptied a half-bottle of after-shave lotion on my neck, desperately trying to kill whatever microbes Jericho had implanted there. I had run out of powdered Ajax a few days earlier, and I was frantic.

In county jail they had supplied each dorm with one electric razor for all sixty-four inmates. And even though you were allowed to soak

the detachable razor heads in a blue-green antiseptic solution, dusty stubble nubs were still pasted on the body of the razor onto which you reattached the heads, and you weren't allowed to clean that part—the Sheriff was watching you the whole time. And every time I used that dirty razor I'd rush back to my cell and check in the blurry steel mirror for cuts on my face and neck, panicking every time a blood droplet emerged on my newly shorn facial terrain.

If fatal microbes entered my bloodstream during my journey behind bars, how could I ever forgive society? They KILL me merely because I thrashed a bitch who was seriously endangering my life? I don't care what your law books say about justice—I don't think that's a very good deal, and if it's the case, I think society owes me some blood. If I get infected with a fatal little germ, you can be sure I'll get my pay-back. I'll become a killing machine. And I'll waste a lot of bodies before I get caught.

It's a great time to be alive and incarcerated.

I make myself a mug of coffee with water from the sink that barely rises above lukewarm, and some of the freeze-dried granules invariably float at the top, half-dissolved into a mucky brownish paste.

The rumor among inmates is that the guards are instructed to bring bottled water in from the streets and to never drink the water here. Up until the late 1980s, the water was pumped from a contaminated well. When inmates started sprouting tumors, officials apparently concluded it was more financially feasible to pump water directly from the City of Salem's reservoir than to face all the inevitable class-action lawsuits from dying inmates.

I had a cellie a while back who did a twelve-year stretch here ending in the early '90s; he's now back in for a parole violation. But near the end of that twelve-year set, he developed cancer in one testicle that made it swell up to baseball-size. He was so weakened from chemotherapy that he fainted and lapsed into a coma after walking up the stairs to the prison infirmary. He eventually awoke to find himself handcuffed to a hospital bed. His cancer went into remission, but lately a brain tumor has sprouted which is severe enough to give him periodic black eyes. They won't treat it, claiming it isn't life-threatening yet. He thinks he contracted cancer from working as an inmate plumber during all the years here. He says that although they changed the water supply, they never changed the pipes, so all the carcinogens still leach into the water with which I fix my tepid morning coffee.

I take slow sips of Cancer Java and stare at the Sleeping Beauty who's crammed into this broom closet with me, the one snoring in the bunk above mine...my darling cellie.

I am forced to cohabitate in suffocatingly close quarters with a living neural web of accumulated pain and ignorance.

I must endure the sour nasal burn of his foot stench and the rancid-peanut-butter smell of his farts and his greenish toenail clippings and the way he keeps slapping his fat belly because he likes the sound it makes and how he bangs the heels of his ugly bare feet on the cement floor and the way he sucks food particles from between his teeth and his off-key whistling and his middle-of-the-night groans and his sad stupid face.

I hear about how his old lady's sister has to get an operation on her finger and so she's going to quit her job as a McDonald's manager and move in with his old lady and all the kids, and he runs through his well-rehearsed litany of excuses for why he never amounted to anything and why his brother's fucked-up because he won't accept his collect calls anymore, and I'd love to break his nose but that would only buy more time being forced to listen to stories like his.

And there are so *many*...just...like...him.

Children with pubic hair. Oversized baby boys never properly weaned, so now they're violent, drug-addicted toddlers with hair on their backs and wrinkled faces.

And all of them have kids, with an 's.' Hear the cons wax righteously wrathful about child molesters, yet they're oddly silent about men who spawn kids and then neglect them.

There's a paucity of what might be considered radical thinkers or revolutionary outlaws here. Most guys are normal, only three notches lower. They want a normal life, but they're too stupid to achieve it.

I'm starting to get the feeling that a lot of these guys aren't too bright. Judging from their facial expressions, it looks as if they've been eating Retard Sandwiches their whole lives. On rainy days, they'll have a bowl of Mongoloid Soup along with the Retard Sandwich.

When the Nobel Prize Committee passes through Salem, I think they're going to skip over this place entirely. The Mensa Society, too, won't find many recruits here.

Shockingly illiterate. One slow-lidded, drooling troglodyte after the next. Men whose mental energy couldn't power a wristwatch. Ugly, stupid, belching, conscienceless, unfeeling, driven-by-instinct, worthless turd dumplings whose only purpose in life is to remind us that forced sterilization maybe wasn't such a bad idea. Even the word "worthless"

is too kind, since it conjures the very idea of worth. They insult the air by breathing it.

I can't ever escape the sounds and smells and presence of the pin-heads. There is eternal, soul-flattening agony in never being alone. I've been down for more than two years now, and I haven't been alone for one minute. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever alone.

Always someone in that bunk above mine.

Always three hundred or more men on this side of the block.

Always two thousand or so at this institution.

When the AIDS crisis broke, common wisdom was that if you had sex with someone, you were also fucking everyone they'd fucked for the past ten years. The same applies to doing prison time with others—I'm also doing *their* time, rubbing up against all *their* misery, all their coiled tensions and simmering resentments and bad breaks in life. And not only am I smelling *their* shit, I'm smelling the shit of everyone who's crammed shit down their throats since infancy. I'm doing time with these husks of men and all the ghosts inside them.

The noise is a constant ice pick to my brain.

The punishing metallic sound of cell bars clicking open and smashing closed. Rude white-noise blasts of a guard's radio static. Some snoring fat fuck's eleven-dollar alarm clock beeping for hours. A crew of welders on the tier above mine, hammering steel and showering sparks and making it impossible for me to sleep.

Ignorant voices from above, below, and side to side. The booming sonic ricochet of belly-laughing clodhoppers tickled silly by dirty jokes. Juvenile middle-agers making fake fart sounds and calling each other homos. An angry elderly Negro screaming out his cell number because the guard forgot to pop it open for pill line.

My tier is perched directly over the protective-custody row, which houses the rats and cowards and weaklings too fearful to mix with the general population. Since their tier is caged-off and no one can get to them, they're the loudest ones, shouting all day from cell to cell, holding deafening conversations about *nothing* for hours and taunting us about our inability to administer instant justice to them.

The noise never stops unless it's the middle of the night, and even then you'll hear crocodilian snores and distant flushing toilets.

I am officially in state "custody," just like a child in thralldom to its parents.

My parents have grounded me and sent me to my room...for years. And even though I'm old enough to have grandchildren, I'm treated with sub-nursery-school condescension.

It's worse than being an infant, because an infant can usually cry and get what he wants.

Many of the cons here pretend to be outlaws, but they are addicted to the system, to the structure and security, to the only family they've ever known, to the "three hots and a cot." Tattooed skin sacs of sick need, baby piglets sucking on the Big Sow's carcinogenic teats.

They're happy having no control, no responsibilities, no decisions to make, being fed and bedded down and wearing Big Brother's state-issued diapers. They say they hate Big Brother, and yet they keep choosing him as their dance partner.

But for me, licking boots gets tiresome.

Control over my identity, environment, and destiny is a primary need of mine, and they've stripped it away from me. Almost my entire fate is now in the hands of those who've proven hostile toward me. While they move around in the shadows, I'm squashed under glass and trapped under a microscope.

My name and Social Security number are now etched in government databases as those of a felon, an enemy of the state's laws.

They have copies of my fingerprints.

My DNA code.

And with periodic urinalyses, even my bodily fluids are in state custody.

Humans need hope almost as much as they need water, and the Department of Corrections exists to siphon all hope from the convict's wishing well. They remove all hope, and the rest falls in place.

The fates have unspooled a finite strand of time for me to be alive on this Earth. The justice system wields a cold, gleaming pair of scissors and snips out a few years right in the middle of that strand.

The semantics are cockeyed. They didn't "give" me three years. They took them from me. And I count every fucking day they've taken. I take a cold blue pen and mark off every fucking day on a little calendar up on the wall. I blot out every day they've stolen from my life.

Every day I endure a hundred indignities, any one of which would have been intolerable on the streets. The thudding regimentation of wake-up bells and sitting up on my bunk to be counted and strip searches and pat-downs and flashlights in my face at midnight when I'm trying to sleep and the omnipresent imbecilic inmates and the smirking condescension of subliterate guards who aren't qualified to lick my sphincter, much less have an attitude with me.

And to my terror, I realize I've grown used to the hundred daily indignities. If I didn't get used to them, it would kill me. But the

getting-used-to-it is a form of death, too.

The pride I swallow—where does it go?

I know this—it doesn't disappear.

Grinding my teeth into chalk dust having to pretend these guards aren't beneath me. The torment of being charged with assault by someone who spells it "assault." Being barked at and ordered around by someone who can't even pronounce my name—he calls me "Go-add." Go add. Go add two and two together, and when you get the right answer, you're allowed to bark at me.

Having to defer to two-legged nothings who aren't fit to catch my turd in their mouths as it plops from my ass. Motherfucker, you don't even deserve to inhabit the same planet as me. I'm so elevated above you, it isn't fair to say we're from the same species.

Key-jangling doofuses peering through the cell bars asking me unnecessary questions as I'm sitting on the toilet taking a dump. Ransacking my cell when I'm not there, looking for contraband and leaving everything turned upside-down. Popping my cell door open, and when I peek out to see what he wants, he'll shout, "Shut your door!" as if I was the one who popped it open.

They're never required to cop to their mistakes.

Not like we are.

The jelly-bellied closet homo with little frog hands who incessantly drops sickening sexual innuendos at inmates he thinks are cute.

The guard at county jail whose wife left him for a bad-boy felon and so he has a nasty habit of spitting into inmates' Kool-Aid and forcing the trustees to serve the saliva-tainted bug juice.

The Sherman-tank-shaped carpet-munching dyke guards who took this job to flaunt a palpable hatred of People with Penises.

Imagine being *proud* that your job is to stand in Receiving & Discharge all day, scrutinizing felonious anuses to make sure that contraband doesn't pop out of them like a mischievous little gopher. When these guards kiss their partners at night, do they think of puckered anuses?

Some guards radiate an arrogance which is near-suicidal, since many of the guys here are lifers who'd have little to lose by cracking a broomstick in half and stabbing the air out of their lungs.

But I have a lot to lose, and these walkie-talkie-toting pricks have the power to falsely accuse me of something and be believed. To beat me unconscious and claim it was self-defense. To act like a criminal and look like the good guy.

God, how these cocksuckers milk their puny positions of micro-

power. Fat-necked, pink-faced, buzzcut, slack-jawed nobodies a notch above security guards but too stupid to graduate from Police Academy, regular spuds whose brief moment of glory was as a nose tackle on the high-school pigskin squad, and it's been all downhill from there, wearing one uniform after another as a hired guard dog of power.

Take off that uniform, and you have a portrait of human failure. Dress them in convict blues, and watch all the power drain out of their faces.

"Power" seems little more than an excuse to abuse in the name of "good." So when one of these ex-jocks-with-a-GED flashes a vicious glare at me as if I committed my crime against them, I strain every tendon resisting an impulse to righteously erase that expression from their face.

I'll step out of a guard's way as we're walking past one another, and then I'll catch myself, realizing how reflexive it's become. Then I'll bite my lip and send a little more rage down into the arsenal where it's all being stored. I'll blink twice and think, *that's all right, cowboy, you'll be stuck working this cattle ranch until you retire; this is just a temporary hitching post for me, but this is as good as it gets for you, so enjoy it.*

If I were to get feisty enough to, say, punch a guard's teeth out through the back of his skull, I'd be shackled and shoved into a lower stratum of hell called the Intensive Management Unit (I.M.U.).

Inmates call it "Thunderdome."

The artificial lights never go out there. The psychopaths never stop shouting. Instead of cell bars in your solitary chamber, your "door" is a plate of steel that has been punched through with a continuous pattern of dime-sized holes. The holes are often plugged up with dried, encrusted human feces. I.M.U. inmates like to "shit-bomb" one another by stirring up their own shit and piss in a shampoo bottle, shaking it until it's a frothy yellow-brown elixir, and squirting the foul excremental nectar from cell to cell.

Once a day, guards will come to handcuff you behind your back and lead you on a leash to the shower, where you're locked in for thirty minutes. After showering, you get a half-hour to walk in the "recreation yard," a six-by-ten-foot room.

The guards in I.M.U. wield complete control over these self-contained pods. More than one inmate has told me that if guards don't like you there, they'll mix in some human shit with your food. If you

get defiant, a half-dozen black-booted emissaries of the state will rush your cell and smash you down with Plexiglas “shock shields” which deliver an electric jolt that stuns you into slobbering submission no matter how tough you are or how strong your will is.

A typical stint in I.M.U. lasts six months to a year. All the cons say that once you spend some time there, you’ll never be the same. Some guys languish in there for years and get so wacked by it that they never leave, night after night standing naked in their cells chewing their own shit and howling at the mirror.

Not that being in the general population here is a boon for your mental health.

Any psychologist not hired by the prison industry would tell you that smashing a steel door shut on someone and cooping them up in a tiny room for years, severed from every tentacle to the outside world which gave their life meaning, would produce drastically negative personality effects. It might even make them dangerous.

Judging from some of the dreams I’ve had lately, incarceration has jarred my psychic equilibrium a smidge. My mind is a pinball machine that reads TILT.

In one dream, I’m driving a figure-eight pattern in a gravel-strewn church parking lot, each time getting closer to a light-bulb-sized glowing red-eyed skull on a stick.

In another, a female accomplice and I murder a waitress at an all-night diner. In the dream’s final sequence, I can see through the diner’s windows...past the empty countertop and fallen waitress...out the other side...where I see myself walking with my accomplice. I’m dressed in drag in the fallen waitress’s uniform, stumbling on her high heels and muttering, “I can’t believe how low my life has sunk.”

I had a dream a few months ago where I’m calmly staring at pictures in an oversized children’s book. The pictures are high-magnification black-and-white photos of cockroach faces.

And last night I dreamed I was a voyeuristic spectator at a clumsy orgy of elderly men and a retarded girl in a dark, moldy house. We all suddenly rushed to the bathroom, but I wound up last in line. So I shat in my hand, held it up for all to see, and everyone ran screaming.

What do you think this all means, Doc?

There’s even an air of surreal dreamy unreality when I receive a letter and the address says I’m at the state pen. I can’t really be in prison, can I?

Before they sent me to this place, I spent nearly a year at Santiam

Correctional Institution, a tidy little minimum-security joint on the other side of Salem.

When they first “dressed me in” over there, I put my blue T-shirt on backwards, with the large orange Department of Corrections shield and INMATE decal on my chest, and the inmate worker said, “No, you’ve got it on wrong—the bull’s-eye goes on your back.”

The bull’s-eye. That’s what I am to them. A target.

Santiam had four dormitories housing four hundred men total. Instead of cells, each brightly lit white-linoleum dorm contained neat rows of bi-level Army-barracks-styled bunks with a small wooden locker painted orange at the foot of your bunk. You could see out the back windows to the yard and watch denim-clad cons in ski caps shooting hoops in the rain. You could stare out the front windows at huge flocks of geese huddled together in the fields beyond the prison fence.

After nearly eight months in county jail and the Intake Center breathing nosebleed-inducing stale recirculated air, I hit Santiam’s yard the first chance I got, walking determined laps amid the icy winter mist, sucking in lungfuls of real-world air under the unforgiving nighttime sky and slowly feeling the blood come back into my cheeks. And even though I still had almost two years standing between me and freedom, I somehow felt there was hope whistling through those bare trees outside, and at night I curled up in my bunk, closed my eyes, and felt the clean, cold wind come through holes in the windows and roll all over my body.

But ironically, the time over at the minimum-security joint was more stressful for me than being in a cell at this maximum-level penitentiary, because a cell at least affords a *little* privacy, and the ceaseless day-and-night cacophonous evil dragonfly hum of that big dorm with a hundred-plus men was starting to frazzle my brain.

Because I was shaving my head over there and having a friend send me news clippings about Jane Greenhow and her neo-Nazi ANSWER Me!-reading British suicide friends, I was placed under investigation for being a suspected white supremacist. When Santiam’s “gang expert”—a fat, oily, middle-aged man resembling Wimpy from the *Popeye* cartoons, a bloke who would have cut quite a figure going undercover in gold chains and a sweat suit and trying to buy crack—called me into his office and asked if I was a white “supremist,” I told him about *The Redneck Manifesto* and my line,

I’m no fan of white supremacy—everyone knows the Jews and chinks are superior.

But he didn't think it was funny, and with an eyebrow arched, he said, "Oh—so they're *chinks*, are they?"

And I felt the cold existential shudder of realizing I was under the ironclad dominion of people who thought they had my number but were utterly clueless about my thought processes and belief systems. And what's worse, I could have laid it out for them with blueprint precision, and they would have been none the wiser.

So after my...alleged...fistfight with another inmate that...purportedly...took place in the laundry room there, I was shackled and dumped in The Hole over here. After three days in The Hole, "assault" charges were dropped because the guard at Santiam forgot to attach the Confidential Informant statement with his paperwork.

I was sprung loose from The Hole into the general population here at The Walls, but after only a few weeks they rolled me up early one morning and shipped me to Columbia River Correctional Institution in Portland.

Columbia River felt less like a prison than a Community College which you couldn't leave: shiny-clean, ultra-quiet little dorms, food that tasted as if it might have originated in the real world rather than some penitentiary dungeon, and—good God!—

Female inmates.

The dorms were sexually segregated, but the chow hall and yard were coed, and as much as I've seethed toward womenfolk during my Hegira behind bars, their presence had an immediately soothing effect upon me. Granted, these weren't exactly primo specimens of femininity; as the joke went,

Q: What has a hundred legs and two teeth?

A: Women's chow line at Columbia River.

But seeing the other half of the human race up-close after nearly two years of separation from them somehow grounded me and made me feel halfway steered back to reality.

But after only five days at Columbia River, I was rolled up again and sent back here to Oregon State Penitentiary, where I've remained. No one told me why I was shipped back, and it took a few weeks of pestering my case manager until she called up my file on her computer screen and asked me,

"Uh—do you have a problem with women? You write about beating women or something?"

Yup, that's me, the woman-beating author. I guess they feared I'd

start battering bitches in the chow hall or something.

So my confidential prison file—which I'm never allowed to see, therefore never able to challenge—has me wearing two "jackets," that of a racist mastermind and that of a compulsively violent misogynist. They put the jackets on me, and there's nothing I can do to remove them. And even though my offender-risk score has me classified well within minimum-custody status, my mere *reputation* as a transgressor of politically sensitive belief systems will keep me here at a maximum-security joint.

Five days a week at 5:15AM or so I'll hear the loud steel shotgun-pump sound of my cell door popping open, and I'll head down into the chow hall to serve hash browns to serial killers and dope fiends.

The chow hall looks like a giant old Woolworth's cafeteria that has started to rot like an abscessed tooth. Sickly artificial lighting. Cracked yellow wall tiles. Scuffed, sky-blue tabletops.

Along one wall run three huge framed paintings done years ago by the same inmate:

A brook with a sunny meadow in the background;

A rocky Oregon coastline;

Ducks flying over a lake.

Upon first inspection, these bucolic settings seem intended to soothe. But staring at them, one apprehends the heavy shadowing, the menacing clouds, and the ocean's unnaturally dark-blue water. You realize the sunny meadow is shoved far in the background, dominated by the turbulent brook; the coast is empty and forbidding, its waters possibly shark-infested; and the ducks look as if they're trying to escape, but their wings are frozen in mid-air.

These are the scariest paintings I've ever seen.

Back in the hot sweaty smoky broiling lard-misted ashy-carbon kitchen, I'm drowned in the sounds of smashing pots and pans, the roaring spray of water hoses blasting crust off dirty utensils, creaking carts and boiling vats and workers running around screaming about the missing trays of greasy kielbasa.

There are rumors that some food crates came in through the loading dock marked UNFIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION. I've been told we've been served ground frozen hamburger left over from Operation Desert Storm, and I'm sure it was fresh when that war ended almost ten years ago. I've seen them wheel in boxes marked "Fresh Pack 1998 Tomato Sauce," and while '98 may have been a good year for wine, tomato sauce doesn't age nearly as gracefully.

And I've served fruit cups on which the expiration date passed four months ago, but the prison newsletter assures us this only means it was "best" before that date.

The stereotype is that in prison they starve you on bread and water and maybe the occasional bowl of cold cabbage soup swimming with dead cockroaches. In Oregon prisons, the food may be lousy, but you're allowed to pile it on your tray and ram it down your gullet until you explode. One is initially amazed at the specter of so many FAT convicts, roly-poly oompa-loompas who've let their bodies melt into shit, stuffing their yaps with big ploppy lumps of starchy comestibles that turn to papier-mâché sculptures in their colons, sweat coursing down their pink hog jowls as they desperately chew, chew, chew, weighing their bodies down until they're unable or unwilling to escape.

Most of prison life seems to consist of standing in one line or another. For food. For showers. For canteen. For phones. Waiting, waiting. Dependent. Compliant.

There are two entrances to the chow hall and two chow lines, each hugging the side walls along old steel guard rails. It takes an hour and a half of nonstop serving to get through breakfast; lunch takes two hours. The lines seem never-ending, as if they're manufacturing new cons every second.

The chow lines are filled with the sort of faces you'd only see in prison, wrinkled and ashen like elephant's hide, lines etched in their cheeks as if they've cried acid teardrops, faces with the hardened detachment of ceramic Buddhas heat-treated in a brick oven, faces ravaged by gin blossoms and knife scars, faces of skeletons and scarecrows, the faces of walking, rotted dead men.

You can tell a new fish just by looking at his face: It carries the dewy freshness of the free world. Three months later, his face doesn't look that way anymore; now it carries bitterness like invisible whip marks.

I can say "hi" to a face in here for months without ever knowing his name. I'll see familiar faces from other legs of the journey like county jail or Santiam and notice how his hair's changed or he's put on weight, and, yeah, it seemed really hopeless then but he's getting out soon.

Sometimes a week or two will pass before I realize a certain face isn't in the chow line anymore, that it must have gone to The Hole, or to another prison, or even released to the free world.

But that face isn't important, because another face will soon replace it. Faces aren't important to the Department of Corrections—bodies are.

The inmates grab their plastic food trays from tall stacks and scruti-

nize them for flecks of hardened food which the hot bleachy dish-washing machine failed to blast loose.

A con will reject four or five trays before he finds a clean one.

Hard, callused hands with scraped knuckles and missing fingers shove their trays at me.

Feed me. Feed me.

And I wonder—*what exactly am I feeding? To whom am I providing nourishment? Am I helping a body grow or feeding a tumor?*

The cons will look down at a dented steel bin containing a huge plop of puddinglike substance the color of Turtle Wax Car Polish over which I stand with an ice-cream scooper. They'll ask me,

"What IS that?"

I'll point to the handmade paper sign that I've fashioned with a pen and placed in front of the bin that reads CUSTARD and say,

Custard.

"Custard?"

Yes. Custard.

"Is it any good?"

I haven't tried it.

They'll pause and then hold their tray toward me suspiciously as if they're doing me a favor by taking a dollop of the stupid fucking custard.

Or I'll be stuck serving bacon on a Sunday morning wearing flimsy clear-plastic gloves, digging my paws into an Auschwitz pit of dead grizzled hogflesh, the Negro guard barking in one ear that I'm giving too much bacon and non-Muslim pork-gobbling Negro inmates barking in my other ear that I'm not giving enough.

Or I'll be scooping out macaroni salad and they'll say,

"I like black olives—pick out some of those black olives for me."

Or it'll be tossed salad and they'll say,

"I don't like cucumbers, man—take the cucumbers out."

Or it'll be Oriental mixed vegetables and they'll say,

"I don't want any pearl onions, but give me lots of those baby corns."

A thousand felons standing behind them, and they think they're at fucking Spago. Look, motherfucker, on the streets you shoot speed with toilet water, and all of a sudden you're a gourmet?

But unless they're baldly prickish about it, I'll try to give them what they want, because living squeezed in a vise like this, the only freedom and control they have is to ask for extra olives in their macaroni salad. A lot of them will die in here, so I'll kick down a few extra olives and consider it my good deed for the day.

Some days I'll slap a glob of butter onto the tray of Jerry "The Lust Killer" Brudos, who made fetish items of his female murder victims' severed feet. He's been down now for over thirty years and is hopelessly obese, mostly bald with a tightly sheared laurel wreath of strawberry-and-gray hair around a large pinkish head, beady eyes magnified by a pair of thick-lensed, black-rimmed glasses.

Or I'll ladle out corn chowder for The Happy Face Killer, who drew happy faces on his raped female prey's corpses. He's an enormous man with tortured eyes and thick, wolfmanlike beard and hair. I'll see him out on the yard sometimes walking the track wearing headphones attached to a radio.

Or I'll slide a pair of hot biscuits onto the tray of Randy "The I-5 Killer" Woodfield, who raped and murdered women up and down the west coast and who, according to what another inmate tells me, to this day insists all his victims deserved it. I'll notice that Randy has received yet another coiffing and dye job out at the Vo-Tech hair salon.

And I'll remember my cellie back in county jail who thrill-killed two people on Larch Mountain above Portland and told his friends it was "better than sex." Just blew 'em clean away with a rifle for the fun of it. I spent two months in a cell with the guy, and he was clean, amiable, polite, and agonizingly nerdy. He was a member of his high-school History Club and excitedly told me of how the club had once made a field trip to DC. He liked classic rock such as Pink Floyd and Steve Miller and was an obsessive collector of *Star Wars* memorabilia. His mom and dad loved their son and visited him every week in jail.

I also recall a taped phone conversation an acquaintance of mine had with Richard "The Night Stalker" Ramirez where Ramirez gripes that the artwork on the new line of serial-killer trading cards made him look like child-loving ex-Negro pop star Michael Jackson.

And I think...

The Lust Killer still wears glasses because he likes to read.

The Happy Face Killer enjoys circling the track while listening to his radio.

My thrill-killing ex-cellie knows everything about Star Wars.

And The Night Stalker doesn't want people to think he looks like Michael Jackson.

To me, these trifling idiosyncrasies of theirs are far more disturbing than their crimes.

It's much easier to view them as pure monsters, but one can never fully become a monster, can they? You can commit isolated acts of

pure monstrosity, yet you retain your humanity. There is no act you can commit that can make you cease being human.

You can never become a monster, you can only flirt with guilt and wind up tortured by it. You never become a monster, only a severely damaged human being incapable of functioning in "their" world, and although that's not the same as a monster, it'll do for them. It isn't about whether you *are* a monster; it's about their need to see you as one. You serve a mythological purpose for them.

From my vantage point in the kitchen, the chow line to the left is entirely Caucasian—you might see a black guy in that line once a week, and he's probably a newbie unaware of the chow hall's unwritten, self-imposed laws of racial segregation. The guards don't dictate these laws—the inmates have segregated themselves, following tribal laws written in their DNA.

The dining room is split in half by a wide aisle straight down the middle, and the seats on the left side are occupied by a solid sea of Caucasianity, with the hardest peckerwoods seated closest to the kitchen, filtering into gradations of weaker white boys back toward the entrance. I've never seen a Negro sit on the left side.

The right side starts off 100% dark chocolate near the kitchen, turns Mexican, then a smattering of Injuns and a handful of white freaks back near the doors. It's presumed that if you're white and sit on the right side near the rear, you're a rapist, child molester, or some unclassifiable weirdo unwelcome in the "woodpile" to the left.

I'd reckon that the population here is 60% white, 20% black, 10% Mexican, 5% Indian, and the occasional lapsed Asian or Jew. Oregon is an incredibly white state, and its prisons boast a racial quotient so lopsidedly in favor of the peckerwoods that an odd sort of racial stasis is achieved. The Negroes don't get too rowdy, or they'd be swarmed in an ocean of white sunshine.

Racism is an accepted fact of prison life. Nonracist whites don't seem to get much respect from anyone, black or white. One white inmate after the next has told me he wasn't racist until he came to prison and was forced to live in close proximity to blacks. And black convicts have consistently told me that Nazis are the only whites they respect, since blacks assume all whites are racist and that Nazis are at least honest. Truly, it's the white boys with WHITE POWER tattooed on the back of their neck...or SS lightning bolts on their throat...or TRUE PECKERWOOD emblazoned across their stomach...who seem to mingle most easily with black cons.

And since I'm just about the only white guy here with no kids, no

tattoos, no history of intravenous drug use, and all my teeth, I'm a race unto myself and don't mingle well with anyone.

After lunch, I'll wait until the bell rings for Yard Line and hustle out to that giant evil drag strip of death and dissolution, that amphitheater of atrocities, that cement-rimmed wildlife preserve teeming with human beasties.

Guards stand in towers that rim the walls, somberly clutching rifles and ready to blow your head off if things get too crazy down here in the pit.

There's a perpetual pall about the yard, a light coating of dust and soot, a feeling of death so close that you might be able to stick out your tongue and catch a piece of death as if it was a gray snowflake. When I first saw a red-and-white chimney belching smoke in the distance, my immediate instinct was that they're incinerating bodies. This place has the feeling of a death camp. This is where you come to die.

Cons walk around and around the eternal track. A small red-haired man circles the loop obsessively every day with a grimace welded onto his face, walking rapidly as if he's late for a business appointment, around and around until his shirt is entirely sweat-soaked. Even in winter, his shirt is sopping-wet as he slogs endlessly around and around in his quest to get right back where he started.

Cons sit at picnic tables working with meditative diligence at prison artwork, images of clowns in striped prison uniforms tethered to a ball and chain, peace signs rendered in barbed wire, and a thorny rose clutched by a hand with blood squeezing through its fingers.

Cons stroll shirtless, their skin inked with inmate hieroglyphics: spider webs on elbows; barbed wire around wrists; LOVE on one set of knuckles, HATE on the other; guard towers on backs; State Prisoner ID numbers on necks; and a permanent teardrop under one eye.

An inmate they call French Fry has scars from third-degree burns all over his face and body, his skin melted into a yellow-and-pink tapestry of chewed-bubble-gum-textured flesh. A con they call Bug-Eyed Bob has peepers which fairly pop out of his skull, and whenever he makes eye contact it's as if death is looking straight through you. A con with a small pink stump for one arm clutches his coffee mug to his side with that stump. Another con's torso is scarred with dozens of self-inflicted razor slashes. An AIDS-ravaged black inmate with a plastic tube sticking out of his Adam's apple sits on a bench, staring out over the field.

A gay Mexican with breast implants and plucked eyebrows circles the track coquettishly. A Negro homo in short-shorts minces around trilling that his pussy smells good today. A slender white male with high cheekbones and shaved legs playfully grabs the crotch of the male "jockey" who protects him.

Among convicts, Oregon's most legendary inmate is Angel, a former Golden Gloves boxer turned den mother of the queer contingent. The fags affectionately call him "Mother Love." Angel is a white male with long, shiny, chestnut-colored hair and a face which is starting to age rapidly. Angel's swishy mannerisms and high-pitched voice are indelibly female, yet he's a convicted murderer known to exact lightning justice upon anyone who preys on homosexuals. The story I heard back in county jail is that if Angel likes you but you don't swing that way, he'll knock you out and suck your dick while you're unconscious. I heard another story about how Angel was jogging around the track one day and twice passed a convict who called him a punk. The third time around, when the convict again called him a punk, Angel knocked him to the ground with a quick combination. Standing over his fallen antagonist, Angel wagged a finger and said, "I am a *homosexual*—you, sir, are a punk."

I'll slide on my old fingerless leather gloves and hit the weight pile to crunch some rusty steel, losing my mind temporarily, throwing my awareness somewhere else like a psychic ventriloquist, focusing on a spot in the far distance and placing all my consciousness there to avert the tear-duct-wringing pain of shredding my muscle tissues into shocked, bruised, inwardly bleeding flesh. Filling the cracks in my wall with cement. *You want to break me down, motherfuckers? I'll just rebuild myself using stronger bricks.*

As Yard Line is called in, a thousand or so inmates converge through a small exit in the gates back toward the housing blocks, and it's this little bottleneck area where you're most likely to be shanked in the lungs by an enemy who can quickly get lost in the crowd.

Some days there are fights in the yard, and as I walk back in, I'll see a series of orange Day-Glo highway cones marking off where blood was spilled.

Little bright-red splashes on the concrete.

And the biohazard team will come in and scrub the concrete clean.

We had ourselves a little race riot in the yard a few days ago. Nothing major. And nothing that anyone thinks is settled.

It's a violent little story which shows how the idea of guilt and indebtedness can get out of hand.

Down in the catacombs where we shower, white boy and black boy are soaping themselves. Black boy owes white boy money for tobacco debt. White boy tells him to pay up. Black boy says fuck you, you're burnt. White boy dries off and walks away.

Later out in the yard, white boy dislodges brick from building and walks into card room, where he clobbers black boy in head with brick. White boy disappears. Black boy and black friends lead guards to the weight pile and point at white boy.

Black boys commit grievous infraction against the Convict Code by involving the guards.

At evening yard, group of white boys confront group of black boys about being rats. A small brawl ensues. Guards snuff it.

Angry little racial pockets form in the yard, groups of tense white boys alongside clusters of edgy black boys. Glares and taunts are exchanged. The tension finally erupts in a racist mosh pit of a hundred convicts punching and clawing, trying to rip flesh chunks out of the other color.

Tower guards fire warning shots until everyone hits the ground. Out in the field, lone guards walk warily amid a sea of prostrate bodies, guards aware for possibly the first time how much of their power is merely in their heads.

Two inmates are taken to the infirmary to be treated for injuries. The warden declares an institutional lockdown. We don't leave our cells for two-and-a-half days, trapped in these steely sweatboxes amid summer heat so intense, you can hear invisible flies buzzing in your head.

On the third day after the riot, they finally pop my cell door open to let me go work in the kitchen. When I get there, everyone's eyes seem wider, alive with a supercharged feeling of evil. Everyone's ready like soldiers. Everyone wants something more to go down.

A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend—you have to cover your tracks in here about who knows what and when they were told it—tells me that one of the riot's main instigators is a white kid, twenty-one, who's been down for two years on a murder beef. Like the song "Mama Tried," he turned twenty-one in prison doin' life without parole. He was recently discharged from the Intensive Management Unit and told someone that he wants to kill as many people as he can in here. That's his goal—to stack bodies up to the sun.

A big invisible serpent sits coiled out in the yard. Everyone knows

something's going to go down, they just don't know when. For the first time since I was arrested, I have a feeling I might be killed.

I was tear-gassed for the first time in my life today.

Prison officials say it was an accident, but some inmates say it's impossible to accidentally set off a tear-gas canister—there are too many deliberate steps to the process.

After a torrid lunch shift in the kitchen serving up piping-hot biscuits, I returned to my cell and began dozing off amid high-90s temperatures, covered in beads of today's sweat floating atop a film of yesterday's sweat. I was yanked from groggy reverie by the sound of clanging cell bars and desperate yells of, "They're gassing us! MOTHERFUCKERS! They're gassing us!"

I bolted upright and looked out the window to see a half-dozen or so guards wearing gas masks with oxygen tanks on their backs, walking amid a ground-level cloud of white vapors.

It's one of those rare moments in life when your brain doesn't want to accept what your eyes are showing it.

Within moments, a foul smoky chemical smell permeated the cell, a mix of burnt tires and bitter lemon. My eyes, nose, and throat were burning.

I looked in the mirror at my red, watery eyes—stared straight at myself and said,

This is wrong.

What they're doing is wrong.

It doesn't matter what I did to her, what they're doing to me is wrong....

If incarceration is supposed to make me feel sorry for crime victims—or for the beleaguered taxpayers who supply me with room and board—it's having quite the opposite effect. It makes me resent their whining. I swear on all that's holy, I don't want to hear a peep out of any of you about how bad you have it out there. You just don't know. Whatever it is, it just doesn't compare.

I'll read some magazine interview with some pampered Hollywood creampuff fag whimpering about how the last five years were very painful for him because, well, his grandmother died, but somehow he's managed to reach down inside his puny little soul and find the faith to press onward, but fucking Christ, everyone's grandmother dies, and I wish Hollywood Boy could spend some cell time with me, and I bet he'd be crying out for grandma pretty quick.

Or I'll read some mealwormy prose by some ivory-vagina college feminist about how she feels "raped" when men whistle at her on the

street, and it's like, yeah, Betty Boop, you've had a rough, rough life, I simply can't fathom how traumatic it must feel to be whistled at, better lock yourself in a six-by-eight-foot cage like I am so's you can sidestep all that abject martyrdom out there in the cold...cruel... free...world.

In this era of acutely hemorrhaging sympathy toward the plight of Negroes, women, homosexuals, the disabled—and crippled Negro lesbians especially—society's bleeding hearts have apparently bled so profusely that there isn't a drop of pity left for the average convict. While everyone kowtows to a wheelchair-bound nigdyke, her brother who's in jail for selling crack is utterly forgotten.

This exasperating phenomenon of confused compassion alongside callousness reaches perhaps its purest state of polarization in the person of ex-Grecian-Formula-using TV game-show host Bob Barker. The gray-haired emcee is a fanatical animal-lover who once sued artist Joe Coleman for biting the head off a mouse during a live performance. Barker went to bat on behalf of the dead rodent in court. But Barker also rakes in bookoo bucks supplying the corrections industry with items such as soap, shampoo, and plastic snap-on shoes. He throws a hissy-fit over decapitated vermin yet feels no twinge of conscience against making a profit on caged human beings. Well, as they say, if the price is right....

The Human Suffering Gold Rush engendered by the recent prison boom has also given birth to an insufferably righteous, shirt-rending, parasitical entity known as the victim's-rights advocate. It's funny how these advocates were never around when *I* was being victimized. They rarely seem to know the sort of lifelong adversity so familiar to the average convict from childhood onward. Victim's-rights advocates are only attuned to a certain *kind* of human suffering, usually that of fragile little embryos whose lives have been so trauma-free that they're utterly waylaid by their first brush with crime. These self-anointed Protectors of the Overprotected endlessly yammer about breaking the "cycle of abuse," oblivious to the concept that imprisoning someone is a particularly vicious *perpetuation* of that cycle. Imprisonment doesn't settle the score, it ups the ante.

Of course, it isn't a power trip for the victims or their advocates. Not at all. Nuh-uh. No-sirree, Bob. *Nein. Nyet.* No traces of sadism in *their* demeanor. No willful infliction of human suffering going on with *them*. As they see it, you can't inflict suffering on someone who isn't human, and criminals aren't human to them.

The "justice" system should be grateful that scientists have yet to

devise a machine which measures human suffering, for it would incontrovertibly prove how many thousands of times convicts suffer more than their victims, assuming their crime wasn't victimless.

But the average law-and-order armpit-sniffer out there will deny even a molecule of malice on his or her part. No, they seek "justice," that's all.

With the veins in their heads ready to burst open and spew forth hot red waterfalls of righteously angry innocent-lamb's blood, outraged citizens tell us they want perpetrators to know what victims feel like.

Is that so?

By the way you're acting, the rabid manner in which you're seizing control and inflicting harm, I could've sworn that y'all want to know what a *perpetrator* feels like.

The righteous rabble's thirst for blood is unquenchable. They exhibit a sadism more sustained and dishonest than anything a criminal is capable of doing. Or *interested* in doing, even.

They're being "hard on crime," which subliminally raises a phallic hard-on. They're wielding a stiff cock against crime. Both Republicans and Democrats campaign with hard-on-crime platforms. You can't get elected these days without promising to smash criminals' testicles under a pile-driver.

You faggot cowards.

Subconsciously, every one of you who wails about how we aren't being punished severely enough knows you couldn't last twelve hours in here without sobbing and clawing at the walls and crying about how unjust the system is. You'd melt down into a little yellow chicken strip before the sun set. If you're so sure that we're coddled and pampered, commit a fucking felony and come join the country club!

Fear of crime is fear of the masked burglar which prowls in everyone's subconscious. It is fear of one's own dark potential, externalized. The War on Crime becomes a black comedy, an endless hall of mirrors where everyone reflects everyone else's worst fears.

Underlying the outraged citizen's cheap histrionics is an abiding envy of the criminal's boldness. The puffed-up law-abider's craven demands for criminal blood serve to mask his own shame and self-hatred for being covered into submission without ever having to be punished. Those who've been scared into playing by the rules reserve a special animosity for those who haven't. Buried within every oversocialized buffoon's psyche is a profound humiliation at having been whipped into line by the law. No one hates a criminal

more than someone with the nagging awareness of having been frightened into compliance.

Shoved deep within his long-abandoned savage heart, every tough-on-crime goody-two-shoes knows there are several crimes he would have *loved* to have committed but was too chickenshit to make a move:

“Goddamnit, I’m so afraid of the rich and powerful that I’ve buckled down and followed their rules, even though it’s given me ulcers and driven me into debt, so, Officer, please, string up his balls for daring to act out his baser impulses.”

If you are suffering, people will find a way to rationalize why you deserve it. This refers, of course, only to *your* suffering. *Theirs* is always cause for outrage.

No, criminals don’t suffer—it’s a “debt” they owe. They committed crimes, so they deserve it.

Deserve WHAT?

How much punishment is enough?

And how much is so severe that it turns the petty criminal into a murderer?

This whole idea of someone objectively “deserving” punishment for their actions is an antiquated, pseudo-biblical concept and almost entirely foreign to me. “Crime” is “sin” which doesn’t trust God to do the punishing.

But the justice system, which peddles such myths for profit, must scramble to depict the victim’s suffering as never-ending and the convict’s suffering as nonexistent. It becomes a situation where the criminal “deserves” everything that happens to him—and worse—while the “victim” never does. Where I “deserve” punishment for beating her up, but she didn’t “deserve” being beaten up for threatening me and attacking me and draining my forgiveness until there was none left. The line of responsibility is never that clear, yet the system has to pretend that it is.

“But if you didn’t beat her up, you wouldn’t be here.”

But if she didn’t bloody my nose after nine months of threatening to kill me, I wouldn’t have beaten her up.

More to the point—if the prosecutor didn’t decide to press charges against me, then hand me over to people who would strip me naked, dress me in a jumpsuit, place shackles on my ankles, run a chain through a small steel black box which locked over my handcuffs, put me on a bus, and then *drive* me here, I wouldn’t be here.

Let’s make it clear about everyone who made a decision in this

process, all right? No one’s hands were tied, except mine—*literally*—at the end of the process. But my actions alone didn’t land me here.

She made a decision to hit me.

I made a decision to hit her back.

And the justice system made a *series* of decisions which sealed me in a bug jar.

Guilt. No one wants to claim it, and with good reason. If they did, it would create two immediate problems:

They couldn’t speak well of themselves;

They couldn’t talk shit about others.

The stereotype is that everyone *in here* cries that they’re innocent, when in truth, everyone *out there* is acting innocent. Prisoners don’t claim innocence nearly as much as they insist they aren’t the only guilty ones.

A recent book about the prison industry stated that more than 70% of all adult Americans have committed at least one felony offense in their lives, yet fewer than one percent of Americans are incarcerated. So if you’re one of the invisible unconvicted felons who still roams free, I’d suggest you speak softly, step lightly, and consider yourself lucky.

Me, well, luck’s never been my bag.

It’s not like I have a vagina and can get away with being violent.

It’s not like I’m a Kennedy and can get away with rape and murder.

It’s not like I’m one of the Bush boys, who can do millions in fraudulent banking deals and not do a day in jail for it.

It’s not like I’m the son of Portland’s police chief, who gets caught with a fat sack of cocaine and doesn’t do a day in jail for it.

It’s not like I’m the Portland judge who received eighteen citations for Driving Under the Influence and didn’t do a day in jail for them.

It’s not like I’m the seven-foot-tall pear-shaped guard in here who was rumored to have slipped his schlong between his niece’s legs and didn’t do a day in jail for it.

It’s not like I’m the guard down in the laundry room who was rumored to have hid in the penitentiary for three days while police were looking to serve a warrant on him for wife-beating and who never did a day in jail for it.

It’s not like I’m the chubby, red-nosed bulldyke guard rumored to have battered her lezzie lover in the penitentiary parking lot and who didn’t do a day in jail for it.

It’s not like I’m one of the estimated fifty percent or more of police nationwide who’ve assaulted others, particularly their spouses, without ever doing a day in jail for it.

It's not like cop-killers get treated far more severely than cops who kill.

It's not like I'm one of the wealthy, who can afford good lawyers to exonerate them from all sorts of crimes so they never have to do a day in jail for it.

No, it's not like I'm one of the wealthy, whose smooth, easy lives will be seen by a wealthy judge as working in their *favor*, rather than against them, when the truth is that they have far less reason or need to commit crimes than a poor person.

What was that you were saying about justice? Speak up—it's *really* hard to hear you.

I might buy into your definitions of good and bad, of crime and punishment, if they weren't so selectively applied.

But the word "good," at least as it issues from your mouth like a halitosis cloud, only seems like a nicer word for "powerful."

So don't talk to me about justice and accountability. I'm in NO FUCKING MOOD to hear it. Your softly spoken homilies are starting to make my ears burn.

You know, my brother was brutally murdered, and yet I don't blame every criminal on earth for it. I don't even blame every murderer—only the person who did it, who was never caught.

Crime may be a human sickness, but so is an inability to forgive. So is a sadistic lust to punish which cowers behind bullshit notions such as "justice."

I've been on the receiving end of crimes throughout my life. Note that I don't say that I've been "victimized" by crime—I've had them happen to me.

Ouch, I've been burglarized.

Ooh, I've been sexually molested.

Yowie, I've been robbed at gunpoint.

Yikes, I've been stalked and threatened.

Criminy, I've been assaulted—repeatedly, so I have a keen sense of how much suffering my brave "victim" endured.

I know what the immediate effects of being on the receiving end of crime are, and I know what the long-term effects are.

But unlike the professional victims, I *also* know what it's like to be incarcerated. And unless you know it from both ends like I do, you aren't qualified to comment on it like I am. Really. You're just another hundred-percent expert with zero-percent experience, so sit down and quit yappin' before I give you several good reasons to keep feeling like a victim.

I speak from hard experience when I tell you this—being burglarized, molested, robbed, stalked, threatened, assaulted, and incarcerated all made me suffer...

...with one big difference—incarceration is *much* worse than any of the others.

Of all the bad things that have ever happened to me, being thrown in a box and stripped of all freedom, dignity, and respect—for months and now *years*—is more painful, dehumanizing...and *criminal*...than everything else combined.

Just because the system has so much power that it is afforded the semantic privilege of defining its predations as "justice" rather than "crimes" doesn't mean the state isn't inflicting human suffering on a scale much more massive than all "criminals" combined.

No matter how hard they try to focus all the attention on what I've done, my "criminal act" doesn't justify their "act of justice."

Two wrongs don't make a right. As Gandhi said, an eye for an eye just makes the whole world go blind.

And then someone killed him.

And putting someone in a cage is a passive-aggressive way of killing them from the inside-out.

Part of the new sharp-fanged torture-the-criminals ethos is a jettisoning of even the pretense of reform or rehabilitation. They don't even use those words anymore, rubbing our noses in the idea that we are here to be PUNISHED. Lock 'em up...throw away the key...and maybe rape or murder 'em in there, if they know what's good for 'em.

Corrections officials argued that since the recidivism rate was so high, programs designed to rehabilitate the felon didn't work.

They never seemed to question whether it might have been the putting-people-in-cages part that didn't work.

Still, to appease concerned citizens who might murmur about the adverse effects of pure punishment, the D.O.C. makes a limp-dick gesture at wallpapering our minds with happy faces through a series of "cognitive restructuring" classes which most inmates have to attend in order to earn good-time credits.

These classes boast snappy titles such as "Pathfinders," "Breaking Barriers," and "Cage Your Rage." They teach us to correct our "thinking errors" so we won't want to shoot meth, steal cars, or beat bitches anymore. They peddle the self-help movement's idiot-level happy-speak, dumbed-down even further to make it digestible for convicts.

By harping on our "thinking errors," the teachers of these classes

seem never to have considered that maybe *they're* the ones whose thinking is screwy.

As it stands, these are the golden lessons the system is teaching me:

Throwing me in a toilet will help me get clean.

Depriving me of respect will raise my self-esteem.

Denying me love will make me more loving.

Treating me as if I'm subhuman will bring out the best in me.

Constantly acting as if I'm not to be trusted will make me willing to act more trustworthy.

Removing me from society will facilitate my social adjustment.

I owe a debt to a society which owes nothing to me.

Placing me in a cage will make me less violent.

What I did to my victim was bad, but what the system is doing to me is good.

Hurting me far worse than I hurt my victim will make me feel bad about her suffering instead of mine.

I am accountable to the government for the suffering I inflicted on my victim, but the government is not accountable for the suffering it inflicts on me.

It was a bad thing that I held my girlfriend in a car against her will for ten minutes, but it's a good thing for the government to hold me in a cage against my will for two-and-a-half years.

It's a bad thing to steal \$10 from someone in a dark alley, but it's a good thing for the government to steal nearly half my wages in full daylight for as long as I live.

It's a bad thing to kill one person, but it's a good thing when the government kills millions all over the world.

It's a bad thing to sell marijuana to someone who wants it, but it's a good thing for the government to shove pharmaceuticals down the throats of inmates who don't want them.

It's a bad thing to force someone to strip naked, but it's a good thing when the government does it to me and tells me to spread my cheeks and cough.

I freely chose to commit my crime, but the government had no choice but to lock me up for it.

The government and its corporate friends aren't the ones forcing the taxpayers to pay for this—I am.

I, not the government, am the one who fails to see the victims of my actions as human.

I should never take the law into my own hands.

I should never presume that the right to hurt others is mine.

The leader of a class insultingly titled "Thinking for a Change," a protected-looking dyed-blond woman who let it slip that she lives in a community so wealthy that ex-felons are forbidden from home ownership there, kept telling us, "The public is fed up with you guys."

Yes, the public is fed up with all that crime they see on their TVs, and, gosh-diggity-durnit, they feel something has to be done about it.

Their TVs tell them very little about how the American standard of living is free-falling and how kids' test scores and workers' wages are plopping into the toilet and how our fine country is violently cleaving into a moat-rimmed wealthy few surrounded by vast flatlands of peasants, but their TVs tell them a lot about a crime wave that's right around their corner.

Hot, delusive cathode rays inflame you by overhyping sensational cases, wispy little white girls ass-fucked and decapitated, bloody cum stains on Sunday-school dresses, wispy little white girls who went to school where persecuted nerdlings spray classmates with locust swarms of bullets, persecuted nerdlings whose hotheaded disgruntled-worker fathers heave hand grenades at McDonald's Playland, splattering innocent skulls open like squashed tomatoes, TV-industrial prison pimps hyping freakish crimes to where you're hiding behind your couch, afraid of all those psychopathic crack-puffing black-brick nigga thugz smashing through your TV screen and snatching your family heirlooms, afraid of all those lizard-skinned chomos lurking in the bushes ready to slice a yellowy fingernail through your six-year-old daughter's hymen.

It can happen anywhere, they tell you. No one is safe.

The public is hypnotized and snake-charmed and brain-damaged by television to where they're mentally crippled, utterly incapable of analysis or discernment. It's all image, myth, and emotion now. They're easy to play.

They've played you.

There's no crime wave. It's a hoax.

Fear of violent crime is through the roof. It's like mercury shooting straight up a thermometer and bursting through the glass.

Actual violent crime is lower than it was in the 1970s, when no one was quite so afraid of it.

TV has created a mass crime panic in order to justify the mass prison buildup.

Two-thirds of American inmates weren't convicted of doing *anything* violent, not even simple assault, much less serial murder or child rape.

The government doesn't give a fuck about your safety, you idiots.

They WANT you to get robbed, raped, and murdered, suckers. Then they'll cage the perps and make money on everyone's suffering. You think they'd care about your precious victimization if they weren't getting paid for it?

It's a business, honey.

The sickest business there is.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, total spending on corrections in America eclipsed total spending on education. More money is now spent on jails than on schools. The nation grows dumber and more enslaved.

They aren't building prisons to keep pace with rising crime, because crime is falling. They're expanding the definition of crime to fill all the beds they've built. It's like the hotel business—they have to keep the beds filled.

There are now more than TWO MILLION Americans filling those steel beds.

Thirty years ago, it was less than two hundred thousand.

A thousand-percent rise...and rising, rising. The largest, most rapid prison expansion in world history. The Land of the Free imprisons more people than anywhere else on earth. More than Russia. More than notoriously repressive China, which has four times as many people as America yet fewer total prisoners. Less than five percent of the world's population lives within the USA's borders. A full *quarter* of the world's inmates live within the USA's jails and prisons. Other industrialized nations function fine with similar crime rates and drastically lower incarceration rates.

I'm one of the ten thousand or so unfortunates currently penned up in Oregon's human zoos. Over the next eight years, Oregon's justice officials plan to cram another five thousand people within cages.

That's not in response to a rise in crime, which is declining—yet Oregon's officials plan to increase the state's number of prisoners by fifty percent.

The predictions have been steady enough that their author joked Wednesday that she simply places a ruler at a slant and draws the same line every time.

—*The Oregonian*, "State Predicts Prison Population Will Continue Steady Rise,"
3/30/2000

She *joked* about it.

So what's the Oregon Department of Corrections' main objective? Public safety? Victims' restitution? Inmate rehabilitation? Inmate *punishment*?

No:

Maintaining growth is still the main issue for the Department of Corrections.

—Corrections Director David Cook, quoted in the same *Oregonian* article

Jokes and slanted rulers and maintaining growth. They've become so arrogant and stricken with feelings of omnipotence that they don't even hide what it's all about anymore:

Money.

Crime doesn't pay? For the prison-builders, it does. For judges and lawyers, it does. For every parasitic industry which provides goods and services to the prison-industrial complex, it does. Crime is their bottom line.

They've made a huge business out of defining sin and punishing sinners. They've made Hell into a highly profitable amusement park. Hell, Incorporated.

The only ones who seem to realize it's a business are the prisoners and the entrepreneurs. Everyone else—the poor saps stuck in the middle paying the tab—think it has something to do with right and wrong.

I am money in the bank to them. Job security. Their children's future. I'm a tiny ink spot on a bar graph pointing upward erectionlike toward maximum profits. I don't owe a debt to them; they're making money off me.

The prison boom. A bull market for crime and punishment. America's fastest-growing industry. And the same Wall Street hairy-backed swine who made billions in the defense industry by lying to Americans that the Russians had more weapons than us are now making billions by fanning the public's fear of a nonexistent crime epidemic.

And those millionaires and billionaires will push for harsher laws and longer sentences to ensure their death camps operate at peak capacity. And like always, they'll get their way.

First-time offenders are now going down for years. Repeat offenders are getting buried for decades. No more probation, no more good-time credits, no more diversion programs or community service. Those are all nice, but not nearly as profitable

The tumor grows. Crime. Guilt. Punishment. Money. Money. Money.

One day when it's far too late, all the tough-on-crime TV-nation dupes will fear going to prison more than they fear being victimized by crime, but by then the system will be so engorged on human blood, they won't be able to stop it. They'll put a big wall around the country, and you'll either be a prisoner or a guard. And you think I'm speaking metaphorically, don't you?

There are only two constant principles in all moral systems:

It's good if it enhances my survival; and

If it harms you in order to enhance my survival, it's even better.

So it's natural that I'd see things differently than the prison-builders.

You're using my life as a bingo chip just so you can feel snuggly all nestled in your den with the crackling fireplace and shag carpet and seven-foot TV screen and bowl of hot popcorn? I'm to roast in hell just so your pampered, protected mind can project a fragile hologram of security? You'll justify any atrocity against me just so you can feel safe? No. I don't think so.

You can't slice a turd into perfect squares. And you can't isolate guilt and wrongdoing like the Department of Corrections tries to do.

Incarceration will always fail in its stated purpose because it tries to pull off a psychologically impossible magic trick:

It attempts to quarantine all potential for evil outside of itself.

Despite the best efforts of those whose foolish law books seek to crystallize good and evil, to etch right and wrong onto stone tablets, these pixie-dust-sprinkled cosmic forces remain much more ethereal than that. You can't trap the laws of cause and effect within a yellowing, gilt-edged law book.

All moral systems seem destined to boomerang upon themselves.

The justice system, by weight of its own guilt, will one day fall to the ground like a sick, old, dying elephant.

It will fall prey to poetic justice, which is always more powerful than official justice.

Things change. One era's good guys become the next era's villains.

Society used to view slaves as barbarians, but now the slaveowners find that role foisted on them.

And so—one day—it will be with humans in cages and those who put them there.

One day, the guardians of public accountability will be held accountable for *their* actions, and it won't be pretty.

One day, the finger-pointers will have millions of fingers pointing at them.

Like the key-holders keep reminding me, you can't harm someone, pretend it's a good thing, and not suffer the consequences. They'd do well to learn the same lessons they keep force-feeding me.

Maybe one day, using the same specious two-wrongs-make-a-right logic the justice system is using to step on my back and make money, I'll be able to put them in cages and show them it's wrong to put peo-

ple in cages. Maybe like them, I'll be able to inflict pain and in an emotionless voice tell them how very much they deserve it.

Ahhh, justice....

I'm not suggesting that the world would be a rosier meadow if we just let everyone run around raping, robbing, and stabbing, although it would be fun to watch how truly "tough" all the tough-on-crime fanatics are when left to their own devices.

But some questions, class—why does crime happen? And what's a logical response to it?

Whoops—sorry for getting so pragmatic. I should've realized that the anti-crime industry doesn't exist to understand crime and prevent its occurrence. No, it operates more like voodoo than a social science. It uses crime as an excuse to set up a grand psychodramatic spectacle, a High Mass based on the Big Tribe's ceremonial needs of guilt and expiation.

I currently reside at a "penitentiary," which uses the same root word as "penance." But penance leads to absolution, and I don't think that's what they have in mind here, at least not for me. Society's being redeemed through my suffering, but I ain't.

Purgatory is where you suffer for your sins and are cleansed. Hell is where you suffer for them forever.

This isn't purgatory, this is hell.

This is the Sin Factory—I'm not here to be washed of sin, but to be stained with it. I'm not being held for years in order to be purged of guilt; I'm trapped here to ensure that I'm removed for as long as possible from everything that might help me get clean.

I'm being used as a pawn on a giant playing board called *Sin: The Game*. They don't want to redeem everyone in this little sporting event—the victim's redemption, and by extension society's ability to view itself as good, comes at my expense. Like a seesaw, they are elevated only to the degree that I fall.

For me to get better would ruin everything for them.

Most guys never get better.

Perhaps the main reason criminals keep coming back through the "revolving door" revolves around this mystical psychological carcinogen known as guilt.

Shortly after I came to prison, I thought of getting the word FELON tattooed on my chest. My version of a pink triangle, a scarlet letter, or a dunce cap. An emblem of the fact that I'm forever branded, stained, and stigmatized in society's eyes.

Once a felon, always a felon. It's never over. You are never absolved. Nothing ever gets stamped that says, "Debt paid...sins forgiven." Society seems to hate you at least as much for the fact that you've been to prison as for the fact that you've committed crimes. Probably more.

The idea of forgiveness has been eliminated. If the state's attitude was, "Look, we feel you've done wrong, but if you accept the punishment, we'll forgive you and make you a part of us again," the recidivism rate would plummet. But by refusing to forgive the criminal, they imbue him with an attitude of defiance, of desperation, of what's the use, of nothing will make them happy.

There is a sense that once you go to prison, your life is irreparably damaged. Things spiral downward from that point on.

It's like that TV show *The Prisoner* from the 1960s—every time he tried escaping the island, a big white balloon came and swallowed him up, spitting him back where he belonged.

Imprisonment becomes an incurable psychological syndrome. Convicts refer to it as being "institutionalized." It means, as one forty-three-year-old convict who's spent twenty-five years behind bars told me, feeling more at ease in here than out there. It means they've not only captured your body—they have your mind, too. And even if your body gets released into the real world for a little while, you'll be back, because your mind never leaves.

With a recidivism rate somewhere around 90%, the Department of Corrections is free to explain exactly what it's correcting. They'll just shrug, say they don't know why criminals aren't responding to their treatment, and keep building more prisons.

The truth—which the D.O.C. will naturally deny—is that they don't want criminals to get better. That's the *last* thing they want. The system is designed to keep feeding on itself. It thrives on repeat customers.

The system exists to cement your failure.

If you weren't a criminal when you went in, you will be when you get out. And it has little to do with learning new criminal techniques and everything to do with trauma and ostracism and having your emotional landscape firebombed and your hopes crushed. It isn't a "crime school" in the popularly understood sense, meaning that cons give workshops on lockpicking and meth-cooking, but it's a devastating psychological modification program which renders you almost totally incapable of reintegrating into society. It isn't a crime school so much as it's a University of Hatred.

When I ask cons what they're learning from all this, the answer is always the same:

I'm learning to hate.

I'm learning to hate.

I'm learning to hate.

Oh, God, you can't imagine the hatred.

The hatred one might feel if he'd been subjected to forced brain surgery under bright lights with no anesthesia which altered him so extensively that there was nothing he could do to get back to his prior state, but not so thoroughly that he wasn't constantly, painfully, humiliatingly aware that he'd been changed.

A dangerous, dangerous hatred.

A hatred that makes me want to peel my skin off, twist it into a noose, and lynch you with it.

A hatred that makes me want to eat these cell bars and spit steel shanks through your rib cage.

A hatred that cakes into my soul like burnt crust inside a casserole dish that's been baking in the oven too long. Can't scrub it off now; it's permanent.

A hatred so intense, I feel I can faint from it. A hatred so dizzying, I'll hold the guard rail as I walk down the old steel stairwell to keep from falling. A hatred so exhausting, opening my eyes in the morning feels like Band-Aids being ripped from raw skin.

An emotional biohazard. High-torqued. Ratcheted up to maximum tension.

My diastolic blood pressure shot up ten points.

There's a stabbing pain in my chest.

There's a lot more gray in my hair.

And when people—even friendly ones—are within arm's reach of me, an urge erupts to start swinging wildly at their heads. I never felt that way before.

Look what they've done to my brain.

There's a big blood clot in there that I struggle to lance and spill onto paper.

There's a big white balloon in my head that's being squeezed on all sides. They're making it squeak. Stop them, they're making it squeak.

Low-level chronic claustrophobia slowly driving me mad.

I can't leave.

They won't let me leave.

Motherfuckers won't let me leave.

They won't forgive me for what I did—and I didn't even do it to

them—but I'm supposed to forgive them for what they've done to me?

Won't happen. Couldn't happen even if I wanted it to. The human mind doesn't work that way. The human body doesn't work that way. When you've been made to suffer at another's hands, you want revenge. They understand that principle in the crime victim, but never in the criminal. My thirst for vengeance isn't evidence that I'm a monster; it's proof that I'm a human being. Only an android could go through this and not want revenge. Only a totally broken individual wouldn't want to reclaim the power they've taken away.

Prison aims to break you.

Instead of fixing what's wrong with you, they destroy everything that wasn't already broken.

They seek to crush your will and render you as toothlessly, drooling-ly compliant as the law-abiders, to beat all the fight out of you. To break you and laugh that you're broken. To keep you alive for the pleasure of watching you die.

They place roadblock after roadblock in front of you, hoping your engine finally stalls and coughs up a last smoky puff of surrender.

They shove you down so far and make it such an effort to climb back up, it's a relief to stay down. You're trapped inside a thousand-foot-high steel drum whose cylindrical walls are greased, and every time you get ten feet up, you slide back to the bottom again.

It's their institution, and they exist to institutionalize you. They'd love for you to succumb to their state-sponsored lobotomy.

They smash you so thoroughly that when you get out, you'll either commit no crimes...or really big ones.

Charles Manson was a car thief until he spent some time in prison.

Jeffrey Dahmer was a two-bit child molester until he spent some time in prison.

I won't beat anyone up anymore. I might not touch them...or I might kill them...but I won't beat them up anymore.

And my rage, naturally, will be entirely my fault. They inject me with a virus, strap me to a steel bed and refuse medication, then blame me for getting sick.

It's like a parent who beats his kid until he's crippled, then beats him again until he can't walk anymore.

Society's starting to realize that spanking kids doesn't improve their behavior, yet they're still tragically blind about the long-term effects of putting adults in cages.

When a sacrifice is needed, understanding only gets in the way.

And yet the ugly, ugly truth is that criminals, over the long trajectory

of life, have typically suffered far more than any of their victims.

This may be why crime victims come unglued over their victimization to a degree far beyond any immediate suffering—because the criminal pops the little bubble in which the victim had heretofore encased themselves. The criminal gives them a taste of the pain, ugliness, and severe emotional spoilage which *defines* the criminal's life rather than interrupts it. The criminal plucks a shiny pear from the tree and shows that it, too, can be bruised.

I look at all the buff, tattooed, evil dudes in here, and I wonder how many little boys were crying a generation ago. How many families totaled by rage and despair. How many dads missing. How many cold, cold mothers. Look at all the dead faces. Too much crustacean shell to ever peel away—only newer, harder, deader layers piled on top. Too late now.

The black kid who told me of blurry memories just before he was sent to a foster home of sitting at the dinner table in front of a plate of human shit his parents were forcing him to eat.

The wacky skinhead whose parents were such druggies that he was delivered in the hospital room frying on acid and has heard voices in his head all his life.

The morose middle-aged Injun who says that ever since his older brothers coerced him into shooting the neighbors' dog when he was five, he's had an invisible magnet around his head which attracts trouble.

The ones who call themselves "state-raised," who've leapfrogged through their lives from group homes to juvenile detention centers to adult prisons. They were born needy and never had those needs met and those needs festered and grew uglier until now they're fossilized and unreachable.

Seeking to defuse little firecrackers, society turned them into time bombs.

An old peckerwood with the stolidity of a felonious Otto von Bismarck told me of how he wants to become a sniper when he's released, specializing in justice officials. His fantasies were chillingly elaborate, right down to the sort of rifle he'd use and what the best sort of escape routes would be.

A robber who's spending twenty years told me he wants to murder his parole officer and every family member of the crime partner who ratted him out—but he doesn't want to kill his partner. Just all of his family members, and let the cheese-eating little rodent live with that.

Similarly, an impossibly muscular meth cook with veins in his neck the size of tree roots wants to slaughter every child of the DA who prosecuted him.

An Indian with over two hundred felony convictions has a plan for the next time they raid his trailer to bust him on some minor parole violation—he'll press a dynamite plunger and blow up everything within an acre of ground zero. He'll get killed, but so will all the cops.

A pensive punk-rock kid who grew up watching his mom shoot dope tells me he wants to blow up things when he gets out. It doesn't matter what—he just wants to blow up things.

Explosions. That fantasy comes up a lot. Everything they've internalized for years finally comes out in a scorching, all-destroying flameball.

I've been down for over two years now, and being on the "outs" is just a dim, long-buried memory, the stuff of dreams.

I've lost sight of the world beyond these walls. Can I ever truly be a part of that world again?

All the hard-boiled convict types who looked so extreme to me when I first fell now look utterly normal. And when a new guy fresh off the streets moves into my cell, he looks like a new fish and I feel like the convict.

And I find myself using prison slang without a hint of artifice.

And I wish I could get one of those high-paying prison jobs, the ones that pay \$48 a month.

And, well, this prison's better than the last one.

And that chicken stir-fry we had for lunch was really screamin'.

And, oh, how luxurious that tiny plastic mattress feels when I crawl atop it at night.

And here I am with all my friends.

Oh God, please God, please please please please God, don't tell me I'm getting used to this.

This here caged gorilla will spend another three months in captivity before the gates open like a dilated anus and excrete me.

I'll leave prison more superhuman and subhuman than when I entered—but not more human. More shell-shocked than I've ever been before, and yet forced to walk a tightrope.

A friend of mine who knows Charles Manson once asked him what he'd like to do if he were ever released. Charlie said he wanted to go and sit under a tree.

I'm with Charlie. I'd like to take a bath and play with my Chihuahua. Then maybe open a door, walk outside—I haven't been able to do that for more than two years—and go buy a cup of fresh-brewed coffee.

Police lights spinning in my rear-view mirror will have an entirely new meaning now...the real possibility of being resealed in a living coffin.

The crowning jewel of my Paranoia Pyramid is the knowledge that I'll be released into the same state inhabited by that foul-tempered, huge-nostriled, gaping-cunted voodoo doll I beat up.

Having to breathe the same air as her...knowing that since they believed her baby-faced victimology rumba the first time around, all it would take from her would be one phone call to lock me up again.

"Um...he raped me, officer...oh, sure it was horrible...sure, I'll testify."

Anne is telling people that she's bought a gun and that she'll never be able to rest as long as I'm alive and I'd better stay away from her, and let's just forget that she's the one on record saying she can't stay away from me, and on record threatening to follow me wherever I go and kill me, and the one who kept saying she was going to buy a gun and kill me before any of this happened, and let's not think about the fact that she used to say she wished I'd stalk her like she stalked me, and that she was the one who'd show up uninvited on my doorstep like a stray cat begging for more milk, and that she's the one who stalked ex-boyfriends with names such as Rod and Branch and some dude who works in a Portland restaurant and would prefer I didn't mention his name. Let's forget that in the year we were together, people named Brandon, Jane, and Darcy called the police on Anne for stalking, threatening, and attacking them, respectively.

Let's just put all that out of our minds and pretend that I'm the one who fits the stalker mold.

OK?

Anne, the most ambitious practitioner of psychological projection on earth, has gone so far as to say she fears I'll want to get back with her and be her boyfriend again.

Yeah, snookums, and those Negroes sure used to lynch a lotta Klansmen down South, didn't they?

Ms. Pignose is giving me a swamp thicket's worth of reasons to suspect foul play from her camp when I bust loose from the gates.

And then, on the day I'm spending my third consecutive birthday behind bars, the clouds part and Jehovah God winks down on me:

Wee Lady Anne is in jail for assault!

The frail li'l orchid plowed over a bicyclist with her car after screaming "I hate bicyclists!" and then fled the scene! Ay yi yi, if it's heinous for a man to hit a woman because of the strength differential, how much worse is it for a motorist to assault a bicyclist with her car?

Upon hearing the news, a cannonball of white-light energy shoots up my spine. A giddy, volcanic surge of righteous revenge splats out of every pore.