

It has been said that if God didn't exist, we'd have to invent Him. It is likewise true that where no knives exist, we are forced to make shanks.

Throughout the Oregon penal system in which I recently enjoyed a twenty-nine-month sabbatical, the accepted term for a homemade stabbing implement was "shank." The word is both a noun and a verb: You use a shank to shank someone, preferably under his armpit with the hope of popping a lung. Other cons in other systems refer to these charmingly DIY flesh-rippers as "shivs," "bangers," "irons," and "burners." Because I am unabashedly Americentric, I wasted no time researching what Limey inmates call them—you lost the war, you look it up yourself. And get the hell out of Ireland while you're at it.

The overseers of Oregon's county jails seemed more concerned about shanks—and the pricey lawsuits that might arise from rampant jailhouse shanking—than did state penitentiary officials. This concern was manifest in the fact that any vaguely shanklike jailhouse supplies—pencils, toothbrushes, etc.—were provided to us in lengths not exceeding the average Asian penis. Once you wrapped your paw around a tiny jailhouse pencil or toothbrush, only a centimeter or so's worth of shanking material timidly protruded from your grip, enough to pierce someone's skin and not much else.

By contrast, Oregon State Penitentiary was the Land of a Thousand Shanks, each one a sparkling testament to Yankee ingenuity. The most durable shanks were fashioned out of metal devices spirited from the machine shop through the time-honored tradition of "keistering," i.e., smuggling contraband in one's rectum, a process which rendered it imperative to sharpen one's shank only AFTER keistering it. Common items purchased from the prison canteen—pens, hair picks, toothbrushes, disposable razors, et al—were also used to make a right good shank. After the occasional pork-chop dinner, the nighttime air would hum with the sound of convicts filing pork-chop bones down to ice-pick sharpness on their concrete cell floors. I once heard of a shank made from a humble sheet of paper rolled into a pointy conical shape and coated with toothpaste in an elaborate curing process.

"The trick to shanking someone isn't in the sticking, homes," a Mexican gangsta who punctuated every sentence with a superfluous "homes" or "eh?" once told me. "The trick is in the ripping, eh?" he said, a teardrop tattooed beneath one eye. "You stick it in him, you just gonna hurt him, homes. You stick it in him, then you rip it sideways, eh? That way, you KILL him, homes."

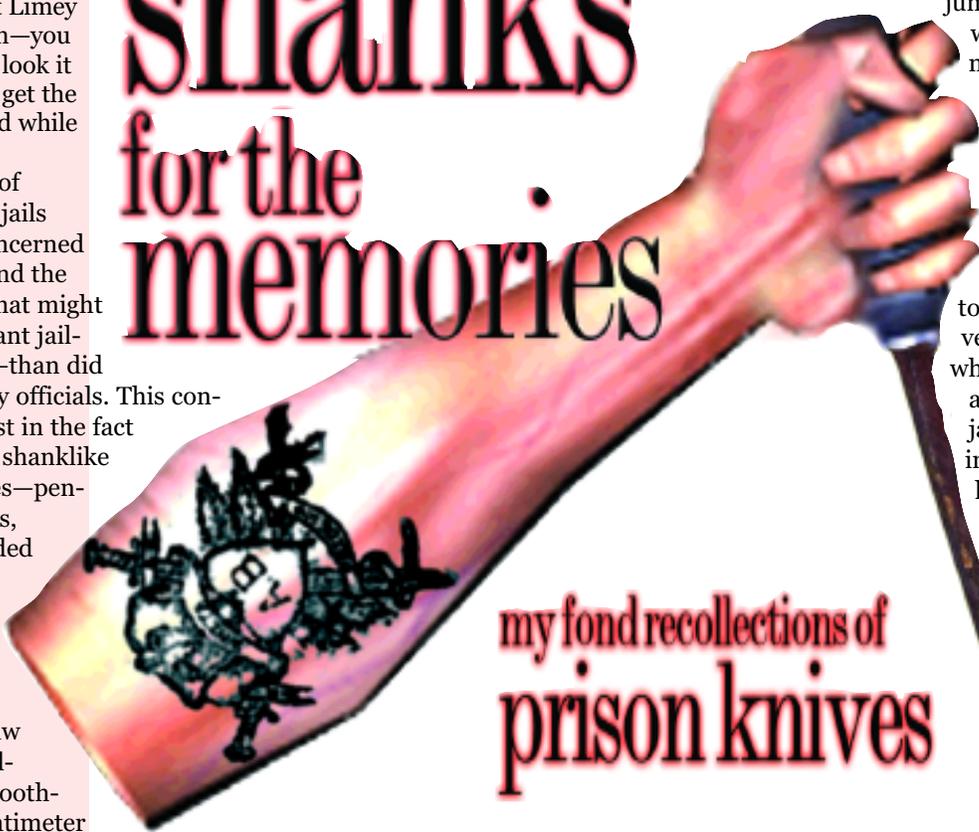
He said he once stuck-and-ripped two inmates in a California pen while serving a seven-year-set for a botched LA drive-by shooting. "They was giving me static, homes," he said, "so I killed them, eh?"

Most shankings at Oregon State Penitentiary occurred while Yard Line was being called in and a thousand or so convicts huddled together near the gated entrance leading back to the cellblocks, making it easy to stick someone like a pig and disappear in the crowd. I only heard of one shanking—a non-fatal one—during my stint there. Guards were able to find the victim by following the trail of bright-red splotches leading back to his cell.

I once stood next to an AIDS-ravaged con, a dried-out strip of human beef jerky strung tightly across a thin jumble of bones, as Yard Line was being called in. He told me that when he served time in Utah, another inmate used his own long, unclipped fingernail as a shank and was able to impale someone's eyeball with it. As I grew increasingly anxious for the gate to open, AIDS Boy vowed vengeance against an inmate who'd refused to pay him for a drug debt. He opened his jacket and flashed me a six-inch rusty nail shoved snugly within a pen's plastic sheath. "I'll get him," he spat. "I'll get him if it's the last thing I do." I made a mental note to never do anything that might remotely offend this fellow.

As opposed to the sneak-attack shanking, a "strapdown" refers to a formal knife fight between two or more

shanks for the memories



my fond recollections of
prison knives

inmates, usually for the purpose of settling a power dispute. The term arose from the practice of using leather straps to secure shanks to both hands so they don't come loose during battle. A legendary peckerwood inmate with a walrus mustache and a body carved from granite gained his reputation after a strapdown to determine which racial group would control the prison's drug trade. He entered a small room along with a black, a Mexican, and a Native American. He emerged from the room as the only survivor.

To discourage shankings, Oregon corrections officials go beyond disciplinary sanctions and typically file new criminal weapons charges against the shankee, meaning extra years trapped in the Valley of Shanks. This policy acquired a tragicomic flavor in the case of a small, harmless, septuagenarian koala bear of a man I knew who had altered his disposable razor so he could cut paper for his insufferably gay pastel-tinged art projects. When guards searched the old bastard's locker only months before he was due to be released, they determined that this innocent device was indeed a shank and whisked him away to county jail to face new weapons charges, adding further insult to his already shankless existence.