

April 4, 1996

Dear Tim:

I want to know why you would do something like that because to me you sound pretty intelligent. To do something like that makes you look stupid.

Your new friend,
Bill

April 14, 1996

Dear Bill:

Why would I do something so stupid? I guess that's the \$zillion dollar question. Looking back I'd have to say that it was kinda stupid. At that time we thought we were trying to stop a war. Times were different in the early eighties. (Well, maybe not so different...) You probably don't remember what it was like having Ronald Reagan as president or all the killings the CIA and its secret armies were doing in El Salvador and Guatemala. I'd been to those places and I knew people who had been killed fighting for very simple things that we all take for granted here - to be able to make enough money to feed your family, to not have to worry about being taken away in the night by the police just because you are a student leader or a union organizer or an Indian. It was very personal for me.

A lot of people around the country here were protesting in many different ways. We talked about trying to raise the political cost for the government by causing damage to their "war machine." In the end it wasn't very effective and we put innocent people at risk. At the time it felt like an emergency. It was, but there were still other more creative, nonviolent things we could have done which might have been more effective too.

One thing I'd say, though, is that you don't always (if ever) know ahead of time that some form of protest or community action will be effective. Often you don't know until you try. After we were arrested, we learned that the U.S. Army had rejected suggestions that they invade Central America to stop the revolutions there. In their report they mentioned groups like ours and talked about the probable social consequences of sending U.S. troops to that region. So who knows? Maybe we did play a small role.

Maybe what we did was stupid in the end. I still respect the part of myself that was willing to sacrifice for the freedom and well-being of others. I'd have to say that I feel worse about how this affected my family, or perhaps about the ways I've neglected or mistreated certain friends in the past than about the things that put me in prison. When I lie awake on my bunk at night, those are the things that run through my head - not my "criminal offenses."

Stay strong and clear,
Tim

Ideología

Te diría que soy materialista
como Marx tanto como García Márquez.
No creo en dios ni diosa
tanto como humanidad.
Creo en los actos como en los sueños
y las obras de las manos
tanto como ojos.
Creo en arriba, abajo
cerca y lejos
al frente y a detrás.
Creo en el dialéctico y tengo fe en la contradicción.
Creo en la pena de la estrella que se muere.
Creo en el amor de la tierra
y el sufrimiento del mar.
Creo en la sangre de maíz
el sensorio del trigo
y la explosión del olivar.
Creo en la belleza de la revolución
aun la ternura de las armas.
Yo creo en el mundo real
duro como la flor
duro como la lágrima
duro como el beso que se forma
en los labios del preso
solo en su celda.
Sí, yo creo en este mundo
tan duro, tan etéreo
donde la más bella bondad
sobrevive por la tortura más incalificable
y nuestra más profunda venganza
será el perdón.

Ideology

I would say to you that I'm a materialist
Like Marx as much as García-Márquez.
I don't believe in god nor goddess.
I believe in nature
as much as humanity.
I believe in the act, as in the dream
and in the works of the hands
as much as of the eyes.
I believe in up, down
near and far
front and back.
I believe in the dialectic,
and I have faith in the contradiction.
I believe in the pain of a star that dies.
I believe in the love of earth
and the suffering of the ocean.
I believe in the blood of corn
the sentience of wheat
and the explosion of olive groves.
I believe in the beauty of revolution
even the tenderness of the weapon.
I believe in this real world
hard as the blossom
hard as the tear
hard as the half-kiss that forms
on the lips of the prisoner alone in his cell.
Yes, I believe in this world,
so hard, so ethereal
where the greatest kindness
survives the most unspeakable torture
and our most profound vengeance
will be the pardon.



Marion Haiku

morning-sharpened light
mockingbird sings from barbed wire
Spring takes the prison!

A Doctor at the D.C. Jail Told Me

I would like
to find
the man who
cooked up the very first
rocks
of crack

and dig him up
(I'm sure he's dead)
and beat him
and beat him some more.

For Comrades Who Ask:

"What is to be done during this particular historical conjuncture?"

A Partial List of Practical Things to Do

throw a stone
 throw another
 → fire a poem
 slash a tire
 → raise a fist
 → raise your voice
 → raise a child
 wear a mask
 paint a slogan
 paint a dream
 honor the martyrs
 build a barricade
 build a network
 claim your history
 claim the streets
 sing a message
 shoot a bullet
 set a fire
 break a window
 break a sweat
 rent a safehouse
 print a leaflet
 forge a document
 shelter a fugitive
 bind a wound
 love a friend
 hold a lantern
 hold your ground
 clean your weapon
 practice your aim
 disable a missile
 create a diversion
 tell a joke
 secure a march

walk the picket
 pick a lock
 bait a trap
 spring an ambush
 blow a horn
 make a plan
 plan a back-up
 wreck the tracks
 lose a tail
 find your hope
 raise the stakes
 change your name
 → wipe for prints
 test a theory
 challenge a dogma
 cut the wires
 strike a chord
 strike a blow
 tell the truth
 trick the man
 hold a meeting
 take a beating
 hold your tongue
 watch your back
 watch the sky
 cut a trail
 leave no traces
 pick a target
 launch a rocket
 learn from workers
 teach a comrade
 mark the time
 free a p.o.w.
 steal the files

steel your heart
 hound a landlord
 feed the homeless
 squat a building
 join a cell
 learn a kata
 memorize the code
 cut the bars
 vault the fence
 clear the perimeter
 swim the river
 disarm a cop
 slip the noose
 slip the checkpoint
 use your fear
 tighten the drum
 plant a thought
 tend the orchard
 cherish a tear
 commit it to memory
 check your ego
 study the map
 deal with the traitors
 silence the snitch
 start from scratch
 carry your weight
 take on some more
 fight to love
 say it again
 cross the line
 take us with you
 don't look back

For Joe Doherty

*Da gcluinfinn an fhuisceog alainn, brisfeadh si mo chroi.
Should I hear the beautiful lark, she would rend my heart.
– from Bobby Sands's hunger strike journal*

For Dorothy Edwards

Letter Read at My Grandmother's Burial

August, 1990

Dear Dorothy,

How much I wish I could be there to help honor and celebrate your life, and to take some comfort in recognizing among all of us the ways your love has fashioned our lives. I saw you last when I was fresh out of jail and about to go underground. You were in the hospital and so sick. I was saying good-bye to you then although you couldn't have known it. (The penitentiary - or death - loomed as the only certainties for me.)

I couldn't expect you to understand my choices but I know you wouldn't blame me for fighting for a world where we all take care of one another the way you cared for your family. In your own way you pointed the direction. You taught me about strength - the kind of strength it takes to raise 12 younger brothers and sisters, raise your own children and then some of theirs, too, through depressions, strikes, wars, and personal tragedy. Yours was the unacknowledged yet profound strength of tenderness. I've carried you in my heart since I saw you last and thought of you in my most desperate moments.

Dorothy, most of all I must thank you for laughter. It is perhaps your most precious gift to me. It flowed from the joy you seized simply from living. You nourished this joy in each of us and taught us to treasure it. In this way you continue to watch out for me, filling my small cell with light.

How is it that even surrounded by concrete and iron I so love this life? Because there are risks worth taking:

- to exult in the being of others
- to give freely
- to hope with abandon
- to love with audacity.

From you I learned to take them all. I will miss you so. But wherever there is laughter and love among us you'll be right there.

Your grandson,
Tim

No Such Thing as White Folks in the D.C. Jail

can't believe I flew in a plane today
shackled and trussed and chained to my seat
but I was flyin', sure as the pilot,
maybe more

It was one of those little planes –
the ones where you feel *everything* go by
and I saw clouds I haven't been knowin' much about.
We circled the Capitol and landed at the D.C. Jail
– or near enough.

I'm on this special hardcore
top drawer
security status
24/7 lockdown no showers no rec

What is this?

My cell's right in front of the damn guard's booth
They're scared to death of *someone*.

A lieutenant with my grandfather's name
insisted on being present
for my otherwise confidential physical
conducted by a young doctor
and the nurse who took my poor blood.
She kept callin' me "baby" and I liked it.

This doctor tried to kick the lieutenant
out of the examining room
but the lieutenant just grunted
and stayed to secure the situation
(thinking about the U.S. Marshals' threats and his pension)

Doc laughed when I said that I had no complaints –
except for losin' my hair.
He said, "Hey, *that's* no problem."
(See, he was losin' his too.)
I wanted to talk about medicine and basketball

but the lieutenant was ready to reclaim his baggage.
Instead I thanked him twice:

once with my heart
as he listened with the stethoscope
and again with my eyes as I left.
I miss him.

This spot here is kinda like Rikers Island
except they've sealed up all the windows
and sucked out all the air along with the hope.

But while Italians and pale junkies
still go to jail in N.Y.C.,
I've had a good look around and I can safely say that
there are no white folks in the D.C. Jail.
It must be a law. It's gotta be a law.
Leadbelly said it was a bourgeois town.

So on 3 North - we've got me - and 200 youngbloods
laughin' and kickin' it through the bars
prison poets
usin' all the voice they were born with
and all the bass they've grown into.

The guards warned them that they'd get written-up
if they so much as *talked* to me
But they do it anyway - naturally -
figurin' that anyone who scared these people so much
was surely someone worth knowin'.
I hope I don't disappoint
because tomorrow
I go on trial
for the audacity of being a white guy in the D.C. Jail
and for tryin' to do something about
that law I'm talkin' about.



Marilyn Buck, Linda Evans, Tim Blunk, Laura Whitehorn, Susan Rosenberg, Alan Berkman,
Resistance Conspiracy Case defendants, D.C. Jail, 1989

No Sound

no sweet clfft! of cords on this playground hoop
no rusting chains neither
rim all bent down in front
parks commission blames it on the youngsters
testin' their legs
hangin' on the rim
wantin' to slam like Michael
even stickin' their tongues out all crazy
like he do on t.v.

but hey, these ain't no breakaway rims like the pros got
look at that
not even a soft bank shot will work
off this sorry-assed backboard
you'd best forget about your corner shot

hey it's not the youngsters' fault shit
even the iron is worn out by these projects

this ol' rim is just tired
of watchin' so many dreams
pass through
without a sound

Risks Worth Taking

1.

As a child
I threw stones into the air
trying to influence the flight
of birds and bats.

2.

My friend and I launched our arrows
straight up into the sky
disappearing from sight for endless moments
pulling the arrows from the ground
buried to the fletching
we savored the danger.

3.

As a young man
I fired my rifle into the heart of despair
we defended the rarest forms of light
we searched for the lost ones
we gave up nothing.

4.

Now without a sling,
a bow, a rifle
I cast my longing to the sky.
Would they serve me better
than poetry to reach
the threads of blue,
of moonlight and crystalline ice
that connect us?

5.

These are the risks worth taking:
to exult in the being of others
to give freely
to hope with abandon
to love with audacity.

I Have a Saxophone Blues Inside

i've never held a reed against my lips,
my fingers are ignorant of the workings
of brass, chrome, and leather
these blues
they would come out
like breath
sweat
or blood

you see,
i dreamed:
a cranefly struggling in amber
a sandstone blossom
folded within a canyon wall
black-eyed susans stiffened and bent
under mantles of ice

and i dreamed their release

i know i can play.

i know it

¡Hay un Compañero Aquí!

(for Brigitte Mohnhaupt)

i went out to the yard this morning
determined to find something beautiful
to give to you –
a feather, an unusual stone or seed,
maybe a blossom from one of the heroic weeds
that, like you, doesn't accept the terms
of its confinement either.

Surely nature would offer up something
even in that desolate space.

And it did:

some wing-feathers from one of the kites
who are nesting in the gun-ports,
and five tiny pieces of quartzite.

But the most beautiful discovery
i made today was a poem of initials
scratched in the asphalt

FMLN FPL

¡Hay un compañero aquí!

Liberated Territory

more than the absence of fear
the love between us
more than the space around us
the place that is ours
this camp, our street
nuestras hamacas, our house
our lives, this cell
a terrain of relations
where the conspiracy begins and returns
we carry it with us
to another squat
on las guindas
to the refugee camps
to the prisons
more than the space between us

not a vacuum at all
the place where our eyes met
one river, ein Traum
i walk with you there
along the Elbe
in Chalatenango, Jabaliyah
beyond the searchlights
in this prison yard
under four stars and a quarter-moon
where we go to do
what must be done
where we solve the philosophical problem
of the other
in the soup kitchen, the safehouse
the polyclinic, the women's shelter
the guerrilla

liberated territory

the place where our eyes will meet
a relation of justice
a promise of integrity
a house made of stone
a defensible position
more than the power within us

Intifada

1. freedom is the arc of the stone
the stone itself
what remains in the hand of the thrower
in the shards of glass
in the jeep's broken windshield
the relation of muscle, stone
gravity and glass
2. liberation is the physical memory
in my hands
of your strong back
to see with your eyes
looking out through your kaffiyah
and my aspirations for this world
carried like stones in your pockets
your power taking measure
of the perimeter of my cell

A Letter to My Brother, in Prison

By: Jonathan Blunk

Listen.
I don't pretend
my life is harder
than the unrelenting sameness of your days
but hear me out.

Between us, brother,
is what each of us has made
and left undone.

I, too, walk
among innocents
and thieves, grasp
at words to name blindness,
suffering and love.

You also must
master this living
each day, learning which stones
will still be left
standing at sunrise.

We each fear
for this world and do
the work we're here
to do, imagining
a time together
by a river
with no need
to speak.

Sweatlodge Ceremony

1.

We lived in adjacent cells, Papineau and I.
We were two mess-hall galley slaves
rowing up rivers of soup and beans.
We argued for days over those steam kettles or in his cell

(sometimes not speaking for longer)
his Great Spirit vs. my Karl Marx
contending over a tiny pair of moccasins
he was beading for the newborn child
of a friend on the street

“Your revolution has no soul. This is why you will fail.”

“Your Great Spirit is only as great as the good heart that beats in your chest – which, by the way, is precisely why we will win.”

2.

The Kansas winter had run its course
and I found myself running in the yard
alone in the February rain – alone except for Papineau,
Uncle Chuck and the other Indian Brothers
burning sage and tobacco in the sweatlodge.

"They come often," Papineau said later, his face beaming and flushed from the heat. I'd never seen him happier.

"She'll come again.
Come sweat with us."

The Blues

By: Roosevelt Johnson

Blues can make you feel good. OH!
Sometimes the Blues can make you feel bad.
Sometimes the Blues can make you feel funny.
The Blues are about women and men or someone like me.
But I have the Blues, Blues, Blues, Blues.
All I see is Blues.

Old Blues!

The Story about Sardine and Tim

By: Roosevelt Johnson

One day I saw a woman playing the blues with her eyes.
Then I seen a man talking with the blues.
Tim started running with the blues.
Sardine started sleeping with the blues.

All right, so the blues didn't work out.
One blues say I been bad today.
I love looking for the blues.
Keep the blues from me.

Between Two Trees

1. a nail driven into a cedar will make it bleed
but only a little

the fragrant wound will heal,
a knot of rust-stained woodflesh

ring after ring
patiently
the nail becomes tree
a gnarled memory of xylem and phloem

but until then
hidden by bark
the nail waits for the ax or the saw blade
defending the soul
as scars sometimes will.
2. imagine:
deep in the earth ancient bones are drumming
fossils whisper to each other
across layers of sandstone, shale and time
gills pulse – wings beat against the rock
3. you came to me with the sound of children's laughter
tangled in your hair
did we speak?
I cannot recall –
is my leather jacket hanging by your door?
4. my letters fill a box on the floor by your bed
the words clatter like a lanyard driven against a flagpole
its tattered and windshorn banners
demanding to be taken out to sea
my poem sits on your easel
captured between your chosen images
at once divided against themselves
and held together by the tenderness of color

and here I await you
amidst collimated shadows leaning into evening

you are the center of music you cannot hear
and paintings you will not see painted

5. in letters we merge our aspirations
with the oils of our hands

is the trace of scent on the pages your own
or that of one of our faceless intercessors?

in spite of them
because of them
what each holds from the other is blessed
for somehow we've learned each other

our bodies remain as the one
irresolvable mystery between us
will we learn them too?
will we lean out from the rockface unafraid
into gravity's embrace?

6. in photographs we study each other
and ourselves together
the absence of the other
studies in longing for how we could be
savoring each nestled curve and flow between us

7. consider:
the lodgepole pine must wait for the fire
fire alone will release its seeds
to the charred and newly-fertile landscape
while windborn embers fly up
to challenge the stars.

The Bluest Blues

This is a blues

for the brothers killed in prison
and for the families who didn't get to say good-bye.

This is a blues

for all the good women and men behind bars
for the crime of being poor, Black, Mexican or Indian or for refusing to kneel.

This is a blues

for the work undone,
the art unmade,
the poems unwritten,
the stars undiscovered, the songs unsung.

This is a blues

for those who will die of old age without seeing the street again.

This is a blues

for those who have been shot off the wall,
cut by razor wire or run to ground by dogs,
and for those who got away for awhile.

This is a blues

for those who surrendered, and for those who shot it out.

This is a blues

for prisoners with AIDS, with HIV, with cancer;
for every prisoner who ever died for want of medical care
she would have had on the street.

This is a blues

for the jailhouse junkies, winos
and all those who are dying on their feet trying to keep the pain away.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who ever hung himself,
for every prisoner ever murdered by a guard and hung up like a suicide.

This is a blues

for every prisoner that ever went crazy inside a cell,
for every prisoner who couldn't make it back out on the street,
for every prisoner in solitary,
for every prisoner who ever gave up.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who lives each moment to the fullest,
in spite of everything

for every prisoner who discovered her intellect in the penitentiary.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who works in the prison factory
for next to nothing and sends what he makes
to his family on the street.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who has lost a wife, husband, friend, or lover while inside,
for every child who can't understand why Daddy or Mommy can't be with them.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who ever watched a sunrise through prison bars,
for every prisoner who struggles to see the moon beyond the searchlights.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who's ever been too cold at night, or too hot,
too wet, too thirsty or hungry and there was nothing to be done.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who has refused an inedible meal
or a comfort or a privilege out of principle

This is a blues

for every prisoner who ever gave his only blanket to his brother when it was cold,
or gave food to a stranger.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who still wants to be a gangster
and for every gangster who's about to become a prisoner.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who's inside for trying to do the right thing on the outside
and for every prisoner who's been doing the right thing since she got busted.

This is a blues

for every woman who's ever loved a man in prison
and for every woman in prison whose husband or lover never came to see her.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who's never had a visit or a letter,
for all the letters sent and never answered,
for every letter ever thrown out by a guard.

→ flaus

This is a blues

for every prisoner who's spent a night in a cell
gagging on the stench of shit, piss and vomit.

This is a blues

for prison soap, toothpowder and pressed-wool blankets.
for disinfectant, roach spray and sulfur ointment.
for sheets too short, socks too small and mattresses too thin.

This is a blues

for every lie ever told to a prisoner by a guard.

This is a blues

for every weight pressed, every brief filed, every cigarette smoked,

every sleepless night behind a wall or fence.

This is a blues

about strip searches, cell searches, shakedowns, interrogations,
and a life of violations and indignities that only one who's been there
could ever comprehend.

This is a blues

for every prison bully looking for someone to kill him,
for every prisoner stabbed in anger,
for every prisoner stabbed for no reason.

This is a blues

for the weak and preyed upon,
and for the predators whose own hearts were the first victims.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who'd be on the street
for want of a competent lawyer,
for every prisoner on death row,
for every prisoner officially murdered by the state,
for every prisoner murdered off the record,
for every prisoner with Life, no parole, no hope,
for every woman prisoner demeaned, insulted, molested, or raped by male guards,
for every prisoner ever force-fed while on hunger strike,
for every prisoner made to chop cotton, hoe cabbage, make license
plates, sew blankets, dig ditches, pick garbage,
for every prisoner ever beaten,
for every prisoner bussed or airlifted while shackled like a slave,
for every prisoner who cannot read or write, ←
for every prison prayer unanswered,
for every prison dream deferred.

4: 36 ...

This is a blues

for the rebels, the thoroughbreds, the stand-up convicts,
for every convict who carried his own weight,
for every convict who took the weight for someone else
and never said a mumbling word.

This is a blues

for every mother who cried
for her son or daughter in prison,
for every prison mother that cried for her children on the street,
for the children in prison with babies on the street,
for every child who's already on the track to the penitentiary.

This is a blues

for the prison snitch whose punishment is having to live with himself.

This is a blues

for every prisoner who couldn't get to his loved one's funeral,
for every prisoner who died alone and had no one to claim the body.

This is an international,
multiracial,
equal opportunity,
affirmative action blues,

a blues especially for everyone else who doesn't
give a fuck about prisoners
'cause they're worse off than us.

This a blues that shouldn't have to be.

A lost blues.

The bluest blues.

This is a blues just lookin' for freedom.

Empty Room

Now I begin to feel what I'd feared most
the astonishing emptiness

your voice
and the music of your hands
carved out of my longing

a room you inhabit like smoke
and leave as mysteriously

your fingers tracing threads of light to their source
and your escape.

This was the risk worth taking

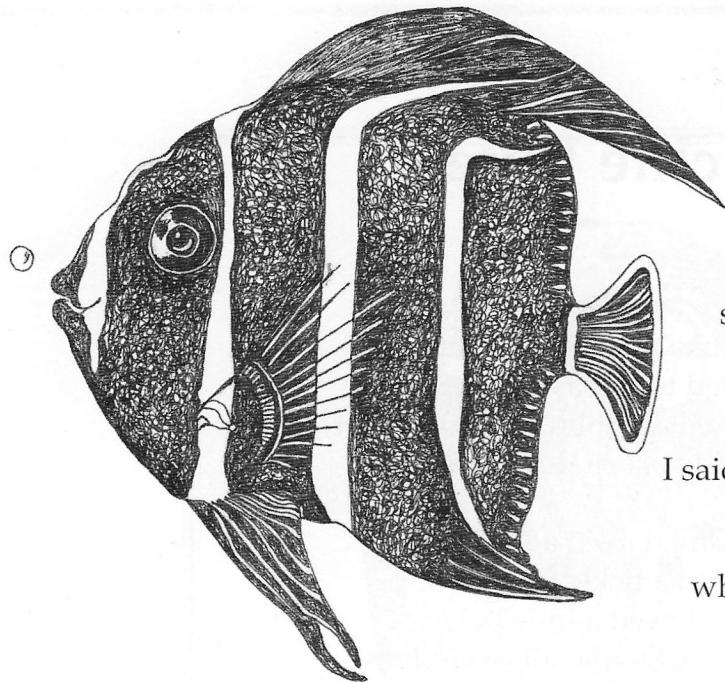
Tickle Blues

Woke up this morning
squirted toothpaste in my eye
dropped my toothbrush in the toilet
think I'll just sit down and cry

Oh I, I need a tickle.
I need a tickle from you.
Yes, I need a little tickle,
I got the tickle-me-all-over blues.

Got me a little monkey friend,
he's as crazy as a monkey can be.
But when I asked him for a tickle
he just scooted up the monkey tree.

I said, "Oh lil' monkey! Lil' monkey friend,
I need a tickle I do.
Yes, if you give me a tickle
I just might find a 'nana for you.



I got me a little fishy friend
she's just as scaly as a fishy can be.

When I asked her for a tickle
she just blew a little bubble at me.

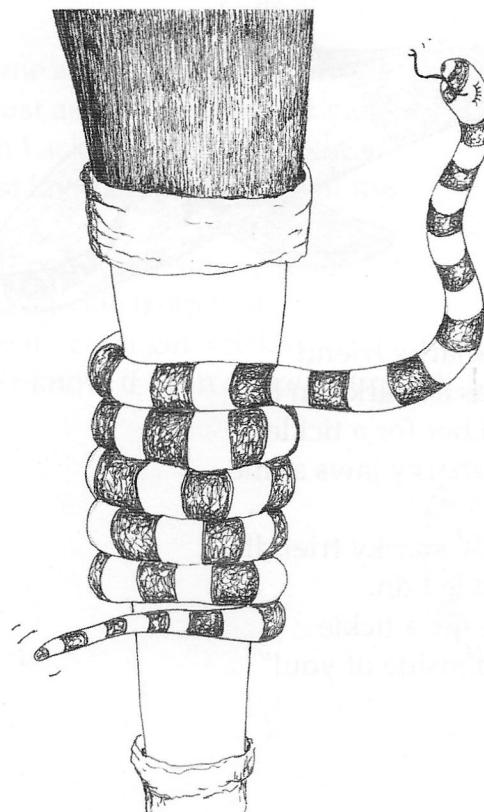
I said, "Little fishy. Oh lil' fishy friend!
I need a tickle from you.

If you give me a little tickle,
why, I'll take you to the ocean blue."

Got me a little skunk friend
he's as stinky as a skunk can be.
And when I asked him for a tickle
he just waved his skunk tail at me.

I said "Now, WHOA! Lil' skunk friend!
Don't want no tickle from you!
Cause if'n you give me a tickle
Why I'll wind up smellin' just like you!"





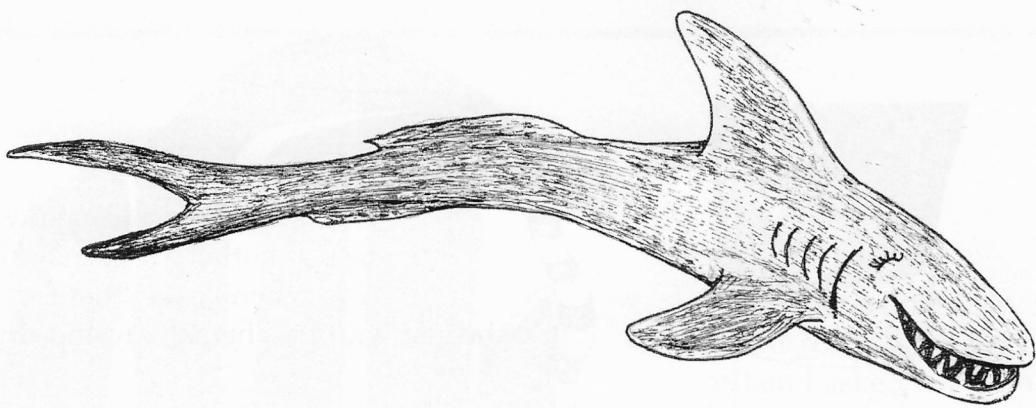
I got me a lil' snaky friend
she's as slithery as a snake can be.
And when I asked her for a tickle
she just wrapped herself around my knee.

I said, "Lil' snake, oh, lil' snakey friend,
I need a tickle from you.
But if I can't get a tickle
then a snaky-hug will hafta do."



I got me a lil' porkypine friend
he's as prickly as a friend can be.
And when I asked him for a tickle
he just shot his porky pines at me.

I said, " Now HEY! Lil' porkypine friend!
I need a tickle it's true
but if you call that a tickle
then my ticklin' days is through!"



I got me a little sharky friend
she's just as toothy as a shark can be.
And when I asked her for a tickle
she just snapped her sharky jaws at me.

I said, "Now wait, lil' sharky friend!
I need a tickle I do,
but if you give me a tickle
I just might end up inside of you!"

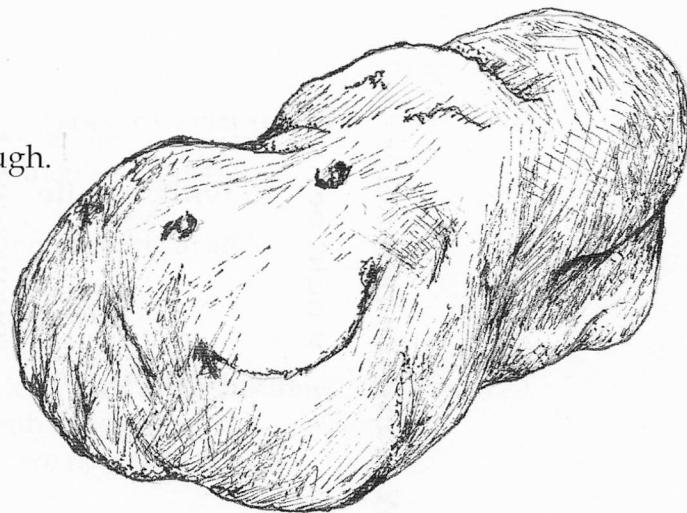


I got me a little froggy friend
he's just as cute as a froggy can be.
And when I asked him for a tickle
he said, "Not until you kisses me!"

I said, "I don't know, lil' froggy friend.
I'd like a tickle it's true
but we tried that one already
and it don't look like it did much for you!"

I got me a little potato friend
he's just as lumpy as a tater can be.
When I asked him for a tickle
he just lay there lookin' up at me

Oh lil' potato, lil' tater friend
I need a tickle from you
'cause if I can't get a tickle
I don't know if I can make it through.



Now I got me a little spider friend
she got eight crazy little spider legs.
She could tickle me in eight places
'til I had to moan and beg.

Oh lil' spider! WOO-HOO! lil' spider friend!
Can't stand no more tickles, hoo, hoo!
No, I can't take no more tickles
'sides, it's my turn to tickle you!



Jailhouse Geometry

Walking the perimeter
of the prison yard
would be
to walk a mile
just how nice it
is to think about
in a straight line.

Penitentiaries and Other Peculiar Institutions

The one true measure
of our generation's progress

(if we've done anything at all)

will be whether
our children's children
will look back upon our time
with the same moral revulsion
we now hold

for the era of
chattel slavery

Oranges

Oranges are a luxury in prison
especially in the hole
something to hoard, trade
or savor

Sometimes they'll fool you -
sometimes the majestic color
is sprayed onto unripe fruit
so it won't bruise when it's shipped.

But the orange could be ruined -
the pulp dry and sinewy,
bitter and full of seeds.

You'd gain by trading it.
You never know until you start to peel it.

I still carry a drawing I made
of an orange I had put
in the window of my cell
in the hole at El Reno.
It became a small fire,
fed by the charcoal grey of the bars,
the one moment of warmth in that cell,
warding off the February rains, the razor wire
and my loneliness.

The oranges in my cell now
were given to me
by a man I taught to read.
He was stabbed to death yesterday.
This time it was for being
white, Southern and convenient.

I don't know what to do
with these oranges.
They are very sweet.

Say It Slowly

Everyone

should have a list of favorite words
 words to *say*
 the kind of words
 you love to roll around on your tongue,
 the ones that make you laugh as soon
 as they come out,
 or are just so sweet to say,
 you dare to repeat them only once or twice
 (so you don't wear 'em out)

Here's my list-in-progress:

monkey	Buddha
stinkfoot	moonboats
pizza	lavender
camel	poppyseed
porcupine (porky pine)	stogie
sodapop	breadbasket
piano	giggle
shoofly	tinkertoys
toasty	rhubarb
Alabama	amber
olive oil	Rosalita
pumpkin (also pun'kin)	whales (use the full "wh" sound)
whisker	cadmium
Snagglepuss	swish
geezer	Chevrolet
cinnamon	sneaky
high-jinks	chili pepper
dawn	coriander
peanut (the way Dizzie Gillespie says it in "Salt Peanuts")	not guilty! case dismissed! home

Notes from the Inside:

Confessions of a Penitentiary Saxophonist

I dreamt that I could play the saxophone. It wasn't that I was *playing* the sax in my dreams – I just *knew* that I could play, the way you know without thinking about it that you know how to drive, or play baseball. Just a matter of fact. When I awoke, that knowing stayed with me. For two days, had anyone happened to ask, "You play sax don't you?" I would have immediately said "Yeah," or at least paused in my disequilibrium before answering otherwise. As it was, on my third morning in the D.C. Jail I sat bolt – upright on my bunk and said aloud to myself, "Wait. I don't know how to play the saxophone."

That was the first time that learning the sax had occurred to me as something I might actually set out to do. Until then, I'd never even held one or seen one played up closer than from my bleacher seat watching my high school's marching band. But why *not* learn? A sizable length of time in prison stretched out before me even if I managed to emerge unscathed from this trial in Washington. I had to finish up a few more years of lockdown time in Marion, but then I could get to "open population" at one of the other penitentiaries. They all had music programs as far as I knew. I would find myself a sax. I would teach myself to play as I'd tried with guitar. This time, however, I would do it seriously.

It wasn't that I had just gotten the idea to play saxophone, the way that one might decide that bridge would be a nice hobby. I wasn't looking for a new life-style or new persona to incorporate. I can't even say that I was an educated listener of jazz music being pulled towards deepening my appreciation. The truth is that at the time I knew very little about jazz, although I knew that jazz was what I wanted to play. This sounds silly, I know, but there was no decision or resolution involved; it was a recognition of something I felt deep inside that would unfold when I found myself in the right circumstances. I don't mean to say that I knew I'd someday become a recognized or even talented saxophonist – only that I would, indeed, play and that it would be right and important to do.

This was my state of mind when I finally did get out of Marion and arrived at U.S.P. Lewisburg in Pennsylvania. The music began to unfold as I got to know my first cellie. When I first showed up at the door of cell B-118 I saw Bill sitting at the desk, rolling cigarettes with a handrolling machine and a can of Bugler tobacco. He was in his early fifties then, but the wear and tear of barbiturates and too much time in prison had aged him well beyond that. Ruddy-completed and a little portly (ever more so, after each time he tried to quit smoking), Billy sported a short but full grey-white beard that still carried the memory of the reddish-blonde it used to be. He hovered at the threshold: a man ready to go to seed, with just enough vanity to stave it off. Come summer you'd never see him without his "Blues Brothers" sunglasses and one of a collection of jaunty-floral print welder's caps. He could have been the conductor on a kiddie train ride at a carnival: to all outward appearances he was absolutely harmless and gregarious. Still, the kids would probably have known instinctively to keep their distance.

Bill was amiable enough at first, but not too talkative. It is the way of older convicts who have had their share of disastrous cell partners. We both were privately doubting we'd have much in common, and we were biding our time until one of us might find a more compatible roommate. Still, we got along fine because we both agreed that the window needed to stay wide open at night. You'd be surprised how many cellmates have come to blows over the window.

Billy's routine never varied: up at 6:00 a.m. when they cracked open the cell doors; then up to the TV-room to watch the early morning outdoors programs ("That looks like a real nice catfish

you've hooked onto there, Chuck..."); then breakfast, a day's work at the UNICOR factory; back at 3:00 p.m. for a solid nap; roll the next day's cigarettes; an hour of TV and then to bed. The same routine is replicated by thousands like Bill in penitentiaries all over the country.

I had never heard Billy listen to the radio. If I had been asked to guess, I would have pegged him as a hope-to-die Country Western man. He grew up in Western Kentucky and Ohio - 100% Cornbread Mafia. From our few conversations I'd deduced that he lived for squirrel hunting, bank robbery and Seconals, not necessarily in that order.

But one day during the daily 4:00 p.m. count, I was perched on the end of the toilet (the chair set aside for guests or the top-bunk guy) and engaging Billy in a get-to-know-your-cellie session. Thinking I already knew the answer, I asked him anyway, "So what kind of music do you like?" Matter-of-factly he replies, "Well, I like jazz..." I was stunned. He could just as easily have said, "Well, I used to play first violin for the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra until I caught this bank robbery case."

"You're kidding me!" I exclaimed, eager to confirm my second line of reasoning: he means Frank Sinatra or maybe Boots Randolph." "So what kind of jazz do you like?"

"Oh, I like John Coltrane and Miles Davis. I like Sonny Stitt a lot, but my favorite is probably Hank Crawford."

I think I might have fallen over backwards into the toilet. A cellie sent from God, in Blues Brothers glasses.

Then offhand he said, "I used to play a little saxophone." For the first time I was starting to enjoy the script of what had thus far been a truly rotten movie.

I confessed my saxophonic aspirations and that very evening we set out for the auditorium, home of the music program. It was my first look at the place would become my woodshed and my sanctuary for the next six years.

The auditorium, part of the original structure of the prison, was built by Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in the thirties. During the Depression, legions of masons needed work to do, and with the government paying for it they took their time. The genius of their trade is in evidence all around the prison. Visitors understandably ask if Lewisburg had originally been a monastery. The elaborate care given to the form casting of decorative lintels, the brickwork lancer arches over the doorways and cell windows, the internal courtyards, all seem suited to another purpose altogether in this new era of prefabricated human warehouses.

Lewisburg was built at a time when convicts were viewed as redeemable; it was built by men who understood that there, but for the grace of God and F.D.R., go I. On which side of the wall they would find themselves once it was laid was often an open question. Under generations of grime and amnesia, the auditorium still preserves this pre-World War II working class aesthetic. It is designed as a place where the warden or chaplain could assemble the whole population. An immense stone and concrete box, it has rows of solid oak pew-like benches arranged in graded tiers that descend to the foot of a large stage. The ceiling, honeycombed with reinforced concrete beams, is suspended some forty feet above. Cast concrete bosses adorn the cornices. They are a legend of European religious symbols: Greek, Celtic, Maltese, and botonée crosses; triskelions, Jewish hexagrams and Solomon's seals. (When the WPA crew did its ecumenical stonework, the Islamic star and crescent was still relatively unknown to prison populations - another measure of the vast changes within the prisons.)

High grilled windows line the walls to either side of the stage, virtually always hidden by rose madder velveteen curtains. It takes a thunderstorm with heavy gusts of wind to remind you that

there are windows there at all. The light and air itself is suffused with taupe-colored hues of neglect. Iron filigreed chandeliers, swathed in cobwebs, sprout bare bulbs, half of which molder there, graying like bad teeth. The rest provide scant illumination. Even when the auditorium is cleaned for special occasions, it never gives up the lassitude and misery that permeates every surface. These can't be scrubbed away.

The population comes here to watch movies now and for little else. But while waiting for the show to start it is impossible to avoid reading the motto that is carved into the proscenium arch over the stage. It is a quote from Sir Francis Bacon: "That which is past and gone is irrevocable and wise men have more to do with the present and what is to come." Another startling anachronism. These words were carved in an era when virtually all prisoners except those on death row had a future to ponder and the means to prepare for it. In these days of retaliatory sentencing and treating prisoners as social toxic waste, most people would have to be reminded that not so long ago a ten-year sentence was considered to be a lot of time to serve in a place like Lewisburg.

Often, as I sit in the dark I imagine myself surrounded by the ghostlike images of hundreds of convicts from the 1950s, mostly white, dressed in khakis and shiny black shoes, wearing crewcuts, sitting on these same benches, some smirking, some cutting up, others affecting the role of the penitent while the warden instructs us all in the possibility of rehabilitation and a return to a productive life in society. These kinds of lectures don't happen anymore. Instead, now the warden appears on video before our Congressionally-mandated PG movie, informing us of what programs Congress has just decreed be phased out.

The faces, the reasons, the messages all change. Yet the feel of doing time in the fifties - when doing time carried an element of honor - to do it *right* - hangs in the air. Sometimes when I'm alone there and I listen very closely, I'd swear I can hear one old con to another - a Brooklyn dockside accent talking out of the side of his mouth (so as not to be seen talking at all) - conjecturing on how the guards caught wind of the escape plan.

The real old-timers at Lewisburg, some of whom have been doing time for more than twenty years, talk about when there was always something happening in the auditorium: religious revivals, Alcoholic Anonymous lectures and testimonials, competitions sponsored by the Toastmasters, and plenty of musical groups of all kinds. Many a big-name act would stop in if they were performing in the area.

The inmate population itself had enough talented men to be able to put together a full jazz band. They performed their own shows or went on as a warm-up for the outside guests. The better players were often invited to remain on-stage to jam. But that was the early seventies. In my six years at Lewisburg only two outside bands have come in to play for us. We inmate musicians weren't allowed anywhere near the stage.

The only evidence in the auditorium of a one-time thriving music program is a bunch of old battered band instruments (most are unplayable and several look like they could have been salvaged from the Titanic) and several rusting file cabinets filled with old charts from the forties and fifties - yellowed and crumbling copies of "The Darktown Strutters' Ball," "The Redskin Rhumba," "Unlucky Blues."

There are rumors that during some kind of cleanup or reorganization, instruments in fine working order (including, I'm told, trombones, two bass violins, flutes, tubas, and a piano) were carried out and tossed into dumpsters. I couldn't say whether it is true or not but I've seen too many moves like this not to give the story credence.

When Bill and I went up to the auditorium to sign out instruments, we were to become the

first horn players who had played at Lewisburg in quite some time. Almost. As we climbed the three flights of stairs from the main center hallway called the "Red Top" that evening, we were delighted to be met by the sounds of an alto saxophone, playing short riffs in the upper register. It was quirky at first, sounding like a piece of a Thelonious Monk tune. But it went on and on, the same three notes, with only slight variations in attack. By the time we got to the auditorium landing, it was downright spooky. We opened the heavy oak doors and beheld the source of the spastic triplets: with his back to us in a windowless alcove stood a 6-foot 7-inch behemoth who seemed to be strangling an alto saxophone. In those enormous hands the horn looked like a New Year's Eve party favor. He was clad in the nutcase's uniform: elastic-waisted high-water khakis, a T-shirt that couldn't contend with his belly, short white socks and raggedy blue slip-on sneakers. He shuffled uneasily from side to side, stopped to brace himself, angled his torso to the left, furrowed his brow, and propelled his black plastic-framed glasses to the precipice of his nose. While locking it in a death grip, he tried to force multiple lungfuls of air into the horn. Then, after the pressure built to an almost unbearable climax, three lunatic notes burst out of the bell, escaping out the window like terrified birds. The man's chest heaved, and he stepped back to gather himself for another chorus.

Out of the side of his mouth, Bill murmured, "That's our future, Timmy."

We shook ourselves from this grim scene and sought out the recreation officer. Bill and I introduced ourselves and inquired about instruments. Bill signed out the only available saxophone - an old but serviceable Bundy tenor. I had to settle for a clarinet. It didn't match up with my "Harlem Nocturne" dream image but Bill assured me that it would allow me to get my embouchure, my lip placement, together.

Bill then hazarded a question to the rec officer, "Say, does that guy out there happen to know anything about the horn?"

"Who, Bubblehead?" the guard replied. "You could talk to him, but in all the years I've been here I haven't heard him play anything except for what you hear him doing now." At that moment, three more desperate fugitive notes shot out the window. The guard shook his head, "No, I don't think you'll be getting too much help from him."

Bubblehead, possibly named for his perfectly round shaved head, but more likely because of what was inside of it, was one very damaged individual. The word on the compound was that in his younger days he terrorized Washington D.C.'s Lorton penitentiary, busting heads, raping youngsters at will. Now he was a Thorazine warrior, shuffling from his bunk to the pill line and to his job in the factory where the boss stuck him somewhere out of harm's way. At night he somehow made it up the steps to play his music.

As Bill and I left that night, Bubblehead was packing up his horn. Despite his doped-up movements there was a seriousness and deliberation that would have led someone else to guess that the man had just finished the second set of a killer blowing session at the Vanguard. Billy asked him, "Did you get it in, Big Man?"

Big Man turned and spoke like a 45 record played at 33 1/3, "Got to get it, baby." Call and response.

(Several months later, many of the D.C. prisoners were returned to Lorton, including Bubblehead. The Rec Department got its alto back. I was hoping to use it - I imagined the sterilization procedures I'd use first- but when we examined the instrument we discovered that more than half of the pads were missing. The damn thing could only *play* three notes. We all paused in silence until Bill pronounced Bubblehead an artist and a genius.)

It took me two long, frustrating weeks before I could figure out how to make a noise on the clarinet mouthpiece. Bill was already noodling away on his tenor. His "only problem," he said, was having to figure out an embouchure with some teeth missing in the front. Billy saw me struggling and stopped to call out, "It's just like a duck-call, Timmy."

A duck-call? Somehow by not trying so hard, I finally produced that characteristic sound of mad soprano bees. I put the mouthpiece on the clarinet and started tootling. Suddenly, to my amazement, and then horror, a tune began to emerge: it was the Coca-Cola jingle from the early seventies, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company..." I almost dropped the instrument. The stupid tune issued forth on its own, not a note out of place.

Bill let out a whoop and laughed until he nearly choked. "Woooo! Stand back, Johnny Coltrane! Get back you devil, you!"

I had never thought too much of the clarinet. It was an instrument that was often forced in your hands in elementary school as part of some cruel hazing process; here, endure this and we'll let you play the trumpet or the drums like you say you want to. I had never enjoyed its timbre either, but once I began to experiment and practice I began to hear sounds I liked. Playing tuned my ears to the radio in a different way. Now I was listening for clarinetists like Eddie Daniels or Don Byron and appreciating multi-reedists like Eric Dolphy and Chris Potter. When an alto sax finally showed up in the Rec Department I almost left it alone. Bill reminded me of our original mission and the tunes we could more appropriately harmonize for two saxes so I grabbed the horn and our work began in earnest.

We were both novices. I had a slight advantage of formal music training on piano for a brief period, then cello and in various choirs. I am self-taught on guitar, and after twenty years, still clumsy. I remembered nothing beyond the rudiments of music theory. We began our training with books we ordered from a catalogue my mother sent us: theory books, scales and arpeggios, collections of standards. We didn't know where to start. Our first orders were shots in the dark. We picked up titles like *Jazz in a Nutshell* (and what we got out of it would fit in one.) But Bill was supremely confident in our course of action. Who needed a teacher?

"It's all in those scales, Timmy."

Bill's routine was seismically shaken. He stopped going to the TV room altogether. His naps were shorn back to a more modest thirty minutes during the afternoon count. We had to get up to the auditorium at the 5:00 p.m. rec call where we'd stay until 8:30 p.m. when we had to go back to the unit for the night. Bill even undertook one of several famous attempts to quit smoking. Everyone he knew suffered but we encouraged him nonetheless. It is striking in our environment to see someone find an uplifting purpose in his life and pursue a positive goal. Bill never missed a practice.

We began each session by staking out a corner alcove or stairwell. If you happened to play in a group, you might be using one of two practice rooms at either side of the stage. The more established bands had use of the stage itself. In the true spirit of the nineties it was every band, every man, for himself. Cooperation was minimal, respect virtually nonexistent. When it came to monopolizing equipment or setting the volume, people did what they thought they could get away with, without risking bodily harm. Fortunately, Bill and I didn't need any equipment other than our instruments, but on certain nights we had to contend with heavy-metal rock bands or Jamaican dance hall rappers who considered volume the most sacred virtue of their music. Acoustical nightmare that it is, that concrete cavern would become awash in the sound. It was like trying to play music at the beach. All but the most shrill high tones would be instantly engulfed in

the rumble of the bass. At the higher volumes one instrument was indistinguishable from another. Trying to discern a melody left you annoyed and exasperated, as when you try to drive a swarm of gnats from your face. There were many nights when Bill and I would practice scales while wearing earplugs, standing in a back corner, straining to catch enough of our notes snapping back off the wall to make it possible to continue.

One night, frustrated nearly to the verge of exhaustion, Bill muttered, "That was *ungodly*. Who has to pay dues like this on the street? Just to play a scale! *Just to play a scale*, Timmy! Gee-minga!"

There seemed to be no limit to the variety of musical stylings designed to drive us to our limit. The Jamaican rappers liked to put the drum machine on one rhythm setting and leave it there for the whole evening, making use of both ear-mashing volume and maddening repetition. Sometimes I really did scream. Of course, no one heard. I may as well have been screaming under a tsunami.

There was the Colombian drug lord with a Julio Iglesias complex. "Pesqueso" as he was known around the compound, carried himself with refinement, aloof to the criminal element around him. He employed a neurotic keyboard player named Louie, a veteran of the Catskills borscht-belt resort circuit where he had seduced divorcees with a repertoire of Latin dance music played on the accordion. In the style of one-man bands, Louie was an octopus on the keyboard. He prided himself as being the one true *professional* musician at Lewisburg. Billy scoffed, "If he's a professional, then so's the organ-grinder's monkey."

Together Pesqueso and Louie would command the stage and before an empty auditorium (empty except for Bill, me and the guard in his office) they would perform a set from the Colombian Hit Parade, circa 1980. They performed as if to a packed house in Cartegena. Pesqueso introduced the songs and would then croon, dance, prance and preen before imaginary fans thronging to the stage, tossing the microphone high in the air while executing pirouettes and accepting imaginary bouquets. He sang excruciatingly off-key. As Bill would point out, Pesqueso couldn't carry a can of *tuna* fish across the street. Sometimes Pesqueso would call out a solo for Louie, "Toca, Maestro, toca!" Louie's bass pattern wandered aimlessly in a rhythmic desert only to be ambushed by marauding staccato notes randomly seized from the scale. The solos were mercifully short.

This routine was performed without fail, without variation every Thursday night for four years. At first I thought it high camp. My friends back in the block wouldn't believe me and I had to drag them up to the auditorium to see for themselves. Pesqueso was, amazingly, never abashed – if anything, the additional fans in the audience drove him to even more inspired heights of showmanship. I often wondered if Pesqueso had rented auditoriums back in Medellín – hell, hired orchestras, too – to perform for his narco-pals and palettes.

But, like watching Abbott and Costello reruns too many times, enough of Pesqueso was, very quickly, enough. I tried to pretend he wasn't there, but then I'd discover myself imitating his dance steps or accompanying his number on the sax. One particular set and its insipidity grated on me like dragging a cat by his tail across a roomful of broken glass. I picture myself in my senility singing the samba "Moliendo Cafe" while my aggrieved children shake their heads.

It got to the point where I'd hear the refrain and I'd be sneering the words along with Pesqueso while I packed the saxophone. I had to get out of there before they started their next number. Yes, it was "*Feelings*."

Bill and I stayed up to all hours of the night reading and quizzing each other on music theory,

trying to figure out just what is so important about a ii/V/I substitution.

"Well, Timmy," Bill explained, "they're all over the place."

And Bill was mostly right, even if the logic that got him there was inscrutable. "I swear, Bill, how your mind works is one of God's miracles in the universe."

We were playfully competitive. When one of us would receive an order of books in the mail, we'd hide them from the other for a couple of days, then let the other guy catch a glimpse: "Hey, what's that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a catalogue. You've seen it before."

"That is not a . . . hey! You're holdin' out on me again, you snake!"

"I can't be lettin' you see this stuff here. I mean, I can't just be givin' up *all* the grapes."

Later that night, I'd hear Bill's voice declaring from the bottom bunk, "Yeah, Timmy, it's all here. The answers to all our questions." Long pause. "Timmy, do you realize that by the time we're through," he hesitated, "well, I'd say in another five years or so - but no *more* than that," his confidence cresting again, "why if we keep playin' and learnin' like this, we'll emerge from here as *Jazz Giants!*" Now completely tickled with his conclusion, he exclaims, "We'll blow their hair back, Timmy!" And with that, the bunk shook violently with his feet kicking up and down with his laughter which then deteriorated into a coughing fit. I'd get alarmed when he did this because his face turned a shade of red that was deeper than I'd ever seen on a human being.

Billy meant every word of it. Almost from the time we started, Bill's been just one or two unnameable things away from having learned everything he needs to know. For me, having failed on three different instruments in my life, this attitude of his used to drive me nuts. I've always felt the need for a teacher -- at least a more advanced horn player who could show me something about the saxophone. I have heard that there are one or two horn players in the federal system, but to this day I've yet to meet them.

The closest thing I've had to a mentor was a jazz drummer named Hakim. He was a wonderful percussionist who had played with both the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Big Band and Marion McPartland's trio. Seeing this diminutive, lithe man who was then in his late fifties, you'd never guess what kind of explosives he could set up from behind a drum kit. What impressed me so much more was how melodically he played. Hakim changed everything I'd ever thought about drumming. With a basic kit - bass drum, snare, floor tom, high-hat and ride cymbal - Hakim could make music that had you looking for where the piano, saxes, and trumpet were hiding. When I think of him now, I see his wrists barely turning, so supple, with this quiet smile, his eyes blinking halfway closed each time he hits his accents on the snare, as if the sound was coming up and splashing his face.

Back when I was still puzzling over the clarinet, I sought out Hakim in the mess hall. He was patiently bemused but surely skeptical about this white guy - an absolute beginner on reeds - who sat before him with the arrogance to want to play jazz music. My presumption must have astonished him. I was astonished myself as I listened to me trying to convince Hakim that he'd see for himself; I was going to play.

Hakim taught me how to count - how to count like a drummer. I had come to him after memorizing Paul Desmond's famous pieces, "Take Five" and I wanted to try it out with his band. Four bars of the introduction went by and I couldn't figure out exactly where to come in, so I waited another four. They came and went. I was starting to sweat. Hakim's brow started to crease. I tried once, faltered, tried again the next measure but it was all crooked. I felt deflated. I thought I'd really gotten the piece down. If anything, I thought I'd mess up a tricky fingering of

eighth notes that end the first riff – I never thought I'd choke right at the beginning of the damn tune.

Hakim got up from the kit and started marching in place in front of me, looking me right in the eyes. He said, "Look at my feet, not at me, Now count 4:4" I did.

"Do you see where my left foot lands?"

"On beats 1 and 3"

"Right, Now count in 5:4." He marched, but this time he also scattered the rhythm patter of Dave Brubeck's piano introduction: doo dumpty-dump, doo-dah, doo dumpty-dump doo-dah. "Where are my feet landing now?"

I watched, but something wasn't right. I felt myself getting nervous like a kid at the blackboard in math class. "I can't keep track of it."

"Then count with me," he suggested. So I did for several measures. Then he started chanting, "Who parked de car? Ah did! Who parked de car? Ah did..." A smile slowly took over his entire face. "That was how Dizzie Gillespie counted in 5:4. Do you see what's happening now?"

I thought I did. "The strong beats land with different feet in each measure."

"Right, right. That's why 5:4 is such a strange meter and that's why you can't figure out where to come in. Your body is too tuned to 4:4. That's the problem with you Europeans," he said, smiling broadly. "But don't worry," he winked, "Paul Desmond figured it out."

So I took "Take Five" back up to the landing in the back of the auditorium and started marching in place in 5:4 time. I'm embarrassed to admit that it took me several weeks to figure out how to come in at the right place. Learning it by ear, I had managed to memorize a version of the melody with the accents misplaced. It sounded wrong even when the notes were in the right places.

As the months went by, it seemed that the more technical ability I acquired, the more improvisation mystified me. I was already losing that vital "beginner's mind" that Zen teachers instruct their students to achieve. In music it means playing without thinking out what you're going to do ahead of time – just respond to what you hear, and play. A precondition is a mastery of the instrument, but knowing that never stopped me from looking for the magic formula: the chord progressions, scale choices, or licks that would give me that unmistakable jazz *sound*. I took to pestering Hakim for clues. Finally he gave me a lecture that I can hear word-for-word in my head:

"Look, I can tell you want to play. I know you've got the discipline to do it if you want to. You've got a good tone. But there's a whole lot more for you to go through to make music. There's no substitute for woodshedding, for getting you ax together. I don't have the answers you're looking for. I swear I'd give them to you if I did. But I know where they are. They're right there inside your horn. Go work them out."

"You see that's the part that scared you. Have you ever wondered why so many musicians have such fucked-up lives? They've got fucked-up lives, fucked-up relationships and they sow disaster all around them because they're chasing a sound in their heads that they can't get out into the horn. Or worse, the sound comes out and it's gone. And they are scared to death that there won't be another one, or that they won't be able to play it when it comes, or that no one else will be there to hear it and bear witness. You dig what I'm sayin' to you?"

I nodded that I did, but I'm sure he didn't believe me. So Hakim continued, talking about how the best musicians he knew, "the ones who are *sayin'* things," eat, breath and sleep their music, even in prison. He described one old horn-man that he had met in Sing Sing who never went anywhere – the mess hall, the factory, the yard – without his alto, wrapped up in an old paper

sack. The old man paced up and down next to the wall for hours in all kinds of weather, relentlessly playing scales and arpeggios. Hakim got up to leave but paused and said, "Those are some serious dues."

I was appropriately humbled. Hakim had managed to home in on my fear of just being another jazz dilettante, and he pulled it out for me to examine. I knew I couldn't commit myself that single-mindedly to one discipline. I just couldn't imagine myself as that old guy playing scales against the wall for the rest of my sentence. Honestly, that seemed more than a little pathological to me. It is a Faustian proposition: If you could play like Charlie Parker would you also be willing to accept the tragic life and early death that went with it? In the end I felt better for having confronted the question and answered it for myself. I also brought a new level of seriousness to my practicing.

I have learned to love practicing for its own sake. Prison inspires these forms of ritualized discipline. Most often you see it in the weight room. You feel a measure of self-esteem in having accomplished something, however incrementally small, to your own betterment. If you cannot control anything else about your life, you can become lord of your own physicality. In this way I love getting a new scale or riff under my fingers. I love the Zen quality of perfecting tone and breathing through long-tone exercises. I love the physical sensations of playing as the tone seems to originate in your gut and then spreads through your lungs, larynx, mouth and out the bell of the horn to go swirling around your head. I even love being pushed by my metronome that chirps insistently – like a hungry baby bird.

When the time comes to pack up I always feel as though I'm just warming up. Three hours never seem to be enough time to get to that place where the horn starts to play itself.

One evening I was lost in a long-tone exercise when I noticed Hakim standing behind me. When I stopped playing he told me, "You have got to think of yourself standing in the middle of the note. The middle of each and every note – not standing off to the side. Otherwise, what's the point? Why play at all if you're not going to be in it?" He turned and left.

In our third year of coming up to the auditorium, Bill and I had earned the confidence of the rec officer enough to be able to move our practice spot to a large landing just outside the auditorium at the head of the stairway. The large oak doors shut out all but the most assaultive volumes, and the wide slate stairway provided a lively sound chamber. There is a window there as well that looks out over the wall to an adjacent farm and the Pennsylvania Appalachian chain in the distance. Summer sunsets light up the hills and sky. We could watch – and even smell – the haying. We watched the fall take hold while working on our exercises, feeling blessed to be able to play and watch. Such peace is unutterably rare in prison. We guarded this, our sanctuary, like priests in the midst of war.

In this period we began to play in a small ensemble for the various religious and community organizations' functions around the prisons. Hakim and his partner, Brock, on bass, held down the rhythm section, carrying all of us. We endured several incompetent keyboard players. About one, Bill was heard to comment, "He thinks the black keys are there in case the white ones break." Nevertheless, we were in big demand. Billy, in particular, was appreciated for his playing but also because the source of the sounds coming out of that tenor just looked so *improbable*, Billy was hailed all over Lewisburg as "the Jazzman." He lived up to the role. I was really glad for him: Bill was having a natural ball.

I have an enlarged photo of the two of us playing at the Catholic community banquet in the chapel. We're both leaning towards the music stands, our embouchures are all wrong. We were

probably playing "Watermelon Man" or maybe "Days of Wine and Roses." Since we're both obviously playing, I know that Bill is waiting for me to signal him (with my foot) when he should start his solo. An instinctively good improviser with good ears, Bill was utterly recalcitrant about learning to keep time. He depended on me to take care of that for him - and naturally resented me for it. My foot was sufficient for cueing his solo entrances, but it was in no way enough to get him to stop.

"It's *hard* for me to stop, Timmy, when I get to chasing those really pretty notes."

"Bill," I said, "Just once I wish you could catch one or two before 392 bars have gone by. I thought Hakim was going to peel your wig off with a cymbal. I got tired of standing on your foot."

"Yeah, I wish you wouldn't do that, Timmy,"

Billy dreams of convincing the Parole Board of his newfound calling as a musician, and retiring in New Orleans someday. "Hell, Timmy, let me live in the back of a bar. There's hundreds of them down there. I'll sweep, clean the place up, and play my horn for the people at dinnertime. All I need is a sammich and a little weed and to play my horn, and I'd be happier than a pig in shit. That's all I need, Timmy! Just a cheese sammich and to play my horn!"

"Don't let the musician's union hear about your arrangement, Billy,"

"Now see, that's what's the matter with you, Timmy. You're always so *negative*."

In prison these days, it's too much to ask to be left alone. In the all-defining interest of "better security and staff coverage" the auditorium is to be phased out as the center of the music program. Instead, we are encouraged, new music rooms will be built in an elevated area that overlooks the gymnasium floor and is adjacent to the game room. It means more rehearsal time and more equitable equipment distribution for the bands, but it spells disaster for the Brothers of the Holy Order of the Saxophone. We will be cast out of our cathedral into a once-a-week storefront rental. You just can't learn an instrument playing once a week.

Bill is inconsolable. He has already put in for a transfer to USP Atlanta which supposedly has the best music program in the federal penitentiaries. I'd be tempted to go with him but I've recently gotten married and my wife, Mary, has moved from Chicago to Jersey City to be closer to me. (Bill made us our wedding rings in his factory shop with slim cross-sections of copper pipe and silver solder.) I've resolved to make the best of it here; perhaps I'll play some more guitar and learn more about composition.

Knowing what is to come, I make it a point to be in the auditorium before anyone else, and I stay behind while band members go to the mess hall for dinner. This is my most blessed time. This is still my cathedral while I'm alone here.

Walking up and down the aisles, I play my arpeggios or more often I improvise. I love tunes like "My Favorite Things" because of how the melody's fourths, fifths and octaves resonate and hover above me while I try to play inside and outside their harmonics. I feel like I did as a boy when I would sneak into my father's church and turn on the pipe organ in the sanctuary. How thrilling it is to fill up a room like that with such massive sound.

I walk and play, just blowing and blowing for the sheer joy. This was what I had known when I had that dream in the D.C. jail. Make a joyful noise, for myself and the Lord. Yet playing in this place alone, it feels like the notes are already here, being played, I need only to breath and step inside of them.

Solitary Mutineers

1.

The sound of grace was, at first, an iron lock
surrendering with a shudder,
hasp hinges slapped open,
one chain after another drawn through staples
and cast aside across rough-hewn planks;
then, sweet silence as the slaver's captain
watched his cargo stumble up from the hold
to become his passengers and his confessors.
Sun-stabbed eyes blinking, legs buckling,
they announced themselves as kin.

Many stood, paralyzed, awaiting what was certainly
the next in the series of incomprehensible horrors --
this one all the more cruel, all the more cunning
the longer it took to become manifest.
Perhaps this was the end, as when the torturer
removed his hood, no longer caring whether
his face becomes known. Why else would they
be brought to the deck unbound, offered water
with which to bathe, to drink?

Yet the fishermen among them assured one and all
that yes, they were truly sailing into Africa's dawn.
Grace was heard in the sibilant waves against the
outlying reefs of Dahomey.

The captain was there on the deck
as they leapt into the surf,
thin legs struggling against the water as in a dream.
Some dared glances back over their shoulders,
still waiting for the inevitable rifle shots --
which didn't come.

Was he tempted to follow --
to strip off his clothes, his life
and join them in the warm shallows?

We know only that he arrived in port
with an empty hold
and a song of redemption.

2.

Grace came to Willie Post in the conventional way:
an amazing white light filled the doorway
of his small cell, he said, and called itself Allah.
So powerful was this vision, he had no real choice
but to make his way to Jumaa prayers
in the prison chapel. The descendants of other ships' cargo
examined this onetime Aryan gang-banger with ripe suspicion.
But there he was, week after week, at Jumaa and five times
a day, prostrate in prayer.

For the Aryans and the Nazis he simply ceased to exist:
"Willie's dead."
But the man the Imam named Subhi, "the Dawn," breathed deeply
and slipped into his new precarious life
poised between treason and incredulity.

Subhi found protection, not with the Muslims
but in his fearless good humor.
He was someone whose laughter you sought out,
a precious prison resource. And then, as if
to strengthen his eccentric aura
he took upon himself the care of the feral cats
that skulked around Leavenworth's infamous walls
and cellblock courtyards. The kindred predators lived poorly then
on mice and what they could scavenge.
The wardens exterminated them in waves
like rats or roaches.

I've lived in cellblocks where we secreted fugitive kittens
for months at a time, feeding them
from the messhall, hiding them during count and
convincing the guard that he didn't see
what he thought he saw. But there always came the day
when the shakedown crew couldn't tolerate the affront,
and some hack would emerge from the block,
triumphant, holding our ship's mascot by the
scruff of its neck, dangling it like
dripping garbage.

Subhi changed all that, surreptitiously at first, producing from a slit in his coat lining a plastic bottle of milk he'd filled in the mess hall. Slowly the cats -- easily a dozen -- abandoned their wide-eyed skittishness for the daily surety of a free meal.

With the money he saved from his factory job and the help of some good-natured guards, the kittens went to the vet in town for their shots, the females were spayed, and the sick and injured were routinely treated and returned to general population.

The cats never lost their wildness, would not deign to be petted or handled, but their bellies grew round, their coats plush. They fell into their own prison routines: *Felis convictus*. You could watch these furry mounds make their way around the compound, too fat to righteously sneak up on anything -- familiar but still improbable sights. They were as jarringly out-of-place as toddlers in the prison yard: animals walking about at will while the humans were locked in cages and counted, sinuous curvatures in a world of hardened right angles, symbols of longed-for domestic comfort, the objects of an alarming tenderness from those who need have none.

Alcatraz had its Birdman, Leavenworth our Catman. But Subhi was no bookish recluse. I can see him in his kufi, with cut-out socks rolled up over the swastikas tattooed on his forearms, standing outside the tray window of the mess hall's dishroom, holding open a plastic bag for donations of scrap meat. Always smiling, he mutely challenged his former Aryan brothers who passed him by. The bags were quickly filled.

Standing at the mouth of his cave, cats at his feet, like some garrulous St. Francis in a field jacket, who could hurt Subhi?

No one at Leavenworth.

So they sent him to the street.
We wondered how it was for him
after twenty-three years inside.
The newspaper article said
that he was living with a family
in northwest Missouri and working
in an animal shelter.
An odd symmetry: How did he come to terms
with feeding his beloved cats
now in cages?
Could St. Francis become a zookeeper?
And how could northwest Missouri
comprehend Subhi?
There are no mosques --
not even the knife-edge of hatred
against which he might have defined himself.
Just the slack-jawed banality
of amnesiac America.

Outside the bank, the police did not seem to
recognize that they were being fired on
by a saint. Nor would they have been
thinking about redemption when they
heard his final shot, followed by quaking
stillness.

Subhi put Willie to sleep.

3.

Amazing
how sick the sound
of charging feet on the tier below
of steel pounding into flesh 28, 29, 30
31 times, they said.
How slick the floor
with more blood than you thought
could have forsaken a man still running.

Grace
was nowhere to be seen or heard
on the way to the interviews.

We were led down the stairway
past a record of desperate struggle --
lichenous ferric shadows
like the human-form negatives
blasted onto the walls of Hiroshima.

The lieutenant set an i.d. card before me,
and I fought the roaring of my own blood
inside my head,
trying to make out an unfamiliar name
beneath eyes that implored my recognition.
No. No. No. Sorry, I didn't see anything.
But later I recalled the gaunt, shuffling figure
as he emerged from the hole,
awakening from a trance,
with a new growth of beard
and a Koran.

Once he had been a skinhead --
scrawled swastikas on synagogues,
torched a roller rink
that spanned the divide of Chicago's
suburban apartheid.
The Imam named him Di'a, "Light."
Now, he was (as you believed):
 a race traitor, a martyr
 a snitch, crazy,
 dead.

None of us knew him; his voice did not carry far.

4.

Living in grace
requires such strength.
And how hard it is
to go on singing
when one sings alone.

The sound of grace is lost to those
who will not listen with a stillness of the soul.
The songs are lost to all of us
when we fail to hear the cries
of the solitary mutineers
cast out and swimming for Dahomey.