

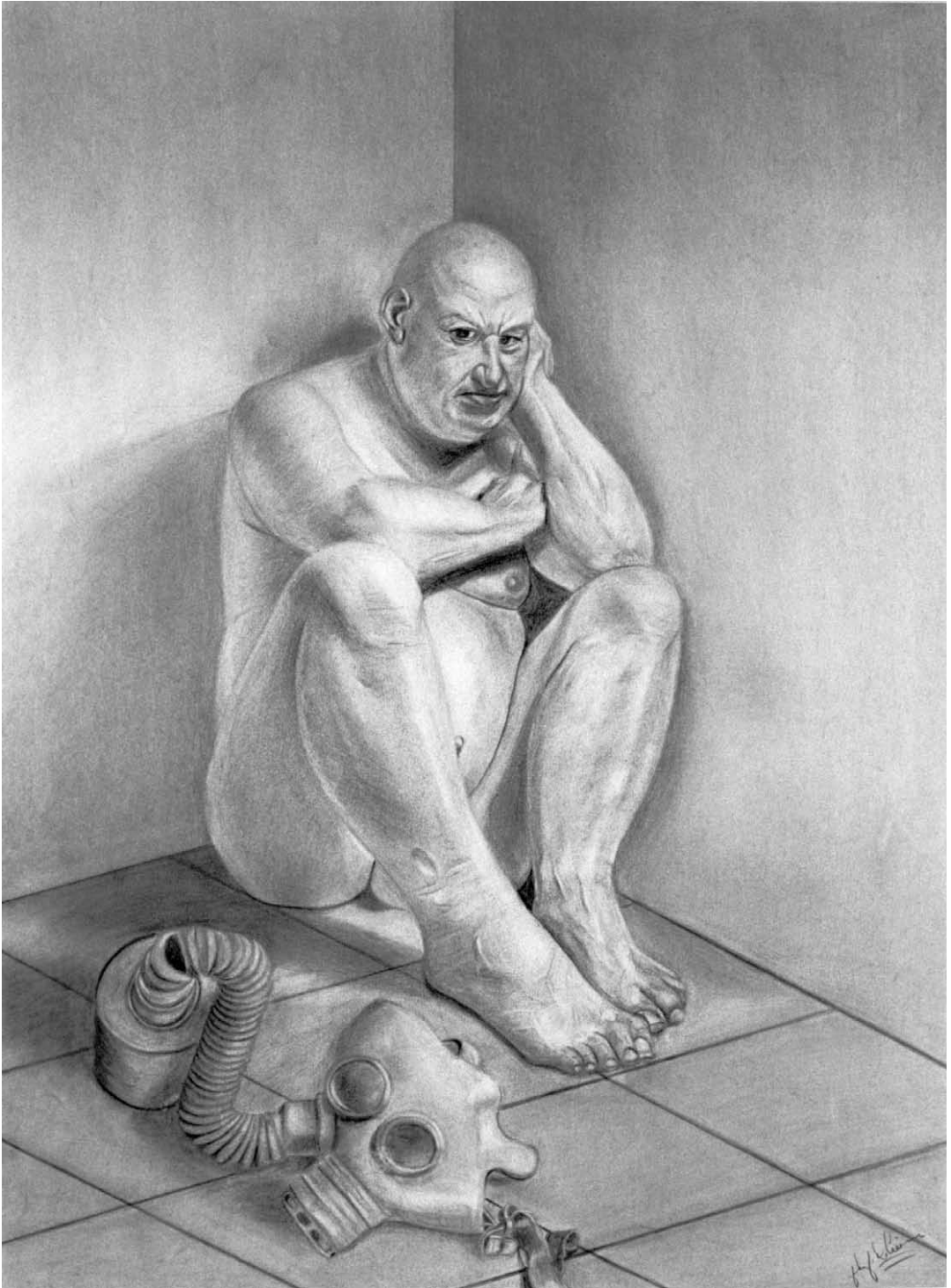
## Editor's Column: Prisons, Activism, and the Academy—a Roundtable with Buzz Alexander, Bell Gale Chevigny, Stephen John Hartnett, Janie Paul, and Judith Tannenbaum

**A**MERICA'S PRISONS AND JAILS HOUSE MORE THAN TWO MILLION inmates. At least half the prisoners released in 2008 are likely to be returned to "correctional" facilities by 2010 ("Second Chance").<sup>1</sup> What is the academy's responsibility to the men, women, and children who live behind bars? What is its responsibility to those who are released?

Over the last fifteen years federal and local governments in the United States reduced or ended funding for educational programs in prison. These programs helped reduce recidivism and offered lifers and other long-term inmates the resources to invent more meaningful lives. This Editor's Column features a conversation among educational activists who have confronted these tough financial and ideological facts and who continue to work with prisoners against all odds. Judith Tannenbaum is a poet who worked through California's Arts-in-Corrections, a statewide program that for more than twenty years has paid professional artists to make art with people locked up in California state prisons. With the help of University of Michigan undergraduates, Buzz Alexander started the Prison Creative Arts Project in 1990, and PCAP has facilitated hundreds of workshops, readings, exhibitions, and performances throughout Michigan. Janie Paul, a curator of PCAP's Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners, has facilitated art workshops in Michigan prisons and teaches PCAP courses that train and supervise art students who are sent into Michigan juvenile facilities and prisons. The author of *Incarceration Nation*, Stephen John Hartnett has spent eighteen years teaching and protesting at America's prisons; he also runs a weekly poetry workshop at the Champaign County jail in Illinois. Finally, Bell Gale Chevigny is the editor of *Doing Time: Twenty-Five Years*

Biographical notes about the contributors appear on page 567.

John J. DiCesare,  
*Thoughts*, 2008.  
Graphite.



of *Prison Writing* and participates in the PEN American Center's annual nationwide contest for incarcerated writers.

**Judith Tannenbaum:** In the mid-1980s, I recited poems by heart. A friend who taught at the California prison in Tehachapi invited me to share with his students the reading I was giving in cafés and bookstores: "To whoever is not listening to the sea / this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up. . . ." Pablo Neruda's words welcomed the men in my friend's prison classroom, each of whom knew the "harsh prison cell" Neruda described. The men listened in a way I wasn't used to. Instead of merely being entertained, they responded as though given bread, food, substance with the power to nourish. "So, through me, freedom and the sea / will make their answer to the shuttered heart," Neruda's poem closes. In the late-afternoon, late-winter light, a few of the prisoners brought out guitars and horns and filled the prison classroom with *corridos* and *rancheras*.

I wanted more and soon discovered that California had what was at that time the most developed prison-arts program in the world. In each of California's twelve state prisons (there are now thirty-three), an artist was hired as a civil servant and asked to create a fine arts program with a full range of classes. I contacted the artist-facilitator at San Quentin and soon found myself teaching a poetry class. Most of my students were in their late twenties or early thirties and had served about ten years on some kind of a life sentence. In one early class session, I brought in Nazım Hikmet's "Some Advice to Those Who Will Serve Time in Prison." We talked a long while about the poem's last lines:

I mean it's not that you can't pass  
ten or fifteen years inside,  
and more even—  
you can,  
as long as the jewel  
in the left side of your chest doesn't lose its  
luster! (38–42)

My job was to share poems and teach poetics. I brought in material on image and sound and on line break and voice, and we talked about these technical matters as they revealed themselves in a wide range of poems. We read, wrote, discussed, and argued about poems. "Speaking in tongues is a poem / A rock is a poem / Shit is a poem / And the corn in it too / is a poem," the San Quentin poet Angel Boyar wrote. We listened to guest poets. Phavia Kujichagulia spoke as a black woman to a room of mostly black men. Czesław Miłosz told my students that, as Americans, they didn't view good and evil the way he—an eastern European who had lived through the middle of the twentieth century—did. Piri Thomas read poems from his own years in prison; Ruth Gendler shared exercises on personification. Genny Lim, Opal Palmer Adisa, Frank Bidart—each of our over two dozen guest artists shared poems and a bit about their lives as poets.

My commitment as an artist, a teacher, and a human being was to Nazım's injunction that we polish the jewel on the left side of our chests. I brought in poems that spoke of this task, and my students taught me what the work might cost. Here's Elmo Chattman:

It is always the same  
For three hours  
you or Phavia or Sharon or Scoop  
manage to get close to me  
only to be peeled away  
like the bark from a young tree  
leaving behind a little spot  
bare and vulnerable  
that does not want to see you go  
but will die of exposure  
long before you return.

Eighteen years have passed since our San Quentin class. In those years I've taught other prison workshops. In each of these workshops—and when I teach youth in public schools—I share poems by Angel, Elmo, and the rest of my San Quentin students.

Coties Perry's "Kicking It with Loneliness" and Spoon Jackson's "Real" are the best models of personification I know. Glenn Hill's "Maybe Tomorrow" evokes hope and longing and always inspires new poems. Poets in Michigan prisons were amazed to read work by California prisoners and gave me copies of their own poems. I took these to the women's prison in Iowa. In North Carolina I was then able to share poems by prisoners from three other states.

In my years at San Quentin, one of my missions was to include my students in the larger poetry community. I not only brought in guest artists but also sent out our chapbooks, broadsides, anthologies, audiotapes, and videotapes. And now, twenty years later, I witness prison poets in California, Michigan, Iowa, North Carolina, New York, Kansas, and Minnesota reading one another's work, thereby creating a community among strangers.

California's Arts-in-Corrections is not the full program it once was, but it still exists. Almost all my San Quentin students are still inside, and many are still writing. Spoon Jackson, imprisoned thirty years this year, teaches poetry himself, in the Arts-in-Corrections prisoner-led classes at New Folsom. "I go where the wind hides / When it's not blowing," Spoon Jackson wrote. "Today I died. / I died yesterday and tomorrow. / At night I fly."

**Buzz Alexander:**

*A Kind of Forgiveness*

This past week, F. Mumford, whose work appears on the cover of this issue and who has participated in PCAP art workshops for several years, wrote to thank us: "You . . . have hit on such a wonderful thing. . . . It uplifts a prisoner's spirit, it improves society's image of prison folk, it is constructive to the souls of young adults. It nourishes all of us!" I teach in a university. The work of PCAP has a great reputation in the university and the local community. And each new group of students who comes into my university classes has the

same stereotypes, the same hatred (for that's what their stereotypes amount to), of the incarcerated. We find some things similar when our speakers' bureau goes out to churches, senior centers, Kiwanis, and the Rotary Club. The culture and conscious policies that generate, as someone called it, "the greatest experiment in social control through mass incarceration in the history of the world" easily replicate themselves in the minds of young people and most others. And the incarceration rate goes up (in Michigan in 1971, there were something like three prisons and 3,000 prisoners; in 2008 there are fifty prisons and over 51,000 prisoners). I watch my incarcerated friends go home and sink. Tony Greene comes out and three weeks later is in drug rehab.<sup>2</sup> It hurts. It can make me despair. I recover when I see my students and PCAP audiences listen to prisoners and change their attitudes. I recover even more dramatically when I hear later from the incarcerated we once worked with. As F. Mumford writes:

I just realized a part of it all for me is a kind of forgiveness. My soul was wounded as I went thru the process of police interrogation, arrest, jailing, the court experience and finally imprisonment. The smiles and conversations with art student volunteers act as a balm for my wound. . . . The letters written to all the artists, and particularly to me, make me cry! I feel filled with gratitude and happiness after the show.

I wrote back:

I've long realized that what differentiates the workshops from anything else I've participated in is the unspoken spirit of forgiveness and even generosity in the room. Almost everyone incarcerated has done some damage—and most have had damage done to them—and you all know that about each other and at the same time know that most of you in the room are trying to grow, despite your demons, and to find what you can of real trust and community in a very hard place. If

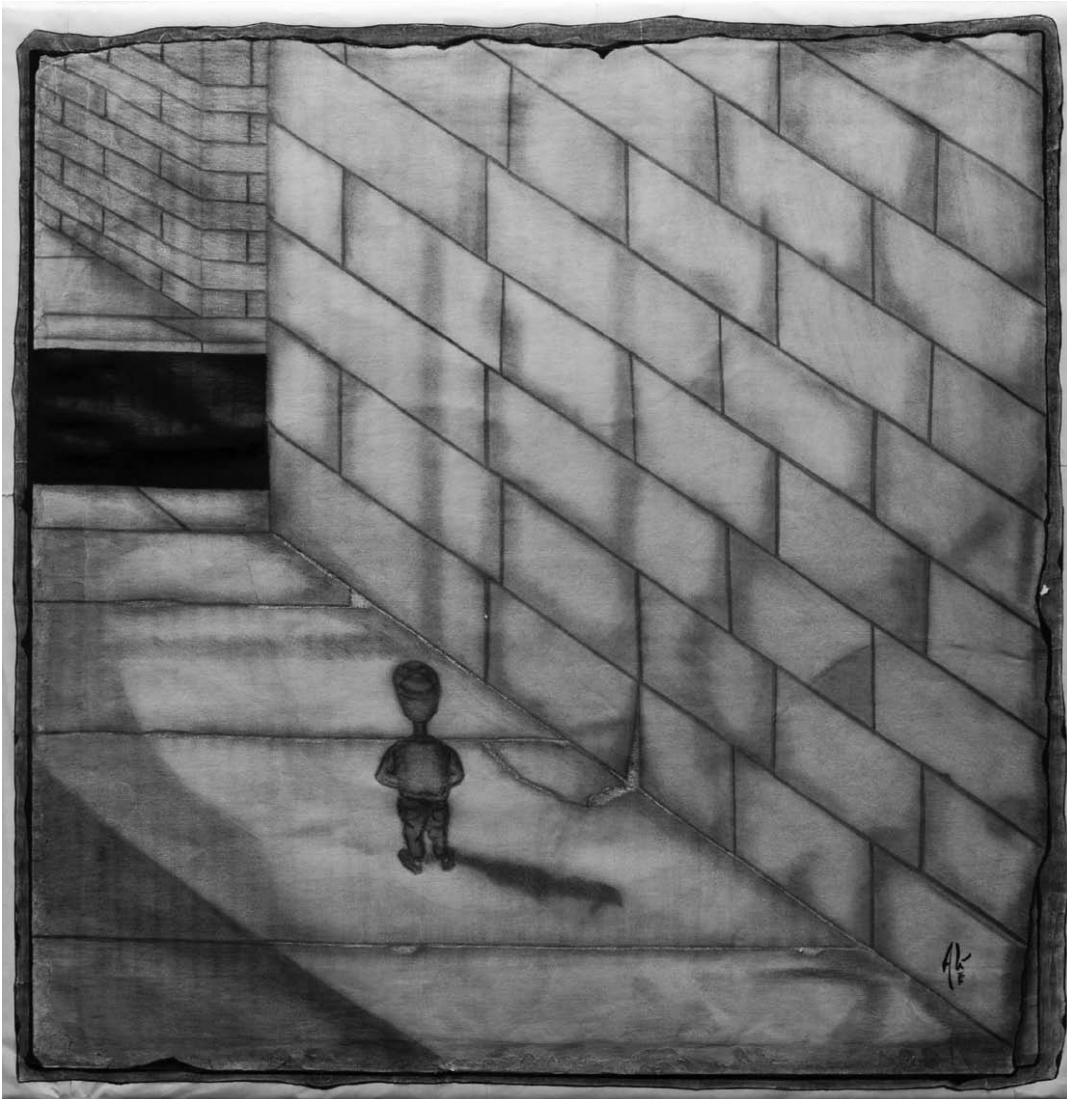
those of us who come in have thought at all about our lives, we know we've done damage too, and so we participate in the spirit of the room. There is something accepting in that which is powerful. The damage is real; some of the crimes are brutal; we aren't all wonderful and don't all get along. But in the face of all that, we give each other that acceptance, forgiveness, generosity, and willingness to help each other try to move forward.

### *Trust*

Trust, at once the simplest and the hardest thing for most people to learn, is the key to

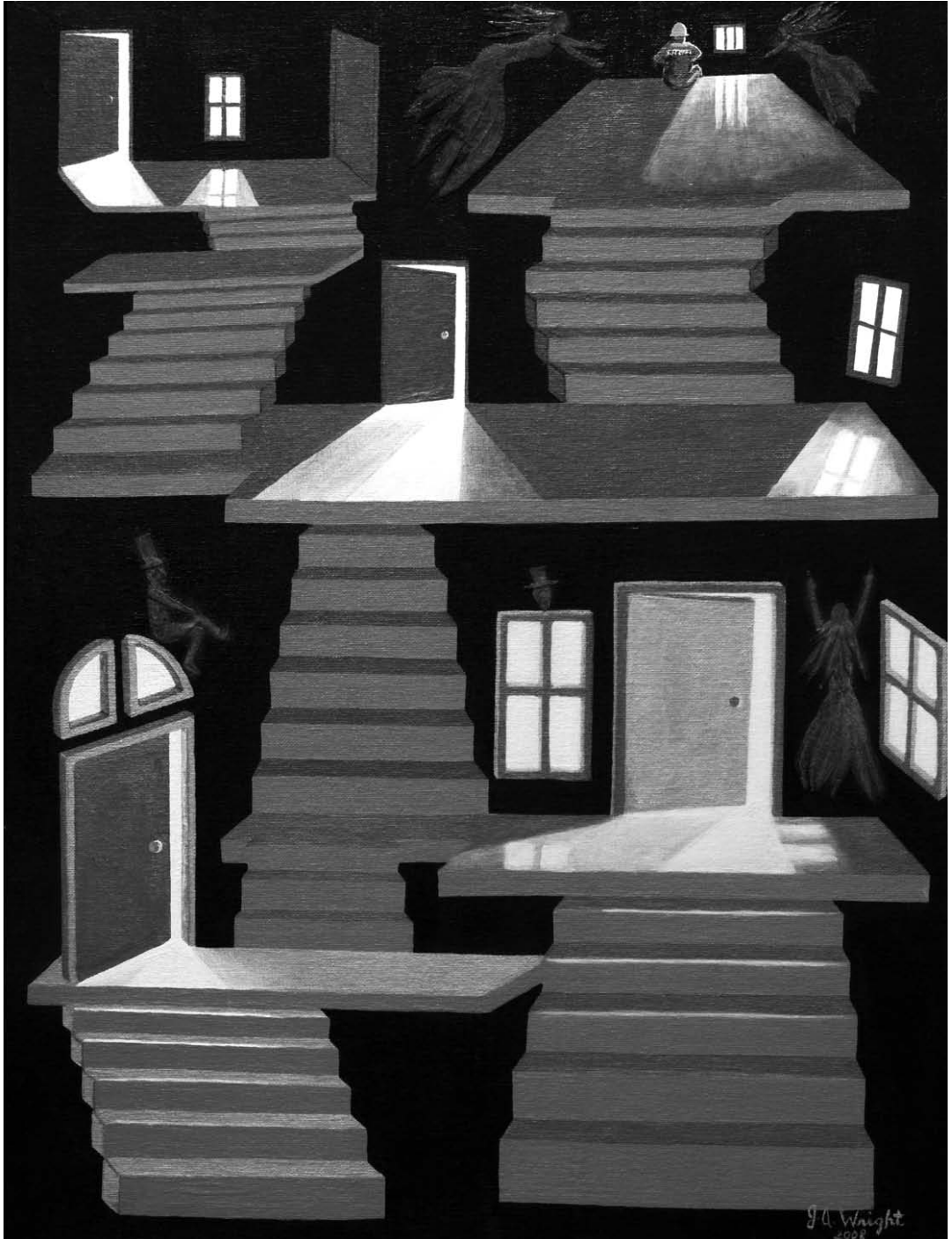
PCAP's work. Jesse Jannetta, a student of mine at the university, quoted from his English 319 journal in a 2006 booklet of tributes:

At the potluck . . . Leslie Neal [who was facilitating a dance workshop in a Florida prison] said something that really struck me. She said that she couldn't understand why the work that we're doing works. The results show that it does, but the weight of her experience tells her that it shouldn't. She thinks it's a little dicey that a bunch of college kids are sent into the prisons to do the workshops with only two or three weeks of training behind us.



Ahmad Kemet Ali,  
*Homeless*, 2008.  
Ink, pencil, colored  
pencil.

Jamie A. Wright, *No More Doors, Alone by My Window*, 2008. Acrylic



He then continued:

When you're up close to the prison workshops, and PCAP, it can be easy to forget how amazing, how unlikely it is. Re-reading my journals from that class brings me back to that time, when nothing seemed less likely than that I would be driving out to a prison every week, working too with a group that was a new thing to each other, creating a play that was also a new thing. Why did I think I could do it? Because Buzz thought I could do it, trusted me to do it. So I did.

We open a creative space where there was none, and we trust all who enter the room to cross boundaries and figure out together how to create striking, original plays, poems, and art. We don't enter as teachers. Like everyone else, we bring our own skills and experience, as well as our ability to be vulnerable and risk creativity. What occurs is chaotic, disrupted, difficult, contentious, marked by struggle, collaborative, and in the end familial. What keeps it going is that we trust everyone to make it happen.

#### *Something Is Missing in Our Lives*

Chris Lussier said years ago in a class session, "The men at the Ryan Correctional Facility and I come to the workshop for the same reason: something is missing in our lives, and we come there to find it." Whether they are built by poverty and violence or by privilege and learned indifference or by something else, the walls around and in us mean that we are unable to make connections and that we are undernourished. In spaces of hunger for learning and creativity, of acceptance and generosity, of chaos and trust, the walls break down a bit. Hollis-El told us, "In the yard, I am like this [he shows a clenched fist]! In here like this [he opens a tiny space between forefinger and thumb]. Then I return to the yard [he clenches again]." In the workshops, whether we know it or not, the possibility of this opening is always in the air. When we all work well, the hand

opens, the walls crumble, if only for that time, and we find or intuit what we're missing.

**Janie Paul:** In 1995 Buzz Alexander and I sent a letter to the Michigan state prisons, asking if there were prisoners who would be interested in submitting work for an exhibit of art by Michigan prisoners. We were amazed at the enthusiastic response. That year we exhibited 77 works by 50 artists from 16 prisons, and we set the precedent for what was to become a major yearly event. In 2007 we exhibited 345 works by 120 artists from 42 prisons. Each year about four thousand visitors come to the two-week exhibition.

Our exhibition was born of our outrage at the invisible moral crisis of incarceration in the United States, at the persistent stereotyping of incarcerated adults and youths, at the disproportionate number of prisoners of color, at the tearing apart of communities and families, and at senselessly long and inhumane prison sentences. Each year, the gallery walls are filled with images of pain and suffering, of tranquility and beauty, of surreal horror, of humor and wild imaginings. The pieces are done with masterly skill and raw talent. The exhibition features a wild array of art exploring the human condition. Most viewers don't expect the connection that they feel, and so they are stunned, are drawn in and begin to question their stereotypes about prisoners.

We wanted to give prisoners an opportunity to transcend their situation. Incarcerated persons who drew pictures or made things learned to think of themselves as artists. And they participated in the exhibition. On our selection trips, whenever possible, we meet and speak with the artists; they write artist's statements that are collected in a book and made available during the show. We make a videotape that includes the opening-reception speeches by curators and formerly incarcerated artists, footage of attendees looking at the art, and a close-up shot of each piece in the show. This video is sent to each prison,

where it is shown to the artists and sometimes made available in the library. At the close of the show, each artist receives a packet that includes press and publicity materials and a copy of the guest book, in which we encourage viewers to write extensive comments. University of Michigan art students and faculty members write letters to artists, giving encouragement and constructive criticism. In response, one artist said, "Thanks to everyone for being there every year—it serves to keep something of an ember glowing inside me—without it, I'm sure that art would have completely died inside me." Another stated, "I would not be an artist if not for this exhibition."

Many artists have been in the show repeatedly—for as many as twelve years. We have seen these participants develop amazing techniques, learn to draw, or develop an abstract style, create new compositional structures, and deepen the content of their work. Artists whose work we turned down one year have presented exciting work the next. This is impressive because most incarcerated artists work alone, without any formal instruction. Though there is a great deal of mentoring among these artists—in some prisons, they convene in groups to learn from one another—most incarcerated artists rely heavily on their own resources.

Most structured learning situations, such as classes and schools, combine instruction with the validating presence of a teacher. In the Michigan state-prison system, art has been blossoming without instruction and without teachers but with the validating presence of those of us who travel to the prisons, have conversations with the artists, correspond with the artists, and do hours and hours of work during the year to mount the exhibit. The artists match this hard work and commitment. This cycle of respect and appreciation fuels the growth and development of the artists and those of us who work in solidarity with them.

As I've said in the video *Witnessing Prison Art: A Curator's Reflections on a Decade of Art by Michigan Prisoners*:

What I find so inspiring is how prison artists forge a way for the soul to find habitation in a place that is uninhabitable and find ways to transform the empty solitude of prison into a source, a river of wishes and images that help them believe in a world which has forgotten them. So the art is an opening out—which is also an invitation to the world. And this is why people are so startled when they see this work. Instead of finding themselves in a dingy, scary, confined world of prison, they are rather invited into a vivid, varied world of humor, of passion, of fear and anger, of beauty, of contemplation, of lust, of awe and admiration, created by people who they thought did not deserve to be in the world but who, in fact, live in the same strange and complex universe which we all inhabit. This is the act of courage that has become a gift to me.

**Stephen John Hartnett:**

*On Trust and Terror*

Richie didn't want to read his poem. "Nuh, don't want to," he mumbles, head down, hands flicking his pen around his stringy fingers like a Ferris wheel. But the guys are persistent: "Come on, bro, everybody reads"; "Share it, dude, share it"; "Don't be a pussy, Richie, read the damn poem." His masculinity thus challenged, Richie unfurls his crumpled paper, clears his throat, makes an effort to sit up straight, and begins to read a poem about how his grandfather, his father, his uncles, and his two older brothers are all locked up. He's not sure whether to laugh or cry, but as the poem picks up momentum he can see that his workshop comrades are shaking their heads in agreement and support. He's hit a chord. He starts reading louder. Halfway through, he's not just reading, he's performing. By the time he gets to the final line—"and so here I am, enjoying my God damned family inheritance"—I can sense that he won't be reluctant to read next week. He just got it. He's hooked. He learned that by transforming the terror in your life into art and by then bravely sharing it, you learn to trust yourself and earn the respect of others. That's what we



Jerry Calkins, *Sky Is the Limit*, 2007. Acrylic.



Hannah Gilliam,  
*Perception*, 2007.  
Pencil, acrylic, ink.



try to do each week in the poetry workshop at the Champaign County jail: to turn terror into trust, to help the silenced speak, to make art in the face of unbearable misfortune.

*On Taking Your Students to Jail*

You didn't just say that. No way. No. No. No.

Woah, sister, it's an expression, everybody says it.

Michael, no, no way, you didn't just call your wife a bitch.

Ex-wife, and for damn good reason.

Heads nod in approval; there is chuckling all around. And now Katie is really pissed. She's a twenty-four-year-old, rural, working-class white woman from Illinois who is about to graduate from college, and she's slapping her hand down on a table with ten men, black and white, old and young, sober and wishing they were sober, most of whom appear to think that calling women bitches is fine. We've been running the workshop for over a year, meeting every Monday, but because the men are transferred out in rapid succession, it has been hard to establish a sense of continuity and shared communal norms. The long-time participants have come to respect Katie's feminism, but the new guys are still talking trash and offering swaggering street-hip bravado—and that means using misogyny as a comic trope.

"You knucklehead, women ain't bitches, they hos." Hearty laughter follows. It's a joke from Dez, the class clown, but there's nothing funny about his situation. He has been incarcerated for two months and still hasn't seen his lawyer.

This is when Katie cuts loose, and for what may be the first time in some of these men's lives, a woman is kicking their asses—not yelling or storming, just teaching hard. She's angry but she's focused; she's had years of classes in women's studies and she's not about to remain silent in the face of this kind

of banter. Sometimes I wonder if the men aren't prodding her, hoping to set her off; I think they find her anger sexy, *really sexy*—they're using misogynist insults to get her temper up, hoping she'll launch, and then they sit back and enjoy the show, both learning and playing a subtle game of seduction.

The guard comes in to bust up class; we're a flurry of high fives and "Thanks man" and "Great poem, jack" and "Katie, y'all right" before the men shuffle back to their pods and we teachers head for the parking lot, abuzz with wonder and exhausted, where we'll compare notes on the session. The big guard is all business, with a pressed blue shirt, shiny black shoes, an array of weapons dangling from her belt, her hair pulled back so tight it has to hurt. As we're going through security, she stops for a second, turns down the walkie-talkie babbling away on her belt, and nods admiringly to Katie, her voice getting soft: "That was beautiful, girl. You give 'em what not."

*On Students and Prisoners Making Art Together in Public Spaces*

The second annual Champaign-Urbana Prison Arts Festival showcased art made by men and women imprisoned across the state of Illinois, by local activists, and by some of my students. We filled the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center with the art, and then embellished that artistic space with films, panel discussions, poetry readings, and a closing "hip-hop celebration," where local high school kids came and did their thing, spinning on their heads, looking cool and strong and beautiful. And we published another issue of *Captured Words / Free Thoughts*, a zine that celebrates works by imprisoned writers. Images, words, sounds, bodies in motion; professors talking to school-board members; school-board members talking to the mothers of prisoners; lots of good food—all these activities are recorded for the radio. I still don't know what will come of the festival, but we're

trying to create a space of community, of free expression and shared hope.

And I have to tell you the roof came down when Katie and Philip, a shockingly beautiful young man who was a former prisoner we worked with in the county jail, now waiting tables at some half-assed joint in the mall, read a tag-team poem about their time together in the slammer. The formerly incarcerated young black man and the white girl about to graduate from college shook it up, each verse better than the former, their rhythms locking in strong and their voices barking the truth. While Philip's girlfriend was getting jealous, Katie's grandma was frowning about all those bad words, and I was beaming, thankful for the courage of those who can see a different world coming around the bend. And neither race nor class nor age nor religion mattered when they finished their glorious poem, surrounded by art, the room full of activists and mothers and kids and even a few professors. As we rose to cheer, Philip and Katie smiled like schoolkids, not former prisoners or prison tutors, just kids turning terror into trust and having a damn good time.

*On the Dilemmas of the Days After*

Richie got shipped downstate, out of the county jail, into some high-tech hellhole where there are no classes or workshops, and it's too far away for his mom to visit; my letters are going to who knows where, for he's not writing back.

Katie parlayed her activist experience into a great job doing social-justice work full time, and she even has health insurance—but of course they're only paying her enough money to eat badly, live cheaply, and hope the bills don't pile up.

Philip disappeared. Apparently a new manager at the restaurant where he was working decided that hiring former felons was not in the company's best interest, so they cut him loose. I hope the beautiful young poet has not returned to selling drugs.

And so it goes. Each day is a rotation from joy to terror, from making art to watching lives slip away, from the thrill of working with young people still hopeful enough to think things will change to dealing with those who couldn't care less. And while most of this makes little sense to me, I know that I love it—I've come to worry less about the outcome, as I do when writing poems. Instead I value the process, and that means showing up each week, maintaining high energy, and trying to model something like commitment.

**Bell Gale Chevigny:** Teaching prisoners and ex-prisoners in the 1960s surely changed my life more than theirs; it made me shift my focus to United States texts and contexts so that I could think and teach more about race and racism. I never forgot my best students' hungry intelligence and determination to grow, which were more urgent than those of most students on the outside.

When in 1993 I heard a reading of a superb and surprising story about race by a PEN Prison Writing Contest winner, I signed on as a juror. The powerful work submitted to us, revealing human realities in prison no media representation touched, moved me to compile an anthology. I hoped that *Doing Time: Twenty-Five Years of Prison Writing* would give our most silenced writers a hearing, make prisoners visible, and surprise the public into reflection. The contributors testified that the act of writing had helped them escape, survive, resist, protest, vent rage, face pain, feel love and remorse, and undertake reform. Writing in prison had deepened the integrity of many; perhaps it would arouse the integrity of free readers.

The night we launched the anthology, I learned that a contributor in Missouri, Jessie Wise, was to be executed within the month. I was about to grasp the personal implications of my project.

When I first wrote Jessie for permission to publish "No Brownstones"—his vi-



brant poem about the Saint Louis ghetto—he doubted he would live a year. Twice convicted of murder, he had spent twenty-nine of his forty-five years behind bars. He’d taught himself to write in many genres and to compose music: “I gathered books, made fret-boards and keyboards with cardboard, and went to work.” He ultimately taught music and led bands on death row—one mordantly called Final Appeal. When the band’s saxophonist was executed, Jessie wrote, “his creativity and musicianship were stripped from the world. People do change while incarcerated, but no one takes notice of that fact.” Jessie took notice, composing “Lament for Tony M.”

Jessie lost his own final appeal and went silent. He responded to my encouraging inquiry:

Knowing our communication wouldn’t last, I didn’t want to get too close to you and then have to die on you. Attempting—the operative word—to think for the both of us, completely ignoring your feelings and capability to form your own thoughts, I felt it better if we didn’t find our lives worth sharing through words; friendships can be so damn devastating that I didn’t want to subject neither of us to the inevitable day.

He made me think seriously: I knew little about this man, nothing of his crimes. Jessie was permitting—or challenging—me to forget him. Sympathy was worthless—it was poison—unless it was for keeps. Heeding a motto of proud old convicts, “My word is my bond,” I wrote carefully, “As long as you want to write to me, I will do my best to respond.”

—  
Elizabeth  
Miklosovic, *The  
Gift*, 2007. Pencil,  
charcoal.

After that, Jessie wanted me to know all about his case. He sent me his long “summary of police and prosecutorial misconduct.” Read dispassionately, it was wholly unconvincing, seeming part fantasy and part conditioned response to Saint Louis’s pervasive racism. Jessie probably believed it, like many writers—including me—whose re-creations come to displace the originals in their minds. But how would I write to him? The question tormented me. Helen Prejean supported, even loved, her dead man walking, leading him to acknowledge his murder. That was not for me, but I leaned on her wisdom: we are each more than the worst thing we ever do. And state murder was anathema to me.

G. English,  
*Halloween: Fall Fun-  
Time*, 2008. Acrylic.

I finally wrote, “Jessie, what can I do to help you?” Then I contacted and consulted his

few friends and his lawyers and organized petition and publicity campaigns. In an op-ed (picked up by the Gannett chain), I argued for commutation of his sentence, drawing on his contributions and his words: “I want to write my books so bad. When they come to get me, I just want to tell them I’m not through with this life, that I have so much to say, and ask them if they can wait awhile. Crazy, isn’t it?” Was it crazy? I wrote, or was the state of Missouri crazy to put to death a person who had so much to offer?

Jessie thanked me but wished I’d focused on his innocence. We could now talk on the phone. Since the opportunity to reopen his innocence claim in court had long passed, I urged him to express remorse, an indispensable key to winning commutation. He felt re-



gret, he said, but no remorse for a crime he didn't commit.

Our talk was circular but oddly pleasurable. He often laughed at the sound of my voice, and I joined him. What mattered in his last days was that his friends were getting together, that we cared about him, and that he would not be forgotten. I didn't regret my involvement with Jessie, but I could not imagine deliberately putting myself through such a devastating experience again.

But the relationships I sustain with these incarcerated writers have obliged me twice again to petition, publish op-eds, and face defeat. Making me take responsibility for my words, Jessie converted me into a death-penalty abolitionist.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Thank you for these provocative, moving comments. Given the extraordinary numbers of men and women who are in prison and their hunger for knowledge, I want to devote a substantial portion of the May issue to the role of the academy in prison activism. Should colleges and universities give faculty members release time for teaching in prisons? Should we create a system for granting college credits to inmates who take classes? What are the impediments to creating degree-granting programs for the incarcerated? On the most practical level, how does one arrange to teach in prison? What texts or assignments have worked well for you?

**Bell Gale Chevigny:** See the PEN Prison Writing Program ([www.pen.org](http://www.pen.org)) and download "Words on Walls: Starting a Workshop in Prison" for useful information and strategies. When I taught introductory college-level English at a county penitentiary in the 1960s, my reading assignments drew one week from *Black Voices*, virtually the only anthology of its kind, and the next from a collection of work by white authors. Now I sometimes assign parts of *Doing Time* to inspire effort, but mostly students read their work aloud while others in the class write observations on what

they hear. Once students learn not to judge but to comment on craft (see Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen's *Beat Not the Poor Desk*), most prove to be sensitive listeners and constructive observers.

**Patsy Yaeger:** What is teaching in prisons like? Can you describe some of the obstacles you encounter?

**Judith Tannenbaum:** Offering classes and art-making workshops inside prison requires a form of planning rarely necessary in other kinds of settings. Although the details vary from program to program and state to state, we all have to work closely with a prison official (perhaps a program representative, someone in the education department or the prison library, or a community liaison) who—if we're lucky—gives us information and strategies for working well in a paramilitary environment. We most often have to let this person know what material and guests we're bringing in, and when. We and our guests have to give personal identification (most often driver's license and social security number) and pass a security clearance. This information is put on a form that we carry in with us each time we visit or that is held by a staff member who processes us into the prison. Often we have to have prison staff members escort us inside each time we arrive. We have to wait for that person, maybe for a very long time. Whatever we carry with us will be searched. We have to walk through metal detectors and sometimes be patted down. We have to give detailed information about any projects, productions, and publications we'd like to create. And then we have to listen to the precise steps we must follow to increase the possibility we can do something close to what we want to do. At even the last minute—before class, rehearsal, or a performance—there might be a lockdown or the star of the play might be put in lockup or the count might not clear, so no programming can happen.

**Buzz Alexander:** Everything Judith describes is true, with variations, in Michigan prisons. I would add two dimensions. One is that often we have to scramble: we come in for the performance of a play, and actors have been transferred out that day or have gotten in a fight and been sent to segregation or have gotten cold feet or have been diverted by a million other things. Since the play has to go on, we figure out how to make it go on. This scrambling happens repeatedly, and one has to be confident and versatile, refusing to say no and finding a way to say yes. And the second is that one has to be strategic, to know what to do when someone or something in the prison blocks us, whether deliberately or ignorantly, whether out of a desire to crush what is beautiful or out of a belief in bureaucratic, inflexible, sometimes suddenly remembered rules. One must know how to talk to corrections officers and prison staff members politely, persuasively, and respectfully and, when that doesn't work and something is at stake, how to go around them to advocates in the prison or prison system. In a crunch and significant crisis, one might need to go outside the system and seek help from a legislator or the university, which we have done only once. And all this must be done without provoking revenge against the workshops and exhibition from within the prison or prison system. Sometimes it's fun.

**Patsy Yaeger:** What does one gain from working on the inside? Does your work play any role in social change?

**Stephen John Hartnett:** Some of our students and workshop participants will stay in prison until they die, some will get out only to find themselves in dead-end jobs, and some will soar to undreamed-of successes, but I think many of them would agree that what our workshops and classes have triggered in them is a belief in their ability to make things, to change things, to revise things, to write and sing and dance and paint. In short, our

workshops are laboratories for agency. And of course that agency slams into the horrors of prison life and poverty and racism every day. Although exploring new forms of agency is not a magic route to freedom and happiness, if we offer our workshop participants anything, it is the sense that they have agency and can make things, and that sense of making and doing can, under the right circumstances, leap from writing poems or drawing pictures to some larger, more directly political arena. For example, I just received an e-mail message from Bryan "Lefty" Smith. When I met him in 1997, he was painting in San Quentin but was leery of public speaking. By the end of our class, he was confidently stepping in front of his classmates and delivering darn good speeches and presentations; last week, following his release from prison, he spoke before faculty members and students at the University of San Francisco! He's out there trying to persuade his neighbors, fulfilling the obligations of citizenship, fighting for social justice. My relationship with Lefty is just one small part of his remarkable life transformation, but he offers us a hopeful model of agency in action.

**Patsy Yaeger:** How do prison authorities respond to the work you do?

**Bell Gale Chevigny:** Sometimes growth in prison is rigorously punished. Over many years in San Quentin's condemned row, Anthony Ross and Steve Champion transformed themselves from Crips members to writers committed to spiritual and political growth side by side with the Crips's founder, Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Just days before Williams's execution in December 2005, Anthony and Steve were transferred to the "hole," where they have been held ever since on alleged information that they were plotting a riot. While appealing this charge, the two men have continued writing about their ordeal.

But on rare occasions some prison authorities embrace, or at least allow, change. In the hole at Sacramento State Prison, Pat-



rick Nolan, a convicted killer, read Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and set out on his own search. A visiting poet (back in the heyday of California's Arts-in-Corrections) helped him believe that a poem could contain—and thus make bearable—buried pain and regret. In response to a race riot, he helped create another “container,” a men's circle that encouraged men to open up to one another and grow and allowed outsiders to work with them. With institutional permission, this circle survives even after Patrick's death.

**Stephen John Hartnett:** I'd like to supplement Bell's thoughts, since my experience over eighteen years of teaching in prisons is that most administrators are happy to have us in their facilities. Our workshops and classes offer much-needed places of reflection and community building, which yield positive outcomes that only the most Neanderthal warden would oppose. I should note, however, that I have had radicals charge that in doing work inside prisons we are legitimizing the prison-industrial complex, making horrendous institutions look better. This argument is partly true, so we need to be clear that even while our work may allow prisons or jails to enjoy good public relations or fulfill their need for programming, we teach prisoners in the name of social justice. Sometimes that larger goal clashes with the realities of prison life—but you'd be surprised how often it doesn't clash, how often guards support our work, how often folks you imagine are enemies are in fact allies.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Bell comments in e-mail that it is crucial to generate more contact across the wall: “We must mentor and nurture writers, help them find publishing or radio outlets and, when they are released, live audiences, especially in colleges and universities.” Are there ways in which teaching at your college or university and teaching in prison intersect?

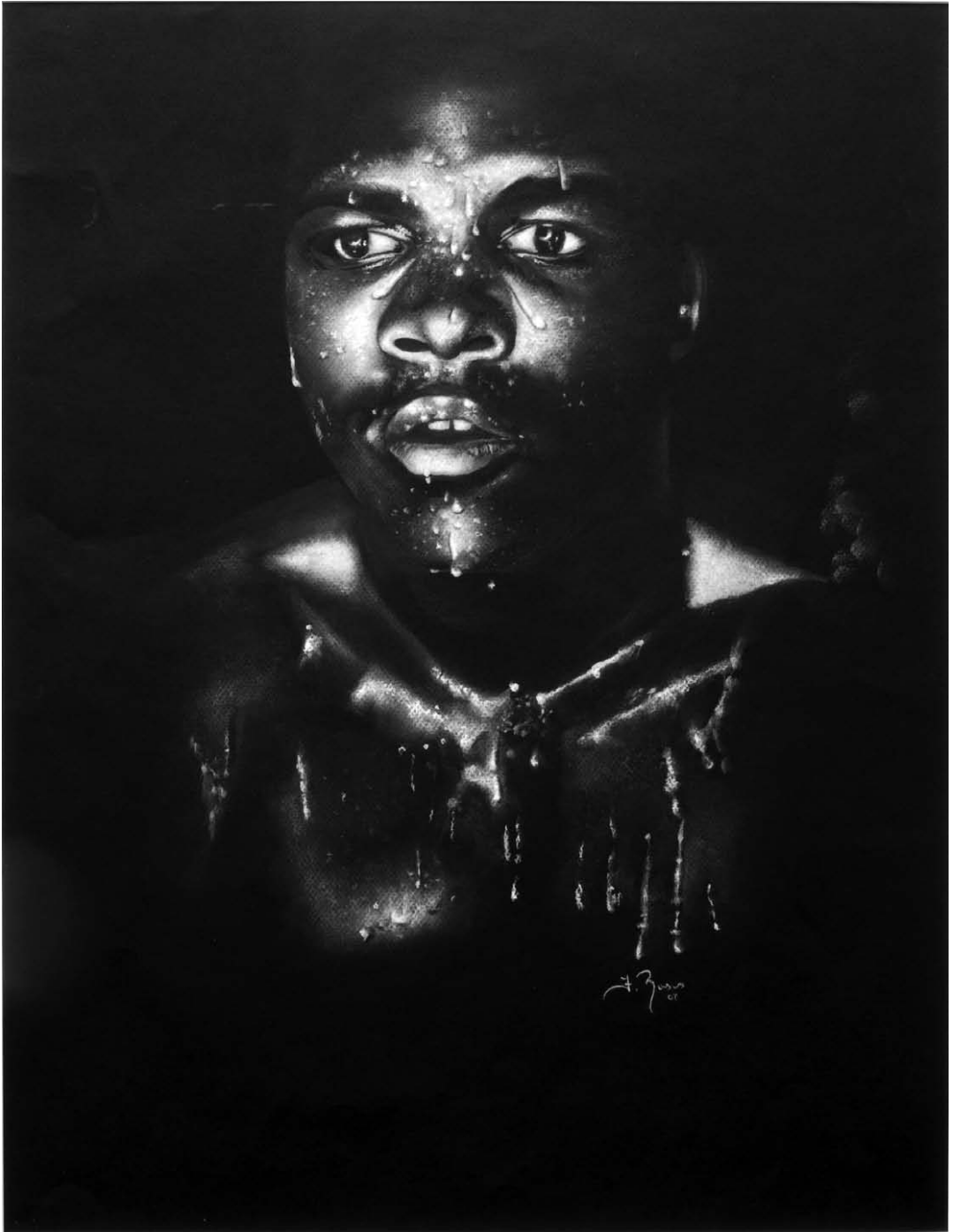
**Janie Paul:** An interesting thing happened last year when I taught my drawing class at the

university. I had started showing my classes art by incarcerated artists, but in this class I did it from the beginning. We talked about how detailed the work was and with what care it is done. My students typically have difficulty spending long periods of uninterrupted time on their work. But seeing this work led some students to spend many hours on very detailed and organized drawings. It helped them see drawing as something close to their being, something that could come from personal mark making. Although some might say that the students adopted a style of “outsider” art, I would say that they came closer to the heart of drawing. Art by incarcerated people helped free my students' imaginations.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Are there other reasons for teaching literature by prisoners in nonprison classrooms?

**Bell Gale Chevigny:** Sometimes it is beautiful and inspires us. We see people like ourselves where we least expect to find them. Prisoners sometimes communicate by flashing mirrors down the tier. Their writing is a mirror that shows us our shared humanity. It reconnects us to the part of our humanity that we have cast off. Sometimes prisoners' writing is profoundly disturbing. It breaches the wall we have unconsciously participated in building. It bears witness and corrects our ignorance, revealing the reality of prison life as no other representation can—the conditions of confinement; the danger of dehumanization, death, or madness; and also the discovery of resources, strength, and endurance most of us never have to know. It makes real for us issues that we may understand only abstractly, like capital punishment, the cynical use of an ineffectual war on drugs to justify more incarceration, the workings of the prison-industrial complex, the substitution of recidivism for rehabilitation, the destruction of the family, the decimation and disenfranchisement of communities of color, and our nation's deepening apartheid. The writer in prison has the

Fred Ross, *G.O.A.T.*  
(*Greatest of All  
Time*), 2008.  
Charcoal.



authority of experience and sometimes the insight to help reverse these developments, which punish and diminish us all. Prisoners' writing makes us feel the truth of Dostoevsky's observation that you can measure the level of a civilization by entering its prisons.

Our connection with writers in prison helps us imagine that another world is possible. This work offers the surprise of recognition. One of the stories in *Doing Time* is called "Behind the Mirror's Face"; reading prisoners' writing allows us to scrape the silver off the mirror and see our brothers and sisters face-to-face through the glass.

**Buzz Alexander:** In my film course on prisons and in English 319, I use writing by prisoners (including *Doing Time*), and I also invite former prisoners, some of whom are writers, to speak. My students, with brief training, go into prisons and juvenile facilities and high schools in tough neighborhoods and experience writing by urban youth, incarcerated youth, and prisoners as it is written, and my students are challenged to write their own work. Such experience is the most powerful way that writing by prisoners is used in University of Michigan courses. The writers are present.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Is there a downside to your work in prisons? What emotional challenges do you face?

**Stephen John Hartnett:** My incarcerated students often talk about our workshops and classes as spaces of freedom, awakening, and discovery. Many of them are being treated like capable, creative, constructive people for the first time in their lives—and this of course feels great. Then they get out (some of them, that is) and find that the world is stacked against them. L. O. Jones, a fantastic artist who wanted to build his career as an artist once free, found himself working twelve-hour days as a short-order cook; he has confessed that he felt more personal freedom while

imprisoned than while working in the "free world." Mario Rocha blossomed as a writer while incarcerated; now he's free, and last week he wrote a heartbreaking message about how he misses the quiet of his cell. Home life, with cousins, brothers, and their wives and kids hanging around, as well as former gang-bangers, leaves him drained and frazzled.

So here's the thing that haunts me: our workshops and classes offer glimpses into a world of artistic creation and mutual respect that many of our students and workshop participants will probably never know again—and the loss of that special space feels to them like a crushing blow, further confirmation of their lousy lot in life.

**Bell Gale Chevigny:** I agree. Some former prisoners I know have told me they're tempted to go back to the world they knew and could handle better than the so-called free world. And although PEN's prison-writing program has organized some writing classes for former prisoners through local organizations like the Fortune Society, these classes have been cut back because the committee is spread too thin. What seems beneficial—though not decisive—is keeping in touch with released writers, encouraging and mentoring their continued literary efforts, and helping them find some outlet for their considerable and valuable experience. But I'm talking here about a few individuals. The current concerted attention to issues of "reentry" is hopeful.

**Buzz Alexander:** I've always hated the term *rehabilitation* because of what it implies about the incarcerated person. I always tell my students at the university that I won't talk about that term unless they are willing to discuss the possibility that they themselves need rehabilitation in a world where they have probably acquiesced in injustices done to others. Instead I always talk about *growth*, the term Judith uses, and by growth I mean further development of agency, skills, confidence, and what comes with articulating and

working with others, performing and being celebrated and gaining new respect. I'm talking about what one brings to one's loved ones, in the visiting room and on the phone, about what one brings to one's family and neighborhood when one comes home.

**Janie Paul:** I think that one of the reasons we mistrust the concept of change when it is applied to prisoners is that too often they are held responsible for things that are beyond their control. And we know this not to be true. To blame prisoners is like blaming the kids Judith writes about who are being tested and measured to death. I work in an elementary school in Detroit in a neighborhood that has the highest drug use in the city, where ninety-nine percent of the kids receive free lunch and many of the parents are in prison. If the students' test scores aren't significantly higher this year, the school may be reconstituted and the kids sent elsewhere. Everyone will be punished—teachers, children, the principal, parents—because such a failure would be considered their fault. "If only the children had learned more; if only they had changed more. . . ."

**Judith Tannenbaum:** Exactly. Words like *change* and *rehabilitation* are based on assumptions about who's locked behind bars and why. Spoon Jackson, a lifer, said in an editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that all rehabilitation is self-rehabilitation ("Keep Fewer"). We're also talking about responsibilities that are not individual but social. Working as I currently do with teaching artists who share writing with youth, I see a continuum linking many urban public schools and prison. We have created a world in which some of our children are being prepared to assume power and others are being trained for prison.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Some people ask why prisoners should get art classes when so many public schools lack art programs.

**Judith Tannenbaum:** I've often been asked that, and I find it a reasonable question. The

point isn't to choose but to see that every human being—not only children in well-funded schools or artists in MFA programs—has the capacity and need to create. I've listened to many lifers—men convicted of murder—say words similar to these spoken by Rick at New Folsom: "When I was young, if any teacher had ever invited me to put my feelings into a poem or a painting, I might not have quit school."

**Patsy Yaeger:** What is the difference between teaching the incarcerated and teaching at a university?

**Buzz Alexander:** There is great hunger for learning and creativity in the prisoners who attend the workshops and often much fearlessness and raw originality built on real experiences. Once they know they can own these experiences, they are eager to do so and to analyze them. My classes at the university are usually exciting and contentious, full of struggling, bright students. But these classes are inferior to the best poetry and theater workshops I've been lucky enough to participate in in prison. I can choose not to be involved in my university classes (I can lecture, sit back); I love it that the prisoners I work with do not allow me that choice.

**Stephen John Hartnett:** I know Buzz and Janie are working on transitional programs. I wonder what others think about whether or not we should be linking the work we do inside prisons to transitional programs for the men and women who get out. The problem is that most of us are already maxed out on time and energy—so thinking about doing more work doesn't seem possible at this point.

**Buzz Alexander:** Years ago I joined in a couple of sessions of a New York City education project for adjudicated youth on court probation. Afterward I talked with one of the project coordinators about the youths' prospects. He said, "Their prospects are very poor; what I hope I'm achieving here is that when they end up incarcerated on Rikers Island, they

will have some resources for dealing that they wouldn't have had if I didn't work with them."

We are constantly urged to do quantitative follow-up work, to see what effect our workshops and the art show have had on recidivism, and we would like to do that (but doing so takes time and money). It would be difficult to determine the role of our programs, of course, because they are just a tiny part of what might be useful to someone coming out, who is up against all the factors we've mentioned. If we did the follow-up study, I would want to ask the formerly incarcerated whether, when they were faced with a hard situation after returning to their lives, such as feeling inclined to treat their spouses or children with violence, anything from their work with us, from what they'd risked as an actor or poet or artist, from being part of a supportive community, had come to mind and been a resource.

We also started the Linkage Project in 2002, which connects people who have worked with us inside with arts mentors in their home communities. We created a play with former prisoners (directed by Gillian Eaton) and performed it in four cities in Michigan. We have just completed our second exhibition of art by Linkage mentors and mentees, with readings and performances by other mentors and mentees. Michigan has one of the best-funded reentry initiatives in this country, and we participate on its advisory and steering committees. Stephen is right that we should do that work and also right that it takes too much energy.

**Judith Tannenbaum:** I despair that almost all my San Quentin students were serving some kind of a life sentence. Which means—in California—that they are all still inside, no matter their profound growth, no matter their artwork, no matter their positive contributions. The three former students I'm closest to serve their thirtieth year inside this year or next.

**Patsy Yaeger:** Can you describe responses you've received from incarcerated students and artists?

**Buzz Alexander:** It is hard to overestimate what these programs mean to those who have been cruelly put down by others throughout most of their lives and who have been told that they don't deserve what the rest of us get in spades. At a rehearsal for a prison play, an artist told me, with tears in his eyes, that he had always thought of himself as nothing until the art show, until he met us. And Lessie Brown, who returned home after twenty-some years, wrote in a letter to Janie and me:

I just don't know how to describe how all this has made me feel. I guess if you consider a woman who felt like she was nothing, who felt she had no potential for anything, and would never be anything, then maybe you can understand just a little, what this has done for me. I now have a talent that I can utilize to support myself, and give people pleasure, at the same time, it is so amazing to me! Then, to incorporate my art with my skills in Graphic Arts, eventually own my own business, and hire displaced women, train them, give them a skill, that they can use to support their children, and hopefully never end up in here, or in a Domestic Violence situation, well, it means the world to me. Thank you, again, for all that you have done for me, and may you both be blessed, always.

We're really not doing anything remarkable: this work allows us to meet, be with, and respect struggling and courageous people. In the end it is simple, and it is poignant that it is so unusual and powerful for them.

**Judith Tannenbaum:** I love what Janie says about being a "validating presence." It seems like these programs shouldn't work, but they do. I was just talking with a student from a prison-arts program at her college, and every detail she gave me (the program lacks adult or faculty support, thirty students teach thirty different classes, participants do not formally talk and exchange information and support) was a recipe for major disaster, but the program has been working and growing for four years. So who knows?

Our comments here show that for each of us—whether we see our work as facilitating, teaching, or being a human being sharing with other human beings—what Buzz describes as opening “a creative space where there was none” is central to our intent and the work we do. Lesson plans and curriculum creation are important—my San Quentin students insisted I teach them something—but at the core of successful prison workshops is opening space in an environment where space is locked and closed.

Patricia Yaeger

## NOTES

1. A *New York Times* editorial in January 2008 asks Congress to pass a “Second Chance Act” establishing a national center to gather and disseminate information about prison-education programs throughout the United States (“Second Chance”).
2. Tony Greene is a pseudonym.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

BUZZ ALEXANDER is an Arthur A. Thurnau Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; a founder of the Prison Creative Arts Project; and a member of the Sisters Within Theater Troupe. He is completing a book on the Prison Creative Arts Project.

BELL GALE CHEVIGNY is a professor emerita of literature at the State University of New York, Purchase. As a member of PEN's Prison Writing Program, she published *Doing Time: Twenty-Five Years of Prison Writing: A PEN American Center Prize Anthology* (Arcade, 1999), and she continues to mentor incarcerated writers. Her other books include *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings* (Northeastern UP, 1994); she still pursues Margaret Fuller.

STEPHEN JOHN HARTNETT, associate professor of speech communication at the University of Illinois, Urbana, is the author of *Globalization and Empire: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, Free Markets, and the Twilight of Democracy* (U of Alabama P, 2006), *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror* (AltaMira, 2003), and *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (U of Illinois P, 2002). He has taught college classes and poetry workshops in prisons in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, and California and is a cofounder of PCARE, a group of communication scholars who work on prison communication activism research and education.

JANIE PAUL is a visual artist and an associate professor at the School of Art and Design and the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is in the brainstorming phase of a book about the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners and is working on a series of mixed-media encaustic paintings based on landscape imagery.

JUDITH TANNENBAUM ([www.judithtannenbaum.com](http://www.judithtannenbaum.com)) has worked in the field of community arts for thirty-five years. She serves as training coordinator for WritersCorps, a project of the San Francisco Arts Commission in which teaching artists share writing with youth. Her books include a memoir, *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin* (Northeastern UP, 2000), and the teaching texts *Teeth, Wiggle as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades*, and *Jump Write In! Creative Writing Exercises for Diverse Communities, Grades 6–12*.