

IN THE DEAD ZONE

I am confined in a stifling cell measuring $7\frac{1}{2}$ X $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet; hewn completely of rock, an aperture in the smooth unfinished stone is where I sleep. A thin and greasy, sweat-stained pallet serves as my mattress. The heart and mind constitute my only means of travel.

I was born and raised in a blighted area of Los Angeles known as Boyle Heights. The squalid flat I called home was in a crime infested area nestled in the heart of the barrio slums of East Los Angeles.

As small children, my two brothers and I would scale the spiked iron fence of Evergreen Cemetery on Brooklyn Avenue. There we would happily play amid ancient tombstones and mausoleums, our trusty slingshots warding off pesky crows and imaginary ghouls.

I remember a quiet, macabre beauty in this place. Many of the mausoleums were elaborate and stately, a few adorned with elegantly wrought iron gates which allowed the visitor to peer inside. I remember, as a seven year old child, being that visitor and wondering what it would feel like to be interred within the cool marble walls.

Now, some forty three years later I have no choice but to live in one. The irony of that prophetic utterance is forever haunting in this desolate place of wretched exile.

There is nothing here to distract me from wandering these godforsaken plains of introspective purgatory; no television, radio or books, only an habitual, Sisyphean pacing that becomes robotic. The only human contact is an occasional glance from a stone-faced guard, who, gliding soundlessly from cell to cell, peers into the haunting silence to confirm I am still alive.

The cell would be neolithic were it not for the stainless steel sink and toilet bolted securely to the wall. A massive dungeon door with a small window affords me a dismal view of a whitewashed wall which runs the length of the tier.

Summer here is unbearable, and in the heat of the day I seat myself near the cell door. The cool breeze which comes under the solid portal offers some respite from the sweltering interior.

A tiny movement on the floor catches my eye as a beetle glides under the door, and for some strange reason I laugh aloud in delight, immensely grateful for the company of this iridescent, itinerant wanderer.

Set high into the sepulchers lid is a tiny slit of a window. Embedded into the rock ceiling and forged of one-inch thick bulletproof glass, it enables another hawk eyed guard to monitor my every move and body function.

Craning my neck against the coolness of the stone wall, I find I am able to glimpse a tiny expanse of Persian blue sky. A scanty wisp of translucent cloud chooses this moment to waft lazily by in the summer heat.

The sun's golden amber, now reflected in the insect encrusted corner of the skylight, spills across the cracked stone floor like an ancient, liquid fire.

I reach out a gnarled hand, once young and virile, to gently touch the radiance of this Holy Star. As I enter the warm circle of its incandescence, I am instantly engulfed, immolated by the searing flames of grief and remorse for a life and promise I so carelessly threw back at the universe...

Shalom and blessed be,

