

Reparative Therapy

Everyone who loved me told me I needed to change, to give up what I was doing to myself. But I refused. Spoiled and stubborn, I clung to my hedonistic life -- drinking, partying, blowing coke up my nose. I didn't like change, and I wanted no part of it. As a result, a judge sentenced me to twenty years.

I sat in the back of an antiquated prison classroom listening to a community college professor conjugate Spanish verbs. My tuition in the college program is being paid for by a private foundation. Why a philanthropist has such compassion for criminals in a prison infamous for violence, I have no idea. Most of society despises us.

In Spanish, I joked with the guy in front of me. A Bulgarian, his Spanish was better than that of most of the guys in the class. "Juan es guapo. Juan es maricón. Le encanta chorizo." Contrary to Hollywood's depiction, rabid homophobia reigns in prison. Homosexual behavior is rare. Partly to fit in, and partly out of self-loathing despite being a gay man, I conform.

The two-hour Spanish class usually ended at 8:45 pm. It was 9:15. The officers, most of whom deeply resent inmates getting an education, rarely let a class run late. Even the professor, who had spent six years in a military Special Ops unit stationed in Iraq, was tense. I was certain a fight had broken out somewhere. Prison security is the only thing that would delay the end of night school.

Finally, at 9:30 pm, a bell reminiscent of high school, sounded. Time for the 'go-back.' Three classrooms emptied into the corridor, followed by the Spanish professor who made a beeline for the exit. About forty men began screaming and gesticulating -- normal conversation in prison. Most inmates believe the volume of one's voice is directly proportional to one's IQ.

Voices of bellowing men caromed off the green tile walls and terrazzo floor. The din made me uncomfortable. I was worried

because the previous night a fight had broken out in the recreation yard outside my window. An inmate was stomped and stabbed by gang members. Officers fired tear gas to break it up. I had an uneasy feeling gang revenge had taken place while the Spanish professor was explaining the use of *vosotros*. "*Coméis. Dorméis. Peleáis.*"

Full of resentment toward the shouting throng, I headed back to my cell with the guys who locked on my gallery. Once we left the corridor, all talking stopped. Prison rules forbid it. As we walked silently in pairs like Franciscan monks back to our cells, I sensed tension. Sergeants, or 'white-shirts,' were shouting into telephone receivers. Normally at that hour of the night, white-shirts are in their offices, leaning back in comfy ergonomic chairs with boots propped on their desks, watching TV and eating pizza with three toppings. As we filed past officers in blue uniforms on our way back to our galleries, they glared at us without the usual ridicule and taunting.

In the stairway, we joked a little to relieve our anxiety. "*Hasta la vista, cabrón.*" "*Bese mi culo, pendejo.*" The gallery housing my cell looks out at a two-acre prison yard that provides recreation for A-block, affectionately known as 'Afghanistan.' It is one of four yards comprising an eight-acre quad, divided by raised catwalks. Three-story structures, clad in red brick, form a massive enclosure housing over two thousand men. The size of a Navy aircraft carrier, the prison stretches one thousand feet and occupies fifty acres.

As I neared my cell, through the barred gallery windows that rise from floor to ceiling, I could see A-block yard: deserted, except for the perimeter where a couple hundred prisoners stood, shoulder to shoulder, facing the brick walls. Their hands, raised high over their heads, were pressed flat against the walls. Sergeants scurried across the catwalks, intensely focused on the yard below them. Over the loudspeakers, I heard a scratchy voice.

"Stop fighting. This is your last warning."

An eerie silence hung in the air, followed by two flat pops

of a gun. Canisters of tear gas had been fired into the yard. Guys on my gallery, already locked in their cells, shouted at me as I walked by. "Shut the windows! Shut the windows!" As I complied, my cell gate opened with a grinding whirr. I stepped in and it slammed shut.

I sat at my desk, a narrow metal shelf, clutching my Spanish books to my stomach. I felt sick, scared. Tear gas is rarely used for fights in the yard. When it is, there are repercussions for the whole prison. Normally a raucous corridor of men shouting, cooking meals and slamming dominoes on Formica tables, the gallery waited in silence as events in the yard unfolded. Outside my window, the A-block handball court had been abandoned, a single blue rubber ball left behind. Shouts of officers on the catwalks penetrated the wire-glass windows.

"Slide down the wall."

"Get on the ground, face down."

I thought of Danny, who sits next to me in Spanish class. He has very little command of Spanish grammar. In hushed tones, I often help him as best as I can -- translating, correcting his spelling, letting him peek at my notes. He has such beautiful hands: large, sinewy, chiseled like Michaelangelo's statue of David. He combs his hair forward, like an ancient Roman. His large, dark-lidded eyes plead for my help as the class conjugates verbs. An aquiline nose and full pouty lips anchor his face. I want to lie in bed with him -- just lie there, one arm draped across his bare chest, and drift off to sleep, hypnotized by his melodic breathing.

In the morning, when I woke, the prison seemed normal -- the usual sounds and banter of the 7:00 am shift change. Once the morning count cleared, the gates opened. I grabbed a pint of milk from the fridge on the gallery, plugged in my plastic hot pot, and made a huge mug of instant coffee spiked with cocoa to kill the bitterness. I never go to the mess hall for break-

fast. Prison food -- mushy, bland and cold -- depresses me. Men braver than I headed to the dayroom and waited for the chow bell.

Waiting for the hot pot to heat up, I looked out at the A-block yard, strewn with detritus from the previous night's melee. Lifeless sweatshirts littered the grass. Balled-up latex gloves, used to strip-search inmates, dotted the pavement. A clear plastic garbage bag, propelled by the wind, danced in circles around the handball on the empty court.

An unintelligible message blared on the squawk box near the dayroom. The company officer shouted down the gallery. "Lock in. Everybody. Lock in, now." Guys who had been waiting for chow quickly abandoned the dayroom. "Ah, shit. Here we go. They musta killed that nigga last night, ya heard."

I dread lock-downs. The uncertainty, the helplessness, are torture. One has no idea when they will end, when the somewhat normal routine will return, freeing us from purgatory. However, lock-downs are also sometimes a calming respite from the shouting and chaos that swirl outside my cell. Every night, as it approaches 10:00 pm, the cacophonous din builds to a crescendo until the slamming gates resound like the clash of cymbals. The hollering slowly abates, transformed to mindless chatter, ultimately forming a nocturne as men become entranced by ancient black and white TVs, drifting off into fitful sleep.

"Hey yo, check out TMZ. That bitch is thick, son, ya heard."

"Put on 'Breaking Bad.' They's killin' that nigga. Word to my motha, son."

To take my mind off the lock-down, and forget the ugly drama of the previous night's fight, I picked up Cien Años de Soledad, Gabriel García Márquez's masterful career-defining novel. Reading in Spanish helps me to block out the banal babel that intensifies whenever bored men are locked in their cells.

"Hey yo, young god, send me a roolly, son. This shit is stressin' me out. Ya heard?"

"Nigga, fall back and smack ya head. You done smoke up all my shit."

"Hey yo, kiss my black ass, nigga."

Visually, I find that phrase erotic. Black men have beautiful asses. Their muscular butt cheeks sit high on long, powerful legs. At times, walking in formation through the prison's brick corridors, I can't help but lustfully stare at the undulating butt in front of me. Do black prisoners have any idea how they arouse gay men by strutting with their pants pulled half way down their asses like rappers, their shirts draped in the deep cracks of their butts? How can men be so homophobic, yet walk around like butt billboards?

I returned to Márquez's village of Macondo. Its sassy matriarchs, sage and potent, animate the pages. I love Pilar's irreverent humor. "Santa madre de Dios. Estoy ocupado destripando conejos para tu guiso. Por el amor de Dios, suélteme." I skipped to the scene detailing Jose Arcadio's huge cock. I debated what Márquez, a Nobel laureate, was thinking when he conjured that passage. Was it autobiographical, or wishful fancy? Do straight men, just like most gays, have a big dick fantasy -- a barely subconscious desire for a powerful weapon of sexual dominance? I admire Márquez's courage in broaching a subject considered taboo by most heterosexual men.

In prison, an inane code governs all references to a man's body parts. Innocuous statements such as, "Take it out," or, "Stick it in," when talking about the microwave, for example, have to be immediately followed by the requisite statement, "No homo." Even common mess hall words like "meat," "sausage," or "buns" require an emphatic "no homo." I refuse to participate in the insanity. Instead, I retort with statements such as, "You're not afraid of homosexuals, are you? Come on, they can't hurt you." White guys are more comfortable joking about their sexuality. But black men never cross that line. Their culture precludes any inference of homosexuality, in jest, or

otherwise. An extreme machismo, most likely instilled growing up in the 'hood, forbids any gay references. Black men wear their manhood like breastplates.

Yet, it's hypocritical of me to criticize a man's armor. I wish I had some. I get nervous simply awaiting a call-out to the prison library, apprehensive of negotiating my way past the four different officers that sit between the library and my cell.

When I locked in another block, and tried to go to the library, the officers who ran the call-outs would tell me, "Library? You ain't got no call-out for the library." Then they would slam the metal lobby door in my face. As I stood there, humiliated, I could hear them snickering as their boot-steps faded, "Library, what's he, a fuckin queer?"

On a Saturday morning in the library, I came across an article in The New York Times about black pastors organizing to defeat a bill legalizing same-sex marriage in Maryland. A network of black churches had formed the Maryland Marriage Alliance, a group committed to defeating the bill. I was hurt, and angry. According to the article, Pastor Joel Peebles of Praise, a mega-church in Prince George's County, had threatened retaliation against Maryland legislators should they vote in favor of same-sex marriage. At a legislative committee hearing on the issue, Leroy Swailes, a black minister, wore a tee shirt emblazoned with, "Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals: The Resurrection of Sodom and Gomorrah."

I struggle to understand the scorn and venom spewed by members of a race who have suffered cruelty, prejudice, and hate crimes for hundreds of years. In the new millenium, despite the racism exposed by mass incarceration, so much progress has been made in the area of civil rights. Blacks have attained positions of leadership and made economic gains through empowerment. I'd like to see empathetic support from those now in a position to do so. In twelve states, gays and lesbians have won the right to marry. But their victories are tenuous, subject to voter

backlash, and the recent Supreme Court decision affirming states' rights in defining marriage.

I recall a political cartoon I saw in a newspaper shortly after President Obama's swearing-in ceremony. It showed a jubilant group of black voters headed to the White House for the Inaugural Ball. As they left behind a group of demonstrators with placards supporting same-sex marriage, they shouted over their shoulders, "Oh, and good luck with that whole equal rights thing!" I couldn't help but feel contempt for the hypocrisy. The Reverend Larry Brumfield, a Baltimore pastor with a weekly radio show that focuses on a black audience, told a New York Times journalist, "It really bothers me how black people can be so insensitive to oppression. They use the same arguments that were used against us by segregationists in the 1950s."

However, cooperation between black civil rights leaders and gay rights organizations has recently begun to increase. Part of the motivation for closer ties has been an embarrassing disclosure, that has since backfired, in a memorandum by the National Organization for Marriage. The memo stated that their goal was to "drive a wedge between gays and blacks" over same-sex marriage. As a result, the chill between the two movements began to thaw.

Recently, the NAACP joined forces with gay rights groups in a common goal. At a press conference, Reverend Al Sharpton, Benjamin Jealous, and Jeffrey Campagna, a gay rights organizer, announced cooperation to end a practice by New York City police forces that has been exposed as racist: the NYPD stop-and-frisk policy. The overwhelming majority of those stopped, frisked, and arrested, are black. Jeffrey Campagna told journalists, "We need to find ways to strengthen our alliances and commitment to one another." Benjamin Jealous told the media, "With states attempting to encode discrimination into their laws and constitutions, it's become clear that as Bayard Rustin admonished us all, we should either stand together, or die apart."

Fifty years ago, Rustin stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with Martin Luther King, Jr., next to him. They gazed in awe at the quarter million men and women who had assembled around the reflecting pool for the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington. As the lead organizer of the march, Bayard Rustin never wavered in his insistence that all oppressed groups -- blacks, hispanics and gays -- must nonviolently protest, and fight to achieve rights.

While the world beyond Attica's thick concrete wall evolves, and society becomes more accepting of those with different beliefs, family structures, and lifestyles, the attitudes of inmates who surround me remain mired in bigotry. On a warm night, I sat in my cell reading Ralph Ellison's brilliant novel, Invisible Man. Outside my cell, two men stared out the window at the handball court in A-block.

"I can't believe I gotta look at this shit. These fuckin' faggots are playin' handball right outside my window."

"Why don't somebody cut them motha fuckers. They make me sick."

I failed to see how playing handball could be so offensive. The fact that homosexuals lived and breathed at Attica, their mere existence, enraged the two men outside my cell. I was angered that two men minding their own business were subject to such prejudice. The hatred spewed by the two men outside my cell caused me to despise Attica, my fate in prison, and myself. My failures -- my selfishness, my stupidity, my actions -- brought me here, and now I had to deal with an environment teeming with hostility and resentment.

Nearly all prejudice stems from two things: ignorance, and fear. Ignorance in the sense of simple unfamiliarity. "I don't know what it is, therefore, I am afraid of it" -- like confronting a strange animal in the woods.

Prisoners fear anything unusual or different; diversity is unacceptable. Anyone who deviates from prison norms is rejected. A man who doesn't walk with a swagger, his pants loosely hanging, exposing his ass to the world in a defiant "fuck you," is considered soft. A prisoner with a good vocabulary, who doesn't punctuate every spoken thought with "ya heard" or "na mean," is perceived as a homo. Prisoners who read literature, not 'hood novels, are queer.

Yet I too am guilty of failure to sustain my ethics, to defend my beliefs. For years, I suppressed my honest feelings in prison. I feigned; I prevaricated. I denied to others, and to myself, that I was gay. To disguise my true identity, I espoused the anti-gay hostility and embraced the ignorance. Like a gang member, I feared to be distinctive, to stand up for what I believed in. As a result, my sexual orientation began to shift. My sexual fantasies started to include women. Late at night, on a rickety black and white TV, I watched straight porn -- antediluvian movies with laughable dialogue, provided by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision to appease and quiet the masses. Some of the male 'actors' turned me on (some were fat hirsute beasts), but I was also turned on by the women. In much better physical shape than the men, they were often resplendent Sirens.

Like stodgy parents, DOCCS only broadcasts the risqué movies on weekends, never on school nights. When the TV porn is unavailable, in an effort to induce sleep, I masturbate in the darkness of my cell. I envision big-breasted women getting fucked by muscular men. During orgasm, I shoot my load into a woman, fantasizing I am a straight man.

At times, to distract myself from my inner conflict, I succumb to the banality of late-night television. When I can find nothing even remotely palatable (which is often), I watch CNN. As the presidential primaries heated up, CNN turned its spotlight on Michele Bachmann. Incredulous, I watched her campaign implode

like a high-rise with its concrete columns detonated. But before the rubble was carted away, CNN tackled the issue of gay reparative therapy, a euphemism employed by Bachmann's family at their mental health centers to describe their program of self-hatred.

Reparative therapy, sometimes called 'sexual reorientation' or 'conversion therapy,' is rooted in the idea that some people are born bisexual and can move along a continuum from one end to another. Socially conservative advocacy groups, promoting the idea that homosexuality is a 'sexual orientation disturbance,' embrace reparative therapy as a method to cure people of what they see as a mental disorder. To support their beliefs, they embrace a study written by a renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Robert L. Spitzer, who analyzed the experiences of those who called themselves 'ex-gays.' The study cited cases of gay men who had undergone therapy to change their sexual orientation. It implied that those who made the switch were more well-adjusted, and happier. However, the study failed to note the experiences of some of its participants who later said reparative therapy delayed their self-acceptance as gay men, and induced thoughts of suicide.

Recently, Dr. Spitzer, now in his 80s and suffering from Parkinson's disease, recanted the conclusions of his study. He said he had misinterpreted his own data. With tears in his eyes, he told a New York Times journalist, "I believe I owe the gay community an apology."

However, Dr. Spitzer's admission has not stopped those who work in Michele Bachmann's family's health center from promoting reparative therapy as a cure for a mental affliction. While I don't see myself as suffering from a sexual disorder, I do wonder whether such therapy can change one's attitude and perception of homosexuality, ultimately changing one's sexual orientation. After eight years of incarceration, I see my sexuality transforming from exclusively gay to bisexual. Adopting the anti-gay attitudes of my fellow prisoners, I have convinced myself that I need to think, and be, straight. A prison metamorphosis has occurred,

altering my character, my beliefs.

I share a narrow corridor, my gallery, with fifty men, nearly all of whom despise gays. Everyday I hear them, as they watch TV, shout "that faggot," or "He's a fuckin' queer." Gay men are ridiculed, and reviled. Daily, I go to the mess hall and eat at a table I share with homophobes. At night, I go to the yard and work out with men who, if they knew my true nature, my sexual orientation, they likely would punch me, stomp me, perhaps stab me. By inculcation, I adopt their beliefs, their attitudes. Through osmosis, I absorb their bile. A victim of my own misdirected anger, I let Attica make me into a bigot.

Attica is so full of animosity that all men are subconsciously affected by it. We attack each other in the yard -- punching and stomping -- without recognizing the source of pent up anger: frustrations, resentments, self-hatred. I see countless men with heinous scars stretching from their ears to the corners of their mouths, some horribly disfigured. Guys on their way to the prison showers proudly display knife scars that wrap around their rib cages like vestiges of great white shark attacks.

Those who shun metal weapons resort to sharp tongues and verbal assaults. The ultimate disrespect is to insult a prisoner's manhood.

"You's a fuckin' pussy."

"Shut ya cock holster, nigga, or I'll shut it for ya."

I find the code of prison ethics foolish, ignorant artifice. Being gay doesn't make me weak, less than, or a sissy. In fact, many gays are emotionally more mature, and stronger, than heterosexuals. We tolerate insults, contempt and abuse. Homosexuality makes us tougher. In some ways, I feel it is an advantage -- giving us a unique perspective that often allows us to excel. Wry and sardonic, we see the world through rose glass darkly. And that skepticism propels us to promote our beliefs, to strive, and to fight.

History teems with gay men who triumphed: Alexander the Great,

Leonardo da Vinci, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol. Of the first twelve Roman Emperors, only one was exclusively heterosexual.

Sadly ignorant of history, one of my prison co-workers is intensely hostile toward gays. The mere mention of them provokes a lava-like eruption of hateful epithets. "Man, I'd like to stab all them AIDS-infested mothafuckas. They's all pieces a shit." Yet on his desk sits James Baldwin's collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son. The small, dusty bookshelf above his desk holds a rarely used stapler, two dull pencils, their blackened erasers worn away, and one novel: Baldwin's Another Country. He likes the purple cover. I gave him both of those books; they remain unread. Smugly I allow him to languish in the dark, as an unenlightened troglodyte.

Yet despite his ignorance, I admire his unabashed penchant for speaking his mind. If someone disrespects him, he tells them right to their face, "Don't fuck with me. I'm not the one. I ain't afraid to catch another body, mothafucka." I, on the other hand, have let prison mute my voice, weaken my fortitude, and sap my pride.

Before getting locked up, I was a proud gay man. I never hid my sexuality. I reveled in it, vitalized by the aura of the forbidden. At times, entering the chic nightclub of the moment, passing the straight masses waiting to get in, I flaunted my elite status, my membership in the haut monde of New York's nightlife. But once cloistered behind Attica's concrete walls, cut off from the world of shirtless, sweaty men on the dance floor, and pavo-nine drag queens decorating overstuffed sofas like throw pillows, I retreated into my shell like a mollusk. I shut the door so tightly, not a ray of light passed the threshold. Slowly, insipidly, like a metastasizing tumor, fear and self-loathing overtook me.

Like many gay men afraid to come out, I'm reluctant to stick up for myself. Gay men aren't exactly known for being pugilists.

Yet we are tough in our own way. Emotionally steeled, we've cultivated a flinty skin to protect us from ridicule, harassment, and scorn. We rarely go *mano a mano*. Yet when it comes to a battle of sarcasm and wit, we are fearless warriors.

"Oh really, honey? Tell me, did your mother have any normal kids, or were they all just as retarded and ugly as you?"

"You nelly handbag, you make Richard Simmons look butch."

Gay men hone their humor to hide their pain. But in prison, there is none of that witty repartee. Incarcerated men are reluctant to expose themselves, to let the facade peel away. Many are scared little boys still looking for acceptance. Fitting in is a survival mechanism. Prison gangs are an extension of that cowardice. They provide protection to those too afraid to stand out from the crowd -- to fend for themselves.

Only a small number of prisoners are openly gay; very few dare to be flamboyant. I admire their courage, yet I treat them with disdain, avoiding the nelly ones like a contagious skin disease. I'm afraid that if I even speak with them I will be labelled gay, a "fuckin' faggot." Before being incarcerated, when I encountered an effeminate man in a nightclub, or at a cabaret show, I was amused, freely laughing at their self-deprecating humor. In prison that open acceptance came to a halt. Weakened and emasculated by prison attitudes, I fail to defend my beliefs, my self. Incarceration has changed me, and I don't like what I see in the warped, scratched prison mirror.

Surreptitiously, shame has transformed my values. Prison morality has overtaken me. The poison and hostility spewed by inmates toward sex offenders, the government, the police and just about anyone who is different from us, has invaded my mind, my cells, my DNA. Animosity toward the outside world altered my personality, the very neurons and axons that comprise my gray matter. Bitter and venomous, I fantasize about revenge. At night, with my prison blanket pulled over my head, I look forward to getting out of this Kafkaesque shithole so I can tell the entire

world to just leave me the fuck alone.

However, for now, I am where I belong. I'm guilty of a heinous crime that resulted in a beautiful person's death. There are no saints in prison. We've all committed crimes, hurt people, used people. But I don't rate prisoners on some contrived scale based on their offense. I judge people for who they are today, not what they did five, ten, twenty years ago, more often than not while drunk, high, or both. So when the judging starts, the insistence that one crime is worse than another, or the accusations that you're a dirt bag because of what you're here for, I don't join in. I've made many mistakes, and I try to overcome that, to change, to do better. But to trash someone, to call them a scumbag, or a piece of shit, simply because of their sexual orientation, I find that destructive to our human dignity.

When the gay-bashing starts, I cringe. I wish I had the guts, the balls to say, "Wait a minute, there's no need for that. Can't we show respect for each other, treat each other like men?" But I don't. I sit there, afraid to open my mouth, to stand up for human rights, terrified that I might be labelled gay. My failure is an admission that I despise the homos, the queers, and myself.

Prisons stand like volcanic outcroppings in vast oceans. Seas of change swirl about them. The cycles of the tide, the constant lapping of waves, have little effect on the incarcerated masses. Isolated, cut off from an evolving society by steel and concrete, prisons teem with animosity, hatred and venom. Without the curing effects of fresh air, the poison accumulates until it is released in a violent eruption -- a fight, a stabbing, a riot.

But in an effort to prevent that, I espouse the importance of change. In prison classrooms, as a facilitator I talk about the opportunities for education and the value of volunteer programs like AA and the Alternatives to Violence Project. In my personal essays, I write about my transformation as another step on my path to enlightenment. I embrace prison as an opportunity

for personal growth. But I didn't foresee that I would fall victim to the acrid, hateful culture that pervades the institution. Not only the inmates, but the correction officers and even the counselors toss dead branches and logs onto the funeral pyre that heats the prison with contempt and scorn. The institutional mantra is "Fuck it, why bother." I try to be vigilant against such negativity, but it's easy to exude hatred and prey on the weak.

The animosity isn't limited to backward prison values. The fear of anyone different pervades American culture. The media often air stories about those who experience rejection: victims of hate crimes and bullying. The CNN exposé on reparative therapy at Bachmann's bizarre institute used a hidden camera to videotape a supposedly professional therapist encouraging a gay man to reject his sexuality. I wondered what kind of men would willingly participate in aversion therapy, repudiating their innate feelings. While flickering gray light from the TV reflected off the fun-house mirror in my cell, I could hear snickering from beyond the silvered laminate.

As the potent summer sun heated up A-block yard, beefy men on the weight pile stripped off their shirts. Sinewy muscle glistened under unctuous coats of sweat. In my cell, hidden from their view, I admired the chiseled chests and lean stomachs. I lusted, tussling with guilt. The lustrous black skin radiated strength. The olive complexion of Hispanics enhanced their meaty pecs and stood in contrast to nipples the size of quarters.

Yet like a frightened child guilty of venal sin, I hid in the shadows. I couldn't share my feelings with anyone. Drawing inward, afraid of prison prejudice, I let poison overtake me. As the disease went untreated, the pain intensified, until the infection had nowhere to go, except inward.

As I stared out at the A-block weight pile, the handsome, shirtless men dissolved. The sun retreated behind the clouds of a steel-gray sky. Verdant grass withered, leaving a yard barren of life. The garbage bag continued its lonely dance on the vacant

handball court.

I withdrew from my stance at the iron bars which line my cell. Laying on my steel bunk with an anthology of Kafka's works, I opened it to the pages that hold Gregor Samsa's story -- a man whose transformation left him trapped. Helpless, he could not escape the confines of his room, his prison. Sensitive and vulnerable, he was wounded from the rejection by those who surrounded him.

Like Gregor, I too have undergone a metamorphosis. I've become ugly, filled with self-hatred, bitter and resentful. I am surrounded by those who judge me, and reject me. But they fail to see that I am immanently no different than they are. I've grown a hardened carapace, but inwardly I am a sentient being, yearning for tolerance, and acceptance.

- September, 2013