

Caged View – April 10, 2015

The demented cement wall I open my eyes to every morning is more than a century old and bleeds tear gas when it gets really humid. Some of the white paint from its last paint-job remains and has been scorched with black soot from recent fire — no doubt set in protest from a dissatisfied resident. The wall is pockmarked with multicolored scabs from years of paint-jobs, has crude gang graffiti painstakingly carved with paperclips, and bears battle scars from the countless futile beatings inflicted by wretched ghosts past.

Despite all of this character, the wall still isn't very interesting to stare at.

The steel bars in front of the cage have their own aesthetic problems, being diseased with rust spots and chipped paint; yet, they are so solid and substantial, much more so than the human flesh they demand in sacrifice from every inhabitant they restrain. They are narrow-set iron snares through which one's arm will squeeze through but just barely be retrieved.

The cage itself is tiny, five feet by nine feet to be exact, and a pair of sheet-metal bunk beds mounted on a wall take up half the space. No dancing allowed. The stainless-steel toilet/ sink attached to the back wall demands almost three feet of area itself, but it's hard to begrudge such a handy device. (Except when it gets stuck on flush mode. It's a high pressure toilet, like all prison toilets, and when it flushes, it roars! I'm pretty sure a U.S. prison has more commodes per capita than any place in the world. I would guess that it flushes about 30 gallons a minute, and at any given time, there are several toilets among the hundred stuck on flush mode. I once had a toilet that stayed roaring for six straight days. Think of all the water wasted... I told every Bossman who came by to call maintenance, but most guards are pretty apathetic about such things because they already feel perpetually overworked. Yet a toilet stuck flushing is far more preferable than one that doesn't flush at all. That's when this convenient commode becomes your worst nightmare. You cannot escape the reek. You can stick your face in the bars and pant for relief, but it's unlikely you'll find it. Odds are, all the cells surrounding you have lost their water too, so you only end up breathing everyone else's shit instead of your own.)

Higher up on the back wall is a naked light bulb with a hanging string to turn it on, a vent, and a 2-plug electrical outlet we use to power appliances we're sometimes allowed to purchase from the commissary if we have our own money. The appliances sure do make life easier and may even preserve life if you consider the fan. During the summer time, it gets so hot in these red-brick ovens they call penitentiaries, men suffer heat-related deaths every year. Needless to say, come July, my fan becomes my most valued possession. A hot-pot is pretty nice too; without it, there'd be no hot water to wash my hands or shave. (Not that washing my hands prevents me from catching every virus that comes to fester in prison. Such close confinement guarantees a breeding Utopia for communal germs desiring to live long and prosper.) The hot water also allows me to enjoy a lovely cup of instant coffee early in the

morning. Other permissible appliances include a nightlight so you can read without disturbing your cellie, and a clock-radio. That's it. No televisions, computers, gaming consoles or any other luxury, regardless of what the politicians claim.

Because most inmates cannot afford quality appliances, the prison system retails the cheapest it can order — all made from brittle plastic that's sure to break quickly. We're not supposed to tape or repair our appliances, but we have little choice. Eventually the guards discover the repaired or broken item, write the owner a disciplinary ticket for possessing contraband, and confiscate the offending article. Which is very unsportsmanlike, because it's often the guards themselves who break our appliances with their harsh handling during shakedowns. To aggravate the matter, even under the unlikely circumstance that an inmate has the money to replace the appliance, he'll be caught in a web of bureaucratic red-tape, waiting for the necessary paperwork to buy a new one. All appliances require property registration in an attempt to keep them from being traded or given away to other prisoners. The policy prevents nothing as a matter of course, but it looks good in the rule-book, and it certainly makes buying a new one painful.

On the opposite wall, just above the bars, are two lockers and small shelves where we keep all of our worldly possessions. Trust me, it's not a lot of storage space — a tragedy for a book lover like me. But after nearly two decades, the lack of possessions has done wonders for killing my materialistic self. I live like a pilgrim going nowhere. Given a choice, I'd have space for more books, but there really is a spiritual peace in owning little or nothing. Sometimes.

We're not allowed to hang any pictures or artwork to spruce up the ugly walls. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the administration believes most guys would plaster their walls with pictures of women in skimpy underwear, and they're worried that it would give the prison a bad image...

Personally, if I had the privilege, I'd draw artwork ripe with the many bright colors that prison has starved my eyes for. I miss colors so much. And beauty, I really miss beauty. But rules are rules, and the walls must maintain their sordid quality. I don't let it matter much. Through many years of spending the majority of my living moments in one of these cadaverous boxes, I rarely notice the details anymore. It doesn't pay to focus on some things. If only I could distract my hearing and sense of smell so easily as I do my vision, I could almost forget I'm in prison at all. But the noise has a way of invading my thoughts, and the body odors of so many men crammed closely together can be eye-opening as well.

Every cell in these old prisons has a different view in front of the bars, if only another section of wall, but many have windows where a prisoner may see outside. I once lived in a cage on the fourth floor of this very prison that had a postcard view for miles. At the forefront was a field of horses that prisoners raise, and a small pond the horses cooled

off in during the summer. The windows faced east, and I watched the sunrise every morning, silhouetting the horses and turning the pond into a field of diamonds. What a gift to see that from inside an unlovely cage.

The view I had from the next cell I lived in was quite the opposite in spirit. I called it "Death's Door". For some months, my view was of a door used only when an ambulance or coroner came to pick-up an inmate. Let me tell you, a prison will only call an ambulance as a last resort. If you're so sick they call an ambulance, the odds are you're going to die. Death's Door was opened many times in my sight; there are a lot of unhealthy old men on this prison plantation. I used to drop to the floor and do push-ups every time they took another body through that door, because it was a reminder that nobody was going to take care of my health except for me.

Fortunately, my present cage has a much more inspiring scene than one of Death's Door. In front of my second floor barred vision, perhaps two bodies lined head-to-toe away, are some dingy windows that overlook a razor-wire fenced courtyard with a gate...where hundreds of slaves are required to stand in rows for roll call each day, before they commence their forced labor at the field and factories surrounding the prison plantation. There are some very interesting faces in those standing lines, some faces so unbecoming that I cannot imagine seeing one outside of a prison. Some faces so frightful, I suspect it to be the sole reason their bearer stands incarcerated. It's been well documented that a jury is less likely to convict an attractive person than an ugly one, so what about these scarred and crudely tattooed faces? There are handsome faces too, maybe even beautiful. Sometimes I study individual men, trying to guess their story. Not that my extrapolations are anything close to the truth; it's rare when someone's face reveals their substance.

I spend far more time studying the elevated steam pipes running across the courtyard, which I can still see even while laying on my back. These weather-stained silver pipes are where dozens of birds and pigeons gather to party every morning prior to dawn.

Birds simply love frolicking on those steam pipes and dropping liquid poop-bombs on unsuspecting victims beneath. The pipes are a luxury perch, a good place to watch for hawks and warm their little feet. It's fun to watch them play and sing; birds are so alive! Prison becomes like a tomb after a while. It's easy to forget how much life there is outside these walls. It's the typical "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon. I don't see nature so it's not there. I don't hear the ringing laughter of children or experience the love and playfulness of a dog, so they basically cease to exist. These and a million other tastes of life are fading memories.

Watching the birds dance in my caged view elicits feelings I wouldn't otherwise have. I'll be moving to another cage soon. I wonder what I'll see?