

by Steve Bartholomew

## Institutional Enlightenment

"You're institutionalized," she said. Silence crackled along the phone wires while I decided precisely where on the scale of mistakenness she was and how I might say as much without sounding defensive. We'd fallen off, she and I, a decade ago. Prison will do that. We'd recently begun writing again, but you can't proofread a phone call, and the immediacy of conversation thrummed my nervous system like a guitar string. Oh please, don't let me come off all jagged or prison-baked after so long. But it is hard not to brace a little when suddenly brought to the light of the freeworld by someone still holding your before picture.

Within her voice were the small swerves of sorrow. She knows that sympathy makes me uncomfortable, but I think she'd found overwhelming the sense that for all the familiarity of my voice its owner was, in ways both stark and shuttered, unknown to her. Maybe we'd both underestimated the tidal forces of this place, how refigured a soul can become. My halfhearted reflex was to offer some exhibit to the contrary.

"Not me," I assured us both, "I don't think so, anyway."

### 1. Big House on the Prairie

Of the word institutionalized I find one connotation in particular troubling: the embracing of one's captor. Not much revolts me anymore, but this comes close.

Upon entering the gates that for all present purposes disappear behind us, we react in only so many ways. Some maintain a practiced otherness with such dedication to being self-consciously aloof that you wonder if they even unpack their boxes, as if the warden will at some point recognize a sojourner when he sees one and send him on his way. Some slather on the ointment of religion, which gives off a rather desperate, palliative odor. I withhold from them my remarks, for who am I to disillusion anyone but myself? Others take up the fringes, hanging on more than out, in a noncommittal way that they hope will get them some action--the items not issued by the state--without getting them in the action, because prison is how I've heard war described: profoundly boring, until it isn't. A few heed the cautionary tales

and achieve a delicate lack of stance, their ideology held close to the chest for fear, I suppose, of being yoked to it. I have no elevation, really, from which to judge the virtue of anyone's coping method. From my being here it follows that I do not so wisely choose my handholds on life.

But there are those who belong to the terrain, who are so surefooted that after a week on the yard they know things about the place that your years have not revealed, and you can't help but imagine their first mugshot as a toddler. A frontal swagger is not hard to spot, and often the loaded moniker will try to do some of the work an embellished ego requires. There will be a Hammer, Shotgun and Hatchet on every yard, a Psycho, Killer and Murder if the yard is live; an Ogre and a few Trolls even if it is not. It's not hard to imagine a directory snarling on ad nauseum.

## 2. Ceremonial Garb(age)

How mild interests become passions, which in here are really fixations. One of the few mentionable is the graffiti beneath which some of us hasten to hide our skin. The motifs do not, despite the impression, occur with abandon. Rather the intent is to repel, or at least offend the eye--the type of high-regret tattoos that promise a lifetime of vitriol to be oozed forth on the owner's behalf, but tacitly, in the stoic and brooding manner we prefer.

If there is irony in prison ink it lies somewhere beyond the bumper-sticker mantras and sketchy gallery of iconography. It is in the counterpoint to the compulsion to stand out, which is that our best efforts render many of us all but indistinguishable from the neck down at any distance. But who could blame us. The opening scene of the prison narrative has your individuality being exchanged for the naked truth of your first crowded shower, after which they issue your this-size-fits-nobody coveralls and a droopy set of pre-beiged underwear, which in dour appeal portends much about the stripe of life awaiting. But you have only just embarked down the trail of forfeitures. You had no idea so much could be subtracted from one person.

Then you are introduced to Newlogic, which is absolute except when it isn't. For although autonomy is definitely not on the matrix of things you are allowed to possess, if you seek refuge in solidarity, you will be labeled a security threat and dealt with accordingly. You are permitted an abbreviated discreteness, that is, you must conform to swarmhood, but only so far as the beekeeper allows in a given instant.

There is a central receiving prison in this state where everyone goes to be sorted out, a processing hub where They slap a label across your future by deciding which prison you merit. Imagine magnifying a squirt of pond water, forms numberless and multiple in squirming layers, milling about and angling in vain toward light or shade, whichever suits. A phenomenon best described as dark enthusiasm occurs there, chiefly among the newly imprisoned. It charges their rambling war stories, the itch to get down to this business of making a name in The Big House. Overhearing the monologues is often not a matter of choice, and when I was younger I would assume they simply knew about places I'd never been, so unremarkable had been my experience. Now I know that these are kids sold on the movie versions, or raised on the tales of old-school cats who walked the yard back in the day, when convicts ran The Joint. But there are no glory patches here worth owning, if there ever were. Notoriety costs more than it earns.

### 3. Clockwork Blues

River rafting. She had recently gone and was highlighting the trip over the phone. A flotilla of friends. Rapids and beer. I focused on the two feet of stainless-steel tentacle attaching the headset to the wall and tried to cobble together comments that would convey something beyond the shameful, unfocused longing which kept shouldering aside my thoughts. I used to be good at this, the dancing current of conversations where you are not simply waiting your turn. My mind fidgeted and tried to form the state of vicarious excitement that friends' adventures should elicit. "That sounds great," I said for I think the third time. Perennial boredom, apparently, is a cancer that attacks whatever is not generic and at your disposal when responding to concepts such as the freeworld and its funs. I tried to envision the actuality of what she was saying, but my frame of reference has become so opaque that in regards to nature my memory has cataracts. I have no more access to the reality of which she spoke than I do the one behind my fuzzy little TV screen, no matter how close to it my face hangs. I mimicked the enthused the best I could and waited for the topic to float downstream.

"How long do you have left again?" she asked.

I try to go over that arithmetic as seldom as possible so that when I do, there has been a notable change.

"Just ten more," I answered with that offhand affect we have, downplaying

any amount of time, half for our own sake, half for that of the listener--usually another prisoner--who may well have what we call All Day.

"Oh God." She said this in a detuned voice. I foraged for a subject, the smaller the talk the better, anything to steer the mood. This could mark a transition, I thought, into an unwelcome phase of our relationship, a place of pity and unanswerable needs, a stage of farsighted wistfulness.

I made reference to Mexico, our months spent there while I was on the lam and we were stupefyingly in love. We knew only enough Spanish to get beat up. How we'd panicked and pulled our rickety motorhome over to better stash our stash when a road sign warned of "security centurions," according to our translation. Evidently, one was merely being advised to fasten one's seatbelt. The time I accidentally ordered thirty tacos, or was it fifty. By this reminiscence I probably only underscored the improbability of another us, and the distortion where one of those free spirits had been.

#### 4. Time's Dilated Pupils

When I was maybe twenty I had a friend named Chris who'd spent five years in the Penitentiary at Walla Walla. The few years between our birthdates gave no purchase on the difference in our ages. I thought I could see coating him like a veneer the time he'd done, a callous formed over his soul, setting him slightly apart from the rest of us. Maybe I only wanted to see him in light of his history, which was at once fascinating and unfathomable, the way you perceive differently the mannerisms of a combat vet once you know that he has legally killed people. But now I think the ligature marks on our personalities just set off a subtle outsider-alarm in freeworlders, a relic mind-quirk carried down from our dim ancestors, from when extricated meant alien, meant evil.

It wasn't like Chris tied his shoes differently or gazed at knives. The flick of distance between us was in the solemn reverence he had for what I'd always taken for granted: a barbecued steak, an iced beer, solitude. And it was in the eyes. He had a way of silently studying people, assaying their movements and factoring what they said or didn't, that could make you a little self-conscious.

Chris had a border collie who was nearly as quiet as he was, named Freedom. So the two things he loved most in this world could have the same name, he said. I remember asking him one night, after one six-pack too many,

how he had made it. He just looked at my face in a narrowed way that held half the answer and made me not want to ask again.

Oh, how relative is time and our clunky estimation of it. Now when I hear someone say they're doing five years, I am dismissive of them, a concession made to wariness, I suppose, or to conservation of disappointment. Do freeworlders bother much with a neighbor moved in for only a month? My shamefully plural stretches of prison add up to the majority of my adult life, and at 42 that is lurid math indeed. Short timers, upon learning that I will be here until I am 52, sometimes look down and do a small apologetic hum, or blurt out in a mumble that there's no way they could do that much time, as if there is a breathing option. I thank them silently for demonstrating how foolish I must have sounded, before. I am reminded of the story of the man sentenced to twenty five years. "But, Your Honor," he cries, "I just can't do that much time." The judge leans over the bench and says, "Well then, son, just do what you can."

#### 5. Years of a Feather

The winter before last, a sparrow strayed into the Reformatory. Against gun-towering odds, he threaded a double-doored man-trap, braving a vaulted dayroom usually fraught with the barking of card games, and then wound down the long, gated corridor that feeds this cellblock. I've named him Jack, after the movie-pirate. He is two years into a life sentence for nothing more than miscounting his turns, for seeking the wrong warmth. Jack Sparrow is grace tangled within a giant's fist. You can hear in his chirrup a note of birdish lament, at how the husk of the world has shrunk so. But to peck and wail over the plunder of his serenity would be to surrender his last beakful of dignity. His flight is no longer frantic or even ambitious, as if this salted landscape, such as it is, finally revealed itself as being not a cruel jest but rather intended in earnest.

And yet Jack and I wear out each day in a similar fashion. We wake (Jack and then I, a tweet later) to confront two likelihoods: today I will neither die nor fly from here. We collapse that knowledge so we can think around it and we plod, or flit, from perch to nearby perch, neither of us having a nest we much care for. We stomach tidbits of by-products not exactly befitting our kind. Without making a spectacle, we exhaust ourselves the better to earn precious sleep, and then we dream. Jack, I imagine, dreams of having fists

with which to shatter the frosted glass holding his sky hostage. I, of course, dream of having wings. And then we wake, if we wake at all, to face two certainties.

#### 6. State of Metaphoria

Something I had written, she said, startled her--maybe not startled, exactly, but it made her wonder why she had not expected the likes of it. During my stints in the freeworld, I did not write much. You might have thought me intellectually transient--not so much stupid as permanently between meaningful ideas. She opined that incarceration somehow frees the mind, or gathers its energies into focus. Romantic to consider, the notion of functional compensation, like the way the fingertips of the blind can make sense of a human face. If only creativity were the bastard of boredom, we'd be monks of productivity.

But writing in here is less noble than it may sound. See me penciled beneath this dim lamp in a windowless cell, ears stoppered against the choir of jabberwocky, bickering with my ghost-reader over this word or that, a process untidy and laborious. I pour my last thimble of mind into what amounts to a window on my own inadequacies if I'm honest, my ego if I'm not. Fretting past the point of self-indulgence, each line of words is a finger in the dike, a bitter sea of stagnation threatening just beyond. How do I tell her that between the twin poles of tedium and existential smolder is a tension that garrotes the spirit--that vanishingly few of us even try to harness our own radioactive decay as a gesture of secretive defiance, that we climb literary mountains whose lonely peaks go unnoticed, vistas from which our worn footpaths of effort are all we might see. How do I say this without appealing to her empathy? Her heart has always dwarfed my own in its capacity to identify with another's suffering, and this makes her all the more beautiful. And yet, strong as she is, I will not fill her with this.

#### 7. She Loves Me Knot

I know freedom to be gratuitous, an extravagance as incidental as the hues taken up by the sky. But the poet in me hates to think this man-hive of stone does not affront some fundament of nature. Quixotic of me, I know, to image a passable world where freedom is an element of human existence, where it cries out for equilibrium in some undetermined way.

A tiny hardcase tree has sprouted from midway up the wall around the yard. With each passing lap I glance up in silent encouragement, but I dare not stop or look too closely lest the tower uproots us both. Likewise, the mind in its scope sometimes finds a crack through which to wriggle. Lucidity sorely opposes hope, the vertigo of futures is a matter best left to others. But the past has become an abusable escape, a crannie into which I hedghehog during the lulls, and anymore I can't honestly say where imagination has taken license. There is an urge to smarten up what was, as an antidote for the learned helplessness of what is. For me, this is because the calamitous memories tread the heaviest--I'm blessed with a protracted lowlight reel with which I may cure any onset of conceit. Amnesia must be a virtue denied the remorseful.

An effect of experience-anemia unsettles me. The monotone of my interactions over these years has left me tone-deaf toward the key in which some memories should be recited. How would I recognize the mundane disguised as a moment, when I have only ennui and rancor with which to cross-reference? I think I remember exactly the doings of a now ancient date--what she said, how she said it, how she moved and laughed. But I must never forget the warning etched on my rearview: objects may appear more fabled than they ever were.

I had a cellmate who, for fifteen years, wrote about a girl he'd dated before coming to prison. He wove a numbing novel from threads of her, vignettes of simple moments peeled back and dissected. She became to him an archetype, his anima. To me--his captive audience--she became the rerun pathos capable of slowing even a prison-clock.

Upon his release, he sought her out. For a decade and a half he had striven toward edification in the hopes that, so fortified, he would fill her eye.

But he found a woman timeworn and windswept, one languishing in that perpetual state of weariness afflicting the emotionally cauterized. She had to be reminded of who the hell he even was. Their short time together had been to her just one brief fling with a man among myriad strewn along those fifteen years. To him, their tryst was destiny flexed and arcing, their minutiae profound beyond compare, as surely it would be to her too, if only she would remember. On the page they were unquenchable and so he read to her from his book, which in his mind was her book. She misconstrued his words, or

maybe she recoiled from the idea of only now discovering she'd been for fifteen years the fixation of someone so forgotten. For how could she know that although he intended nothing untoward, after having been spider-holed for so long while remembering across a small lifetime, human nature had goaded him to clutch those memories, to arrange them in flattering poses until he believed they were staring back.

It is safe to say that even he could not tease a sonnet out of their reunion. The adversity with which we learn to cope features neither vulnerability nor the act of facing the anguish of rejection, and the shock of a dashed reality sent him spiralling right back here.

If only an awareness of an affliction could inoculate against its effects. I speak of a related syndrome to which even the strongest among us seem to give over. When we finally emerge from here, we tend not to fuss in seeking a mate, nor pay more than a keyhole of attention. Rather, we become irretrievably entangled with our first companioness, so to speak.

You stagger through the last gate, blinking, rapt and unsure about your secondhand knowledge of the planet unfurling before you, the tugging abruptness of freedom impossible to ingest as it flies at you. The world is and is not the same, everything seems overlaid across what you remember. You are an infant in size twelve shoes. The scales fall from your eyes, behind them a ruckus of beholding. Fit for anything but life, variety piles up and clogs the senses, and in the midst of all this, you happen to meet Her.

You meet, and all heaven breaks loose. Whatever confluence of events held to be responsible must surely be God or Fate. The savor of her features, how her voice eclipses your will: oh, you've met the Perfumed Storm. Crack goes your casing and beneath it you are raw, you are spindly. Your heart is an imbecile and you lose custody of it. She beckons or maybe only acquiesces, and you cross her event horizon. Smitten also is your instinct for preservation, not unlike our little brother, the mantis who, despite the loss of his head and neckparts to his answered prayer, does not flag in his heaving enterprise. Likewise, your deliberations conclude with a shudder and you collapse like an alibi on the stand. Those enameled nails turn out to be barbed, delicate only in how they settle hooks throughout your chest cavity. I remember reveling in my own ill-natured throes, no less dumbstruck and eager for all my having known better.

I imagine it to be an exploitable glitch in one of evolution's



subroutines, like the imprinting of baby goslings, who are known to follow the first figure they see, be it snowgoose or bipolar bear. And so it goes with us, indicted by our own emotional bankruptcy and resented to years of servile dysfunction to which we are tethered by our penis.

This time, when my day arrives, I hope to meet an adventurous tourist who will grace me with her utmost attention and patience but not her phone-number afterward, one preferably from a country I am not legally allowed to enter.

#### 8. What Does Not Kill Me Makes Me ...Stranger

She was asking me about a recent lockdown, the month the prison had mouldered, my cellmate and I in our six by nine foot cell, save for showers every other day, give or take, mostly minus the give.

"I can't imagine," she said, "It must have been terrible."

"Eh. It is what it is."

I don't know what this expression means in the freeworld, or how often it is even heard. Its place in our phraseology, I think, owes to how succinctly it characterizes the nature of our powerlessness. The ability to withstand inscrutably has become the mark of the modern convict. I find a small freedom in choosing to endure in silence until I reach critical mass. Perhaps because we learned long ago that our remonstrations rarely accomplish a thing aside from likening us to human bagpipes; but moreso because here, the measure of power is in our reaction, or lack thereof.

I can't say whether authority with impunity attracts or causes a certain bureaucratized bulliness, but this seems to be a self-enforcing feature. Neither can I say that I would do much better, were roles reversed. Not now. But that notion alters nothing, there is no undeading the seat of my reactive tendencies. Toward situations that I am told are grave I still attempt a seemly response, but it is a pretext really, of what I think is expected. I remember but can no longer summon outrage. How this will one day translate in the freeworld is not heartening. For now, the least I can do is the most I can do: remain as outwardly blank as a towel.

## 9. Seasons on Mouse Arrest

Years ago I was a baker at the Penitentiary in Walla Walla. As part of my job I would check the mousetraps while the ovens were firing up, at three in the morning. They had at some point switched to the flat, sticky traps because they hurt less when you catch them with your face. One morning I found stretched across a black sticky trap a baby mouse, nearly dead. He had struggled until so much of his skin adhered to the trap that he was nearly flat. I took him into the pantry where the guards were not likely to observe. With lard and fingernails, I eventually peeled him from the trap, minus much of his belly fur. He was not much larger than the last segment of my thumb, his eyes were two glittering periods. He was exhausted and probably terrified, but he perked up for milk-soaked crumbs of cornbread. I named him Richard Gere.

Richard Gere spent the morning in the chest pocket of my smock. It was not within my power to return him to nature, and so he came back to my cell, hiding within my loosened fist during the pat search. If literature has made into a cliché the subject of mice and prisoners, it is for good reason: it requires no romanticizing. Our commonalities glare even ungarnished. In such a wasteland, the harboring of small life is irresistible to even a drop-forged heart. As an omnipotent keeper, you feel like father nature. You feel like a prison guard.

Back in my cell I made for him a cell of his own from the cardboard box the prison designates as being for sacred items. I figured he was the item closest to sacred I would be likely to find within those walls. I discovered that mice do not in fact eat everything. He would not touch state-issue meat, which I took to heart. He liked peanut butter, which was entertaining to watch. But he still preferred the baked substances that had gotten him locked up in the first place. He learned to come to his name if I said it in a flutey way that promised a pinch of pie crust. He would scamper up my arm and into my sweatshirt, and in this manner we walked the yard--his nose protruding from my collar now and then to twitch for whatever titillates a mouse. I marveled at the fact that he never peed on me, not knowing then that mice urinate constantly, dribbling down their tails. It wouldn't have changed a thing.

Weeks passed, and then months. Richard Gere grew a potbelly and his chin grizzled, evoking a tiny goatee. One morning I awoke to an eyeball-sized hole

staring from the box. There'd been an escape. In a panic, I searched the cell in case he was hiding. But he was gone.

At first movement, my neighbor knocked at my door, a nest of blanket cradled in his arms, a mouseface poking out. Richard Gere had woken him in the small hours, traipsing across his chest. After that, he had to go into the solitary bucket at night--he'd become an escape risk.

We'd always managed to be in the yard or anywhere else when the guards searched the cell. But one night our luck ran out. They came down the tier holding his bucket out at arm's length, a piece of cardboard as a lid. "Look," I pleaded with them, "don't throw Richard Gere outside. He won't make it. He's not a wild mouse." It was a December evening, and in the desert extremes of Walla Walla that means brutal cold and wind that burns.

"He is now," one of them said, his tone as final as a gavel. They turned down a hallway prohibited to me. I headed back to my mouseless cell. I contemplated the fate of Richard Gere and the eventual upending of my own bucket. Though I yearn for the singularity of that day, I must own the fact that I too have matured in a box, and when I leave it winter will be upon me in every way. Will I have learned by then to venerate whatever will keep me from prowling my own sticky traps?

It occurs to me that prison itself is the leading cause of recidivism. I don't say this to subtract in any way poor judgment and its culpability from the equation. What I mean is, we are, by definition, society's lowest members before we arrive here. It's a given that we have defecits in certain societal components. But the lessons offered only serve to lessen us, like a citizen factory in reverse. If we were to model our behavior after our only visible examples of society, which are guards, we would act in bad faith indeed. We come to believe that even in the great macrocosm--the freeworld--authority and righteousness are mutually exclusive, that justice is a euphemism for an adversary that will lie, cheat and steal better than we ever could. Ardor, or even diligence only exist to safeguard the quantum of punishment, to conjure some new method of erosion. It becomes natural to conceal integrity, for it is seen as subversive, a threat to the sensibilities of authority, and anyway, fortitude promises far less than the betrayals of informants. We are retaught constantly that truth is assigned by might alone.

Warehoused in (reform)atories and (penitent)iarries, we are expected to, well, reform, be penitent. But we instead become conflicted by a love for the

shining universe that begins a few walls away, and contempt for its emissaries, our wranglers. Prison installs its own operating system in you, one that is not compatible with the world's software.

#### 10. Unsweetened Nothings

We've fallen off, she and I. Prison will do that. There is no finger to point, nothing I could put it on. Perhaps one of us realized that whatever of me that once overlapped with her has gone gangrene. I contend with a life so whittled down because I have earned it. Do not mistake me for harmless. How selfish must I become to willingly embroil an innocent in such ironbound upheaval? Even from the glossy remove of a visiting room there is scarce more than sorrow in witnessing this.

A matter of time, goes the saying. Nowhere else though, are the stakes such that a ticking certainty attaches to each good-bye--and they are many--because this matter of interlacing with a freeperson is a condition of time itself. None of Mr. Einstein's equations describe how time creates space, a proportionate vacuum, between all your If Only's and the state of your whirling atoms. Occupying that space are your remainder years, their potential a sort of mass, the ballast lashed to your little skiff. You whisper to each other that a life ashore together is only one sea away. You take on water, but your mantra has the word "bail" in it, and you row your heart out. This boat's too small and rickety for two, but oh, the delirium of being not alone, and some promises are inflatable. It only seems unreal, stutters your heart to your head. But you cannot see far in this vast storm and you've yet to learn how tall, dark and diverting rogue waves can be. You know the boat too often rocked will jettison you, and you've been a castaway before. So you either swallow with counterfeit composure certain salty facts that slosh about in your skull, or you make her choose between lying and attenuating her own humanity for the sake of your ego, as if she owes somehow for your being adrift in this non-pacific ocean in the first place.

Prison romances are shoddy replicas of the type with no moving parts. She may have vowed, "for better or for worse," but not for uncountable hours spent partitioned by a small table, beset by cameras and above which table must be kept all four hands. She could not have imagined that to have and to hold would be timed not to exceed five seconds by watchful guards, twice per visit. Prolonged emotional petting without release backs up the soul.

There exists a tiny subset of exceptions, curiosities really, the rare couple who abides the celibate Sahara, possessed of some element unreckonable, their hearts ensheathing a valiant kernel of what transcends this. They either defy or exemplify the nature of attachment, or maybe both. The rest are off-white lies struggling to believe themselves. And yet, given the choice between cupping my bruised sensibilities and reaching for another high-kick, my calculations run dicey every time. I did not become this adept at the art of losing without practice. I live within an isolation engine, I would not fuel it on purpose.

#### 11. Dented Reflections

Some scientists say we are mostly water. The ones with better microscopes say we are mostly empty space, that if one of my nuclei were the size of a marble, my nearest electron would be in orbit two football fields away. To the extent that I can know my own tiny voids, I would vouch for the latter. For although I will never embrace my captor, beyond the dents and scratches in my steel mirror I see a man conditioned by his cage and frightened of embodying it. The closer I stare the more distant I appear.

I am habituated to a box-shaped sky.

I am jarred by the slightest affectionate touch from another human being because I am no longer attuned to such things.

I can remember only memories of a good day, not what that really entails.

When I happen to notice, my face is in the shape of disdain, a screen-saver cued by the constant jostlers of what was once personal space.

Concertina wire must be an indigenous species of flora.

The consideration of physical violence and its countermeasures is something braided into daily life.

Compassion is a muscle atrophied from malnutrition.

I have no idea what anything softer than two inches of vinyled foam-rubber feels like.

Non-khaki clothes are startling, and sometimes difficult to look away from in a polite amount of time.

I have forgotten what true silence is.

I am ashamed of how rancid humanity seems to me.

It is routine, the showing of every last pore of my skin to another man upon his command.

Dignity is episodic and illusory.

I have only the right to remain.

Anything I enjoy can and will be taken away by a court to which there is no appealing.

At the mention of the vast rifts of time some of us weather, my eyebrows no longer budge.

The presumption of authority is pervasive--I would take orders from a janitor, if only he were properly uniformed.

The stultifying sameness of each day makes it impossible to calendar them correctly.

I salivate when twenty steel doors are racked in concert.

I am Pavlov's dog with a pencil clenched in my teeth.  
And though my core shrieks at this proposition, I accept it, for it is what it is.

She had it right all along: I am institutionalized.