

ca. 1250
words

FILL IN THE BLANK

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I live in a world of almost no color - white, black, gray + khaki - the institutional palette, the colors of imprisonment. It is a bland place without flavor or variety, an oatmeal world (which is itself an insult to oatmeal). Our lives, our activities, our thoughts + words, food, clothes, even the buildings + pavements themselves reflect this antiseptic eradication of pigment + hue. Only nature brings its diversity of life + light to embellish my days; the sun with its amber-gold + crimson fingers radiating throughout the sky, the sky providing its tranquil sapphire + cobalt-blue canvas as background to the ballet of clouds, the shape-shifting figures of cream + ivory + puffy-white or their streaks + broken trails slithering over the horizon + leaving behind nothing more than their memory as the winds caress the emergence of spring, the early blossoms + first blades of grass + the reawakening growth of leaves once again coming forth after the desolation + stillness of winter. Earth stirs from its slumber + reminds us to breathe deeply, to open our eyes + take in its beauty + be thankful, for it is the one thing this prison cannot beat back. Nature will not submit to man's cruelty, though it may be injured it refuses to be eliminated. Oh, but they try, for to erase color + create monochromasia is sedation. It is a calculated environment, all premeditated corners + neatly defined spaces, uniform, clear-cut, an architectural manipulation of concrete + cinder blocks + bars meant to induce a prolonged mental

coma, the landscape within the walls itself lethally tedious + interrupted solely by weeds + the few persistent birds. I am a part of that landscape, their property, a blank slate + anytime something is written on me, they remove it like graffiti on a bus. I am to be whitewashed + brain-dead, a file on a hard-drive to be managed + cataloged + eventually disposed of as so much human waste, a digital extermination - bloodless, painless, emotionless, clean, sterile, + easily forgotten as though we never existed at all, the perfect management of imperfection. We are executed in a line of computer code + buried in the residue of technology, our voices never to be heard, our faces + prison records resurfacing forever as a warning to others, devoid of our humanity like skulls of the enemy on a pike posted at the gates of perdition. Do not enter!

Our lives are limited to a grid, a compound, specific + delineated - do not cross the line, walk on that path + no other, dare not be out-of-bounds, never question any figure of authority, thought is forbidden, creativity unacceptable, spontaneity + independence a danger to the institution. Inmates are expected to be submissive + vacant, to resign themselves to sameness + to be absorbed by the indistinguishable mass. My humanity matters not, I am a number, a worker bee, a chess piece within the BOP's domain of power + influence. They move me as they wish, chose my usefulness + utility, rule my function within narrowly-prescribed parameters. I am their

pawn, no more, disposable if necessary to their purposes. They state my "preparation" for re-entry to society has already begun, though I know of no such world that exists which resembles the twisted parlor game I am caught in, all regimentation, robotic + mindless. I suspect they are preparing me for recidivism, not freedom or supervised release. Surely even they must know it is a lie, for no man or woman or child will ever live like this other than a prisoner. Such is their folly + their arrogance that they have convinced themselves we are clay to their potter's wheel + they will mold our futures + shape the decisions of our lives. And if we crack or shatter, we will be tossed onto the heap of broken + wasted human shards, though the fault may be found hidden in their design + intent. How can a pot tell the potter what to do? How can an inmate tell the jailer the system is flawed? We have been informed by our keepers that WE will always be wrong, they expect it, they plan on it. Their strategy is based on preparation for our mistakes, not our successes. They have no idea what to do with us when we accept responsibility for our crimes + are motivated for positive change. Post-release, we are simply dumped like so much toxic waste into a society that neither wants us nor is prepared to deal with our needs. Ex-cons are radioactive - NIMBY - not in my backyard! We are targeted, not encouraged; dangerous, not welcome; flawed + irredeemable, not expected to prevail + prosper. The odds are against us + we are not even

given the courtesy of a level playing field upon which to begin anew, nor are we truly given "equal opportunity" for employment + a place to call home. The communities we return to have tagged us like coyotes in a wildlife study expecting failure + a return to our previous habits, yet act surprised + outraged when we do. How sad, how pitiful indeed shameful that our world is one dedicated to our continued incarceration + NOT our future healing + success.

Justice does not exist in a climate where extremities are the only possibilities — black or white, right or wrong, the way of the system or no way at all. It smothers human existence for the sake of order + control, it sacrifices self-motivation + personal discipline for the assumed security of sameness + prepares individuals to live in a world where they will always do as they are told, to follow orders without question. This has always been the basis of subserviant behavior + is necessary to the establishment of every totalitarian regime our history has witnessed + democracy is NOT immune to this perversion. Our nation's prisons betray the worst of this surgical removal of individuality + does so under the guise of law + order. No officer of the law, No judge or legislator, No government truly wants to encourage prisoners + wrongdoers to embrace critical reasoning + considered debate. Their goal is to manipulate thought + reason, to replace it with "good behavior," + further to convince the captive, the slave, of THEIR good

intentions for us. Therein lies the deception + false hope of rehabilitation, for it is in the retraining of character + identity that they desire to excise our previous selves + implant their will — some would call this brain-washing, others cruel torment. But in so doing, our "benevolent masters" ignorantly overlook the fact that we are neither blind nor so easily fooled + exploited. This irrational obedience to all authority is the REAL danger to our freedoms, this constrained + colorless place which leads undeniably to one of two endings = slavery or revolution. The human condition requires independence + demands righteousness, + the human spirit must + will prevail over evil. And while the vast majority of criminals cannot deny their guilt, we are never going to lay down + prostrate ourselves at the feet of our oppressors. The "end times" are coming + the walls of injustice will fall, as will the walls of prison, + the people will take back that which is rightly theirs — liberty + self-determination + the essential necessity of personal dignity. It is the ONLY choice.

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