

## Fill in the Blank

*W.E. Roberts*

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I live in a world of almost no colour – white, black, gray and khaki – the institutional palate, the colours of imprisonment. It is a bland place without flavour or variety, an oatmeal world (which is itself an insult to oatmeal). Our lives, activities, thoughts, words, food, clothes, even the buildings, and pavements themselves reflect this antiseptic eradication of pigment and hue. Only nature brings its diversity of life and light to embellish my days: the sun with its amber-gold and crimson fingers radiating throughout the sky, the sky providing its tranquil sapphire and cobalt-blue canvas as background to the ballet of clouds; the shape-shifting figures of cream, ivory and puffy-white or their streaks and broken trails slithering over the horizon, leaving behind nothing more than their memory as the winds caress the emergence of spring. I admire the early blossoms and first blades of grass, and the reawakening growth of leaves once again coming forth after the desolation and the stillness of winter. Earth stirs from its slumber and reminds us to breathe deeply, to open our eyes, take in its beauty and 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 colour and create monochromasia is sedation. It is a calculated environment, all premeditated corners and neatly defined spaces, uniform clear-cut, an architectural manipulation of concrete, cinder blocks and bars meant to induce a prolonged mental coma. The landscape within the walls is lethally tedious and interrupted solely by weeds and the few persistent birds. I am a part of that landscape, their property, a blank slate and anytime something is written on me, they remove it like graffiti on a bus. I am to be whitewashed and brain-dead, a file on a hard-drive to be managed, catalogued and eventually disposed of as so much human waste, a digital extermination – bloodless, painless, emotionless, sterile and easily forgotten as though we never existed at all, the perfect management of imperfection. We are executed in a line of computer code and buried in the residue of technology. Our voices never to be heard. Our faces and prison records serving 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, compound, specific and delineated: do not cross the line, walk on that path, dare not be out-of-bounds, never question any figure of authority, thought is forbidden, creativity unacceptable, spontaneity and independence a danger to the institution. Prisoners are

expected to be submissive and vacant, to resign themselves to sameness and to become absorbed by the indistinguishable mass. My humanity does not matter. I am a number, a worker bee, a chess piece within the Bureau of Prisons domain of power and influence. They move me as they wish, chose my utility, and rule my function within narrowly prescribed parameters. I am their pawn, no more, disposable if necessary for their purposes. They state that my “preparation” for re-entry to society has already begun, but I know of no such world that exists which resembles the twisted parlor game I am caught in, all regimented, robotic and 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 free man, woman, or child will ever live like this, only a prisoner. Such is their folly and arrogance that they have convinced themselves. We are clay to their potter’s wheel, and they will mold our futures and shape the decisions of our lives. If we crack or shatter, we will be tossed onto the heap of broken and wasted human shards, though the fault may be found hidden in their design and intent. How can a pot tell the potter what to do? How can a prisoner tell the jailer that 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 and 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 and irredeemable; not expected to prevail and prosper. The odds are against us and we are not even given the courtesy of a level playing field upon which to begin anew, nor are we given “equal opportunity” for employment or a place to call home. The communities we return to have tagged us like coyotes in a wildlife study expecting our failure and a return to our previous habits, though they act surprised and outraged when we do. How sad, pitiful and shameful that our world is one dedicated to our continued incarceration instead of our future healing and success.

Justice does not exist in a climate where extremes 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 and control. It sacrifices self-motivation and personal discipline for the assumed security

of sameness and prepares individuals to live in a world where they will always follow orders without question. This has been the basis of subservient behaviour and is necessary for the establishment of totalitarian regimes that our history has witnessed. Democracy is not immune to this perversion. Our nation's prisons betray the worst of this surgical removal of individuality, and they do so under the guise of law and order. No officer of the law, no judge or legislator, no government truly wants to encourage prisoners and wrongdoers to embrace critical reasoning and considered debate. Their goal is to manipulate thought and reason, to replace it with "good behaviour" and further convince the captive, the slave, of their good intentions for us. Therein lies the deception and false hope of rehabilitation, for it is in the retraining of character and identity that they desire to excuse our previous selves and implant their will. Some would call this brainwashing, while others may say it is cruel torment.

However, in doing so, our 'benevolent' masters ignorantly overlook the fact that we are neither blind, nor so easily fooled and exploited. This irrational obedience to all authority is the real danger to our freedoms. This constrained and colourless place which leads undeniably to one of two endings: slavery or revolution. The human condition requires independence and demands righteousness; the human spirit must and will prevail over evil. While the vast majority of criminals cannot deny their guilt, we are never going to lay down and prostrate ourselves at the feet of our oppressors. The "end times" are coming and the walls of injustice will fall, as will the walls of prison and the people will take back which is rightly theirs – liberty, self-determination and the essential necessity of personal dignity. It is the only choice.

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