

It is steaming in this tiny cell. The walls drip, the floor perspires, and another bead of sweat rolls down my tattoos. Even they itch, rebelling against the heat and prison ink.

What to do? Go outside and hang out in the elbow-to-elbow, dust-caked, dog-kennel of a yard, listen to another man's drab lies of thug-life grandeur? Or drip sweat on the typewriter while tapping out my own lies. Make no mistake, it is all a lie—the system, who we are, why we are in here.

What is not a lie, this slow burn of incarceration, eating away a man's life an hour, a day, a year at a time? I crave intensity. Pleasure, pain, no matter, just some spark to let me know I am alive, not hung in suspended animation. Or maybe the craving is simply for release, by physical freedom or a jump from this plane to the next—to be or not to be, like Hamlet. These walls welcome his madness, and perhaps there is a measure of release in madness. He had a noble cause to pursue, a great evil to avenge, corrupt governors to slay. My great cause is to become a productive citizen, if I am to believe the same people who took my life, tore me from my family.

These are the same people who have revived the dark ages' debtors' prisons and settled them squarely in twentieth century America. The idea of old was to jail anyone who could not afford to live, and make them languish in dungeons until they miraculously produced the money to pay outstanding bills and newly levied fines. Today's judges routinely order fines as conditions for parole, as they send non-violent men and women to iron cages for decades. The fines might make sense, might even be tolerable, if prisoners were allowed to work them off, but with penitentiary jobs that pay an average of ten to twenty dollars a month, the necessities of prison life hardly get paid, much less any outstanding debts.

Historically, Michigan prisoners worked factory jobs, earning a couple hundred dollars a month. Now most of the factories have been shut down, and the remaining few pay mere pennies an hour. Hobbycraft programs offered opportunities for industrious prisoners. More than "privileges" for idle hands, projects like ceramics and leather tooling provided a way to earn enough money to support our wives and children, to pay off our court fees and help with legal expenses. First, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) closed the road stands that sold our work, and then they restricted art programs—and our earning potential. To heap insult on the injuries of

those with fines, the MDOC automatically confiscates half of any monies family or friends might send to help with daily living expenses.

What to do? Hang in the burning dust of the prison yard, where now hundreds of broke, unemployed, uneducated men fight over the scraps that trickle to hungry hands? Even education has become an unattainable privilege. The waiting lists for the one or two small programs offered by each prison can stretch into a wait of years. Not that the skills taught are practical. Here, at Saginaw Regional Facility, we have the choice between Food Technology or Horticulture, either of which barely prepare one for a minimum wage job any sixteen-year old can get. Even if one is fortunate enough to get into one of these anemic programs, he can be ousted for the slightest infraction, including misconducts that have nothing to do with the program. Catching a substance abuse ticket in the cellblock for drinking fermented oranges results in immediate loss of educational programming and employment, regardless of grades or job performance. Add to that sanctions, such as the loss of yard, recreation, telephone, and lengthy or permanent visit restrictions.

The purpose of these whipping dances? There is none. There is no point. What can be the point of caging nonviolent men and women for years, decades, even lifetimes? When starting with a bad promise, the story can only deteriorate, in this case into a growing system of senseless imprisonment and torment. Poke a caged animal for a few years, then give him to your neighbor's family. Sound ridiculous? Torment humans with senseless punishments and unleash them on society. How adjusted, how "rehabilitated" will they be?

Perhaps I am an embittered convict, spouting for the sake of a rant. Or maybe I am your brother man, trying to find reason in insanity, searching out that greater cause to pursue. To be a productive member of the highly technological, enlightened, civilized society that solves its problems by banishing its brothers and sisters and sons and daughters to stone tombs, that consoles itself with platitudes and the great lie that they have provided the banished ones with finely worded standards of "humane" treatment—is that my greater cause? To hurry out to pay taxes supporting prisons for deadbeats? Supporting the "war" on American citizens who get intoxicated on something other than state-approved religions or alcohol? Supporting a national prison population of over two million human beings?

Maybe it would not matter so much—the sweating walls, the deprivation, the hypocrisy, the spirit-squelching confinement—if I thought there was a

reason. I have met thousands of prisoners along this ten-year travail, and the only lessons learned are disillusionment and hate. Hatred for the system. Hatred for the people who support the system. Through clouds of disillusionment my greater cause appears, and it becomes clearer with each heavy year. How ironic that sometimes what we most fear we become, what society dreads it creates.

But right now I am disillusioned with my broken fan and I hate this humidity. "To be or not to be"—I wonder what Hamlet would do?

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