

THE ART IN/OF SURVIVAL

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Surviving in the under world of prisons is just that - an ART in survival. Forced to exist in surroundings foreign to the very organic nature within us, as women we struggle to erase the fear by shutting down our emotions. The dialectic that ensues over the course of incarceration is voiced in tears and sung in blood.

The way of woman's compassion, the cultivation of her complete field of communication, be it eye contact, body language, hand gestures, fragrance, gait, style, through listening to the breathing of the heart - the caress of a soft word - all of this is negated inside the walls of confinement. Commands are barked across lines between them and us. If you can't learn to shut down, you will not survive.

Enduring the extremes of sensory deprivation is a startling regression for any twentieth century person, but particularly for women. The deprivation threatens our very essence. Where patterns of every imaginable colour and texture outside of prison enrich the eye's span both indoors and out, the prison baseness of stone and steel remains ungraced. Grey days and black nights are the colours of precisioned function - the colours of punishment.

The only sequence is dislocation. Pipe-thick bars easily pierce stone and concrete; the flush of fifty toilets re-enforces rudimentary evacuations; the grinding of metal on metal, railing steel gates grate and screech into the locking frame embedded in concrete, just a few feet from your head. No feather pillows. Rigid lumps of fire-proofed matting assault our sleep.

The fragrance of flowers, of incense, of jasmine tea, the scent of your lover's skin - all are displaced with the odour of disinfectant, of mould, of foul-smelling water and stale food, of dusty paper and institutional soap which permeates your nostrils. No longer the taste of freshly home-cooked meals and real buttered, fresh bread. Now, it is bologna, sausages over-frozen to cardboard, food fried in lard and fish flakes that look and taste like shredded napkins, canned apples and gravy mixes obscene in their fake colouring.

Adding to these insults are the monthly line-ups for basic needs such as Tampax when the guard yells out, "Regular or Super"? More insidious are the male guards who snicker as women are paraded past them hand-cuffed and shackled, often bleeding from self-inflicted wounds. We don't see it. We don't hear it. We don't taste it. We don't smell it. We don't feel it.

The absence of aesthetic pleasures debilitates sensitivities and threatens death. The slightest awareness of beauty brings an assuage in form - breath. In this world of decay and corruption, we find beauty where we can and we make beauty to live.

Relief within prison is found only in the physical and creative arts and through the true friendships made with others imprisoned. Ours is a cloistered world, one where every minute of our day and night is calculated and where we are forced to conform to inane rules and regulations and where we are counted over and over and over again, keys smashing our senses as doors crash behind us locking us in coffin-like cages and cells. Nearly every night we hear muffled crying and almost as often a shrill scream from a nightmare or the strangely quiet slashing of flesh while another throws up. The experience of being locked up with many women, of women strutting proudly in the worst of men's persona, is outlandish. One response provoked is that of women's art.

The creative spirit within the woman's heart is the dominant path to survival. We are dying, and nearly devoid of life, we rush to the art form like shadows catching the body as we round the cornerstone. Dehydrated, waiting for life-fluid form, we reach for the pencil, the knitting needle, the clay, anything which will provide meaning and confirmation to our existence. With the most basic of tools, we fashion beauty and in that beauty, we are empowered and our woman-spirits survive.

The works of art that women accomplish in prison take many forms. Aboriginal women generously share their ancient teachings beading eagles and rosettes and crafting soft leather vests and moccasins. Some women knit and crochet wondrously intricate rainbow patterns into bedspreads, afghans, sweaters and dresses. Here are women who paint and draw, turn teacups and pots on the wheel and compose heart-wrenching and heart-warming poetry and prose. The art of women in prison is inclusive of every sensuous form imaginable including the meticulous waxing of a tile floor.

Women in prison waste nothing. Every bead, every shred of fabric and leather, every piece of paper and every pen is used or passed on. When a woman leaves prison, she leaves to another prisoner, her clothes, television set, stereo, bought soap and perfume, make-up and music. When women leave prison they take with them the love and respect for their sisters in struggle. They leave behind their tools for survival. The woman left will be reminded that one day it will be her turn to leave and when it comes, she will also pass these valuable tools on.

Society conditions women to value themselves in terms of form and function. But once imprisoned we are denied both. Art in prison is as much therapy as it is an obsession to create something beautiful with which to identify. It is an obsessive path through which we express the pain, the loss, the fear, and the anger that wells up within when we feel we cannot take another minute, never mind another year. The art of creation is an inward retreat which empowers those who find the path. When the Solicitor General proudly announced that yes, in four years we would go home to see our families, and when the \$100,000+ per year

men at National Headquarters tell us how their staff practice the humane and rehabilitating execution of their Mission, we are expected to be overjoyed and grateful. Through art, women survive these idiots.

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IN AGONY AND THE ECSTASY