

New Poetry by Lisa Stice: “Our Folklore”



FIND MYSELF LOST / *image by*
Amalie Flynn

Our Folklore

Long ago, you were molten rock, and I—
well, I spoke the language of bears.

But now that I have been out of the forest
for so long, all the words and grammar escape

me, and I often find myself lost. And you—
well, you are often mistaken for a statue

in this solid state. No more rumblings and
agitations. We are both quiet these days.

New Fiction from Cameron McMillan: “Call Me Nobody. Let Me Live.”

I can still see his smile as I settle into my desk and the normal morning wave shuffles in. First comes the pinstripes of the best and the brightest, carrying their expertise and experience like an expensive briefcase by their side, letting it swing around for all to see. They speak of exotic and noteworthy places all the same, making no distinction between

a Washington and a Baghdad. Their presence and self-importance is ballooned by the special assistant that seemingly exists to fan the flames of their egos, oohing and awing with every detail of the important missions the guests recount, and gesticulating at the carefully placed references to impressive figures they dealt with on their travels. I tap on my keyboard to log into my computer and listen in on the personal odysseys of guests' respective self-declared, world-saving pilgrimages. I place my second coffee next to the cheap frame at the corner of my desk and there it is, the smile.

Like every morning, I peer over at it and see the sparkle of Mulligan's teeth above the sand-caked filth of our fatigues. I try not to smell the smoke or taste the dust, as I know that leads down a dark road littered with smoke, fire, and demons. That I cannot stand. So, instead, I distract myself from the tightening in my chest with a gulp of the warm brew and some shuffling of papers. I blink hard and take a deep breath as the final straggling dignitary drones on about the misfortunes of his delayed connecting flight and the plights of business class. I think he's a former ambassador turned senior fellow of some kind with an expertise in economic development or the like. Just for kicks, I look at the special assistant's schedule to find the reason for the wayward ambassador's troubles. In block letters, I see the title of the conference he has been invited to attend: DIPLOMACY AND BUSINESS SYMPOSIUM: ADDRESSING POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH.

The worn down dirt roads and begotten mud huts along the banks of the Euphrates replace the calendar on my screen. The smell of wretched decay, sewage, and wastewater penetrates through the windows of our M-RAP. I hear the laughter of the little girl who chases a deflated and torn soccer ball down the trash-filled alleys of Al Baghdadi. She waves at our convoys as we pass by until, one day, she follows the ball onto an unexploded mortar cache that sends her flying high into the sky and litters her tiny bones and flesh across the same

roadway.

“I’m Dean Miller’s 9 a.m.”

I look up to see another suit standing above my desk. This one is slim and powder blue, matching the relatively young man in it. He does not look at me. Instead, he is glued to his phone, which must contain urgent emails that will assuredly save little girls from blowing themselves up playing soccer. I begin to say that I am not a receptionist, but bite my tongue as I look at his expensive watch and down at his polished shoes. He’s never been near Al Baghdadi or any town like it. Instead, I give him a smile and lead him to the Dean’s office where they commence a discussion about their understandings of the harsh realities of intra-state conflict and prospects for resolution after sucking down their French-press and marveling at the Indonesian artwork on the Dean’s wall. From their air-conditioned haven, they will save the world, for they know war and violence.

Walking back to my desk, I try to guess the blue suit’s age. He looks as old as D’Angelo was when he died. Early thirties. D’Angelo played guitar and had a Harley at home. He showed me a picture of his kids once, but I can’t remember if it was one girl and two boys, or two girls and one boy. That’s about all I can remember about him. I didn’t know him well, but our few interactions were cordial enough. I wasn’t there when the IED ripped apart his legs into a mangled mess, either, but I heard on the radio that he was still alive when they put him in the medevac chopper. He bled out somewhere over Al Anbar province. I look back at the frame on my desk, focusing on the American flag we’re holding in front of a row of Hescos on our second week in country. We’re wearing boonie caps and our full combat load, flaunting our weapons, ammo, and Kevlar. I wonder if it was one of the boys or one of the girls who was handed the folded flag at D’Angelo’s funeral.



General Lee lies on its side after surviving a buried IED blast in 2007. The Stryker was recovered and protected its Soldiers on more missions until another bomb finally put it out of action. Photo by courtesy of C-52 of 3/2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team

see:

<http://www.army.mil/-news/2008/06/06/9708-general-lee-rides-again/>

The computer bings and I look at my email to see an announcement about a new security studies fellow. I scroll through and skim the highlights. *Army. Lieutenant Colonel. West Point. Intelligence officer.* Always intelligence officers. Sometimes pilots or JAG lawyers. But no grunts. That must be the unwritten rule in the veteran's affairs office down in admissions and financial aid. I imagine a not so distant reality where the security studies fellow conducts an intelligence briefing. He details the security of a road in the Hit district of Al Anbar and deems it free of IEDs. He declares it safe for travel by convoy and foot patrol. He stands in front of a PowerPoint presentation in a faraway headquarters in Kuwait or Qatar. That's that, and so, off D'Angelo goes.

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It's 10'oclock now and all the suits have filed off to their respective conferences and meetings. With the fanfare died down, the stream of faculty trickles in. The pinstripes of the best and brightest are replaced with the tweed of the wise and prognostic. Reading some of their bios on the website, one wouldn't be alone in mistaking them as manifestly prophetic. A well respected professor of gender studies decides to engage is some small-talk with an associate dean behind my desk. I can't help but overhearing as I sort through expense reports of faculty research trips to Italy and Montenegro. They discuss her recent book on women in the US military and

consider branding techniques to effectively showcase it on the website. The dean suggests a meeting with marketing.

“It’s remarkable work, Kathleen. The section on women in combat arms units was so inspiring.”

I hear the creak of Carhart’s door flying open from her chu as the clash of metal pierces through the silent air of the desert night. Thompson runs out as he pulls up his OCP trousers by the belt and holds his rifle in his left hand. He swivels his head from left to right and scans the surrounding compound before he runs off and disappears from the moonlight. I hear Carhart’s screams. But it’s more than screams, like the unrelenting howl of a wounded animal about to die. I walk into her room and see her sobbing on the floor, cradled into a ball, and notice the blood on her sheets and the gash above her eye. I follow the procedure. I get her to medical care, notify the commander, and pester him into opening an investigation. I tell her she can trust me. I promise her justice. “No probable cause” is the official finding. Three months later, we stand in the same rank of formation and watch him get promoted to first sergeant. I check my phone to see the last time she responded to one of my calls or texts since we got home. Three months ago, “don’t worry about me.” The second try at a sober living home hadn’t worked out. I hope she’s alive.

Professor Goff is next, the director of security studies, who is even more ancient than the academic institution itself. Carrying himself with a purposely relaxed gate and attitude, he emanates purported knowledge my way. He’s wearing his usual attire, knee-length khaki shorts, a wrinkled polo shirt, and his all-weather Birkenstocks. What’s Professor Goff up to today, I wonder, as he plods along the hallway towards the dean’s office. Pasted on the front page of the school’s website, I see the usual overbearing text and logo advertising “Great Power Symposium: Deterrence and Conflict in a Polycentric World.” Professor Birkenstocks is the headliner,

calling all of the future national security leaders that roam the halls to be blessed by his presence in the large auditorium. I roll my eyes and take another sip of coffee. I think of the professor's book about Iraq that launched him into the stratosphere of academia's giants. It's about Al Anbar Province, where my friends and I served, and deals with the Marines who "bore the brunt of the fighting." I look up an op-ed of his from 2003. He's arguing in support of the invasion. I find another from 2007 where he explores the logic and efficiency of the surge. He says losses are inevitable. I remember Mulligan's obsession with reading. Sci-fi and flash fiction, I think it was. I see his smile. Don't do it, I think. More coffee.

The dean comes out to greet Professor Goff with the normal platitudes and mutual self-congratulation. It's almost noon and I decide to leave for my daily walk around the quad before eating lunch. I like to sneak away from my desk for fifteen minutes to breathe fresh air and see the finely cut grass. I see a group of undergraduates playing ultimate frisbee outside and try to guess their age. Probably 20 or 21. With some quick math, I realize that Mulligan would be a junior if he lived long enough and his GI Bill paperwork went through. The undergrads laugh as they toss the frisbee back and forth and I see Mulligan's grin. I hear him chuckle as the older guys in the platoon mess with him. Thankfully, that's how I remember him, smiling. I'm grateful I wasn't there when they found his body. Blasted brains and blood all over his chu. His left hand still gripping the trigger well. No note. Nothing. Just Mulligan smiling one day and his own rifle in his mouth the next. I'm glad that I'm left with his smile.

Heading back into the school, I pass the framed awards and photographs that line the halls of the entrance to honor famed alumni who went on to shape world events. They include a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, an ambassador, and a head of the World Bank. I see the students scurrying about, cramming

articles, academic journals, and other forms of knowledge into their brains as quickly as they can. I look back at the pictures and wonder which one of them will be on the wall next. I wonder if anyone in the building has taken the time to look at the picture on my desk, at Mulligan. I think of all the current, former, and future leaders of geopolitics that roam the halls around me that could benefit from having known him, from having known his smile. Maybe it would make the world a better place. Maybe not. The idea brings a poem to mind, but I'm not sure why. The author escapes me. It says, "Call me nobody. Let me live."

New Nonfiction: "One Woman's History of Sexual Abuse in Prison" by Patty Prewitt

Missouri inmate Patty Prewitt has been in prison for almost 40 years. She is serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Bill, in 1984. The conviction, however, is problematic. The prosecution's case relied upon slut-shaming Prewitt and questioning her fitness as a mother based on relationships that took place five and more years before the murder, a time when the Prewitts were separated. The prosecutor did not share with the defense evidence that established a strange car was seen parked around the corner, a significant omission. A pathologist, brought on only weeks before trial was discredited in a number of trials where he served as a witness for the prosecution.

Prewitt is not eligible for parole until 2036, when she will

be 86 years old. Maintaining her innocence, she declined a plea bargain that would have made her eligible for parole after just seven years. Had she taken the deal, she would have been released many years ago.

As the longest-serving inmate at the women's prison in Vandalia, Prewitt has been a model prisoner. Former Missouri Department of Corrections Director George Lombardi who, during his 41 years in corrections, has never recommended anyone for clemency supports Prewitt's release. In light of "the long sentence she has already served, the total support of her children and grandchildren, and her unprecedented contribution to the culture of the prison and to her fellow offenders," he recommends that "Missouri Gov. Parson take the just, responsible and compassionate action and grant Patty Prewitt clemency." Warden Brian Goeke identifies Prewitt as a woman best suited for release.

In May of '86, 20 days after I first came to the prison near Jefferson City, I was shackled, chained, cuffed and shoved on a state bus to the prison in Chillicothe. Upon arrival, a male corrections officer caught me alone in my cell and strongly suggested, threatened, that I would be his sex slave with no choice in the matter. His words and manner were horrifying to this newbie, but his prediction did not come to fruition, because my new guardian angel cellmate, Theresa, made it her business to protect me. She was a large no-nonsense heroin-addict biker chick who had done serious time in Florida where she acquired absolutely no love from prison staff. She also teased me about being a scrawny country gal, a rube, but we both agreed that the perv was not going to get his hands on me, so help us, God.

In August of that year, after Theresa was paroled, word came down the prison grapevine that a federal court declared that

male and female corrections officers are to be treated equally with the very same duties and rights. That sounded only fair until we realized that it meant that male guards could frisk and strip search us. A bit of panic ensued, but the officers I spoke with swore they didn't plan to jump into that trick bag fraught with unforeseen and seen problems. But it only takes one.

As Carol and I exited the chow hall, this particular guard, a stout big-bellied greasy man, motioned for Carol to turn around and assume the position with feet apart, arms outstretched. Prior to this we'd only been patted down by females. To our shock and surprise, that man stepped close on Carol's backside with his face buried in her hair, then reached around to cup and squeeze her breasts. I stood frozen—the next in line. The color drained from her face as he roughly moved his beefy hands over her buttocks, then reached between her legs to feel her pubic mound. Color came back to her visage with a scarlet vengeance, while he retraced his steps from buttocks to breasts. I couldn't stay to witness the rest because fear kicked my rabbit legs into gear, and I found myself running, racing up the stairs to hide in my cell.

After I calmed down, felt safe to come out since he hadn't come after me, and shift change was over, I found poor Carol, a tall, handsome lady with considerable intellect and two teenage daughters who adored her. But her husband was abusive. During one violent event, as she attempted to leave, he chased after her like the maniac he was. He yanked open the car door but slipped while grabbing at her. She inadvertently ran over him. To ensure he wouldn't kill her and the girls as he had promised, she slammed it in reverse and backed over him which earned her 25 years for second degree murder. After 20 years of horror at her husband's hand, she did not deserve this guard's sexual assault in the name of penal security. From that day on, if that guard was on post, we'd miss a meal. Sometimes the chow hall would be nearly empty except for a

handful of masculine inmates whom he never bothered.

A few months later, on December 14, I was called to the visiting room to see my parents and five kids. To my dismay that guard stepped from the side and in front of the female officer as he motioned for me to assume the position. (In those days we weren't strip searched prior to a visit, just frisked. They rightly reasoned that we wouldn't be bringing drugs *out* of prison to our visitors.) I quietly appealed to his inner gentleman, "Please, sir, I'm a rape victim. I beg you. Please allow the female officer to search me." Trembling in trepidation, I saw and felt his rage explode like atom bombs within his gray eyes.

My five young children and parents watched this exchange while trying to figure out exactly what the hold up was. The pat search prior to a visit had always been quick, so to them this was suspect foot-dragging, but my protective father got the picture, narrowed his eyes and set his jaw. Attempting to sound like a grownup who's in charge, I sternly advised the officers, "If you're not going to allow me to visit, give my family the big box of Christmas gifts I made for them." Both stared blankly at me, so I bravely added, "Do you understand?"

By this time every husband in the visiting area was asking his wife if that particular greasy-headed fat man had run his hands over her. I was not alone in my indignation and could feel the energy shift. The guards exchanged looks and silently decided the female would frisk me and allow me to visit. But the moment all the visitors left the area, I was escorted to the hole for "creating a disturbance and disobeying a direct order."

In May of '87, that same man sent me to the hole again for the same transgression—refusing to submit to his sweaty hands on my body while huffing his sour breath on my neck. This was the last straw. A group of us dug around in the law library and successfully sued the Missouri Department of Corrections in

federal court. On September 30 of that year, seven of us rabble-rousers found ourselves shackled, chained and sitting in court testifying to not only the abuse of officers, but, for some, the years of abuse by husbands and boyfriends. The kindly older federal judge was visibly shaken to hear a lady tearfully explain that a male guard had felt her sanitary napkin and interrogated her about it. Another lady had a double mastectomy, the result of cancer, and was torturously embarrassed when a man made fun of her "flat-as-a-pancake" chest. We and the officers also explained that the searches were targeted to find cookies—cookies that were served to us on our trays at chow. That particular guard stumbled through his testimony as to why he must thoroughly search our breasts, buttocks and inner thighs to keep America safe, while his fuming wife glared from the gallery. Because of the fuss we caused, the Missouri Department of Corrections was mandated by the federal court to create a method for officers to cross-gender pat search without fondling and grabbing certain body parts, but of course no one can make rules by which everyone abides. I've had issues since with both male and female guards who can't help but take liberties.

In December of '89, a large group of us trouble makers were shipped back to the prison north of Jefferson City. While there I ran into several minor sexual skirmishes and wrestling matches, but nothing I couldn't handle until a new education supervisor was hired. Unfortunately I was his clerk. This persistent little man thought it was his duty and right to have sex with me, so he literally chased me around his desk. Our warden got wind of this problem and asked me if it were true. I explained, "If I tell you that he is inappropriate, I will go to the hole under investigation. Right? Well, I will not do that and miss visits with my kids." And I didn't. But I had another plan. My lecherous boss was friends with a recreation officer, and I let it be known that my brother would do bodily harm if I told him that a black man was abusive to me. Everyone had seen my big handsome brother

visit, and evidently my boss believed my lie, because he nearly ignored me after that. The truth is my sweet brother was a peaceful preacher and never fought anyone in his life, but these people didn't know that.

The Great Flood of '93 ruined our prison and sent us packing to a men's prison called Church Farm. I was so accustomed to unsolicited, unwanted sexual encounters that those years seemed pretty mild—nearly peaceful. For example, one maintenance man quickly lost interest in me when I harshly kneed his groin. Then in January of '98, we were transferred to a brand new prison in Vandalia with all new guards. During a count time, one COI, who resembled a bloated Elvis impersonator, knelt at my chair in front of my other three cellmates and sincerely inquired, "What do I have to do to get you to suck my big ole dick?" My friends inhaled in shock, but after he disappeared, Donna remarked that the reason he jumped up and exited quickly was the lightning quick drop-dead look I shot at him. As if!

During the next couple of years, more than several staff persons were caught with their pants down and lost their jobs. One sergeant in particular had a type: petite, pretty, young, white. One of his targets, a lovely twenty-year-old with a soft botheel accent, asked me for advice as to what to do. I counseled her that if she tells what he's up to, she will go to the hole. Her only safe recourse is to never get caught alone around him. But this panicked kid confided in a grandma-like officer who slammed her in the hole just as I predicted. The girl rotted down there for months until she "admitted" she lied and then was transferred to another prison. Standard operating procedure.

Years of his terrorism passed by until this sergeant met his match. His final victim, who was beautiful in a mean way, spit his semen on her sheets and called her lawyer who called the cops. I never found out what became of the sergeant, but this gal sued and settled for millions and freedom. I thanked her

while telling her that we'd been trying to get rid of him for years. With her hands on her slim hips, she leaned back, cocked her head and plainly told me, "Ya weren't tryin' too hard." With a chuckle, I had to agree.

For years we were terrorized by a guard who loved to grope us and call it a routine pat search. Not only did he pull up close on a butt, he'd grind his hard little penis on the butt and whisper nasty words in an ear. If you protested in the slightest, he cuffed you and hauled you to the hole, the original walk of shame. Everyone, including staff, knew about him, but staff turned a blind eye. Every hour he was on shift was torture. My friends and I were repeatedly in trouble over him, and he took down too many good women. He would still be employed here, except he was arrested for a pervert-related crime in the free world.

In 2010 I heard about a federal law called the Prison Rape Elimination Act, which was designed to prevent vulnerable prisoners from being sexually assaulted by either staff or inmates. A few years later, as I exited the chow hall, a male lieutenant called me over to assume the position for a pat search. In my smart-ass way I casually commented, "So much for PREA." PREA must have been a sore subject, because he yelled at me a long tirade about how they don't have to follow laws and can do anything they want with us and to us because we have no rights and nobody knows what goes on in here because we are hidden and nobody cares about whores. He was so angry that he didn't even see that a crowd had gathered around us. That's how crazed he was with neck veins bulging and snot and spittle flying. He finally noticed his audience and gruffly ordered us to disperse. A few more years passed before our prison was forced to abide by PREA and stop cross-gender pat searches, but by that time I had grown old and gray, so guards and other staff ignore me as an object of desirability. I may be the only woman ever who is thankful for wrinkles and white hair. Prison staff still yell at me and treat me like a stupid

slave, but none want to have sex with my scrawny old body.
Praise the Lord.

New Nonfiction: “A Bridge” by Kent Jacobson



Take me to the alley

Take me to the afflicted ones

Take me to the lonely ones that

Somehow lost their way

Gregory Porter

The twelve-foot chain link capped with concertina wire said, *Whoever you are, you aren't welcome.* The penitentiary sprawled on a barren hill in a forgotten tract in Connecticut, far from houses or schools or the next town. It was 1990, the dirt and rutted parking lot empty. Maximum security didn't pull many visitors, and this would be my first time inside. I recognized no fear, not at first.

I remembered waiting as a boy in a lot outside another penitentiary. I perched in the passenger seat of the state car

my father drove, the black 1950 Chevy with the siren and flashing light. Dad exited the facility smiling. The men inside fashioned signs for the Rhode Island Forest Service and were likely paid very little. The work, Dad said, was always good, always professional, and always on time.

Great oak trees surrounded that old place.

Here, there were no trees, no flowers, not a planted bush. A twilight overcast pressed down as I made my way to a squat, concrete-block building that appeared to be the welcome center, beyond which crouched the penitentiary, a low mean spread of menace which housed two thousand inmates. I explained to the officer hovering behind dark, inch-thick glass what I was there to do. He grunted.

He asked for a driver's license and peered into the worn briefcase Dad had gifted, checking for anything an inmate might want as a weapon. He dropped the license into a drawer and extended a laminated pass through a small hole in the glass, and with the sweep of an arm, he motioned to a steel gate through the chain link.

Dad had been a hard man. While he never came clean about his earliest days, I realize now he was aware a ghetto kid like he had been, loose with brawlers on a drunk through Providence speakeasies, could have landed in a prison making signs. Possibly he smiled as he left that Rhode Island penitentiary because he felt lucky.

He'd floundered as a student and dropped out at sixteen to do piecework in a factory where he poured out work with speed. A threat to more senior men and making hardly any money, he turned back to finish school. And throughout the Depression, without support except an immigrant father's scorn, Dad bulled a path through college. He worked a year and enrolled in school the next.

He died a decade before I entered Osborn Correctional.

I flinched as the steel gate clanked shut behind. I crossed a dirt yard on cracked asphalt to an officer in a head-to-toe black uniform, and I flashed my laminated pass.

"Wait here."

His glower said, *Forget it. We have more to deal with than you.*

"Screw 'em," Dad would say, "whoever the hell they are, whatever the bastards do. Sometimes, you've got to stand and be counted."

Black uniform ordered me through a second, heavier steel gate where more guards lurked behind more dark glass. My Harris tweed jacket, the worn briefcase, and the evening hour said who I was.

I'd been warned about the guards.

The second steel gate clanked shut behind me. My stomach churned. Will anyone open these doors when I want *out*?

There seemed to be no laughs in this dwelling, only these cold mothers and their freaking gray walls.

"Why you here?" a voice barked from behind the glass.

"I teach in the college program."

Books won't help thugs, Mister, I was ready for him to say.

He gestured down the wide hall.

"Take a right down there and go till you find a guard."

Still no waste of words.

I did what he said and took a right into an enormous, extended corridor. Voices blasted off the walls and concrete floor. Inmates exited a room far ahead, most of them bulked up

bodybuilders in identical tan shirts and tan pants. They thundered toward me four abreast, one pack after another. I stepped faster and avoided eye contact.

They ran over 225. I was an Ivy League poster boy in tweed and corduroy. Their faces said, *Who's the punk? Who invited him?*

What had I expected? I'd joked the inmates might have two heads and keep cobras as pets.

A woman at a party asked why anyone would teach in a prison. Wasn't the place dangerous?

I said teacher-pals declared prison the best experience they'd had in a classroom and didn't say more. Their conviction was absolute and I bit. They'd crossed a bridge they hadn't supposed was there and learned something, though they didn't say what.

Bedlam grew as more streamed from what was maybe the dining mess. Masses of them, and too many to count. They howled.

What am I doing in this place?

I showed my pass to a guard I found. I said I taught the English course. He smiled and proceeded down one more hall to a room assigned to Jacobson.

"Is this experience new for you?" he asked.

The guard seemed curious, not at all prickly. He wished me the best.

Inmates passed and nodded to the new guy. They smiled.

I thought, I must be in a different institution.

The room that was mine had an immense oak desk and a matching oak chair. I wasn't going with that; I wanted no barricade. I took a plastic chair-desk from the front and turned it to the other chair-desks in neat rows facing the front, the oak desk

and chair and the blackboard behind me.

I tried not to think what men had done to end in maximum security. Murder, pedophilia, armed robbery, rape, the worst crimes were the most likely. A section of my brain spat images of fiends.

Get a grip. You can't teach fiends. Dad drank with Tommy Pelligrini, a man rumored to be in the Providence mafia. Tommy wore a navy suit and a modest tie. His memory seemed to quiet my mind.

I understood little, nonetheless, about the actual men I was teaching. I'm certain I looked grim. I picked fingernails and fooled with the marriage ring on my finger. Men were finding seats. I rooted in my briefcase for a pen, a pad of paper, for nothing. My back had a knot the size of a golf ball.

Would I recognize anyone? I scanned the roster.

An inmate asked a question and I gave a too brief answer. I didn't initiate conversation like I usually did in a new class.

I glanced at my watch and a voice inside chirped, *You've crossed scarier roads than this, boyo*. A buddy remarked once on my cool in a crisis and my son, Morgen, cracked: "Dad's good in a crisis. It's ordinary life that gives him trouble."

He was ribbing, though I hoped tonight he was right.

I counted twenty-three men in all. Half, I would learn, had killed someone. Most had spent their childhoods in fractured homes, abandoned by fathers whose savvy might have pointed to a better pathway.

The men sat in four straight rows, seats directed at the teacher like we had in grade school. I didn't ask them to form a circle because I planned to hog the talk tonight. They were black men except one, everybody in a tan uniform with a buzz-

cut. White people can't tell one black person from another, a smart observer said.

The single white sat in a far corner. Outside, darkness had fallen and inside it wasn't bright. He wore deep-ink shades. What lay in wait there?

I'd memorize their names and offer that much consideration.

Now. Let's go.

I called the roll and scribbled a note when a man responded. One had red hair. A coffee-colored inmate displayed freckles. One was Goliath, a second a featherweight. Another wore a bandana. Still another had a sweeping scar on a left cheek.

I went one by one, up a row and down the next. I used the scribbles and named each inmate correctly. Bodies straightened. The room perked. Two mentioned how little respect they received in Osborn and others nodded.

The next would be easier, I thought. I would describe in general terms what we'd read and their writing would analyze in coming weeks: American writers from Irving to Twain to Baldwin to Tobias Wolff, with a handful of accessible poets.

I started to speak and couldn't get the words out. My hands shook and my voice fluttered. Fear had taken a public walk. I stopped. I couldn't teach like this.

A hand shot up three seats away. The Goliath, maybe in his twenties and close to three-hundred pounds, a football player once, I bet. He plowed holes for running backs.

Head down, he waved a hand, hesitant.

"Can . . . can I say something?" He spoke with a stutter.

"Sure," I said.

He held a beat, reluctant to say what he wanted to say.

“You . . . you seem nervous.”

“You got that right.”

The room exploded. Laughter, every single man, belly laughter, even No Eyes behind the ink shades.

Without a prompt except my fear, the men spilled their first hours in Osborn, last week or years before. The shakes, the diarrhea, the sleeplessness, the stares into the dark, the dread, the guards, the threat they might not live.

They did their best to talk me back from where I'd shrunk. They'd been there. They understood. Don't be ashamed. We managed. You can too.

I'm old. I forget names. Days are shorter and they fly too soon. I admit it was a tiny episode in a prison, years ago, hardly worth a mention.

The moment stays.

We are you, they said. We are you. These men who were like the mill kids I grew up around, only older, and in more serious trouble. Men who brought me back to my brawling father.

They weren't foreign. They weren't strange. For a moment, they saw me as I was. Like them, afraid. They were me.

I came from no fractured home, I hadn't been abandoned by my father, I hadn't ever been so continually disrespected. Yet here I was, at a bridge my father knew.

And there they were too, waiting.