

Prison Stories II: Poems from a Worker in the Prison-Industrial Complex



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Introduction

In 2008, *Justice Policy Journal* published a compilation of my short ethnographic stories about prison work. Those vignettes were based on thousands of notes I wrote while working for the Nevada Department of Corrections from 2000 to 2007. These poems are also based on the same notes, and crystallize many of the issues still found in the US prison system today, including brutalization effects, bureaucracy, prisoners' families, mental health treatment, objectification of prisoners, gangs, hepatitis, sexual assault and other forms of violence, warehousing, and worker burnout.

The poems, and their introductions, reflect my evolution from a naive sociologist turned prison guard to a disillusioned caseworker and member of the US injustice system. I have also included footnotes to explain prison terminology that reflects the “common sense” of the high-security prison yard (a place where a “minute” is a year, and a prisoner’s cell is his “house.”).

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As a new correctional officer, I was tasked a few times as a transportation officer, escorting inmates from county jail to state prison. For some inmates and officers, it is a new (and frightening) experience. New inmates and new officers, are called "fish." "Chester" is one name, among several, given to a sex offender, a prisoner of the lowest status.

another load of fish

he's tossed an orange baggy jumpsuit
well-worn by killers, chesters, gambling cheats
he's then restrained with silver handcuffs, lock-side up
belly-chains, and leg irons, lock-side down, all
double locked
all with jaws, which, have closed ten thousand times before
and when it's time to go to prison for the first time
he swaggers in the state-owned chains, as if it was an honor
until he almost trips, and like a teen, he sneaks a look around...
and luckily for him, all the others are focused in their own worlds
eating fright on humor sandwiches
and his shoulders drop and as he enters the van
and his body slumps for the first time

transported in a moving cage, low-profile
placed miles from the city streets where he ruled for years
I can see the hard swallow beneath bravado
as he looks up, and gazes at the miles of razor wire, the towers,
the dead-gray slab buildings, and then the sallyport gate
he's herded, name yelled out and stripped again
baptized in a lindane shower

and he'll strut again when his cell becomes his "house"

when he finds weaker minds and bodies and learns new scams
yet prison life will wear him down, like years of ocean over rock
prison life will grind him into a tired young old man
"tired of the drama" talking of "the days"

Tattoos have been a part of prison life, and street life, for generations. They often reflect associations, rank, pride, and philosophy (“mi raza [my race]” “smile now, cry later”)

tatting up¹

black ink draining, burning, inscribing:

identity into his smooth brown skin

injecting:

territory, respect, honor for the raza²

historia, pride, and the seeds of glory

slaps on the back by the other vatos³

a reason for an honorable war

to fight with honor for the carnales⁴

his insides incubating

slowly turned to flan⁵

.....

1 Tatting up” = tattooing. In prison, the tattoo often signifies gang affiliation. Tat guns can be constructed from a walkman motor, wires, and a pen, and are shared by fellow gang members.

2 raza = race

3 vato = dudes

4 carnal = blood brother

5 Medical workers tell me the long-term effects of Hepatitis C turn the innards into a mush-like substance. HCV is perhaps prevalent in 30% of the prison population. Inmates are not tested unless they show symptoms, which may not exist for 10 years or more. The government figures it would be too costly to take care of everyone with the disease.

This poem reflects my observations (and imagination) as a new caseworker as I walked the high-security security prison tier.

lockdown bed and breakfast

the man of infamy and reputation, now half-asleep, watching his television and sucking on a hand-rolled cigarette.

a 19-year-old Sureño⁶ still working on his rep chewing on candy and scheming with his homie through the electrical outlet.

a skinhead waiting for me to pass so he can cadillac⁷ pride and hate across the prison's upper tier.

a few looking at skin magazines towels blocking the slivers of light

two yelling out chess moves

two doing art, one for tattoos

someone probably sharpening a knife of hard plastic

a few smoking meth⁸ or weed

a few soldiers resting from the machine⁹ preparing for the coming war

but most just waiting for the cops to pass food through the slot as you pass from cells 1 to 48

.....

6 Sureño/Sureno 13 = Spanish meaning "southern" or "from the south"; 13 synonymous with south.

7 cadillac = inmate-made device used to pass contraband from one cell to another

8 meth = methamphetamine

9 the machine = series of physical exercises done by gangs

Crime is frequently an intergenerational phenomenon. Sometimes several family members are incarcerated. The path to the criminal lifestyle often takes years, but sadly it often begins early. The "jacket" is an inmate's personal file, which reveals, conceals, and frames the prisoner's life.

his jacket and a polaroid © of his son

he was a crying kid
kicked in the head
a "stupid bastard," "troubled child"
special ed. resource room
then a bully cutting classes, doing weed
opportunity school: Jefferson, then "juvy."

"a thug," he told himself with pride, and his set
"blood in, adrenaline rushes, cash, and a bitch"
and from the jacket that I read:
his jacket says four life with-outs for two victims
he says he was just along for the ride
a robbery in a Mexican restaurant.
he doesn't tell me the brains and skin splattered like salsa.
he shows me a polaroid of him: his son,
he says he loves his three-year-old son:
someone else's "stupid bastard"
another number on the way.

Sometimes rehabilitation at the prison seems to be far from "what works." Instead, correctional workers and prisoners are just playing the game, doing only what is required, and not developing as responsible and mindful humans.

fakin' the funk

the inmate slides his certificates
out the thin gap between the heavy steel door and wall
I grab them, scan through them:
anger management
AA/NA, life skills, street readiness
and put them in a manila envelope

"I'm enrolled in education," he says
"and anything else that's offered"
"I almost got my GED"
he hasn't got a write up in more than a year
"not since that little incident on the other yard"
he does it all
"I'm sorry for what I did," he says
[sorry you got caught, I think he thinks]
he knows the right words anyway
I say "you're doing good"
he knows he's on the clock
he knows I know he's on the clock
and I write his parole report and four others:
call the mothers, and fathers, if there is one
F1, a number, a few words entered
photocopy his certificates
paper clip them, turn them in

give the originals back to the inmate
act like I give a shit
rehabilitation?
there is no fucking rehabilitation here
he knows it
I know it
the warden knows it
the parole board knows it
I've seen them come and go and come back
some killed on the street
I know he cliqued up when he was twelve
smoked dope at thirteen
arrested, slapped on the wrist fifteen times
until the judge got serious
and the crimes got really serious
and the victims were probably in the dozens
the victims that we know about..
I listen to the tier, to the gang shit
he doesn't know that i know
he's not out of the mix
but he also doesn't know
it really doesn't matter to me
not much anymore

Working in a mental health unit can be a culture shock. In this maximum security prison, not much treatment occurs, aside from anti-psychotic and anti-depressant drugs at daily pill call (aka "the candy store"). Some prisoners pretend to swallow the drugs, then sell them. When mentally ill inmates discharge from prison, there is often nothing waiting for them except the cold streets.

treatment team

seated ten feet away in his orange jumpsuit
unshaven, with the eyes of an exhumed thirty-something
silver wrist restraints comfortably tie his arms to his back
and an escort to his left and right.
slowly staining soaking staining brown spots
oozing to the surface of his clothes with a psychedelic odor
as the mental health professional at our table smiles and says cheerfully
she says how ya doin'mr. kovacs?
airborne feces quicken, into
my burning, unaccustomed nostrils
"ok"
he replies in flat affect, eastern European accent,
with the eyes of a corpse, and the lips of the comic straight man
restrained by meds thank god, thank god
and then the psyche doctor says "thank you Mr. Kovacs"
as he scribbles on his chart
and the inmate stands up
and the big green men, in plastic gloves return him to his world of putrid baby
scents
shit freed down the bottom of his brown and orange jumpsuit onto the
hardened white tile floor

In the past, violent mentally ill inmates were given frontal lobotomies. Today, some are given forced medications, which act as chemical straightjackets. It's understandable for staff and administration to want the "meds," in order to keep peace in the mental health unit. As the prison psychiatrist told me, distributing these meds is like the used car salesman putting sawdust in car transmissions—to make a car run—just long enough to sell it to some dupe.

sawdust job

I told the doc that JJ seemed much better
after the "tuneup"
I could understand what he was saying
which was uncommon
for this black Frankenstein's monster
in yellow mental health unit jumpsuit
and Thorazine © stare
after a few words he usually mumbled
in his baritone voice
staring as his muscles tensed
and his breathing increased
yelling "BITCHMUTHAFUCKERASSHOLE"
a few times charging at the door
throwing his tray out the food slot
frightened on the yard years ago
JJ had to act crazy to get away from the fray
that's what the old guard told me
now he was crazy, no fakin' now
paranoid schizophrenic forced meds dead-end crazy
the doc said they did a "sawdust job" on him this time
you know what the tuneup was?

they filled him full of drugs, and stopped the order for the drug that stops the
licking

you see how his tongue juts out, the doc said?

in a year or two it'll be all the time

he won't be able to eat on his own

and he won't let anyone feed him

with the voices in his brain saying we are out to get him

they had done to a scary crazy broken black man

what used car salesmen

do with broken car transmissions

The justice system is unjust and unequal. If you are poor, you have the right to a public defender. In many cases, however, the defender is overworked and underpaid. Prisoners call them "public pretenders." Having seen what happens in court, looking through hundreds of records, and talking to prisoners, this is what I imagine it must be like.

in the event you cannot afford one

"and in the event you cannot afford one"

it seemed like a blur then

it's playing in slow motion, now

the gavel crashes at the end, then returns

"in the event you cannot afford one"

an endless loop of the same video, 15 wasted years

just a minute¹⁰ left now, he hopes

you know the right words now

but what could have been is lost

the words repel, now, vato

as you just know your homies laugh their asses off

from the streets of Vegas and LA

as the loop returns to play even with the TV on sometimes

the metro interrogation room, no window

"take the deal"

in super slow, the words sound deep

and stupid

you thought "you have the right to remain silent

you have the right to an attorney

in the event...in the event...

one will be appointed for you

you will be represented by a public defender"

keep quiet, maybe you'll slide again

don't snitch
you didn't think...you don't think..
the loop rolls on
represented by a tired young woman
just out of law school
not Perry fucking Mason
with 100 other files piled on her desk
all of your ignorance, laziness, greed, pride
your eighteen-year-old brownness
your foreign accent, your stutter
the clown, crying later
and you didn't realize until your homies
fucked you up the ass in court
in front of the jury
the straight-faced mostly White hang-man jury
you were done when you remained silent, and when you talked
and when you were born, and when...
and your homies laugh their asses off, you imagine
on probation, off probation, getting pussy
chillin', having cold cervezas
while you rot from a prison cell in Ely, Nevada
you learn the law from a state prison cell
as if it matters, to learn the law now
defending your sad 33-year-old ass
with a pathetic habeas¹¹, the best years gone
in a long slow-motion loop
a couple of hundred miles away from home
you might as well buy a lottery ticket, vato¹²
lucky you

.....

10 minute = 1 year

11 habeas = habeas corpus

12 vato = dude

Sometimes I feel like nothing more than a cog in the prison-industrial complex.

intake, in a maximum security prison

another mix in the mix:

a murderer, a problem child, more gang soldiers, a child molester

and so on and so on and so forth

that's why they're here off the prison bus today

that's what it says on the intake sheets:

on the paper invoices I've scribbled out:

more loads of flesh in the human-meat warehouse

four dozen inmates packaged in orange jumpsuits and chains

up the steps single file, escorted by an officer

four dozen noses on the hallway wall, for now

two whispering when the officers aren't looking

a long-haired giant grabbing at the handcuffs, that have been on for six hours

stripped in groups again: pubic hair, dick and balls, cracks and tats

no weapons...found

the usual convict factory, factory work

another rows of cans on the shelf

institutional files

property files

visiting files

medical files

tv's, hotpots, clock radios, cd players, fans

legal work, letters, squished little Debbie cakes

and other assorted materials of appeasement

cardboard boxes of property sorted and run through the scanner

ok, ok, ok , ok

a youngster, youth offender program failure, growing crooked

threatened, flooded, burned, threw urine and feces on an officer, it says,
on psychotropic medications, mental health class two
the officer tells him to put his back against the door
you are Mr. ? I ask
drug of choice? do you run with anyone? any enemies?
another computer entry, around the door to mental health
they ask him how he's doing, review his meds
a quiet black man in his forties, a convict, return customer
almost happy to be home
off the cold streets of Las Vegas, out of the wash, away from the youngsters in
prisonland, the other prison, caught stealing food there
I've seen his face before, I smile and ask him how he's doing
he caught the bitch this time, a 5-to-life, another robbery
he says he wants to work in the kitchen again
another entry
another out the door
a sureno soldier, loco gang member
a drive-by killer, so to speak
his papers say the bullet's ricochet killed a nine-year-old girl in the way
in front of her mother and father
another vato tatted up for the war college
he owes it to his clique to ride in the kar¹³ he killed from
you have a yard name, I ask?
a paisa who cannot speak English, a street pharmacist caught with an ounce of
meth
caught again in visiting at the other prison, his girlfriend brought it in, it says
I try to speak in broken Spanish
a norteno¹⁴ separated from the last two Latinos
a "medium failure" dark purple skin under his eyes

doing 2-5 for stealing CDs, the judge had seen him too many times
a violator who could not find work, said "fuck it," got caught with marijuana
done with the gangs he tells me
another pile of cord wood to be stacked
a White kid with a swastika on his upper arm, says he's not affiliated,
not yet, i think, until the Aryans¹⁵ work him over
two crips, older gangsters, both nonsmokers
can you live with the last guy in here?
or do I need to house you with someone else?
a staff compromiser, sweet-talking, love letter manipulator
got a nurse to bring him drugs, and a map
a rogue cop caught oppressing, just here for the night, put in a separate cell
a middle-age man who killed a gangster, first arrest, seems out of place
he says the gangster raped his daughter
central office says he stays here, so he stays here
another can of beans on the shelf
a day care worker who used three year old children, like toilet paper
and had the audacity to put it on video, made walk-alone
another one for neverland, protective custody
another load of shit to be shoveled
another five or ten more, i can't remember
the numbers swimming in my eyeballs
19 keepers in tonight
29 staying overnight, baby sat, with a shotgun
6 out tomorrow
more beds filled, no one killed today, a good day
separated, sorted, soon
milled in the convict factory
.....

13 kar=a small gang clique

14 Norteno/Norte 14=Spanish for "northern" or "from the north."

15 Aryans=white supremacist prison gang. In Nevada, the prominent Aryan gang was the Aryan Warriors.

Inmates have sex in prison, even if the State says it's a crime. Sex is often linked to power and exchange.

you couldn't call it rape

he likes young Latino men
not "faggots"
those are those he cells up with
this smart, red-haired, freckle-faced, square-jawed
forty-something, child molester-rapist-murderer
who thought there was no witness to deal with
this neverland, asshole of an inmate
who helps young Latino men on their cases
criminal and civil litigation, grievances
he gets them cakes and packs of cigarettes
and they live with him
he's never been caught, doing it in prison
you really couldn't call it rape, anyway
that's why he's still in protective custody
liking young Latino men

The ability for administration to use force is essential for prison safety and security. One worker told me that years ago blood and gun powder were common smells in one of the units, so some things have changed. Sometimes, though, I question how force is used. I believe force can sometimes give an inmate status. I believe it can also show that violence is a legitimate way to solve problems. Some staff members, particularly the old-school types, cannot understand this concept.

the martyr

the shooter calmly guides the red laser light on the inmate
a dozen rounds of dots smack staccato
after nods from the prison boss
shredding pieces of the inmate's coal black skin
burning pepper rounds, exposing dark pink flesh
constructing jeers, and memories, from nearby lockdown cells
the shooter coolly says "he failed to comply"
and away from the camera
the boss, the ex-marine, slyly smiles between his mustache and his bloated gut
and the inmate smiles too

Not all kids who come to "max" are lifers. Some however, seem to have few life choices and choose "life [in prison] on the installment plan."

youngster

he smiles as I approach his cell door

he thinks, I suppose, I'll cut him slack

though all I've ever given him, this five foot zero, rot¹⁶ framed teen

is time and more restrictions

I shake my head and look at recent incidents scribbled in my little notebook:

stuck his dick out the food slot at a female guard, three weeks ago encouraged by a lifer to do the deed,

he does not know I know he's making chomos¹⁷ in adjacent cells go crazy; he denies it

I smile back and shake my head at the baby dawg

his jacket says discarded by his crackhead mother,

left to an auntie, he said

then he took to the curb, where he stole from the weakest without much heat from the cops

he was proud of that

I only give him words today, and a promise,

and with another smile, I bare my teeth

maybe he confuses this with weakness

I promise him he'll pay

not a convict yet, he merely answers with "whatever, whatever"

and the next time I see the dead-end kid

exiled to his new house¹⁸ in the lower corner, under the stairway

I try to let him see he still has a chance like few on the tier

if he doesn't want to be a physicist or predator

he laughs out loud, and cries without a sound

so no one on the tier will know

he's not a lifer... yet

16 rot = rottweiler

17 chomos = pedophiles

18 house = inmate's cell

Prison workers are the dirty workers of the 21st century, feeding and escorting inmates instead of slaughtering animals or operating heavy equipment. Instead of the blistering heat of the mills, officers have to deal with threats and the chance of being assaulted, and having urine and feces propelled on them.

another day in the slaughterhouse

if they're killing each other
well, you still have it good, friend
yep,
it's still the easiest paycheck y'ever had
3 days off after tomorrow, get drunk
watch the playoffs all weekend
just don't get in the way when the drama happens
let the senior in the bubble know where you are
if, maybe, they can get a clean shot with the shotgun
call for backup
make sure you have fresh batteries for your radio
they don't pay you to be a hero, you know
just be careful picking up the blood
and for god's sake, wear rubber gloves

Prison life is not always a "total institution." Family members can see incarcerated family members in scheduled visits. But prison is far away, and many families just want to forget. It is believed inmates with more family support and visits are less likely to re-offend. The visiting room, however, is a common point of entry for drugs. Kissing a visitor is a common way for inmates to get to drugs in. Drugs are passed from mouth to mouth to rectum to mouth. Drugs have even been found with baby diapers.

pink dresses

young girls in pink dresses
underneath thrift shop winter jackets
young girls holding onto mother's hands
five hours in the car
five hours of desert outside the car door
young girls coming up the cold, snowy prison sidewalk
coming to see their daddy, for the first time this year
he says he loves them and he'll see them soon
he promises he'll write to them
not aware guards are watching
rudely staring at their parents' long kiss
young girls, not raising their heads high enough yet
to see the razor wire above them
on all sides

Sometimes inmates must be restrained for their own safety. Inmates may be restrained physically, or with forced anti-psychotic medications. In this world of physical isolation, hardness, and hopelessness I believe a few inmates want the interaction of physical force and "drama."

four-pointed

green suicide blanket

covers his head and body

and beneath

soft restraints holding him face down

as he quiets and sleeps

for a minute

incessant fists strike the plexi-glass windows down the hall

echoing anger attention seeking thrusts from around the corner

"FUCK YOU BITCH"

Thorazine stares

seem almost natural

almost normal here

“Joe” is based on a middle-aged prisoner who has spent most of his life, and all of his adult life in prison. In a bungled home invasion, he killed someone. He was imprisoned at the age of 19 and has a “life without” sentence. Although poses little threat to society, he (and the state budget) must pay the price until he dies.

“joe—close custody”

Joe stops mopping

He points to the slight swath of water, says

“the floor’s wet”

We exchange nods as I pass by him:

stillness, in prison blues

the quiet, middle-aged bespectacled

ex-Black Warrior

back number 23457

mopping, buffing, taking out the trash

for cents an hour, in perpetuity

Today, next week and next year

the football field length of floor will be a mirror

buffed by the same cat (as he calls himself), for pennies an hour

maybe

until the day he dies

twenty five years down

another caseworker tells me he’d let Joe

babysit his children

but there is no redemption here

only “justice”

This poem is based on a suicide that I will never forget—only a few months before I resigned. As a caseworker, I was involved in classifying a prisoner for evaluation and treatment in a mental health unit (at another prison)—it seemed obvious that he was in bad shape mentally—losing 40 pounds over a short period of time and saying he was "going home," despite his life sentence. The prisoner was quickly returned to general population at our facility despite my documentation. I asked several questions after the incident, believing that the mental health teams at the other prison did not do an adequate job of classifying and treating this prisoner. When we were briefed on the suicide, the associate warden made it seem the incident was of little significance.

the prison suicide

In June he told the nurses

"I'm going home."

Strange for a man doing life in prison

He only stared at us, though, when we asked him questions then forced him on medications and onto the bus for treatment

By July he returned to us

They called the diagnosis a mistake

They said the life had no symptoms there (aside from the voices) and here he returned to normal—General Population—where there are only predators and victims

And here the former predator took two shoe strings and tied them together then tied them to his bunk then to his neck and he leaned into home

And after he was bagged and tagged little was said, except he had been a predator— his crime and his nature was a one-sentence eulogy

About the Author

Dahn Shaulis is an adjunct professor at Burlington County College and Camden County College in New Jersey, and Delaware County Community College in Pennsylvania. Now from outside the "injustice system" he works on several progressives causes, including legislation to downsize prisons.