

PCAP NEWS

November 2016

The PCAP newsletter aims to keep incarcerated artists, writers, and performers informed of what the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is doing and how to be involved. If you know someone who would like to receive this newsletter, please have them write to us.

A Note from the Director

by **Ashley Lucas**

The last few months have included a few significant changes for us at PCAP, including a change in staffing. The wonderful Heather Martin left us to return to Youth Arts Alliance! (YAA!) as Director. YAA! provides creative arts workshops inside juvenile detention and residential treatment facilities in Southeast Michigan, and Heather founded that organization before coming to work with us. We are delighted to be able to continue to partner with Heather and with YAA!, where PCAP volunteers lead weekly arts workshops.

The best news I have to share with you is that we have hired a remarkable woman named Mary Heinen as PCAP's new Program Coordinator. Many of you may already know Mary because she is something of a PCAP legend. When Mary was incarcerated, she was known as Mary Glover and was the lead named Plaintiff in *Glover v. Johnson*—the landmark case which secured parity for women in Michigan prisons, past, present and future. Prior to this litigation, incarcerated women were paid less than incarcerated men when working the same jobs, and women could not earn college credit leading to a degree while doing time, even though men were able to earn Bachelor's and Associate's Degrees. *Glover v. Johnson* paved the way for the founding of PCAP because our founder Buzz Alexander and Mary started the first PCAP workshop—the Sisters Within Theatre Troupe, which remains active to this day—at Florence Crane Correctional in 1990 under Warden Carol Howes. Mary was in that first PCAP workshop for years before her release. Since her commutation, Mary earned a Master's of Social Work degree from the University of Michigan and was awarded a SOROS Justice Fellowship, which she used to focus on reentry initiatives. She worked for PCAP years ago as Coordinator of our Linkage Project and continued to volunteer at PCAP after she left that position. In her new role at PCAP Mary supervises the many volunteers (mostly university students) who facilitate our weekly workshops. She also organizes special events, mentors students, and continues to facilitate reentry workshops. Though she has long been a part of the PCAP family, we are proud and grateful to have her as part of our staff once again.



Mary Heinen

Elaine Chen has joined the PCAP staff for this school year as Exhibit Coordinator, a temporary position. El, as she is affectionately known, first appeared in our lives by coming to the *Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners*. She started talking to me in the gallery, asking all sorts of enthusiastic questions about where all of this remarkable art had been made and how we had come to host a prison art show. She joined PCAP officially the next Fall by taking one of my classes and facilitating a theatre workshop at Women's Huron Valley. Since then, she has also facilitated theatre and vocal music workshops at Gus Harrison, a reentry workshop in Detroit, and a creative writing workshop at a youth facility in Washtenaw County. She is currently one of the facilitators of the Sisters Within workshop at Women's Huron Valley. She has also volunteered with the art show and at all sorts of other PCAP events. We have many enthusiastic and dedicated students, and even among that group, El stands out as someone who gives her whole heart to volunteering at PCAP. We are grateful to have her working with us in an official capacity as she finishes her senior year.

The rest of our news is more in keeping with our regular annual activities. Art selection trips are well underway and will be finished before the start of the new year. The art we've seen thus far has been fantastic, and we can't wait to see the art in the facilities we have not yet visited!

Selections for the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing* have been received, and co-editors Phil Christman and Hannah Webster along with a great many volunteers are reading through all of the submissions. Everyone who sent in writing for our review will receive feedback early in 2017.

A Note from the Director cont.

PCAP volunteers are currently facilitating weekly workshops at Cooper St., Cotton, Gus Harrison, Thumb, Women's Huron Valley, FCI Milan, several youth treatment and detention facilities, Catholic Social Services (reentry center) in Ann Arbor, and middle schools in Ypsilanti and Southfield. Next semester we also plan to be at Woodland Correctional Center and the Forensic Psychiatric Center. New workshops will start in January.

The last thing I would like to share with you in this newsletter is that with the holidays approaching, all incarcerated people and their loved ones are in my thoughts and heart. This festive and celebratory time of year weighs particularly heavy on those who do not have their freedom and the many people who care about a person in prison. Please know that you and your families

Linkage Project

Would you like to stay connected with PCAP after you come home? The Linkage Project offers workshops, cultural field trips, connections to PCAP's campus community, and the opportunity to build a network with other artists, writers, and performers. If you would like to participate, please write to Vanessa Mayesky when you have a release date.



Linkage Project members try virtual reality at ArtPrize 2016

Exhibition News

We are excited to announce that PCAP has been awarded \$19,800 from the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA) for the *22nd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners*. The award will support a new curatorial process, artist speaker fees, publicity materials, and an upgrade of exhibition design and installation. The MCACA funding will cover about half of the total cost of the exhibition. PCAP will ask donors to support the other half through a fundraising letter, the art auction, and an online request.

PCAP's traveling exhibit, prints from the first 20 years of the *Annual Exhibition*, is in high demand. The exhibit was assembled in 2014 for a conference at Rutgers University. Since then it has traveled to Central Michigan University, Silver Maples Retirement Neighborhood (Chelsea), the Immaculate Heart of Mary Motherhouse (Milan), and Recovery Park (Detroit). The exhibit is scheduled to display at the Ella Sharp Museum (Jackson) and Wayne State University in 2017.



Focus on Creative Writing

We asked three editors of the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing* who are enrolled in the Zell Writing Program at University of Michigan to share their thoughts and advice on creative writing.

Finding Your Subject

by **Joshua Berg**

Richard Hugo was a Northwest poet who wrote about small towns that had seen better days. A well-loved teacher, he collected his lectures on the art of writing in a book called *The Triggering Town*. One of the claims in the book is that “you owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything.” For example, let’s say you sit down to write a poem about the sunset you witnessed on December 31, 1999. The last one of the 20th century. You soon run out of things to say about the bridge you saw it from and the meaning of the new millennium. But you were with a great friend that day who you’ve since lost contact with. It’s these feelings that you owe allegiance to, even if they weren’t your original subject.

To Hugo, a good poem has two subjects: the subject that triggers the poem and the real subject discovered while writing it. In *The Triggering Town* Hugo gives the example of an imaginary poet who writes a poem called “Autumn Rain.” After a few good lines, this poet can’t think of anything else to say, he is stuck, so he starts giving us the meaning of the poem, maybe a metaphor involving the shorter days of the season. But what if autumn rain isn’t the subject of the poem after all, just the idea that got him started, the “triggering subject” for what he really wants to say? What if it’s really a poem that wants to drift into baseball or the election or piano lessons or learning to cook with grandma?

As poets, allowing ourselves not to know what the real subject is before we begin writing the first draft gives us the freedom to discover what we really want to say. This permission to leave behind the genesis of our work and allow our imagination to find that true and real subject can create surprising results. Hugo calls it “writing off the subject.” Give it a try: Here’s a poem by Hugo and a prompt by poet Ed Harkness, a student of Hugo’s at the University of Montana back in the days when you could smoke around the workshop table:

In *The Triggering Town* Richard Hugo suggests we “Try this for an exercise: take someone you emotionally trust, a friend or a lover, to a town you like the looks of but know little about, and show your companion around the town in the poem.” Read Hugo’s poem below and then write your own.

Use the name of a real town in your poem’s title, an unfamiliar town might make it easier to let the imagination roam. Knowing too much, Hugo says, can be a limiting thing. Never let facts get in the way of the imagination. Hugo advises that if the town’s one stoplight works fine but you want it broken in the poem, let it be broken.

Try writing in the present tense and including details that make your town unlike any other. Remember to let yourself “write off the subject.” If the poem pulls you in a certain direction, follow that. If you want to say something strange, do. Let others worry about whether or not what you say makes sense. Let your town be a trigger for the imagination.

Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg

by Richard Hugo

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,
a dance floor built on springs--
all memory resolves itself in gaze,
in panoramic green you know the cattle eat
or two stacks high above the town,
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse

for fifty years that won't fall finally down.
Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?
Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Philipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
when the jail was built, still laughs
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
The car that brought you here still runs.
The money you buy lunch with,
no matter where it's mined, is silver
and the girl who serves your food
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

Using Scene: Some Pointers on Prose

by William Klein

Think about the last time someone told you about a dream they had. "I was visiting an aquarium, and I saw my father but it wasn't my father," they might have said. If all they wanted to tell you was what happened in the dream, then this description is fine. In creative writing we call this kind of description narration: description that covers events in summary, but does not engage senses, dialogue, or action.

However, what if that person wanted to tell you how their dream felt, not just what happened?

"I was wandering around the aquarium," they might say. "It smelled like brine, and it was dim.

"Are you lost?" a guide asked me.

"No, I'm waiting for my father," I said. I knew he was in one of the tanks, but I couldn't find which one. I put my hands and face on the glass, which felt cool. Then, water started pouring through the ceiling, soaking my clothes, splashing all over the floor. A dolphin swam up to the glass, bonking it with his snout, the sounds subdued underwater. The dolphin was my father, he was trying to show me how to swim, but as the water passed my mouth, I knew I wouldn't learn in time."

This gives us a much clearer picture of how this dream felt, as well as what happened. Notice how much more engaging, exciting, and downright weird it is than the standard narration. This is what we call full scene: description that engages the senses, uses dialogue, and avoids summary.

You'll notice something about full scene, though—it takes up a lot more space than narration. If you go on with full scene after full scene and none of the information seems all that important, the audience starts to get bored. That's why only essential information should be rendered in full scene—to save page length, and keep your readers.

There's a bridge between the two, what we call half scene. Half scene is a mix between narration and full scene, like sprinkling in sensory details to keep things interesting, without slowing down the pace too much. Here's an example:

"In my dream, I went to the aquarium to meet my father.

"Are you lost?" a guide asked me. I told her that I wasn't, and that I was looking for my father. Then, water started to pour in from the ceiling, and a dolphin swam up. I knew it was my father, even though it wasn't him."

These three modes of storytelling: narration, half scene, and full scene, can be used in fiction or narrative essays alike. Knowing when to use each helps keep readers interested, and can get your work published. When I read prose submissions for the PCAP literary journal, I often wish writers would use more scene and half-scene, since they make for engaging reading, although I sometimes wish a writer would use narration to summarize bits of their story that are necessary but not interesting.

The important thing is, don't just write a story the way you talk. Try to consider which form of description is most important, and use that to draw out the best parts of your story. I know PCAP submitters work hard on their stories—going to all the trouble to pick a good idea and often writing it out by hand—use these three modes of storytelling to get the most of your work.

The Red Sweater

by **Francis Santana**

At some point in life everyone wears a red sweater. Nothing special. This is one of those things that everyone does, like opening a door or overpaying for brand name products. But what happens when something that is commonplace carries significant meaning to an individual who decides to write about it? Consider the following lines:

The red sweater fits me like a glove.
Is what everyone and their mother is wearing
at school, but my mother bought me this one
with her sweat and tears.

The first thing we notice is that anybody at that school can claim ownership of these lines. There is nothing unique about what the writer is telling us, we can assume that every mother works hard to provide for their children and that possibly this generic sweater is a good fit for most people. There is not much said to catch our interest. The clichés, lack of details, and absence of individuality keep the reader too far removed from the writer's experience. In contrast, here are a few lines from a poem by Joseph O. Legaspi:

The Red Sweater

slides down into my body, soft
lambs wool, what everybody
in school is wearing, and for me
to have it my mother worked twenty
hours at the fast-food joint...

With his depth of detail and specificity Legaspi is able to make his red sweater unlike any other red sweater. We can feel the wool sliding down our bodies, and through a small window we get to see how hard his mother has to actually work to buy him a single piece of clothing. These two approaches illustrate the difference between how clichés and general claims can dilute our writing and our personal experiences by confining our ideas to the realm of the unmemorable; and how the simple task of personalizing what we want to say with what is unique to us elevates our work over the slush pile. But how can we tell if our work is generic and/or full of clichés? There are a few questions we can keep in mind:

If my statements/lines are claimed by anybody else, do they still hold true?

Everyone can claim to have opened a door, metaphorical or otherwise, but the details of opening such doors vary from person to person. Some people might run into locked doors that need to be forced open, into brass doorknobs that are warm to touch like a lover's elbow, into doors the color of forgetfulness, into doors of opportunity that instead lead into solitary confinement. Details like this are what populate a good piece of writing. Saying that we have opened a door does not suffice, we need to share the motivation, the setting, the relevance of what we are conveying.

Has anyone heard this before?

There is an extensive catalog of phrases loaded with meaning; "blood is thicker than water," "force of nature," and "tip of the iceberg" are some that quickly come to mind. At some point those phrases were unique and imaginative but they have now and for a long time been dismissed as first degree clichés. But these clichés are still around and for a lot of us there's nothing easier than to cut and paste what we believe to be universal truths to relay our ideas, truths that have been confirmed through a crowdsourcing of sorts. But the only truths clichés can confirm as a whole is the absence of originality/individuality and an overabundance of laziness from part of the writer. Why explore our thoughts in a whole page when we can explain ourselves in a handful of phrases? For starters, our audience is not interested in word economy, nor in reading something that has been said the same way so many times before. Our audience is interested in what only we can feed them. They salivate about what they cannot taste anywhere else but in what we have the ability to serve them.

Why am I writing this?

I think this is the most important question we can ask ourselves. Our motivation is what guides the choices we make in our writing. If we just want to let people know that we own a red sweater, then the first poem in this page, although boring and generic, might prove enough for our intentions. We just have to be aware that not many people will be interested in what we have to say. But if our motivation is a necessity to understand our mother's labor, and our urgency to explore our relationship with her then we might find it vital to dwell only on the details of our own mother, dismissing all generalizations and clichés in a process that will be messy, and probably won't lead into a single epiphany. In other words, in good writing the sweater might always be red but it never fits all.

Calendar

November—December, 2016

Art selection for 22nd Annual Exhibition

Weekly creative arts workshops

Assembling a creative portfolio workshop
(December 17, Ann Arbor)

January—February, 2017

Final selection for 22nd Annual Exhibition

Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing
notification letters

Weekly creative arts workshops

Art auction

March — May, 2017

22nd Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners
(March 22-April 5, Ann Arbor)

Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing readings
(March, Ann Arbor; May, Detroit)

Weekly creative arts workshops

Award Winners and Selected Work exhibit
(May, Detroit)

Linkage Project workshop day
(May, Detroit)

About PCAP

Mission Statement

The Prison Creative Arts Project brings those impacted by the justice system and the University of Michigan community into artistic collaboration for mutual learning and growth.

Contact Us

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