

# 17 NORTH



a restorative narrative based on the trial transcript and oral history  
of Glenn Cox, recounting his 17-year incarceration in Attica,  
Orleans, Otisville and Hudson Correction Facilities.  
Dramatized by Glenn Cox & E. Merwin.

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## 17 NORTH

*a drama of resistance & rebirth*

In 1992 the struggle of Glenn Cox began. City worker, counselor, lifeguard, he was attacked in his home by an assailant with two weapons. Having no criminal record and confident of his innocence, Cox went to trial and was speedily convicted of murder and sentenced to life. After four years in the prison law library at Attica, Cox appealed, and five New York State appellate judges ruled he had been wrongfully convicted—yet he remained in prison for 17 years.

It was upstate that Cox reclaimed his autonomy and livelihood as an artist. And as this play affirms, it was through the creative spirit that he survived his years of incarceration—singing, reading, painting and caring for his kids “in there and out here.” In these times of isolation and fear, we have much to learn from his experience and from his character O.T. who believes it is again “time to let the spirit lead.”

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17 NORTH

**SETTING:**

Subway platform NYC March 2020 in the early days of the pandemic—when fewer and fewer people are commuting and only a few diehard singers and musicians show up to perform—until one day a singer and guitarist find themselves on an empty train platform. Stage right is a subway bench and on it a sketch book and pencil. Stage left is a folding stool beside an overstuffed backpack, and behind the platform is the grimy, white tiled wall of the station

**CHARACTERS:**

**O.T.** subway singer whose dreads have thinned since he began growing them as an act of resistance when he was wrongfully imprisoned in Attica in 1992. This play recounts his 17-year incarceration in Attica, Orleans, Otisville and Hudson Correctional Facilities. Since his release, he has supported himself with various jobs, in recent years as a subway singer. With the onset of the lockdown, that livelihood is about to end.

**AVI** homeless street musician who like O.T. is lingering on the subway platform just as NYC prepares to lockdown; early 20s, waifish in appearance, AVI's role can be played by any gender.

**SHADOWMEN** chorus of 3 shadows appear on the tiled wall of the station, at times leaning on a subway column, checking their watch or iPhone, looking down the tracks. As O.T. tells his story, the SHADOWMEN take on the various roles of inmates, officers and

civilians and engage with him in dialogue.

**GHOSTS OF HUDSON** appear as shadows on the tiled wall of the station. These are former inmates, girls and young women, incarcerated at the Hudson Correctional Facility from 1890s to 1970s; their silhouettes outline boxy dresses as were once worn by female inmates.

**Historical Note:** Before Hudson Correctional Facility became a medium security men’s prison, it had a long and violent history of incarcerating and abusing women and girls. In 17 North, Glenn Cox recounts his life in four facilities, ending with Hudson whose history he learned from officers and civilian workers. He discovered evidence verifying these stories while working in the basement he and another inmate found and read the logbooks documenting their abuse.

According to investigative journalist Nina Bernstein, “The institution of Hudson near Albany, had opened in 1887 as The House of Refuge for Women... discipline meant solitary confinement on bread and water, shackles and beatings.” (Bernstein, 1996) From the accounts of many of the Hudson staff whose families had lived and worked at the facility for generations, Glenn Cox learned of the routine rapes that resulted in abortions and the death of the girls who were buried on the grounds. As documented by Bernstein, a former resident of Hudson Training School for Girls had reported stumbling over the cemetery when she attempted to escape: “there were weathered markers, and no epitaphs, only girls’ names fading from bare limestone. Lizzie French. Nellie McGovern. Anna Schabesberger. Julia Coon. Mary O’Brien. Jennie Fuller. Barbara Decker. `Annie Whitley. Helen Peer.” (Bernstein, 2001)

The play also refers to the Attica riot of 1971, based on sources listed in Bibliography.

At Rise: Seated on a stool beside a bulging backpack, stuffed with all the portable property of a person living on the street, sits AVI with her guitar case open at her feet. She tunes her instrument then takes a cellphone from the bib of her overalls. She opens YouTube on her phone and clicks on a video of a guitarist playing *Winter* of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. She then props up the phone on her backpack so she can view the video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZuD5n9WO7o>

(*Sabuncuoglu, 2015*)

This video appears on the tiled wall of the station. Avi listens and studies the screen of her phone, depending on the actor's musical ability—she either practices the fingering of the piece along with the video or listens and sways to its rhythm. Enter O.T. who drops a five-dollar bill into the open guitar case.

O.T: That's beautiful. Man, I love it. Used to listen to classical every night upstate in Hudson.

AVI: You from upstate?

O.T: From? No. I'm from New Rochelle. Lived upstate though, seventeen years. How about you? Where you from?

(AVI pauses the video, puts aside guitar, stands and stretches.)



AVI: Around.

O.T: You seem kind a young to be out here on your own. Where's your family?

AVI: Don't matter.

O.T: (nods toward the open case) How'd you do today?

(AVI folds the bills and places them in the pocket of her overalls.)

AVI: So far? Including your five? Seven dollars.

(Picks up coins from the case and displays them on her open palm.)

And thirty-six cents.

(They exchange a glance and laugh.)

O.T: Yeah, well how about with that five, we made sixteen dollars today? Sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents?

(They laugh again.)

O.T: How'm I going to pay my rent with sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents? By the time I get back, Miss Lorna's gonna be standing at my door with her hands all out, toe tapping. Already owe her for last week. And what am I gonna give her? Sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents?

AVI: What do you rent like a room?

O.T: A hundred eighty-five a week for a room the size of a cell, no kitchen and a rusty pipe for a shower that I gotta get up and use at four in the morning so I don't have to knock out some *jabroni* comes banging on the door. Throw in another twenty for a/c might as well be eight hundred for the honor of having a roof over my head.

AVI: Yeah, New York rent. Tell me about it. I had a place up until like a month ago.

O.T: Used to be, you could live on what you made down here. Man, please, on a good day? We'd break down on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and head home eighty, ninety dollars a man. For two hours work? For singing?

AVI: I know you. From the B train. You and three other guys were singing some Coney Island song.

(O.T. bows with a flourish)

O.T: That be us. *Under the Boardwalk* as first sung by the Drifters 1964.

AVI: Sounded real good.

O.T: And real good money while it lasted.

AVI: So, you think it's not going to go back to being the same?

O.T: Trust me. Nothing goes back to being the same.

(Sound of train approaching and then on the tiled wall the image of train pulling into the station. Doors open, doors close, no one exits. The sound of train doors closing and departing the station.)

AVI: Whoah, that's spooky. I've never seen that before. Nobody.

O.T: Whatever New York City was? That's done, that's over. It's a wrap. And so say the powers that be.

AVI: You really think so? I'm Avi by the way.

(AVI extends his hand which O.T. shakes.)

O.T: Down here they call me O.T.

AVI: What's that, like your initials?

O.T: Yeah, you could say that.

AVI: So how long you been singing down here?

O.T: Eight years. Eight years ago last Christmas eve. I was on my way, grudgingly, to my job in Chinatown--only job I could get at the time at a McDonald's where I was working my ass off for \$225 a week. Shit. Sixty years old and I'm hauling sixty-pound bags of trash out of a subbasement, twenty, thirty bags a night—and that's after eight, ten hours of mopping and scrubbing that joint.

AVI: I don't mean to be rude, but couldn't you get something better? I mean you just seem so... I don't know, experienced.

O.T: Let's just say I've had to deal with some restrictions. Which was why on that night, on that particular R train, I seized my chance. I was about to get off at Canal Street when four guys come through singing *Silent Night*, as sung by the Temps. You have heard of the Temptations?

AVI: Yeah, sure. I'm into old school.

O.T: Old school. Yeah, you right, old school. So, naturally, I join in with my old school baritone. Now these brothers are professionals. They're down here to make a living, not have some jive ass turkey mess up their money. But I know where to come in and how not to step on another man's note—and we sound good. In fact, passengers start applauding like I'm part of the act, and they're reaching into their pockets and purses and peeling bills out of their wallets. That's when the lead singer comes up to me and gives me his card. And I been down here ever since. And you? What brought you down to this underworld?

AVI: At first to practice because my place was so small. Pretty much a bed behind a long blue drape. I was renting it from this dude who was already like a germ freak. Then forget it. Once this virus thing hit, he was pulling back my curtain, spraying bleach and running his little Shark Mopvac like on the hour. And then he's got the balls to complain when I put on my music and start practicing.

O.T: Man, a guy like that? Just needs someone to put it to him, straighten his ass out.

AVI: I'm kind of nonconfrontational, so I came down here. And in like five minutes? A guy in a suit drops a ten-dollar bill. I'm sort of shocked. But I keep practicing and the money keeps dropping. Didn't know if they liked what I was playing, or they just felt sorry for me. Either way was okay with me. So then when Mr. Clean told me I had to go because he hooked up with some younger dude who was getting thrown out of his spot, well, I've been down here by day and riding the trains most nights.

O.T: Might be time to think about another hustle.

AVI: I don't know. Guess I'll go back to waiting tables.

O.T: The way this ship is sailing, looks to me like we're headed for

a perfect storm, and whatever you did is going down with the ship. The way they've got this thing rigged, this whole city's gonna be on locked down, release date unknown.

AVI : (shrugs) Hey, maybe I'll join a circus. If they're not all dead.

O.T: Did plenty of circus acts in my time. Got shot out of cannons, slept on nails, swallowed razor blades. Damn. Put my head more than once into a lion's mouth.

AVI: Seriously?

O.T: Nah, not a circus. At least not the kind with a tent. But I am resourceful. And wherever I am, in whatever condition, I thrive. Upstate I did welding, plumbing, metalwork, blueprints, even milked cows in Orleans. But any real money I made in prison was from my artwork.

AVI: Prison?

O.T: I wasn't staying at a Sheraton for no seventeen years.

AVI: (Stammering, suddenly self-conscious.) Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to...

O.T: You didn't offend me. I'm not ashamed of my life, my life's an open book. It's all on the record. Sent me up to Attica with a life bid. Took me four years in the law library to get that shit reversed.

AVI: I can't imagine being locked up for a day. I'm sorry.

O.T: What are you sorry for? You weren't on that jury. Every one of them was a cop, c.o. or a parole officer. You a cop, c.o. or a parole officer?

AVI: No.

O.T: Alright then. Those were the only kind a jurors got picked that day. Jury foreman was a superintendent of parole. Couple of correction officers, policemen. I'm sitting there at the *voir dire*, watching how this thing is playing out.

AVI: For deer?

O.T: *Voir dire*. That's when they pick the jury. It means speak the truth.

AVI: Never heard of that.

O.T: Well, neither had I. No arrests, no record, only had this naïve belief that if I went to trial and spoke the truth, that nightmare would be over. And for fifteen months on Rikers Island, I held tight to that illusion. Until now I'm sitting there watching this jury get picked, and this white guy on his way out taps me on the shoulder. Never forget him. He was wearing a leather jacket, nice leather with an American flag across the front. He leans down toward me and says, "Hey, man, good luck. You're gonna need it." (Pause as O.T. inhales and nods.) That's when I knew. That jury was handpicked to send me upstate. Prosecutor, judge, and not least of all my get-what-you-pay-for-attorney, nothing for nothing--knew they were gonna get my ass upstate before I walked into that courtroom. Man. I was railroaded.

AVI: What's railroaded?

O.T: Like you're on one of these trains, and it passes your station, and you can't get off. Then it speeds up and you still can't get off. And you got no control where that mother fucker is driving that train. That's railroaded. And you don't have to believe me because five New York State appellate judges unanimously agreed that defending myself against a man who kicked in my door and attacked me with two weapons was not murder.

AVI: So, then they had to let you out.

O.T: It's a lot of theater. A lot of game to make you feel you got a chance. Then I got railroaded a second time.

AVI: They can do that?

O.T: They did do that. Thought I was about to put it behind me. Everybody thought I was going home, inmates, c.o.s, civilians. Gave my shit away—T.V., radio, headphones, nice set of headphones. No one thought I'd be back. Came down to the Tombs for resentencing, then come to find out the judge whose decision got reversed is going to do the resentencing. These mother fuckers are railroading me again.

AVI: Same judge?

O.T: Same judge. Back down to Rikers to wait three months for her to get her ass back from Russia. Same judge who hit me with a life bid, furious to see me back. Same judge staring down from the bench, asking do I see the tree outside the window. There was no tree. I just stood there, stayed shut. "Well, by the time you get out, Mr. Cox, there will be. You'll be an old man by then." Eight and a quarter to twenty-five. Had to call my father, tell him a second time, Pop, I'm not coming home. Man, caused a lot of people a lot of pain.

AVI: So how many years were you...uh?

O.T: Locked up? Seventeen.

AVI: Seventeen years ago I was like five.

O.T: Seventeen years behind a lie. It was crazy, man. Officers were

shocked to see me back at Attica. They even showed me the paperwork that said I was supposed to be released from court. Ain't that a bitch? Officers in Attica showing me my own paperwork that I was supposed to be released from court. Asking me what I'm doing back here, like I'd come back to this hellhole of my own free will.

AVI: Couldn't you fight it?

O.T: I did fight. Appealed twice. Kept going before the parole board every two years. Nothing mattered. Even got a citation from the warden for saving a civilian's life during a riot in the mess hall. Didn't matter. Got to the point I didn't even open the envelope.

AVI: What's it like?

O.T: What's what like?

AVI: Being there. You know, there.

O.T: (momentarily caught off guard) Prison? Like no place you been and no place you want to be. Why?

AVI: It's just that someone I know, someone I'm, you know, related to is... there. And I guess I've wondered, since I was like a kid, what it's like.

O.T: And where upstate is this... relation?

AVI: I don't know. One time when I was like really small my mom was taking me somewhere to see him. It was late and it was snowing hard when we got to where we were supposed to get on a bus. But we didn't go.

O.T: That's the way it is. You get on a bus seven, eight o'clock the night before, get to Attica maybe eight, nine the next morning. Plenty of visits got shutdown because it snowed so hard, not even those plows could get through.



AVI: Yeah, well, I was pretty young, and eventually I just stopped asking.

O.T: And what's this person to you?

AVI: Actually, nothing. I mean, I never even met him. I guess my father, but I already had a dad. A stepdad. And so yeah, to me? Nothing. But since it came up, I was just sort of wondering again.

O.T: There's no one place that's prison. You've got your maxes, your mediums. They're all plantations, but just like out here—you move around—even borough to borough. Bronx isn't Brooklyn and Brooklyn's not the Bronx. And life in any of 'em depends on the person living it.

(As O.T. moves toward the bench, the lights dim and the platform takes on an otherworldly look.)

AVI: Then what's Attica like?

O.T: You want to see Attica? Go ahead. Google it. Attica State Prison.

(AVI googles on her phone and the image that she is looking at appears on the tile wall—it is the exterior of Attica State Prison at night: the wall, the guard tower and a tree.)



<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/nyregion/attica-prison-infamous-for-bloodshed-faces-a-reckoning-as-guards-go-on-trial.html> (*Robbins, 2015*)

That's it. That's the guard tower. That's the wall. Thirty foot high. And that tree? Never seen that. Ask anybody who been there. When the van pulls away from Attica, you don't look back.

(Another shadow train pulls into the station. When it departs, three Shadowmen appear on the wall. Like commuters they check their iPhones, stare down the tracks.)

AVI: Yeah. but was it like being there?

O.T: Wasn't at Attica at first. After I blew trial, I got sent to Fishkill, another plantation to get processed. And when I got there after fifteen months on Rikers, I was clean, gained my weight back. I got my face back, my body back, everything. Like I was lifeguarding. But now we blow trial, we get transferred to Fishkill and that's where you get you the shots.

AVI: Like a vaccine?

O.T: Exactly, only it's a jet gun like in the military, and it's loaded with all these concoctions so when you go into these other facilities you don't get nothing, you don't give nothing. Now after two, three days, I'm losing mad weight. I'm racing, breathing hard. What? I'm

an athlete, what the hell's going on here? Now they got me in observation, and I mean I was out, I was out... of... it. I'm so out of it that they had to bring me, honest to God, a wheelchair to get a shower cause the hot water makes me lose my breath, weakens me.

AVI: So, what was in the shots?

O.T: That's what I'm asking myself. Never was sick like this in my life, dropped forty pounds quick. What was that y'all put in me? Now I been in the hospital a couple a weeks and this doctor, salt and pepper hair, old nice guy, comes into my room.

SHADOWMAN 1: Mr. Cox?

O.T: Yo, doc, what's going on with me? I can't hardly stand up.

SHADOWMAN 1: Well, your tests have come back, Mr. Cox. And you have Graves' disease.

O.T: Graves' disease. Am I dying?

SHADOWMAN 1: No, Mr. Cox. You're not going to die. It's treatable.

O.T: Damn.

(There is a pause as the heads of the three SHADOWMEN tilt, conveying confusion.)

SHADOWMAN 1: Mr. Cox. I'd have thought the fact that your illness is treatable would be good news.

O.T: Good news? Only good news would be I'm getting up out of here. (to AVI) Go to prison behind a lie. And they might keep me the rest of my life, might never see my kids again. For defending myself? This world ain't for me, and I'd just as soon be up out of it.

AVI: How long were you there?

O.T: In the hospital? After the radiation, maybe another month or two.

AVI: Radiation?

O.T: Yeah, they took me outside to a specialist. Dude comes in the room carrying a box, metal box. Had on suede gloves, and he's holding a clamp, long metal clamp. I say, man, you look like you're going to do welding or some shit. All you need's the helmet.

SHADOWMAN 2: (Glances up from iPhone and laughs.) No, Mr. Cox, this is for you.

O.T: For me? (to AVI) So he opens up this box and with the clamps, he pulls out a jar, glass jar. And in it's this green and white pill, about this big and this narrow. Like the size of something you'd give a horse.

O.T: (to Shadowman 2) What is it?

SHADOWMAN 2: Radiation.

O.T: (to Shadowman 2) Radiation? Listen. I'm not the sharpest knife in the cabinet, but I'm not that dull to where I don't understand that radiation don't belong in humans. (laughs) Unless you wanna turn into the Hulk.

SHADOWMAN 2: (iaughs then turns attention back to iPhone) We want you to take it.

AVI: As in swallow it?

O.T: I know, crazy right? Now I'm a stranger in a strange land. Like I'm on another planet. And I don't have no say-so cause if I wanna

stay alive, I gotta believe in these demons, okay? And the reason why I believe in these demons that can't even cure a common cold is because I know they want to keep me alive to do that bid. So they ain't gonna kill me. And if they try, they gonna say wait a minute, we want to see that cat suffer. Bring him back. (laughs) Whatever you gotta do, heal him!

AVI: So you took it?

O.T: (approaching the bench.) And soon as I did, I started to feel this heat all through me. I'm racing now, and my head is throbbing.

SHADOWMAN 2: You'd better sit down, Mr. Cox.

(O.T. sits on the subway bench and appears disturbed and in pain.)

What you are now experiencing, Mr. Cox, is called a thyroid storm. You may be experiencing this for several weeks.

O.T: (to AVI) All my senses are awakening, and my brain feels like it's swelling.

(AVI approaches O.T. and tenderly places her hand on his shoulder.)

AVI: Are you okay?

SHADOWMAN 2: Keep this patient under observation.

O.T: Yeah, man, it was crazy.

AVI: You shouldn't have taken it. Weren't you afraid?

O.T: In there, you take it. You're their property, and they just do what they do. They say here's your blood pressure medication. And

you say, I don't need no medication. Last time I looked my blood pressure's perfect. And you don't take the pill? You might be in the box until you do. Now you're on that shit for life. But it's profitable. And that's what prison's really about. Profit. And you're just a means to the money. So when you say was I afraid? Yeah, I was afraid when I got to Attica, heard all this wailing and screaming like a psychiatric ward. And this is my first time in prison. Man, they're doing my intake and I put my head down and I cried. (pause) My whole life. Whatever pain I had, I held it down. (pause) But yeah, when I got to Attica, I cried. Officer processing me kept his eyes down and stepped outside to give me a minute.

(Pause while AVI sits beside him on the bench and takes his hands in two of hers.)

Yeah. So, was I afraid? I was afraid when I hit Rikers Island. Until I got used to it. Said to myself I can't show my fear. And I didn't show my fear. In there you can be it, but you can't show it.

AVI: What happened after the hospital?

O.T: They take me back to C block, and they say this man ain't gonna be able to work for a while. Keep him in his cell and monitor him. So now, they're giving me a medication, this steroid, and it was putting fluid in my head. And if I didn't take it within a certain time, the fluid would go out of my brain, and it would hurt like holy hell... It was something like somebody twisting and squeezing the fluid out of my brain like it was a wet rag. Used to be in my cell under my pillow over my mouth, screaming and crying so nobody would hear me and think I couldn't handle the bid.

AVI: How long before you got well?

O.T: As in feeling no pain? To this day I still race, get headaches. My vision goes in and out. But a couple weeks go by and I'm back

in the yard, working out. At first I'm skinny. But once they give me that medication, two weeks after? That shit blew me up.

SHADOW MAN 1: Yo, check out, O.T.

SHADOW MAN 2: He came in here skinny, man. How'd he blow up so fast?

SHADOWMAN 3: Yo, Frankenstein, go get the weights ready for us.

O.T: (laughs to AVI) Came in, I was the understudy. Now I'm bigger than all of 'em. (to SHADOWMEN) I got you. See y'all in the yard.

AVI: (nodding toward SHADOWMEN) So, they're your friends?

O.T: Just like out here, you pull people to you. Every facility I went to. Closer to me than my own family out here.

AVI: So how many people are in... like share... your area?

O.T: A cell? In the mediums you've got dorms, maybe ninety men in a dorm. But in a max you're in your own cell. Some of them have bars and some doors. C block has doors. Now the door's the thing—you got some privacy. You can do what you gotta do. Sometimes you move in a cell and you see the knife sharpening grooves on the floor. People was in there before you, sharpening their knives, getting ready for battle. Yeah. And in D block, you go into the yard, you can see the shotgun shell holes in the wall from when they had the riot back in the 70s. Prisoners and officers died in that yard. We used to play ball there. I used to sit there and play chess in that yard. I used to go and hit the heavy bag. In the wintertime, by myself. Snow this deep and I'm trudging across the yard with that thing on my shoulder. And that's the same ground that all that blood went into. (pause) Go ahead, go on and google that too. Attica riot. See

for yourself I'm not making this shit up. That's history. Same history they want you sleepwalkers to forget.

(AVI types in Attica Riot on her iPhone, this b&W image appears from a NY Post article from which Shadowman 3 reads aloud.)

<https://nypost.com/2016/08/20/the-true-story-of-the-attica-prison-riot/>



SHADOWMAN 3: (reads the article on the wall) “Police herd the subdued inmates into a yard before stripping and searching them after a prison riot at the Attica State Prison.”

O.T: Yeah, man, these bullshit phones are good for something if you put 'em to good use. Go ahead keep reading.

SHADOWMAN 3: “When a helicopter flew over the yard at Attica Correctional Facility on Sept. 13, 1971, five days into a takeover of



the prison by its 1,300 inmates, some of the prisoners thought it held New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, come to help negotiate an end to the standoff. They realized their error when the gas dropped.

The combination of CS and CN gas created a “thick, powdery fog” in the yard “that quickly enveloped, sickened and felled every man it touched. But while the gas subdued the prisoners, it was merely the opening salvo in a full-on sadistic assault that set the stage for days of death and bloodshed, weeks of torture, years of pain and decades of lawsuits, investigations and recriminations.”(*Getlen, 2016*)

O.T: A lot of blood was shed in that yard. Don’t matter Black, white, Puerto Rican, don’t matter what color you are. In there you all the same. A lot of blood shed all through there. You get sent up north, your life is in God’s hands. Inmates, officers, there’s a lot of demons upstate’ll kill you, but they kill you quick in Attica.

(O.T. nods toward the image of Attica on the tiled wall.)

Yeah, that’s the same ground soaked up all that blood. It’s crazy. You can feel the energy all through Attica. In D block yard, you can feel the heaviness of it, the spiritual weight. Even on the tiers you can feel that weight. You even see it moving by.

(The image of Attica on the tiled wall fades and as the shadow of cell bars appear and the dim lights now verge on darkness barely illuminated by fluorescent light, SHADOWMEN fade.)

You can be in a deep sleep, say two three in the morning. You wake up and you see something going by your cell. And you say, oh shit.

And you get up real quietly, keep your shoes off, so your feet be on the stone floor. Stone be cold as shit. Put your mirror on the gate.

What was that? Not who. What was that? You staring into your mirror on the gate. No reflection. Everybody's locked in. Ain't like the mediums getting up and goin' down the hall to the bathroom. This is a max. And when you locked in at ten o'clock at night, those doors don't open until five in the morning to go to chow. And that's how that go. Two three four in the morning. You put your mirror out. Ain't no c.o. walkin', ain't no keys jingling. There's no human image.

AVI: What do you hear?

O.T: You don't hear nothing, you just see energy going by. Slowly. Like somebody blowing out smoke, only it moves by real slow. And it's dark. Don't mean they're evil, just mean they're troubled. (pause) Moving from place to place, trying to find their way out. I already know what it is. Cause people died in those cells, some people got murdered in those cells. They lock him in and set him on fire, burn 'em cause they might have snitched or something like that.

AVI: What about you?

O.T: What about me?

AVI: How did you get through all that?

O.T: Kept to myself. Didn't mess with no drugs, didn't mess with no gangs. I respected myself, and people respected me. And I was in shape. My whole life, I was an athlete, in the Marines, trained on Paris Island. I was a lifeguard. Nobody preyed on me. Couple times I was battle ready, but God was looking out for me in there. Only battle he was getting me ready for was out here.

AVI: So what do you do most of the time?

O.T: Man, you ask more questions than a D.A.

AVI: I'm sorry.

O.T: Nah, it's okay. I get it. You're thinking about your daddy.

AVI: I wouldn't exactly call him my daddy, but, yeah, I guess that's why.

O.T: Any other day there wouldn't be no time for stories. I'm all about coming down here, stepping to my business and making that money. But now here we are. No money to make and this whole city 'bout to be shut down. Imagine that. A whole city on lockdown. Time to let the spirit lead. That's how I kept sane in there. I'd be in my cell, talking to myself, laughing, singing.

(Lights shift from dark to dim and SHADOWMEN reappear.)

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, Cox, you alright in there?

O.T: Yeah, man, I'm good. (to AVI) Used to sing in my cell. Sang in the box to keep from going crazy.

SHADOWMAN 2: (calling as if from a distance) Yo, who got a store?

SHADOWMAN 3: (responding as if from a distance.) I got one.

AVI: A store?

O.T: Yeah. You making twenty five cent an hour, you better be resourceful. Dude goes to commissary, buys an overload. Cigarettes, Little Debbie cakes. He know people gonna get hungry through the night.

SHADOWMAN 2: Yo, gimme two cookies.

AVI: But how do you... you know, shop?

O.T: Cat's got a net bag he ties a string to, long string, about the length of this platform. And in the net bag he has a can a beans. And the can a beans is for the net bag to have velocity and travel.

SHADOWMAN 2: What cell you in?

O.T: (pointing toward the SHADOWMEN 2 and 3) He could be on one end of the gallery, and he could be way down the other end, or maybe on another tier. Put your mirror out on the gate, you can see an arm swinging this net bag with that can a beans in it. Then as far as he can throw it, fwoosh, you'll see it traveling.

(O.T. makes a whistling sound to replicate the sound of the string unfurling from the net bag.)

Su, su, su, su, su. Then BADAP, bowp, bowp. It hits the ground and rolls with that can a beans in it, maybe in front of your cell. (to SHADOWMEN) Yo, who's cell this come from?

SHADOWMAN 2: Cell 2. I'm trying to get it to 37 cell.

O.T: I got you, bro. (to AVI) And that's how it go. It's like family. And whether you want to or not, you could be reading a good book. Good book. And all of a sudden this shit lands in front of your cell. You gotta come outta that, cause you gonna want help too sometime. Might be you fishing, and some other guy getting your net bag to where it got to go. Yeah. You eating that fake food from the mess hall, an hour later you hungry as shit. Used to put down sugar packets to hold me over to morning.

AVI: What time's breakfast?

O.T: They call chow at five. You march down your cell block, A cell block and C cell block to A mess hell. You walk the gallery and

down the corridor to Times Square.



AVI: Times square?

O.T: Go ahead, Google that too. Times Square Attica.

(On the tiled wall appears this image of the mess hall at Attica with arched columns.)

<https://pbase.com/kjosker/image/25165280>

O.T: Yeah, that's it. Right in the middle of Attica. They got a four-way hallway and a big sign that says Time Square. And Times Square leads you to the law library, the yard, to the Chaplin's office and to two mess halls. Each mess hall holds 700 people, and each one's like a cathedral only it just ain't got no altar in it.

(AVI searches and an image of the mess



hall replaces Times Square.)

<https://pbase.com/kjosker/image/25165274>

AVI: Is this it?

O.T: That's the mess hall. So now you go in two by two and you find a seat. And when you look up, you see the owls.

AVI: Owls in Attica?

(Across the tiled wall shadows of an owl and birds flying overhead.)

O.T: Mostly these blue-black birds with long beaks. And then you got the sparrows and the owls, barn owls and hooting owls. All of them flying and nesting overhead. Some of them lined up along the windows and across the beams looking down. Then all of a sudden when the prisoners are ordered to get up and stand on-line for food, then you can see the birds flying down, hundreds at a time swooping down in waves. And over there in the corners, you can see those owls turning their heads, watching them, trying to decide which

one he's gonna grab up. Eventually you see an owl coming down, and he'll run one, two maybe three birds right out the window. Sometimes you see him fly back in with feet hanging out of his beak. Go right back up on the rafter to perch and stare down at the prisoners. Sometimes an owl'll fly down, land right there in front of you, and you see the small feathers fly off onto the table. Big old bird size of a pit bull. Yeah, man. Owls in Attica.

AVI: So, everybody eats together?

O.T: Hell no. You got something like twenty-seven hundred men in there. That's a small town, only it's in one big ass building. Think about it. That's a lot of beds to fill and a lot of mouths to feed. And money's being made on meals and lodging. And when I was in it, there was something like seventy-seven prisons in the state of New York.

(AVI searches on her iPhone, then reads.)

AVI: It says here now there's almost 2.3 million people in 1,833 state prisons.

O.T: Biggest hotel chain in the history of the world. And all these guests, guest as they like to say out here—next guest. All these guests have gotta be fed. So, we'd be up at four in the morning to go work in the mess hall.

AVI: What's your job?

O.T: First, lineman. I was on the counter serving, making twenty-five dollars every two weeks. Then I got moved up to the kitchen. That was after the riot in the mess hall.

AVI: What happened?

O.T: What goes on out here, goes on in there. If there's beef out

here and they couldn't solve it? It carries on into there. And if when they call home, they find out you upstate in another prison, they will go to their counselor to put in for a transfer to get to where you're at. To get your ass. Then when they get there, they wait for their chance. Now in this case they found out he was in Attica and going to the B mess hall. And sure enough, when they came down for breakfast, we were behind the counter ready to serve, and the houses started coming in. And each house got forty men. And they got their state greens on, we got our whites on, white shirts, white pants, white hats. Now picture this. You got guys that are loving, guys that are hateful, guys that are bitter. And they're coming in early in the morning and they miserable because they woke up in prison with long sentences. Haven't seen their family in years, might never. (Pause as if momentarily snagged on a thought.)

AVI: So now they're coming in.

O.T: One group of forty men, another group of forty men. And they quiet, but they got mean faces. And next thing you know, we're serving the oatmeal. Bow, brother say hit me off. No problem, bam. And next thing you know there's commotion. And everybody turns around, and I'm looking over everybody, whole tables get up. And I can see where they're stabbing this guy.

AVI: How many?

O.T: They bum-rushed him. I'd say about ten, twelve. Others trying to get at him too, but they can't because you in my way. So whoever got there first, got him. Ran him under the table, and they go right

down under there with him, stabbing him. Now in the booth up on the wall where the owls are, you got these glass booths. And in them you got officers with binoculars and one with a telescope, and they press the gas. Now in Attica you can see 'em in the ceiling over each of the aisles, they look like shotgun shell caps. One's yellow, one's green, one's red.



AVI: What are they?

O.T: That's for when they release the gas. Now remember this mess hall holds 700 men. Man, there was yelling and screaming and then the gas dropped. You can see this powdery dust coming down, but when it hits that ground, bow. All of a sudden, whole mess hall is cloudy. You can't barely see faces right in front of you. And everybody's coughing, taking off their shirt, wrapping it around their fists, trying to punch these windows out. Bam. You can hear glass breaking, and you see people kicking and blood flying and people punching out these windows cause they can't breathe. And everybody rushing to one little hole trying to get fresh air. Big men, powerful men, and we are broken down.

AVI : But how about the officers? They're breathing in the gas, too.

O.T: You can see the outline of the officers, moving around calmly. They're used to this. They told us, they get trained in breathing this stuff. Now they got their sticks out, and they be pulling people off the ground.

AVI: And where are you?

O.T: We're still behind the counter. There's me and a Muslim guy and another dude that's with us. He runs off, but the Muslim guy stays with me, and Raymond, little guy, Black civilian, say like five feet. He's scared. All you see are his eyes like he seen a ghost. Officers, civilians they got themselves to safety, left him in. And he's cowering behind the counter because now it's pandemonium.

AVI: All the workers left?

(SHADOWMAN 1 is bent over and coughing.)

O.T: Civilians yeah, and left Raymond, left him out there in the mess hall with us. And I say, yo, get down. And I take off my shirt, my mess hall shirt, and I wrap it around his face, cause this stuff

burns like somebody threw hot sauce in your eyes. Your eyes be tearing, burning and you can't see nothing. And they said this is the mild, but we're all rendered helpless... So eventually an officer comes out.

SHADOWMAN 2: Yo, Cox, where's Raymond?

O.T: (to Shadowman 2) Where you been at? Y'all left him here to die, man. Get him outta here!

SHADOWMAN 2: I got 'im.

O.T: (to AVI) So he hurries him out and slams the door again. Bam. Now they're herding us outside to the yard in back of the hospital. And I am incapacitated. Everybody is. Yo, soon as you run out there, you're flopping on the ground. Coughing, gagging. You think you gonna die.

AVI: What time of year is it?

O.T: This is like middle November. But up there that's wintertime. And it's cold. It snowed the day before, and all I have on is a t-shirt cause I gave my kitchen shirt to Raymond. Freezing. And we get out there and we see officers they lined up, and they beating people on the way out. (laughs) And the sergeant of the mess hall comes out.

SHADOWMAN 1: Hands off my workers. They didn't have anything to do with this shit.

O.T: Only now I don't have on my whites. And so I do this here.

(O.T. puts his arms over his face to protect himself).

SHADOWMAN 1: You're okay. You go on ahead.

O.T: Now I'm outside and I fall to the ground. I'm gagging, I'm choking, and everything is coming out of me.

SHADOWMAN 2: Yo, Cox!

SHADOWMAN 3: O.T. Over here. We got water.

O.T: (to AVI) Brothers get me to my feet. The water's from where the snow melted. Everybody's trying to clean their faces off and their eyes. After about forty-five minutes I start to get myself together. When I did? I look up, and I see the officers on the wall with AK-47s pointing down at us.

SHADOWMAN 1: Don't make a move.

O.T: I'm looking up at these rifles drawn on us. Thinking am I gonna die in this yard? (pause) So I say a quick prayer, I say, please let me get home to my kids. Please.

AVI: How long were you out there?

O.T: Held us out there all morning. Say, five hours. Freezing. And then the sun came out, and it started providing some kind of warmth. Everybody grouped together, you know, hugging each other, trying to stay warm. Finally started letting us in one at a time. And so we come in and they have us strip down.

SHADOWMAN 1: Come on. C block, mess hall workers. Strip down to ass.

O.T: Take our shirts off, our boots off, socks off. We had to take our pants off, underwear off. Butt naked.

SHADOWMAN 1: Alright, back to your block.

O.T: So, you got like forty naked slaves. (laughs) Black slaves and white slaves. And we're butt naked. And we're this close. And we go back to our house.

SHADOWMAN 1: Get in your cells.

O.T: Then they started running the showers cause we're covered in that white tear gas residue. In your hair, in your nose, on your eyelashes. That shit's cancerous. So we get washed off, and they give us fresh towels and back to your cells. They lock us in for like, shit, what was it? Like two, three days.

AVI: So, if you can't go to the mess hall, how do you eat?

O.T: They bring meals around, only you can't shower. Gotta clean yourself over your sink. Lay around, wait. Finally, we go back to work, and as soon as I go into the kitchen area, I sense something's up.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, where's Cox? Where's Cox at?

O.T: I'm here. Why. What's it to you?

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, they love you down here, man.

O.T: (to AVI) And I'm thinking to myself what the hell's going on? Now y'all love me?

SHADOWMAN 1: They feeling you, man. They heard about what you did.

O.T: Did? What'd I do? Now an officer takes me to the back where the civilians are at, police and all that. Big civilian steps in. Big dude, I think his name was Mike. Puts his arm around me. And I'm freaking out. These country boys don't like Blacks, and they don't like convicts. And I'm Black and I'm a convict, and you got your arm around me?

SHADOWMAN 2: (laughs) Come on in the back, Cox.

O.T: (to AVI) This here is a set up. They trying to kill me.

SHADOWMAN 2: Go ahead, Cox, sit down.

O.T: No, sir, I'll stand. (to AVI) I'd rather stand because I'm surveilling the area to see if I got to fight, who I can get first, who's a threat, who ain't a threat? Who's gonna lead, who's gonna follow, who ain't really gonna do nothin.

SHADOWMAN 3: Inmate Cox, we heard good things about you. What you did for Raymond.

COX: (to Shadowman 3) It wasn't nothin.' You know, natural, you're supposed to do that for people.

SHADOWMAN 3: Well, in here we really appreciate that. Now I don't ever say this, but anything you ever want in that freezer, you can come get it and take it back to your house. Chicken, roast beef.

AVI: Free food, cool.

O.T: Nah, that's not my style. You supposed to do that. Man, I was a lifeguard. I'm trained to save people. Hell, even after Don attacked me, cracked my head open, came after me with a sword and a knife. I beat him down, and then gave him CPR.

AVI : Really?

O.T: Really. Detectives testified at my trial. Yeah, man, when they got there, I was on the floor giving him CPR. Had him breathing until they told me let him go. Didn't do nothing. Just left him lying there and locked me up.

SHADOWMAN 1: Thanks, Cox. You saved my life.

(For a moment O.T. is disoriented, then looks toward Shadowman 1)

O.T: Raymond?

SHADOWMAN 1: Yeah, it's me. Told my family and they really appreciate what you did for me.

O.T: (to AVI) Now this is the funny part. Check this out. It's Thanksgiving and Raymond's family come up from the south. He tells them, and they can't believe there's humanity like that in prison. From convicts? So they write to the Superintendent. And I get a letter of commendation. (Pause) Which didn't mean shit at the parole board.

AVI: Did you think it might?

O.T: Yeah, sure I did. This was a situation where there was a riot. I could've left him there. You ain't a prisoner, you ain't a convict, you a civilian, you against us, you one a them. But I didn't do that. But my character came out, naturally. So yeah, that was before I went down for resentencing. And it didn't mean shit.

AVI: So, you were there like thirteen more years?

O.T: Not at Attica. Now they downgrade me from a max to a medium. Plantation. And that's all it was, another plantation. Served the next four years at Orleans.

AVI: Where's that?

O.T: Orleans is even further north than Attica, say maybe twenty miles to Canada. Wake up with snow piled up over your window. Used to be out before dawn to go milk the cows and that snow'd be

(with emphasis) comin' down.

AVI: Milk the cows?

O.T: Yeah, they'd wake us up around four. We had a crew, say nine guys and they'd transport us over to the farm. You got like 37 cows on this side, and 37 cows on the other. Our job was to put the hay down, clean the area, then hook the hoses up to the utters. Now those cows sway, and if you get caught in the sway, guys get crushed. So I used to come in, turn the on the overhead barn lights, and I'd say, come on, ladies, let's go. It's soul train time. And I'd sing to them. Dance down the aisle, stall to stall, and do my job. And those cows they loved me, never gave me a problem.

AVI: So how long were you there?

O.T: In Orleans? Say another four years. Before I transferred to Otisville for six.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, Pop.

O.T: Yo, Pop? (O.T. peers across the tracks at Shadowman 2.)  
Rashan?

SHADOWMAN 1: Yeah, Pop. They showing movies down the hill. We goin'?

O.T: Yeah, sure we goin'. Get Stretch. (to AVI) In Otisville they used to call us the family. Never forget it. Me, Rashan and Stretch. First night I got there from Orleans, didn't even have my shower shoes. And you know I don't stand on nothing barefooted. (to SHADOWMAN 1.) Hey man, didn't get my commissary yet. Can y'get me a pair of shower shoes?

SHADOWMAN 1: Only got something like twenty on my commissary sheet. (hesitates) But, yeah, alright, O.T. I'll do it for

you.

O.T: It was something like four dollars, and he did it. He stood out on faith. Went to commissary, came back with the shower shoes, nice, brand new ones. (to AVI) Then when I got my sheet, had something like twenty thousand on it at the time.

AVI: Twenty thousand dollars?

O.T: I wasn't broke out here, and I wasn't broke in there. Had two good jobs, counselor for the city and construction crew. And when Pop died, and they sold the house, I was straight. And I made sure the people who were close to me had what they needed too. My kids out here, and my kids in there. (to Shadowman 1) Yo, young brother, what you need?

SHADOWMAN 1: Two cans a tobacco?

O.T: Bet. (to AVI) It came in a can. Bugle. With the rolling papers inside. So I got him two cans, and I do like he did. I brought to his bed, and I said, thank you, young brother for what you did for me.

SHADOWMAN 1: I got you, Pop.

O.T: (to AVI) Then that Saturday morning, I'm just getting familiar with the place. Sitting in the dayroom. I was in the back, playing the

wall. Now, I don't have to deal with mess hall because me food is stacked. Cans of jack mack, bags of rice, beans, black beans. Tuna, onions.

AVI: Where do you keep it all?

O.T: In my wall locker. You got a big ass locker. Mine was stacked. Boxes of pancake mix. I got syrup. (to Shadowman 1) You know how to cook?



SHADOWMAN 1: Yeah, I can cook.

O.T: You wanna eat breakfast?

SHADOWMAN 1: Yeah. But...

O.T: I'll tell you what. You clean the mack, make the pancakes.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yeah, but can my friend get down?

O.T: What's up with your friend?

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, he's a good dude. Stretch. He from Queens, he's quiet. He aint't got nobody. He was cooking with some dudes and when his money ran out, they kicked him to the curb.

O.T: Oh, yeah? You tell him to come talk to me. (to AVI) And now he comes in. Nice kid, a little taller than me. Pleasant smile.

AVI: How old is he?

O.T: Twenty or so, like your age. Now they don't know what I got in my account. But I know. And we gonna eat. Pancakes, jack mack, fried onions. We were sitting there around that table. Saturday morning. Everybody came out. Knew them. Didn't know me.

SHADOWMAN 3: Well, look here. Y'all eatin' lovely.

O.T: Yeah, man. People respected us. And when they showed movies down the hill, we would go as a family. And they used to sell bean pies. Bags of mixed popcorn, cheese doodles. Chips, pretzels. A bag, say, thirty cents. I would buy each of us a bag, you sign the disbursement form and they go in your account and get later. (to Shadowman 3) Yo, how much for those bean pies?

SHADOWMAN 3: Fifty cents. How many you want?

O.T: How much for the whole box? (to AVI) So these brothers, they get in a huddle.

(Laughs as SHADOWMEN move together to confer.)

(to AVI) The whole box? This is the biggest sale they had in their whole history of prison bean pie baking.

SHADOWMAN 3: Thirty dollars.

O.T: Okay, give me the disbursement form. (to AVI) Now they looking around like they not sure I'm for real.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, I'm telling you. This man is good for it.

O.T: (to Shadowman) Thank you, brother. Keep it back there for us until after the movie's over. (to AVI) It's got something like thirty, forty pies. Big old box. So, they take it back to the house, put it in fridge. And I said, y'all can go down and get 'em whenever y'want. And you know they were watching that fridge make sure nobody else was getting into those bean pies. (laughs) But I didn't care.

AVI: How long were you together?

O.T: Years, man, something like five years. It was a give and take sort of thing. Cause after Pop passed, I didn't have nobody. No visits, no packages coming in. So Rashan's mother starts writing to me, and his sister. That was the reward for me. Never forget him. Chinese and Black. Taught how him how to read in there.

AVI: How?

O.T: Same way my grandmother taught Pop. She broke it down in

syllables. Like she taught me. He read his first book through me.

AVI: What was it?

O.T: I'll tell you right now. (pause) It was by... Chancellor Williams. Uh, huh. It was the Destruction of Black Civilization. It was about uplifting the mindset. Out here I never was much into school. But in there, if you looked in my cell and I wasn't painting, I was reading.

AVI: They let you paint in prison?

O.T: Let me? Please. I had officers coming to me for my art. In Otisville there was a kid that taught me how to do my portraits on t-shirts. Once I mastered that, people were coming to me to do rappers, their Bentleys, their Ducati motorcycles. Wherever I went, my art sustained me. Then when I got to Hudson they gave me a job in the maintenance, and I met this guy, white guy, good dude, in maintenance, and he used to stretch my canvasses for me. I'd hit him off with a pack of cigarettes, and he'd make me four good size canvasses from one bedsheet.

AVI: Where'd you paint like in your... room?

O.T: Yeah, my room. Eight by nine. Bed, stool, wall locker. But yeah, that's where I'd paint. Sometimes straight through the day, and sometime straight through the night. That was my peace, man. I'd put on my headphones and I'd be in a whole other dimension.

AVI: Yeah, classical does the same for me.

O.T: Not classical, classical was for the night. When I was painting, it's had to be something electric.

AVI: Like what?

O.T: Sometimes alternative, Smashing Pumpkins.

AVI: Smashing what?

O.T: Sometimes Metallica, White Zombie, Pantera.

AVI: You're into metal?

O.T: Sometimes, German heavy metal. Sounds like opera, you'd like it.

AVI: Really?

O.T: Listen. It's the same thing I used to tell them upstate. Man, don't pigeonhole me. Coltrane, Yo-Yo Ma, Michael Jackson. If it's about life, I'm about it.

AVI: I'm just surprised.

O.T: Used to surprise a lot people in Hudson. Inmates and officers. On weekends you'd find me in the dayroom watching Bull Riding. Yeah man, bull riding.

AVI: As in mechanical bull in a redneck bar?

O.T: As in live action. Officers used to transfer to our cottage cause they knew I'd be on that shit. They'd be standing in the doorway watching, only I was feeling the bull. Beautiful beasts. There was one, Bodacious. Bull was so powerful they had retire him before he killed somebody. Officers used to let me stay up late watching that shit, they loved it to, only I was feeling the bull. Man, get his ass. (laughs) Yeah, one of these days I'm gonna paint that bull.

(O.T picks up the sketch pad and pencil and begins to draw. Behind him on the white tiled wall appears a video of a night sky, pitch dark and alive with stars. As O.T. tells the tales of Hudson.)

Mind if I draw you?

AVI: I don't mind, go ahead.

O.T: Yeah, man. Sometimes images would come to my mind. I would draw them out first and paint whatever it was right there. One time—now check this out, I did this woman on stage, and she was playing acoustic guitar. Yeah, man. She had a gown on and she was barefooted. Had hair like yours. And on the stage, I did the slats of wood, everything, wood grain, nails. There were curtains, but in the back, it was dark, pitch dark, and all you could see was stars. Yeah. You dig what I'm saying? You get it though, right? (pause) What you get out of that?

AVI: That it's eternity?

O.T: (nods) People would come to my cell and watch me paint. They'd say, "What's that mean?" Or "Mr. Cox, what you trying to get across?" And I'd break it down to them. This woman is playing this guitar very softly and in back that's nothing but the universe, that's the mind, the infinite mind, and she's the intuitive part of us that plays softly and tries to get our attention. You know that, right?

AVI: I do now.

(Throughout this scene he continues to sketch AVI, putting down his pencil and addressing the audience directly when moved by the urgency of his words.)

O.T: I meditated one time so deeply, I was so deep that I actually saw that image. It was dark and I saw little white lights shooting across space. And I was traveling, I was traveling deeper into this. Just darkness and stars, tiny pinpoints of light shooting by. Never forget that. Just like I'll never forget the girls.

AVI: Girls? What girls?

O.T: Years before Hudson was a men's prison, it was a prison for

girls, girls younger than you. They called it a training school. But it wasn't nothing but a school of torture and torment. Yeah, man. I know because I worked for maintenance and we found the logbooks from the 20s and 30s downstairs in the basement. And I know because underneath our cottage, one time we went downstairs to fix a leaky drainpipe, the main drainpipe, and I saw these shelves. Old, you know how wood gets when it ages, real dark and moldy. And I ask the civilian who's the head of maintenance, (to Shadowman) Yo, man, what are these shelves for?

SHADOWMAN 1: Cox, you didn't know? This used t'be the morgue, downstairs here for the babies. When the girls got pregnant, had a miscarriage or whatever, they put 'em here.

AVI: (AVI stares intently at O.T.) Or whatever?

O.T: I'm like what? I was stuck. But now I'm remembering what I heard about the mess hall. (to Shadowman 1) Oh yeah, some officer told me the mess hall dorm used to be a hospital.

SHADOWMAN 1: And down in the basement is where they used to operate on those girls.

O.T: (to AVI) Now watch how this plays out. Those girls came to Hudson—maybe during one of the world wars, or they were prostitutes down on their luck, or they were kids on the street that got picked up, hauled in front of a judge and sent upstate.

AVI: Railroaded.

(As she does a GOOGLE search, her cellphonescreen appears on the white tiled wall: Hudson New York Prison for Girls. Images of the Victorian brick buildings of the institution appear. AVI scrolls down the images and stops on this image of female inmates in the laundry room then reads.  
<https://www.columbiapaper.com/2019/04/records->



<https://www.columbiapaper.com/2019/04/records-restore-history-of-hudsons-prison/> (Huling, 2019)

“The prison opened in Hudson in 1877 as the House of Refuge for Women, the state’s first reformatory for women and, according to some historians, America’s first “gender-specific” women’s penal institution.”

O.T: Yeah, well, wasn’t no kind of refuge in it. Man, kids. Should’ve still been with their mamas, and some judge railroaded them to Hudson.

AVI: (continues to search and read from her phone.) “The institution at Hudson near Albany had opened in 1887 as the House of Refuge for women. In the home-like brick cottages, discipline meant solitary confinement on bread and water, shackles and beatings.”

O.T: And rape and murder. I don’t need to Google that shit. I’m a living witness to that history. I saw those cemeteries with my own eyes. Right outside my window. Foul deeds were done to those girls in Hudson. Officers, civilians, they told me, and I’m telling you.

(On the tiled wall appears the cover of an ebook, *The Children of Wild* by Nina Bernstein. AVI scrolls over the publication page, the table of content, then clicks and reads the text that appears on the wall.)

AVI: “The road to Hudson institution cut through woods of sumac, poplar and locust and climbed up to the remnants of a massive stone and iron gate.”

O.T: (O.T. interjects in a soft voice.) Yeah. Yeah, I know that road.

AVI: (continues to read as O.T. nods.) “Behind an eight-foot fence, on a hundred and sixty-acre bluff overlooking the Hudson River between the Catskill and the Berkshire Mountains stood the red brick buildings of the State Training School for Girls.”

O.T: Yeah. The van drives up through woods, and the dirt road turns into black top. And on the right-hand side as you get near the gate, you see the bunker.

AVI: Bunker? You mean like a building?

O.T: Not a building, jut a mound of dirt built into the ground. Used to be the makeshift morgue for the girls who still had family somewhere to come and claim the bodies. Officers told me. Funeral director would come from town and pick up the bodies up at nine, ten o’clock so the girls wouldn’t see the hearse coming up the road. He’d pick them up and take them back into town.

AVI: “The fourteen cottages, imposing two-story brick buildings housed twenty-five to thirty girls each had barely changed since the oldest ones were built in the 1880s.... Peeling paint, cracked plaster and gaping holes marked the walls.... In the dark hours before the six thirty a.m. wake up call, sleep was broken by the sound of urgent knocking as girls who had to use the toilet tried to draw the staff’s attention.”



O.T: There's two bathrooms in each cottage, right next to each other. Sometime, watch this. Sometime you go to the bathroom and everybody either be out in the yard or everybody asleep or at mess hall, and you go into the bathroom and you hear somebody knocking. And so, "Yo, I'm in here, man" Knocking, knocking, knocking. And you catch 'em knocking, get off the toilet and pull the door right open. And nobody's there. (pause) It's the ghost of them girls. They can't rest.

AVI: "It was a small cemetery. The old gravestones had been so tilted by spring frosts and winter thaws that they looked almost scattered. There were no dates on the weathered markers, and no epitaphs—only girls' names, fading from bare limestone. Lizzie French. Nellie McGovern. Anna Schabesberger. Julia Coon. Mary O'Brien. Louella Roarack. Lydia Althouser. Jennie Fuller. Barbara Decker. Anne Withey. Helen Peer."

O.T: I saw it. Two cemeteries from out my window. No gravestones, but those bodies are still in the ground.

AVI: (continues to skim and read) "Years ago, dead babies born to inmates were buried there... and girls caught trying to escape who later died inside the institution."

O.T: What'd I tell you? See. They tried to escape cause they were being raped, and they killed 'em.

AVI: "Other bodies were sent home to their folks for burial, but even after death, runaways were punished. This was their solitary confinement: a cold dark grave, lost in the woods forever."

O.T: We could see the graveyards. Civilians'll tell you. I had a window. Look out my window you could see the yard, and look to the left, further out, you could see the baby graveyard and the adult girl graveyard. Right there. Yard, graveyard, graveyard, road, pinewoods. Trees on each side, and once the cars go over that little

hill, you don't see 'em no more.

AVI: So it's all true.

O.T: I lived it, but I'm glad you checked that out so you can see for yourself.

AVI: I didn't doubt you.

O.T: Now, in my cottage, A cottage, they got a hole in the ceiling, a trap door where you go in the attic. Nobody's in the attic. There's a Yale lock been on there for decades. Officers and prisoners are hearing something rustling around up there, so maybe there's squirrels or something running around up there, so head of maintenance goes up there with a bolt cutter, breaks that lock. What do we find up there? Old pocketbooks like from the 20s, piles of them, and we start throwing them out. And these green dresses, these long prison dresses the girls in Hudson used to wear and these kind of black shoes they wore back in their day. So long story short, a new lock goes on the trapdoor, and nobody goes up into the attic. Nobody. But we still hear it, only it's clearer now, the walking up and down, back and forth, back and forth. And the inmates that been there for a while, like myself, we already know it's haunted. But a new inmate, coming in from another facility? He don't.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, what's that? What's up there? This only a two-floor cottage.

O.T: Yeah, we know that.

SHADOWMAN 1: But there's a big ass lock on that door.

O.T: Yeah, we know that too. (to AVI) You can take your little cell broom and go like this.

(O.T. jabs upward with his pencil as if hitting the ceiling)

And it doesn't stop. It's that energy, man.

AVI: Anbody ever seem them?

O.T: Gus'll tell you. One night he goes down to the bathroom three, four in the morning. And there's this fire door exit. And next to it, there's these red fire stairs at the end of the cottage. He goes in the bathroom, comes out to go back to his cell, turns around and sees two girls sitting on the stairs. One is looking up like she's trying to figure something out or maybe praying, and the other one's like this here.

(O.T. bends over on the bench to let his head rest on his arm that he spreads across his lap.)

Gus was rubbing his eyes at the slop sink, trying to see if maybe he's dreaming. Goes back to his cell and locks in. He said, yo, he was scared to death. Goes back to the bathroom, comes out again and they're still there.

(On the home screen of AVI's cell phone, which is projected on the wall, it is visible that she has selected an app to record O.T. The app image looks like an old fashion tape recorder. As she records O.T. the "tape" spins.)

AVI: How about you, you ever seen them?

O.T: One time I was sweeping my room. And I had draped the extension cord for my radio and lamp over the back of the bedpost so I could get up under the bed and near the window. Tim came in. (to SHADOWMAN 1) Tim, hand me the mop.

SHADOWMAN 1: Here y'go, O.T.

O.T: (to AVI) And I'm reaching over to grab it and all of sudden

that wire comes up over the bedpost and whap! It's on the floor. Now that's not supposed to happen because the bedpost is a good four, five inches high. Alright, no problem. I take the dag-gone wire and drape it back over the bedpost. Now there's no way that's

coming off unless I take it off. And then whap, its whips over the bedpost and hits the ground a second time.

SHADOWMAN 1: Yo, the girls don't want you to put that there because they can't see out the window.

O.T: I'm looking at Tim and I'm buggin' out. Now Tim is my man, a white guy from Jersey. And I say, Tim, come on now, you only been down like two years, you going home next year and you mean to tell me you're talking to the girls.

SHADOWMAN 1: Glenn, I'm telling you. The girls don't want you to put the cord there because they can't look out through the window.

O.T: Now I'm starting to think maybe it's the current running through the cord. Maybe being that they're spirits, they can't deal with the current. So, okay, and I left it on the floor and just mopped around it.

(On the tiled wall, silhouettes of female figures appear. They're various weights and sizes, but all of their figures wear the same calf-length dress. As they appear, some linger, some float off. Some stand still by the image of the app, they seem curious and study the image.)

AVI: Did the girls come back?

O.T: Let me tell you what didn't happen. Three months I didn't sleep. We had spring mattresses up there on a metal frame. And I'm

lying there at night, still, and my bed starts vibrating like this.

(O.T. grabs the edge of the bench as if he is shaking it. One of the silhouettes whose profile is seen from the side, covers her mouth and seems to be giggling.)

Young Spanish brother across the hall from me, good kid, man, sensible kid, all he do is work out, eat, keep to himself.

SHADOWMAN 2: Yo, Mr Cox. Can I ask you something?

O.T: What's up, man?

SHADOWMAN 2: At night, my rack shakes. Like every night. And I'm not moving. And it still be shaking.

AVI: Rack?

O.T: (to Shadowman) Yeah, I know man. Mine too. (to AVI) Your rack's your bed. Started staying up at night painting until four in the morning. They call chow at five, and I had to get up to go to work. I told the civilians I worked with in maintenance what was going on, and they say they been hearing it too. Dudes been there for years, they been working there twenty, thirty years, their families worked there when the girls were there. And they're affirming this shit? Yeah, man, I was afraid.

(Around image of the recorder app, the curious shadows huddle and converse. Aware now of the actors, they point and gesture.)

Civilians I worked with took me to this cottage that's been abandoned for decades. They use it for a storage shed—been mad sightings in there by officers and prisoners. So, I go and get this bed. Didn't feel right, but I had to get it. They helped me bring it upstairs, put it in, gave me extra shelves for my closet, everything's good. And then it starts vibrating again.

AVI: So, what'd you do?

O.T: What could I do? I'm locked in. Knew inmates who transferred out of the facility, grown ass men couldn't deal with it. My face is getting drawn, I'm losing mad weight. Even in maintenance, civilians asking me if I'm alright.

SHADOWMAN 3: Cox, you're not looking too good. You wanna go outside to the hospital?

O.T: (to Shadowman 3) Nah, man, I don't want these officers messing with me. (to AVI) I gotta stay around because there were some of these officers used to go in my cell, knock my stuff around, try to get me to react.

AVI: But why?

O.T: James was the one who told me the day he was going home. Came over to me in the dayroom. Hugged me, then pulled me aside so the nobody could hear him.

SHADOWMAN 2: Don't worry, Cox. Hold your head up, you'll be out of here in eight more months. (lowers his voice) Watch out, they're trying to take your CR to keep you here.

O.T: Oh, really, thank you, James.

AVI: What's CR?

O.T: That's your conditional release. Mine was seventeen years. That's when by law they had to let me out.

AVI: If it's by law, how can they keep you?

O.T: They mess with you. And if they don't do it themselves, they

give an inmate a pack of cigarettes to create some shit. You react, and now they got a reason to keep your ass locked up. Yeah, man. So I go back to my cell and lock in. After he told me that I stopped being in the day room so much. Went right upstairs, locked in and

kept painting. One time when I was at work, they came and tore... it... up. Then two officers come to maintenance to escort me back to my cell. Man, they had thrown all my shit on the floor, emptied out my locker. (pause) And stole my paints. (pause) But I remembered what James had told me, sat down on my bed, and I did not react.

(When AVI turns off internet on her phone, the image on the tiled wall reverts to a moving image of the cosmos.)

AVI: I don't know how you did it.

O.T: Took me some time to see it, but he was looking out for me the whole time through there. And when officers were trying to get me to react, do things to me, God gave me the humility, self-control—don't react, don't react. They'd come at me, two, three at a time. Don't react. Just keep your eye out. I got these guys. And he would get them. Next thing I know, officer so and so, he transferred out. I didn't do that. Where's officer so and so? Oh, he transferred out yesterday. Thank you, god. I didn't pray for it, but he got rid of them because they were a thorn in my side, trying to keep me locked up. He had an appointed time for me to be there and an appointed time for me to leave. And when he closes door, nobody can open it, and when he opens it, nobody, no matter how much money and power they think they have, nobody can keep it shut.

AVI: But you seem so... I don't know. So not bitter.

O.T: Nah. I'm past that. I'm here. And when you this (taps his chest). And you know who you are with him, in him. It's just an experience. Life takes you through experiences. Somethings you

control, somethings you can't control. And no matter how perfect you try to act, go out in the day, calamity just find you. You didn't even cross the street yet and calamity happens. It happened to me and it cost me seventeen years.

AVI: Did you know him?

O.T: (pause) He lived down the hall. We had words, and I was walking away when he came up behind me and cracked me in the back of my head with a flashlight. I'm leaking like a sprinkler, blood splattering all over the walls. Run down the hall to my spot, standing there, looking at myself in this big antique mirror like your grandma might have. Blood dripping and shit. Looking at myself thinking, I can't go to work tomorrow like this. So I wrap my head in a towel and next thing BWAM, my bedroom door comes flying open. Man kicks open the door with so much intensity, this big old porcelain doorknob from like back in the 30s flies out the hallway window and lands outside. They didn't believe me until they sent an officer around and he found it between the buildings. Next time I saw it was at my trial as evidence on the table next to his broken sword.

AVI: Sword?

O.T: Yeah, his sword. He came at me with a sword and a knife. Now I'm running around the bed. This man chasing me stabbing and slashing. Now he got me twice. Here and here. But he shouldn't a did that cause now he brought out something I always keep a lid on. This animal, this demon. He brought it out. He gave it life. And then when he swang. (laughs) Is that a word, swang? (Laughs)

AVI: I don't know. Swang?



O.T: It is now. Then he swang. (laughs) and he missed. Spirit of God said now's your chance, and I rushed him. And that's where I got the advantage. Sword broke when he fell and I grabbed the butt

end. Then I went in. Man, I didn't even remember until it came out in the trial. Man had a broken nose, broken ribs. Finally he hits the wall, slides down to the ground. I can see the blood fizzling out the crack in his skull. Calamity. I send the girl who was with us to get help. Now I'm on the floor giving him chest compressions. And he's breathing when the cops walk in. Tell me to let him go. Let him go. Cuffed me, locked me up, and he died that night in the hospital. (calmly) And that's how that go.

AVI: But he attacked you.

O.T: Don't matter. Now there's a body. Like I said, you don't look for trouble, but there it is. (shrugs) Calamity.

AVI: And that doesn't make you angry?

O.T: Angry. (pause) They come at you ten, twelve-deep. Those goons, those country boys can crack your ribs, break your bones. Grab you up out of your cell and you might not be coming back. (pause) Mother fuckers. Same goons came at those girls, same goons snatching up kids today. Tormenters, murderers, hitmen. Some with badges, some without.

(O.T. takes a moment to pull in rage.)

And they know how to set you up. They look in your file. He don't get no mail, no visits, no packages. He's by himself. And they kill you. Man dies and you come home, and what happened to so and so? You seen him upstate? Nah. He's dead. They killed him. They bury you up there. I told you about the girls, right? And the babies, so that tell you that's how they get down. These people are demons.

You know, they're tormenters. That's their job, their purpose. Don't matter if you're black or white. They do it to white boys too. Break you up, they kill you, they take your body out. They call you downstairs, ten o'clock everybody's locked in. And people hear you

hollering and what not and after that the hollering stop. You don't hear it no more. Then you look out the window, you can see a car coming, they coming to get that body. And they'll tell people—what happened to so and so. Oh, they went on the draft, cause they do draft people at night.

AVI: What's that mean, draft?

O.T: Another prison. Send him out eleven twelve, one in the morning. They tell you that, but they killed a man. (pause) Man oh man, I got some stories.(pause) If I wanna live, I had to let that shit go. Bitter means you've got no dreams. Man, I can't even tell you all the dreams I have.

(AVI appears deep in thought, as if meditating.)

And what about you? What are you dreaming about?

AVI: Right now? I'm picturing Hudson, and I see it like you saw it from your window. Only there's tables, long tables—tables that run across the yard, across those cemeteries. And all the girls are there, only they're not wearing the green prison dresses and black shoes you found in the attic. They're wearing new clothes, all these different styles. Old-time dresses with lace around the edges, some in shorts and tank tops. And some of them are holding babies in soft blankets. And on the table there's a feast: baskets of bread and bowls of fruit. Platters with salad and quinoa.

O.T: What's quinoa?

AVI: Doesn't matter because nobody eats.

O.T: Nobody eats?

AVI: Because before anyone can lift a fork, the littlest girl, she tilts her chin up and sings grace. She doesn't say grace-she sings it. In the sweetest, lightest voice.

O.T: That's beautiful, Avi. I'm seeing this now.

AVI: And then, light as leaves, they rise and float in currents above the yard. Like leaves blown off branches that have held them to the tree too long. And now they're finally free.

O.T: To me? That's no dream. That's real, man. That's a prayer. And prayers are real. They flush the heart.

(Pause. AVI resumes her place on the stool and reaches for her guitar.)

AVI: How about you? What's your dream?

O.T: Ever see that movie, when Jim Carey flies back in time, sees his past?

AVI: Sure, that's Christmas Carol.

O.T: Yeah, well look here. If I took you back with me to every prison I was in, they would tell you. Officers, inmates, civilians. Yo, that's Cox. He's the artist. He had the whole prison locked down. Attica, Orleans, Otisville, Hudson. And Rikers Island. I had that sewed up too. I had my followers. (Taps his chest.) And that's before likes and shit on Facebook. You dig what I'm saying?

AVI: Maybe you should start painting again.

O.T: If I put my mind to it, there ain't no should, no maybe.  
(laughs)I'm like Ali, and I'm coming to get my crown back.

AVI: And I believe you will, O.T.

O.T: And I believe you will too.

AVI: Me?

O.T: If you with me, you the same as me. You been through a struggle, you don't have to tell me. I already know. And with every struggle, there comes a crown. You just have to be ready to accept your crown when the time comes.(Pause) Play something.

AVI: What do you wanna hear?

O.T: What was playing when I came by?

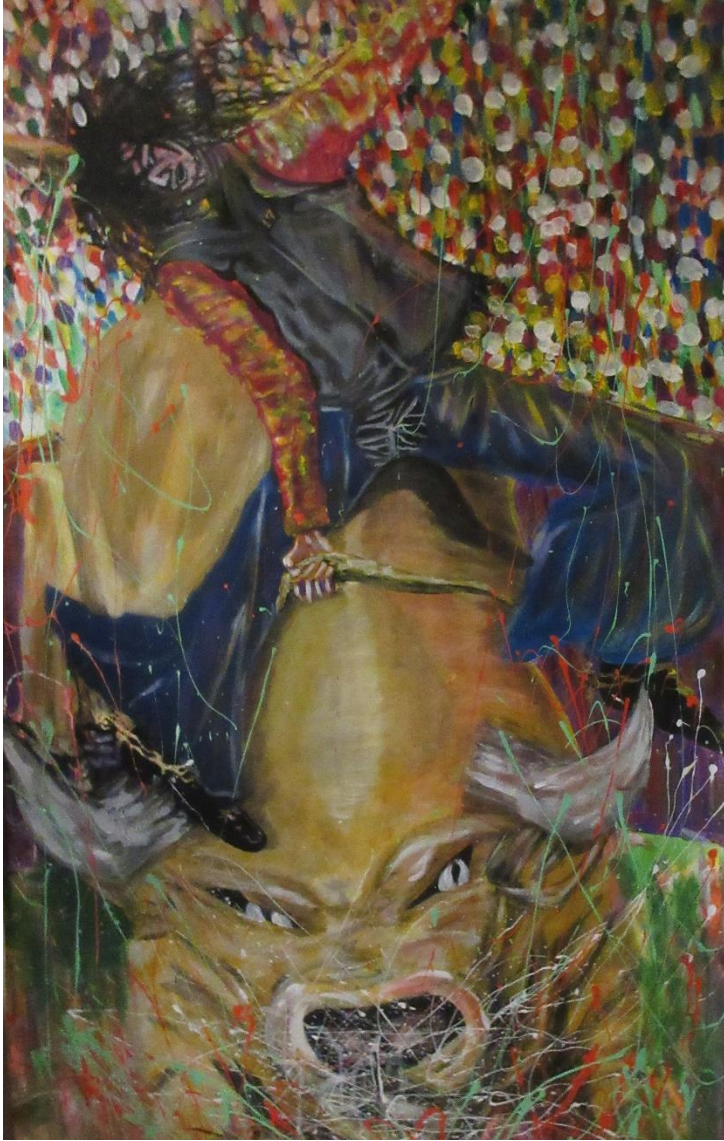
AVI: Four seasons. That was winter.

O.T: Winter? Then play spring. (points to the ghosts of Hudson.)  
Time for something new come up out of the ground.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fENuHRAPemA>

(Against the flickering image of the cosmos on the tile wall, the hands again appear of the guitarist, playing an arrangement of Vivaldi's Spring. O.T. rises slowly, showing for the first time a sign of age, stretches and crosses to AVI. They embrace as darkness overtakes the stage, but the music continues.)

THE END



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