

THE PO

THE MAGICIAN

Miguel

At age eight was when I first seen this magic trick. This old man held this funny looking wand and he pointed it at this younger kid. The old man didn't make any magical gesture or even say any magic words. I guess the source of his power came from his eyes because you could see the concentration in them. Then it happened, the magic trick, out of nowhere came a thunderous sound and the young man levitated for what seemed like forever. When he finally came back to earth the second part of this trick took place; his skin began to change colors from a pale white to a cold blue. An older man that lived next to me grabbed me and brought me home and I was so angry that I couldn't stay and watch the third part of the act till it was explained to me that what I just witnessed was not a magic trick but something very horrible and very real. A murder. I stood in my room confused, confused because I didn't understand how I really felt. Half of me hated myself for being so foolish to not understand what I was witnessing and the other half was amused at the fact that I took the power out of death and seen it as nothing more than a trick. Was I a monster at the age of eight or a child whose mind guarded me from the reality of life's horrible acts by manipulating my understanding of things? Then I looked in the mirror and in my eyes I saw the same concentration that the man with the magic wand had. Uh oh, could it be I too am a magician?

WEVER *and the Passion*

Writing and Performance at Garner Correctional Institution

Georgia Monaghan

You know you are not attending your average poetry reading when you are instructed to wear no jewelry and bring nothing with you besides two forms of photo I.D.

You know you are not attending your average theatrical performance when you are informed that the play is being delayed while a replacement is found for an actor who is being detained by a lockdown in A Block, due to a fight that broke out involving the very same actor.

I am attending a performance of plays, poetry, and memoirs, being held at Garner Correctional Institution, a maximum-security prison for male offenders tucked away behind lush wooded foliage in one of Connecticut's prettiest and most cultured towns.

I have been invited by Garner's librarian, Mark Aldrich, to witness the creative results of his playwriting course, as well as work produced in creative writing classes taught by Chris Belden.

As a university-educated, middle-class woman who was coddled since birth by overprotective parents, this is an experience I have been anxiously anticipating in every sense of the word.

The experience begins as we drive up to a meticulously landscaped circular driveway in front of an institutional building that could just as easily be a local middle school, until you notice the circling spirals of razor wire at the far end of the car park.

Entering the building, we need to provide photo I.D. at two separate checkpoints before going through a metal detector and storing our car keys in a locker. By some sheer miracle the librarian has managed to gain permission from the assistant warden for me to bring along a photographer to record the event, just as long

as he does not capture the inmates' faces. This is going to be a challenge for the photographer, who believes that faces reveal the real stories. Despite the permission we have been granted, I am still seriously unnerved by the sign informing visitors that taking photographs inside a state prison is an offense punishable by up to twelve months' incarceration.

We wait for Mark as he is paged to escort us to the library, the venue for today's performances. We need to pass through a metal gate that would not be out of place at Alcatraz. I jump back in response to the deafening, gun-like pop as the gate is unlocked for us. We walk through a maze of colorless block walls and stairwells until we arrive at the library.

Inside the actors and performers are buzzing in preparation. Finding a replacement for one of the actors is proving difficult. The role requires bending down on all fours and wearing a pig's snout that the librarian hastily crafted out of a Styrofoam cup this morning. A hefty African-American inmate has no problem wearing the pig's snout and is almost talked into assuming the role until he finds out about the physical demands: "What is it about 370 pounds and bad knees you don't understand?"

A younger inmate without knee problems is quickly found, and we take our seats in the open space of the library. The bookshelves around us are populated by a wide variety of books including everything from classics, the works of Shakespeare, college study guides, and an inordinate number of law books.

The entire back row of seats has been reserved for the "distinguished and esteemed guests." Behind us is a row of four computers currently being used as word processors by some of the inmates. One of the inmates



RIISING

Philip

In rapture as a beautiful rainbowed phoenix he soared through the orange-purple sky toward the setting sun on the horizon. The sun, as it plunged into a rolling green plain, without a soul to be seen but marked by a tall gothic church with spires that pierced the life out of the dimming sun, oozed blood-red light onto the surroundings. The phoenix savored the phantasmal sight with his very soul. As he descended down through moist cotton candy clouds, thick wind pleasantly rustled his tail feathers. But alas, all was not well as it seemed. As he came down to the earth, too late he saw an angry mob of men, previously hidden beneath an ominous hillock, with rusty chains and deadly guns drawn in ambush. Click, click, click!!! The men fired at the poor phoenix and before he could register the sound of gunfire he was hit, his graceful body spasmed in midair with pain. His last thought as a phoenix was of freedom and then he surrendered unto death.



But it was not actual death, for he was not actually a phoenix but a young man awakening in prison. And it was not dusk but rather dawn and the sun was merely beginning its long strenuous climb to proclaim itself king of the heavens. There was however a group of men in uniform, on the tier below who cared not for the young man's freedom—in dream or reality—and were obnoxiously popping his door: click, click, click. At the auditory assault, he rose like Lazarus from the waking dead and rubbed his heavy sleep-crusted eyes. He then paused to reflect on his purpose for the day and strengthen his resolve to make it through this bleak existence. Then he remembered joyfully his dream as a phoenix and realized the existential maxim, that humans are free agents to make their own happiness in the uncorrupted world of the mind. Did not he just create a wonderful dream in which he flew freely—out of nothingness? For there are many he has known who were beautiful, rich, gifted, and most of all miserable souls who hate their life and fellow man. Happiness is a condition of the mind and spirit which is his alone to determine in chains or without. To do this was his purpose every day. Indeed, with his sacred inner place in order he stepped out of his cell to face the ever-changing chaotic outer world.



stands at the podium to thank us. He is profuse and genuine in his expression of appreciation for our attendance. He scans the row of special guests, giving each one eye contact and his generous thanks. It means so much that we have taken the time to hear and value their creative work. You would think that a bevy of local dignitaries were in attendance, but as I look to my left and right I am reminded that it is only myself, the photographer, the librarian's wife, and a local poet. My first instinct is to wonder why none of the performers' families or friends has been invited. Then I remember where I am.

From my vantage point in the back row I cannot see the faces of the inmates in the audience. For a moment I can imagine that I am sitting in the back row of a seminar for a group of orderlies or male nurses, because the inmates are all wearing the same bland, beige, loose uniform so reminiscent of hospitals. The only individual humanity visible from my vantage point is the inmates' different hairstyles: a crew cut here, braided dreadlocks over there, thick brown curly hair, black hair gelled back, a shaved head, a limp silver-gray ponytail. I have to change seats because I can't see the performers past the inmate in front of me who has black frizzy hair pulled into two round buns on top of his head. It's like sitting behind a large fuzzy silhouette of Mickey Mouse. The only other signs of individuality I can see are their shoes—each inmate has a different brand and style of sneakers. I notice that all the sneakers are either black or white. Apparently color is not allowed.

Except for on the walls of the library, where vibrant murals painted by the inmates themselves burst into the room. This is the only evidence of color I have observed anywhere in the jail. The inmates' choice of subjects for the murals is telling: The Trojan Horse and Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* in particular. Nelson Mandela's biography is displayed prominently on a nearby shelf, a symbol of hope and endurance.

Once I have taken in all the imagery, I am confronted again by where I am and who is sitting around me. The problem is I don't know who is sitting around me. As I look around, I cannot help but wonder why each inmate is here. This is a maximum security prison. Every inmate around me has been convicted of a violent crime. *Who is a murderer and who isn't?* There is no way of knowing. *Am I safe here?* The librarian and writing teacher

recline in their chairs seemingly without a care as they listen to the introductions. Unfortunately, neither seems to be bodyguard material. It is just as well that it is not until much later that I find out that one of the inmates performing today has been sentenced to 999 years, 99 months and 999 days. Maximum release date: Not applicable. What would someone have to do to get that kind of sentence?

Recently I attended the Town Players' local production of *Murderers*, a play in which three actors portray three different murderers who explain the reasons and events leading up to each of the capital crimes they committed. It is a black comedy, and the well-educated, middle-class audience laughs, applauds, and enjoys the fictional depiction of these cold-blooded murderers justifying their actions, myself included. Yet I cannot help but wonder how that same audience might react if I could somehow transport them here to experience this event.

The first of three plays, all written and performed by the inmates, is about to begin. It occurs to me that any review I may write will not fulfill the purpose of your average theater review. This is a limited, one-time-only performance and, dear reader, no matter how highly I may recommend the production, there is no chance you can attend.

The order of the plays has been rearranged, so the "understudy" has some time to learn his lines and practice wearing the pig's snout. We start with a play called *Was the Word*, about two friends sitting down to write the Book of Genesis. This subject matter is not what I was expecting. The actors are wearing bathrobes tied around their waists to represent biblical garb. I wonder whether being in a dramatic role is the only chance these inmates ever have to wear anything other than their prison uniforms.

Earlier, Mark informed me that this play had to be viewed and approved by the warden before it could be performed in front of an inmate audience. There was deep concern that the play involved an inmate actor "killing" a member of the prison staff—Mr. Aldrich, the librarian—even though the event happens offstage. The play begins with the two actors sitting at a table examining two large scrolls. We find Laptha and Misrah collaborating on the first book of the Bible. As is common in many artistic partnerships, they begin to experience creative differences:

Laptha: ...The idea about the serpent...couldn't he be more sly than evil?

Misrah: No...we are writing this thing to teach people about the dangers of the world, and we have to hit them hard, right between the eyes. Bam! Evil is what evil does.

The play has the audience's rapt attention. I have taught Catholic high school girls who were not as well-behaved and attentive as this audience of inmates.

The two friends move on, but also have difficulty agreeing on the story of Jonah:

Misrah: ...We have to show God as angry and...wrathful so that people will fear him....We need to scare people away from all of the wickedness....

Laptha: Why? Why can't he be loving and merciful and benevolent?

Laptha shakes with rage and then calmly asks his friend to come into a back room: he has something to show him. Offstage we hear a loud thump and a yelp, and then Laptha returns, wiping his hands on a towel. He thinks for a few seconds and then begins to write:

Laptha: "There were two brothers, Cain and Abel." A good old-fashioned murder, that is what this book needs.

The irony of the situation is not lost on the inmates. They laugh heartily in all the right places.

The second play, *The Great Debate*, is no less philosophical. Two characters, Poverty and Education, engage in a debate about the causes and prevention of crime:

Poverty: You've never been in my shoes. In fact, I don't even have shoes. Heartless robbed me of them the other day.

Education: ...People become content living in poverty and are relegated to a life of crime.

Poverty: Hey, I ain't never do a crime I ain't haft to do.

A unanimous wave of snickering spills out over the audience in bashful self-recognition.

And although I am aware that almost every race is represented here: Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and African-American, I am startled by the doubled-over belly laughs that follow this exchange:

Education: Let's take *Brown vs. The Board of Education* for example...

Poverty: It's not just brown people that are afflicted with poverty, it also affects white people.

Mediator: Gentlemen, please, Race Card couldn't make it tonight so let's just keep it between those who are present.

Finally, Education is given the last word:

Education: Let's not permit our grievances to over shadow our opportunities. Remember that education is free and so is love. (*Education takes off his brand new pair of white sneakers and hands them to Poverty, who slowly and deliberately puts them on his bare feet.*)

Poverty: (*amazed*) Thank you, brother. Now I can walk to the library. It's two miles away, but I've got determination.

Education: Let's go together.

Mediator: ...Join us next week for a debate between Irony and Karma.

Despite the humor here, as Education and Poverty, arms around each others' shoulders, walk offstage, I am misty-eyed. Powerful theater makes you think, feel, ponder, and reflect, and it should also move you—and this has passed the test.

Now surely the third play won't be as philosophical and symbolic as the first two. For goodness sake, I know there is an actor playing a pig!

As *Wake Up, Indra* begins, our understudy pig is finally revealed donning his snout, rolling in the mud, smiling and oinking happily. Perhaps this will be a variation on a children's story. No, this play is about three Hindu gods at their wits' end because one of them has turned himself into a pig:

Shiva: Look upon this disgrace! Lord Indra, King of the Gods, wallows in the mire in a pig body.

Ganesh: If he continues in this manner, by sheer force of his will he could draw the entire world into his pig universe.

Shiva and Ganesh, dressed in floral paisley bed sheets, plead with Indra to resume his divine work to no avail:

Indra: Oink! Oink! I am happy here, be gone with you! From now on I will cease to speak the language of the gods. I will forget all I know of heaven. From now on, as long as I am a pig, I shall be here and now! As a pig!

IF ONLY

Ronald

If only you were born rich life would be easy, right?
If only you weren't black you could get a job, right?

If only you worked 9 to 5 you would be free, right?
If only you just sold weight you wouldn't be in jail, right?

If only you weren't so disrespectful, but you so hood, right?
If only you could get out of your own way you could change your life, right?

If only you could earn respect through giving it, you would be a real man, right?
If only you would treat her like one, she would be your queen, right?

If only you could get an education, you could effect change, right?
If only you didn't see a black president race could be your excuse, right?

Now if only you think about what I said maybe we can prove people wrong, right?

Desperate, Shiva resorts to extreme measures; he casts a spell, and Indra shrieks and rolls around in pain, as if dying. Finally he becomes silent and then pops up onto his feet.

Indra: Oh what a hideous dream I just had! I, king of the gods, was a pig! And not only that but I wanted the whole universe to come into the life of a pig! To have fallen in love with a pig's life! Imagine how much more entrenched in illusion humanity is... and how great their suffering.

As I look around, I wonder whether at some point these inmates fell in love with a pig's life. Is that how they fell from the grace and fell away from the lives they were capable of leading?

The inmate playwright stands to receive his applause with the actors. I am unprepared for the bespectacled, intellectual-looking young man who appears as though he should be attending to someone in an Apple store. The mother and teacher in me weep for the missed opportunities and wasted potential I see in front of me. This young man is as intelligent and thoughtful as my own son. What choices led him to where he is today? Which wrong turns did he make? Which wrong-way signs did he ignore?

The theatrical part of the program has ended, and now Mr. Belden, the creative writing teacher, introduces a series of readings by the inmates who have taken part in an eight-week creative writing program. One of the first readers is the oldest man in the room, who sports a silver-gray ponytail. He seems obviously unwell and needs a cane as he limps up to the podium. A fellow inmate brings him a cup of water without being asked, and tenderly pats him on the back. His voice is husky with age, and I cannot make out every word of his poem entitled "Self-Portrait," but I catch his description of his "eyes born brown; now correctional gray." I am taken aback by how old and weak he seems, and I can't help but wonder when he committed the crime that placed him here.

One of the assignments the writing teacher has given the class is "Waking Up in My Cell." Of all the prompts given, this one has sparked the most protest. One of the inmates prefaces his reading by telling us that he spoke to the teacher after class to argue against completing this writing task: "Mr Belden, I am doing this writing class to escape reality, not to write about it." Another inmate eyeballed the teacher and asked him whether he realized what he was asking them to do. The moment of waking up each and every morning in

a prison cell can be the most devastating aspect of incarceration. Another objected that with all the cells being identical square white blocks, there was nothing to write about. Yet some of the most powerful and diverse writing comes out of this prompt. One inmate ends his poem with, "In another phase of remorse / Here I lay / Waking up to go to my writing course." Another exhorts his fellow inmates to sign up for the next round of the writing classes, saying, "It will open things up in you."

The inmates' memoirs recall simple and happy memories, as well as poignant ones. An elementary school Mexican Hat Dance performed by "three-footers in sombreros" precedes a letter to an unknown incarcerated father, describing how "proud" he would be to know that his son, although never having met him, has followed so faithfully in his footsteps.

Although one inmate writes that time "is an adversary that must be respected," the one thing these writers have, which many aspiring writers holding down day jobs would envy, is the time to write. The inmates meet for an hour a week to discuss their writing projects, but most of the actual writing is done while they are in their own computer-less cells. They all write by hand in composition books that must then be transcribed by other inmates, who type up their work on the library's computers, which, even in 2010, are still driven by floppy technology. My request to have all the writing I've heard today emailed to me is impossible—there is no internet or email allowed on the computers in the prison library.

Mr Belden concludes this special event by quoting Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote, "I took a long look at myself and, for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray—astray not so much from the law as from being human, civilized. ... That is why I started to write. To save myself."

If the plays have touched me and brought me near to tears, the raw, emotionally honest poetry and readings have rocked me to the core. Their personal writing has revealed each inmate's individuality and humanity in a way for which I was unprepared.

As I stay behind to shake hands and thank each of the inmates who shared his work, I look into eyes and faces that I would never guess could be capable of any atrocity. Could writing possibly have the power to heal and save these men and transport them to a better life? I can only pray that the transcendent power of their writing affects them as much as it has affected me. •

SUMMERTIME ASH

L.

My brother holds my bronze body as the ash floats and twirls in the summertime air. His arms tense and shake as he empties the rest of my remains in the ocean-scented breeze. His face is full of pain, full of loss, but the more I drift away, the more his face turns into the face of a boy, and the further I go, the more I can see. I can see another boy, but smaller, standing next to him. He has a missing tooth and brown hair. He's smiling and laughing as he throws rocks off the cliff of Watch Hill. We were only there for a day, but I remembered that day for the rest of my days. It was my first memory, it was the beginning. The bright sun and blue sky seemed to stretch forever over the dark blue Atlantic. The image is in such contrast to the stark town of forty thousand where I resided. The town sixty miles away, the town that birthed John Brown, the town of factories, drugs, and alcohol.

The years wasted in that town flash and dance as I continue to swirl into the blue void. I can no longer see the ground or my brother below me, but as I continue to float I feel at home. I feel at peace. I am back where I started.

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—Eldridge Cleaver

WEATHER UPDATE

J.G.

September 14, 2007: Overcast with endless loops of razor wire in sight. This follows today's stunning earthquake, measuring 8 on the 10-point Richter scale.

It was centred principally along the Hartford-Newtown no-fault line, previously thought to be seismically stable. Persistent tremors continue. The resulting devastation toppled or damaged virtually every landmark in the area. Recurrent tsunami-sized waves of emotion seem inevitable. And a major depression is expected to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

The sudden catastrophe caught the average citizen by complete surprise, dashing his expectation for some quiet years of modest productivity and peace, hopefully near Alexandria.

Now, in the analysis of experts, such a person faces 1½ to 2 years' anxiety and crushing confinement in spartan isolation. This is made all the more acute by the citizen's persistent plea: "I always followed the law, and tried to avoid trouble!"

The overblown charge will soon be followed by the pro forma "casus prohibitus" inquiry, hastily patched together and thrust before the jaded Inquisitor. Adjusting his black robes, he picks up his rubber stamp, inks it, and brings it down firmly: "OK with me!"

Details about the distant, conclusive "trial" will be available in about a year. Quake damage and cost updates will continue as they are released.

On the lighter side, nippy nights signal that it's time to get flower bulbs in the ground! Try blue crocuses—in April, they'll taunt you: "Remember Groundhog Day? Groundhog Day!..."