

Walk In Those Shoes

Winter 2026 Newsletter – ISSUE 16

The Planning Platter

By Angela Maureen Robbins

On February 26, I began my 30th year of incarceration. While it hasn't been easy, I always endeavor to use my time to the best possible advantage - taking college classes toward my degree, learning new skills, facing emotional pain. I want to leave better than I was when I came. Hopefully, I will be remarkably different in many ways.

In the United States, there is no parole opportunity for federal inmates to apply for an early release. But in the military Court, that under which I was convicted and sentenced, there is parole. It is an annual appearance after ten years of confinement. To many, an annual hearing sounds like an amazing opportunity.

I don't want to sound ungrateful; it is an amazing opportunity. One for which I am exceedingly grateful because there are so many others that do not have that possibility, and I see them every day. But when you peel back the layers of what an annual hearing means to a person, to their family, and even to a victim's family, you see another side.

There is a cycle of preparation that the incarcerated individual must go through to prepare for parole consideration - obtaining letters of employment, housing, and support from family and friends; creating release plans; writing a statement and rehearsing your statement so your delivery isn't horrible. Then there is the ticking clock while you wait for the date of the hearing to arrive. It sits in the back of your mind no matter what you're doing - eating, talking to friends, working out, sitting in a class, it doesn't matter. The thought is there.

Yet the loudest ticking of all follows the hearing. Leading up to that day, every waking moment was filled with thoughts of the actual hearing, leaving you unprepared for the wait that follows. You are completely derailed. Sometimes I lie awake at night, wondering about the response. Will it be different than the last 20 years of denials? Will I even be able to walk out of the office with another denial? How will I break it to my mother, who's been waiting for three decades for her child to come home, that we have to wait yet another year? Other nights I think about what type of car I'd like to drive, or how I will be able to learn to use a cell phone fast enough to gain employment or pay for *anything*, because who uses cash anymore? Sometimes, if I let myself go... I think about enrolling in a cooking class where I can learn how to make authentic sushi, or swimming in the ocean again, or standing outside during a time normally reserved for count and not having to look around.

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SPRING WRITING CONTEST RESULTS

1st Place – Angela Maureen Robbins, *The Planning Platter*

2nd Place – Darrell Manness, *Those Who Care*

3rd Place – Jose Rodriguez-Basquez, *The Way Back*

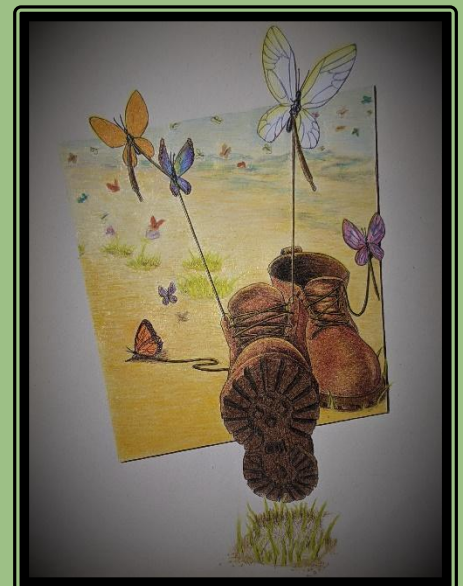
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Writers whose essays are chosen for Page 1 of the monthly newsletter will receive \$25 upon publication.



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

Recently, while sitting with my friend Allison and discussing plans for a mentoring program we both participate in, the conversation meandered, as most do. I stumbled onto my challenges when thinking about the future. I admitted that hope, to me, is such a dangerous thing because the disappointment is crushing when the denials come. Family and friends don't understand this unless I give them a deep and depressing explanation. I sometimes think I am cutting off *their* hope by not wanting to plan or fantasize with them. But I can't let hope loose in my heart because then I won't be able to breathe as I walk out of that office with yet another denial in my hand.

I met Allison roughly thirteen years ago. We both worked in the Education Department, both teaching GED classes. Our friendship grew organically from working together as well as having a similar interest in art. After many years we ended up selecting seats across from each other so that we both had plenty of space to spread out our crafting supplies, but could still speak if we desired conversation. When I took a victim impact class, Allison was the facilitator and helped me gain a better understanding of the impact behaviors have on others. I felt comfortable sharing my years of pain and challenges with her. Not only had she been college educated in psychiatry, but she was a caring and compassionate person who could listen without judgment.

When she countered my pain with her own thoughts on hope - *give it room to breathe* - I had to listen. She told me to let it sit on a platter, alongside the other dishes at the table. Consider it a platter of possibilities, the future I envision. She told me to focus on the plate in front of me.

I thought this was cute, maybe a bit simplistic, but she was definitely onto something. She told me we can add to and take away from the platter as we see fit. We don't have to invest any real energy into what's existing there. But since we're aware of it, we can also passively plan for that future by adding to our skill set, or moving in directions that would make those possibilities viable. I took this advice and tucked it away for future reflection.

I then went on to describe my struggles with reopening the wounds I created thirty years ago in order to prepare for these hearings. I hate having to go through the same process year after year and crushing my family's hopes with denials. I equally despise knowing that my victim's family must revisit the pain every year, not just to commemorate his death, but to ask the parole board to keep me in prison. I can't imagine how this process allows people to heal and to move on with their lives. I have tried to move on and leave that horrible person I used to be behind, but the wound must be re-cut every year, re-opened, re-bled. Philosophically, I can understand that this might actually be a latent manifestation the parole creators intended, but is it good psychologically? I can understand why the parole creators would want me to hurt every year, but the victim's family? Does it not inflict more harm to them?

Rather than meditating on things we'll never know the answers to, Allison shared a little of her history with me so we could reflect on shame. We carry it because neither of us can even recognize the people we were back then. Neither of us can figure out why we made those decisions that inflicted so much pain because we are no longer those people. We were so broken inside that our thoughts actually seemed normal, and trying to explain or rationalize it is a heart-wrenching, futile exercise. An apology doesn't satisfy, it can't explain a logical train of thought, as nothing we said or did back then was logical.

No one but us, or individuals in our situation, could understand these moments. There is not one staff member who could walk me through understanding that guilt serves only three purposes in our lives: showing us that we've erred, teaching us how to prevent making these mistakes again, and guiding us to begin making amends or live a life of amends. "Shame serves no purpose," she told me explicitly. But guilt, well, it can be used to learn and grow and do better.

Shaka Senghor, author of *Writing My Wrongs*, illustrates just how writing can be far more than just a hobby — it's a lifeline. During his 19 years incarcerated, writing became the tool that helped him understand himself, confront his past, and imagine a future he once stopped believing in. His transformation didn't start when he left prison; it started far earlier; during a time he also picked up a pen.

Creative writing isn't just an activity; it's a form of freedom. Writing provides a place to tell the truth, even when the world isn't



...Fast Break Book Club Review — Mad Honey

Peace to all the Fast Break Book Club readers out there endorsing our humanity with your support. Your collective consideration is key to our success, and we thank you for believing in us. We're back with our end-of-summer book selection: **Mad Honey** by Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Finney Boylan.

This pick came from **Kim Carter**, who shared, "Since we previously read Picoult's *The Pact* in our book club and the reviews were fair, I wanted to see how she'd do alongside another author."

What followed was one of our **most heated discussions yet** — conflicting views, strong reactions, and genuinely respectful dialogue as we explored a subject that's becoming less taboo in prisons. Following are some of our member reflections...

Jeremy Murrell offered a direct critique: "Mad Honey was a good read, but the concept was somewhat delusional because all analogies don't equate the same. Plus, it ain't okay to keep secrets and force me to do something I may feel is unnatural."

Warren Gregory highlighted what stood out most to him: "There were three parts overall I liked: good surprises, social issues, and the contrasting writing styles of both authors. It's a story of how our business is our own — until it's not, and we are obligated to inform another."

Darrell Maness added a broader concern: "Mad Honey was a great read but extremely deceptive, and yeah... it's a matter on which I disagree. To me, it's proof of society trying to force what we should think."

Marcus Mitchell considered the craft: "This book was diabolical. The deceit was plotted from the very start. I thought the authors did a phenomenal job researching their material, but I wasn't keen on the subject matter."

Chanton (Terry Robinson) shared a layered reaction: "At first, I was excited to read Mad Honey, then let down; then curious, then bored. It was definitely layered emotionally with a suspense element that lasted the entire book. The subject matter was morally conflicting; personal rights is not the right to deceive others. It helped me in my own writing to see that some characters don't make for good villains."

Final Thoughts

Mad Honey proved unexpectedly relevant, sparking our longest discussion yet. Picoult's seasoned writing and Boylan's ability to keep pace made this collaboration memorable — a must-read for those with literary sensibility, though not for everyone.

Next up for the Fast Break Book Club: **The Three-Body Problem** by Cixin Liu — a sci-fi thriller involving alien contact. Should be interesting. Stay tuned.

UNFRIENDED

By Terry Robinson

Being in prison is bitter enough, but add friends to the mix, and it can become poisonous. Prisoners trusting in the integrity of proven criminals carries a risk that can kill the odds of a productive prison stint. The reason? Some people make prison time work for them, seeking positive transformation, while others create unruliness, chaos, and ruin - which ultimately supports the prison system. By design, prison fractures friendships. In no other place is there this degree of safety in numbers – yet reputation is a solo act. Reputation is the priority for many prisoners, as it is a deterrent for violence and harm, so much so that some will sever a friendship to solidify a reputation, proving themselves never really a friend at all.

I had a friend I considered so close, I called him *'Lil Bro*. Come to find out, we were never really friends at all. I met *'Lil Bro* when he was in his early twenties. He had just arrived on death row and was out of sorts with the experience to come. Some of his mannerisms resonated with me, as I too was once *'new*'. For that reason, I extended a helping hand, which he reciprocated, and we entered into the role of friends.

As friends do, we ate, laughed, and swapped war stories together. We shared pictures of our family, took up opposing views in sports, and in tough times, we each lent an ear. But *'Lil Bro* had other friends and other influences as well, those who promote fear and violence. Those friends were members of a system within the system, one to which I don't subscribe. Our friendship would become fractured over time, and inevitably break apart.

No longer close friends, I still considered *'Lil Bro* an ally, and I would be there for him whenever he needed. However, his new group dynamic championed ruthlessness and reputation, making anybody and everybody a mark. Several times I found myself on the bitter end of *'Lil Bro's* betrayal, determined as he was to prove to others that he was hard. In truth, he was a good guy with wholesome values, suffering herd mentality - yet good guys don't always make good friends.

That's not to say true friendships aren't formed in prison every day, because shared adversity absolutely forges bonds. One of my closest friends, Tony, is a guy I met 30 years ago... in a prison. I visited him after my release, and he has since visited me on death row. He calls my mother his *'ma'*, checks in on my kids and family, and puts money on my books. He has been more than a friend and forever my brother, someone who holds loyalty over everything else. His friendship is the one good thing I got out of prison – someone who's always got my back.

As for *'Lil Bro* and I, we don't talk anymore, preferring tolerance over turmoil. It saddens me that in prison, where reputation is a commodity, some friendships are collateral damage. But real friendships made in prison are thoughtful and supportive, they encourage and don't enrage. I've learned not to toss the title of *'friend'* around loosely, lest it bring about bitter repercussions.

MORE WRITING BY TERRY ROBINSON, AKA CHANTON, can be found at: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/author/chanton/>

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