

**weed-seeds**

*poems by hal cobb*

Hal Cobb #118558  
Luther Lockett Correctional Complex  
Post Office Box 6  
LaGrange, Kentucky 40031

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**The Prisoner Pant**  
(after *The Secretary Chant* by *Marge Piercy*)

My ribs are bars of regret.  
From my heart hang  
chains of regret.  
Razor wire crowns my head.  
My chest wells with sorrow.  
My feet are lead weights.  
Drag. Clank.  
My head is a cacophony.  
My head is a courtroom  
jammed with judges and juries.  
Hands pressed together  
grasping at faith,  
falling flat.  
Crash. Burn.  
My stomach distends.  
From my mouth spew silent screams.  
Hollowed, emptied out,  
humanity drained.  
Dreams die.  
Hopes hie.  
Find me an egg crate  
for I have become  
a shell of  
a man.

## weed-seeds

dwindling dew-drenched dandelions  
desire diaspora; daintily dipping and dancing  
bending biddably in the brisk breath of a breeze  
forever focused on fulfilling their fate and fortune

graceful geese glide over razor  
wire while wispy weed-seeds waft  
through chain-link fence blown beyond  
the vast human wasteland of incarceration

rousing wary words to whirl in my head  
prompting phrases to propose perfect pairings  
and importuning imposition of imaginable images

private poems plead to be put to page  
aspiring abandon, long lusted for liberation  
far from the ache these same few acres accrue  
rife with detachment, disappointment and desperation

forever chained to the past and prior pain in a  
weary warehouse of the discarded to count down  
chalk-marked days of judicial judgment called justice  
discouraged, disparaged and disheartened disjunctions  
out of sight, out of mind, unwitting world rushing on

carefully crafted cadences cannot cope with containment  
expectantly folded, enveloped and stamped  
then sent forth to seek fulfillment on their own

wordsmithed weed-seeds wishing  
to root in friendly, fertile soil  
beyond banal banishment

**insouciance**

the wild ramps  
weighed down by  
remnants of april showers  
seem heathered against the  
recently thawed kentucky bluegrass

vibrant violet volunteers  
proclaim their purple praise  
beneath chain-link and concertina  
heedless of their prison yard rooting  
fulfilling destiny despite imperfect placement

**apollo greets eos**

early morning sun backlights  
a pristine periwinkle panorama

cool, crisp cockcrow air  
caresses chilled taut cheeks

refreshing flared nostrils and  
rejuvenating stale night-air lungs

stirring sluggish, sleepy senses  
with a dew-drenched dawn

diamond-like droplets iridescently  
reflecting rapturously radiant rays

the charioteer of sky teasingly tips his hat  
at the quintessential queen of morning

## lightshow

the benefit of the boring  
white-washed, faux rough hewn  
lumber formed concrete correctional facades

is the blank canvas they provide for  
the dancing lightshows of dawn and twilight  
in this unimaginative, junior-college-like campus  
wrapped in twin razor-wired, chain-link enclosures  
dropped on an old garbage dump on a former farm amid  
the otherwise unsuspecting kentucky bluegrass countryside

red sky at morning spreads a new kind of warning  
reflected first by the aluminum flashing edged flat roofs  
then the bare backdrop comes to life with corals and saffron  
as swathing strokes of amber, gold and magenta irradiate daybreak

red sky at night portends a prisoner's delight  
as purpled hues transverse shocking pinks  
to quench flaming reds and burnt umbers  
peripheral sunset brilliantly illuminates  
the khaki clad compound perpetually  
locked down in daunting drabness



## **lamentation**

they stand tall across a hidden creek beyond not one  
but two twelve foot chain-link fences strewn with scrolls of razor wire

they rise above the enclosure, a grove stretching wide along the hillside  
scaling up a grassy meadow to a railing and cornfield above

I long to sit in their shade, feel rough bark against my back  
strain to hear sap circulate as the breeze rustles through leafy boughs

I want to sidle up the trunks, hang from the branches  
and sit cradled in the nurturing crook of nature's limbs

a junior high choir teacher once coaxed  
"I think that I shall never see a poem a lovely..." out of me

but today, words are my only solace  
and a found leaf pressed between journal pages  
is as close as I can tangibly get:  
a prisoner pining for outlying trees

## reality shots

the early morning storm clouds  
give way to the piercing rays of dawn  
the rain washed atmosphere clear and bright  
fresh air cleansing night locked lungs emerging  
for the first morning trek on a recreation field track

the rain glazed grass glistening as the  
outlying trees wave in the welcoming wind  
above the grove, a faint rainbow in the southwestern sky  
drops of rain weep from nowhere in the cloudless, sun-filled heavens  
joyously transcendent in the rapturous radiance of dawn's refreshing re-creation

the swallows cease their saturday summer song  
as the peace and quiet of a pristine prison morning  
is pierced by cracks of gunfire echoing this shallow valley  
past eh grass and gravel moat between twin concertina-capped fences  
up the hill, beyond the glen, across the empty fields, a firing range for correctional staff

my reverie disrupted by reality  
there are guns in them-there towers  
the pickup truck perimeter patrol is packing  
endlessly circling like a vulture seeking carrion  
ready to take the life, at least this morning, I savor

**i'm a grown ass man**

don't talk to me like i'm a child  
he added from behind a mask of masculinity  
a caricature or machismo trying to convince himself  
as much as anyone else he knew what it was to be a man

bragging of the baby-mommas left in his wake  
how he never held a real job 'cause he could hustle –  
of the guns he had, the threats he made, the things he took

i think of my undereducated, underpaid, underappreciated father  
who juggle three and four jobs at a time to keep a roof over our heads  
keep us well clothed, well fed and still send money to his widowed mama

all the while caring for five kids, all by the same woman, his partner for life  
quietly paying for the doctors, dentists and optometrists of childhood  
tending to the yard, his garden, making cakes for our birthdays  
still finding time to take us fishing and teach us to cook

and never once did he complain or have to defend his manhood  
to a bunch of inmates in a prison yard chow hall line

## my father's roses

it was a treacherous, beautiful thing  
to exit the backseat driver's side of the '57 Chevy Bel-Air  
when dad would park it in the driveway next to  
our crackerbox house on Schoen Drive

there was a twelve inch  
strip of dirt between the foundation  
and the concrete driveway alongside the house  
carefully amended with fertilizer and planted  
with half a dozen or so tea roses

he attended to them  
in ways he never tended to us attentively  
pruning, dusting, debugging and deadheading  
coaxing from thorny branches fragrant blossoms of  
bright whites and ivory to coral and rhodamine

we could never just throw the  
door wide open and bound out of the car  
like on the passenger side with its grassy knoll  
between the driveway and the neighbor's house

you had to judiciously nudge  
the door barely open and squeeze  
through the slightest slit possible as not  
to scratch the paint on the Chevy or, god forbid,  
cause any damage to his precious, prized roses

if you forgot, you not only risked  
scratches and gashes from the wicked, vicious thorns  
but a smack upside the head or the miserable commission  
to retrieve his famous skinny belt from his bedroom closet  
or to harvest a switch from the forsythia bush  
out back to wrap around the legs  
of the bad boys of summer

**Fishing Fall Creek (after Nighttime Fires by Regina Barreca)**

When I was seven in Indianapolis  
we drove to fish at Fall Creek. Rarely all seven of us,  
usually the three boys and Dad. Sometimes Mom  
would tag along. I hadn't the patience to fish with  
a cane pole and its red and white plastic bobber,  
nightcrawlers dug from our garden as bait. I'd  
take a sketchbook or hike the muddy trails  
around the tributary of the White River.  
It was my father's favorite fishing spot. Once  
We lined the trunk of his car to smuggle back  
remnants of a sand bar to fill the box at the  
bottom of our backyard swingset slide.

I made titillating discoveries on my solo hikes  
that would make my young heart palpitate and  
my innocent mind race: discarded underwear,  
limp and slimy fat balloons, little square silver  
wrappers littering the pathway. I'd also find lures  
and bobbers dangling from trees, yards of fishing  
line dotted with clamped on lead weights. I'd  
liberate them from leafy limbs and place the  
new found treasures in the family tackle box to  
atone the guilty secret of the other furtive finds.

Those times Dad would arrive home later  
than expected, he'd say he stopped by Fall Creek  
for a little fishing. No one questioned him when  
no blue gill or crappie accompanied him home. I was in  
high school before I heard about Fall Creek, around the  
same time I discovered a stash of magazines in the trunk  
of my father's car with names like *Blueboy*, *Honcho* and  
*Mandate*. One of the junior high English teachers  
had been busted along Fall Creek. Something  
called lewd behavior. Echoes of homos and queers  
in the haunted halls of high school pricked up ears and  
made my heart palpitate and my not-so-innocent mind race.  
It took me years to admit that two and two do indeed  
make four, to grasp my father's draw to the banks of  
Fall Creek. Fishers of men cast for more than crappie.

**Pendleton Pike** (*after Snapping Beans by Lisa Parker*)

I snapped the seat belt into the silver buckle  
in the empty space between my father and me.  
I was home for the weekend  
from California, for my brother's wedding.  
James Taylor sang, "You've Got a Friend"  
as I pulled from Oaklandon Road down  
Pendleton Pike towards town.  
He'd been Chatty Cathy at the house,  
proud papa with all his brood under his roof  
for the first time in years, since my divorce,  
since my coming out, chef and master of ceremonies  
for the celebratory weekend,  
coordinating catering for the reception,  
he'd asked me to drive him to town to pick up last minute supplies.  
The small talk died off  
as the new development along the highway  
gave way to the cornfields of my youth.  
The silence between us grew, both of us staring at  
the road, not daring to look the other's direction.  
My mind was screaming as the silence roared,  
ASK HIM NOW! CONFRONT HIM NOW!  
All I could muster was a meek, How're you with me now?  
He'd refused to come to the phone for months  
when I'd call home, my mother taking her turn  
as intercessor between prodigal son and wounded parent.  
Part of me wanted to tell him  
I understood why he beat me,  
trying to beat it out of me like  
Uncle Milton tried to beat it out of him;  
that I knew he didn't do it maliciously,  
that he hadn't purposely tried to traumatize me  
and drive me out of my body, that I forgave him.  
The other part of me wanted to pummel him  
and make him suffer the way he'd made me suffer.  
Part of me wanted to affirm the  
best parts of me came directly from him,  
from our affinity, and that I was  
happier now than I'd ever been.

The rough hand that had earlier  
crafted delicate roses out of  
the creamiest icing in the world  
for the towering wedding cake  
seemed to search the empty space  
for cigarettes he no longer smoked.  
He said, You made your choice.  
There was no accusation in his voice.  
In between the lines I heard, And I made mine.

## hands

those are my hands  
etched on her gravestone  
one hand holding a thirsty cup  
the other pouring a quenching pitcher  
“serve on another with love” it says

designed by her hand for a  
national church convention  
she carefully posed my hand  
holding a pyrex custard dish  
as she sprawled and crawled  
across the living room floor  
shifting to find the right angle  
hurling frustrated threats at me  
to still my twitching hand  
as my fingers cramped

at other times, her tiny hand  
clasped tightly in mine  
felt small, but far from helpless  
“baboon grip” she called it  
I, secretly scared to let go  
she was the one who  
was going to save  
me from myself

her hands caring, capable  
mine nail-bitten and anxious  
hers hands sure and fluid  
mine tentative, choppy  
always second guessing

her hands unsuspecting  
mine desperate  
hers trusting  
mine hopeless

she filled my cup



as I filled her tub  
she always strived  
to quench my thirst  
I, in turn, squelched her  
she offered me living waters  
I gave her a watery grave

her hands always  
served me with  
nothing but love  
my hands mistook  
saving her from me  
as the same

my hands are still  
nail-bitten and anxious  
she always saw  
more in my hands  
than I did

## **legacy**

it was my job  
to provide her  
a world of safety  
instead, I filled her  
world with fear

it was my job  
to protect her  
from monsters  
and bogeymen  
instead, I was  
the channel

it was my job  
to hold her tight  
when she was scared  
and dry her eyes when  
fearful teardrops fell  
instead, I brought  
horror into her life  
and clouded her eyes  
with unspeakable terror  
and left her to cry alone

it was my job  
to be a soft  
place for her to fall  
to be a source  
for lightness and joy  
instead, I have become  
a hard spot in her heart  
bricked behind the shame  
of a different name I secretly bore  
and swore I'd never pass on

I've become a lump  
a horrid heavy weight  
secretly carried and carefully

hidden not just from herself  
but from her world

most fearful that she  
might more than  
sound like me  
look like me  
act like me  
she might  
be like  
me

## **labyrinth**

winding into the great unknown  
I drop all pretense of knowing –  
slowly, silently, sinking step by step  
beyond the belly of the beast  
into the bowels of my being

I return to the womb expectant  
of rebirth, renewal, realization –  
the consistent cacophony of confusion  
quieting as I follow a winding pathway  
previously and prayerful paved

walking alone, I sojourn with others  
embracing affinity with those  
who have walked this way  
before in awe across the ages –  
I remain uniquely and quietly  
on a present path of my own

the journey inward, uncharted –  
each tangible stride follows  
a flowing map clearly marked  
each carefully laid turn snaking  
private pilgrims to promised lands  
of stillness, quietness, inner sanctum  
where resides the still, small voice  
awaiting attention, awareness, and  
the inherent knowing of inner godliness

## **salsa meditation**

my hands will smell for days of onions, garlic  
and jalapenos despite repeated washings after slicing, dicing  
and mincing with my trusty lid-o-matic and plastic picnic knife  
essential utensils of a prison prep chef in a concrete and steel cell-cum-kitchen

I love the feel of a ripe, juicy tomato  
the fresh earthiness of chopped green pepper  
the abundant aromas attack my olfactory senses  
tempting and teasing my palate with anticipatory explosion of first taste

and in that moment I am awakened, enlivened, emboldened  
transported from bland greyness of confinement to full sensory recall  
of my essential humanity

## not just alcatraz

I hear them before I open my eyes  
raucously and joyfully heralding the morn  
why is it birds always sound happy, contented?

of all the places on earth to choose to live  
they've picked this place of concrete and steel, fences and razorwire  
nesting in any nook or crook or cranny in this warehouse of misfits and malcontents

using their avian charms to bring out the best in the worst of the worst  
hard-core convicts siren-seduced from antisocial and selfish ways  
to feed the birds with tuppence of bread

## no offense

it must be okay  
to be prejudiced  
hold a bias against  
a whole class of people  
just as long as you say  
"no offense to anybody"  
miss california said so

a bigot can hold on to  
her hatred and phobias  
as long as she smiles and says  
"that's just the way I was raised"

ergo, son of jim crow should be allowed  
to hold on to his prejudice, bigotry and flag  
as long as he streaks his hair and bleaches his teeth  
"such a fine looking young man, that's just the way he was raised"  
his daddy and granddaddy and great granddaddy must be so proud

now poor miss california's been fired and she's crying foul  
"tolerance is a two-way street" she self-righteously proclaims  
chiding the untolerated to tolerate her intolerance...  
someone should've raised those people better

**only the lonely**

the bees are busy  
doing their busy-bee thing  
in fields of clover blossoming beneath  
my idle feet dangling from a bench too high

a pair of butterfly flit and fly  
playing a round of butterfly tag  
or is it a seductive dance of romance  
mocking me, alone with my thoughts and pen

a train's passing whistle wails  
a gaggle of geese glide overhead  
a jet's distant stream trails the sky  
as I sit solitaire in the same spot still



## fundamental query

anticipation unfulfilled  
unspoken promise denied

bruised heart, wounded ego  
bewildered soul craves understanding

does stone cold law  
brittle parchment, crackled ink  
usurp the power of the word made flesh?

is the word not love?

is not a lover's tender touch  
a passionate embrace, soul's  
response to spirit's breath?

are not lovingkindness and compassion shared  
the divine lifting, exalting the mundane?

self-named keeper's of light  
trace shadow on the ground  
call it unadulterated truth

yesterday's shades are not today's  
as sun transverses a revolving earth  
its tilted axis ever changing the horizon  
causing shadow to shift minute by minute  
hour by hour, day by day, never the same

and yet you continue to heed  
the clamoring of cloaked charlatans  
tuning out your own intuitive intelligence  
and the soft whispers of your still, small voice  
and every cell crying out in your god-gifted,  
divinely created and wholly-blessed body

to give vacant, vapid voices credence  
and silence the supplications of your

suppressed body, harnessed heart  
and repressed soul, as every  
ounce of your beloved being pleads  
for revelatory recognition, rescue and release

why are you still shrouded and sheathed in the shadows  
sitting on your hands, when you were created to run  
arms wide open, naked and joyous in the sun?

now tell me truly: is truth ever found with  
back to the sun and downward gaze?

## **the thought of you**

last night  
I resented the void  
that was your side of the bed

I hated you  
for the absence  
you could not control

I decried  
the unfairness of fate  
railed against my brokenness

tonight  
I drift off drowsily  
lost in the thought of you

your presence  
palpable, overwhelming  
enveloping, all encompassing

I recognize  
your ever present presence  
in my full and everlasting heart

and I know  
wherever your heart is  
I, too, dwell there forevermore

## **I wonder**

who decided a button was cute  
or tested rocks (boxed or not) for I.Q.?

who decided a pin was neat  
or checked a doornail for a pulse?

who interviewed the insect to  
ascertain if he were contented in a carpet?

and who was it that fondled the witch  
and lived to tell the temperature of her tits?

## **I wonder too**

if an apple a day  
keeps the doctor away  
how many apples does it take  
to get him to make a house call?

## **I wonder why**

the stone turning stoner  
could find no stonewort  
on the river rolled rocks

he was neither stony-faced  
nor stone-hearted as he searched  
for spot-on stones for his stonework

but as often is the case for the stoned  
his brain went stone-cold, stone-dead  
stonewalling the stonemason's stone search

so he returned to his stonemason shack  
in his stonewashed jeans to stonily munch  
stoneground snacks from a stoneware saucer

**haiku (or two)**

revealed unaware  
a kimono akimbo  
a peek-a-boo breast

a kilt akilter  
an alluring enticement  
the question answered

**a few haiku (mind you)**

I am not my mind  
I am not ego or thought  
present with presence

the thoughts drifting by  
are but as clouds in the sky  
transiting my mind

## vincent

I don't recall if it was  
don mclean or mr. doversberger  
who first introduced me back in the '70's

was it radio waves wafting the words of  
"starry, starry night" accompanied by a mournful guitar  
or the dulcet narrative tones of a high school art class slide show

art history and pop culture converged in a sad, despondent song  
and the reverential oration about a desperate man who could not, not paint  
I listened to the stories but could not comprehend any more than adolescent angst allowed

an arthouse screening of "vincent and theo"  
later informed me of brotherly love  
the artist yet tossed between  
obsession and depression  
still I could not know

an unexpected trip to new york city –  
a strategically planned excursion  
to the museum of modern art

the minstrel and art historian had me insufficiently prepared  
as my emotional knees were knocked out from under me  
my soul never knew someone could sing out so clearly  
on canvas with dynamic and fervid swaths of paint  
so completely full of compassion and knowing

I at once felt awed and overwhelmed –  
enormously empty and inadequate –  
as insignificant a grain of sand –  
measureless as drops in ocean

he drew me in, mesmerized by vibrant color  
bright and alluring as blazing sunflowers  
cool and serene as iridescent irises  
seduced by the lurid dance of

night sky moon and stars

his perpetual moment, his welcoming eye  
the presence of his pure unbridled passion  
captured, challenged and informed me

he understood all I longed to know  
illuminated what otherwise  
could not be expressed

he felled me with wonderment  
he made me pensively ponder –  
would I ever know passion so intoxicating?  
could I ever understand the blessing and the curse  
of being so completely and creatively obsessed?