
HUCK'S PICKS

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Issue 15



Richard Grosso should be writing material for *The Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report*. I mean, this guy is *seriously* funny, if you'll pardon the oxymoron. Nobody escapes his satirical pen, not the Mob, not the jerk in line ahead of you at the airport, not Hitler, not even Grosso himself. Ever think about strapping a dead moose on your car, only to discover that a few miles down the road, the beast is signaling for a turn? Grosso does, and he does it and so much more with an eye for the kind of humor that makes many of us laugh when nothing else does.

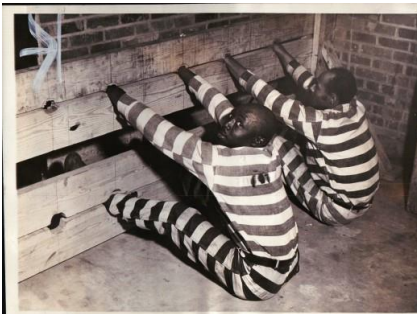
If you know someone whose death would not upset you, you'll love his suggestion for legalizing homicide, restricting it of course to one person per month. Grosso has worked out the details nicely, including tossing in a divorce lawyer for an Easter two-fer!

But make no mistake; like any good satirist, Grosso hides the truth barely below the surface. After stating that murder "is a part of life," for example, he drops the bomb: "My society taught me that." Food for thought in the only Western nation that still kills its citizens.

And speaking of America, wait until you read Grosso's take on Christopher Columbus and his neighbor, Mrs. Rosetti, who swears he'll sail off the edge if he leaves town. Oh yeah, and when Queen Isabella initially resists his proposal to sail off and discover America, Chris tosses in a promise to discover Stevie Ray Vaughn as well. That seals the deal, but then again, who could resist that promise?

I could write pages about this funny, funny book, but you need to get it yourself and spend time with it to enjoy it to its fullest. I'm in the middle of my third excursion through it and still spotting hysterical things I previously missed. Do yourself a favor and read *Comedy Central in America* from this immensely talented writer. Mr. Grosso has a career ahead of him if he wants one. After all, who doesn't need a laugh, especially today when so many idiots in DC offer so many tempting targets for a satirist's pen. Oscar Wilde is no doubt spinning in his grave at the lost opportunities. (fictvv)

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Leonard C. Jefferson is in prison in Pennsylvania, and he isn't happy about it. Hard to imagine who would be, but Jefferson is even more irate because the criminal-justice system convicted him before he was ever brought to trial. His book, *Pennsylvania Imprisons Blacks At Highest Rate*, details not only his own case but, as the title reveals, a disturbing pattern of discrimination against black defendants in general.

This work is a synthesis of artistic genres, each with its own aesthetic but bound by a common thread: the blatant and organized effort to take more African American men and women off the street. Jefferson's visual art covers every issue, from the execution of Troy Davis in Georgia to the killing of Trayvon Martin in

Florida, from the plantation mentality found in every prison to the brutality that supports it. And along the way, we get a valuable history lesson, one often neglected, as Jefferson reminds us, in America's public schools.

"Heritage of Hatred," for example, explains the birth of the blues within the context of black misery under the thumb of white oppression. "Black History Month" exposes the tradition for what it is, an attempt to mollify a guilty conscience. And in "The Dirtiest of Deeds" the poet reveals the hypocrisy of capital punishment and the superficial explanation that separates it from other forms of homicide.

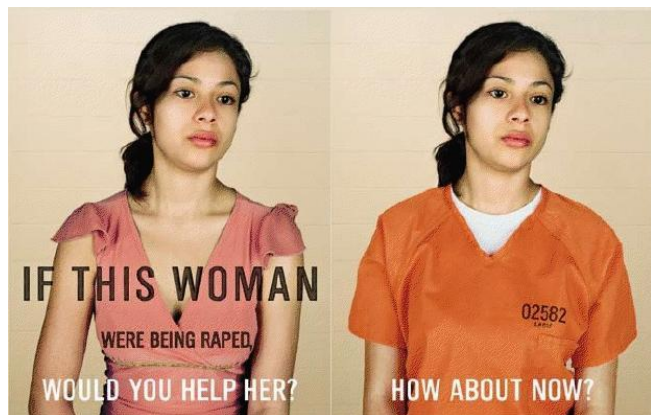
We even get a caustic, and well-deserved, treatment of Clarence Thomas (in "Thirsty") as a traitor to his race. And yet, in "Big Picture," Jefferson doesn't hesitate to aim his critique at passive racists or unconcerned African Americans more intent on living in their own hermetic bubbles than discovering the tragedy that lies just outside their doors. As he points out, maybe America isn't so damned beautiful after all.

Closing the work, and the door on higher expectations, are two letters from an attorney Jefferson contacted for assistance. The lawyer "vaguely remembers" the case and suggests that Jefferson somehow find the money to hire him after being represented by appointed counsel at trial. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. If you think the country's attitudes have progressed beyond 1865, then you need to read Jefferson's book.

This work is a disturbing collection of poetry, visual art, and narrative force. It accomplishes its goal precisely because it is disturbing, which should provoke a thoughtful response from anyone with an IQ above room temperature. (nonfictvv)



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Patricia Prewitt has hit another homerun with her one-act play, *PREA*. For those of you who don't know, PREA is the acronym for the Prison Rape Elimination Act, passed by Congress in 2003 and intended to stop--or at least reduce--the incidence of rape in prison. A noble goal, its success was doomed from the beginning, at least partially because of the attitudes Ms. Prewitt reveals in her drama.

The play begins when a prison, intending to present the usual dog-and-pony show to a naive audience, picks three women (two lifers) to "discuss" PREA and its local success, focusing, of course, on sexual assaults by one prisoner on another. The guard orchestrating the performance isn't, however, prepared for the direction the conversation

immediately takes.

Prewitt's characters take no prisoners in describing the sexual assaults that occur in women's prisons, only they pull the curtain back to reveal the real source of the problem: the male guards who prey on the female prisoners. As Patty and Janiece explain, predatory guards use a variety of tactics to compel sex, either through favors (gifts, perks, etc.) or force. And in each case, these perverts act with impunity, relying on the prison investigator's standard response in rejecting any complaints by the victims as either lies or misinterpretations of the guard's intent. Only rarely does a prosecution commence as a result of a rape of a prisoner by a guard.

Patty Prewitt tells it like it is, and it doesn't take a brain surgeon to recognize the intrinsic problem of posting male guards inside women's prisons. It's a rapist's paradise: a large cohort of potential victims with small probability of getting caught. The sexual predator/sadist can indulge his basest whim with virtual impunity, because the prison administration will always prefer to protect its image than ensure justice for the victims.

As Prewitt's action closes, the two lifers share a smile about the supervising guard's reaction. The rest of us can only shake our heads in disgust at the vulnerability of the victims placed at the mercy of men who should themselves be stuffed in a hole someplace. If you're looking for a "real" take on what women experience in prison, check out this piece--and then try to sleep in your bed where you're safe and warm. (dramavv)

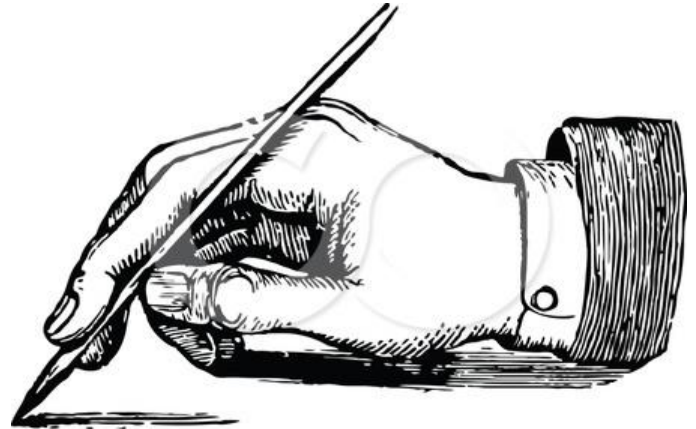
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Kennard Short's collection of remarkable drawings, *Some of My Art*, covers a broad spectrum of subjects, all of which are designed to convey a sense of hope mingled with the harsh reality of prison and a world that doesn't always give us what we want. Short's jailhouse subjects reflect the loss any prison sentence carries, but the artist also provides accompanying aphorisms that serve as a counterpoise by reminding us that everyone makes mistakes.

History is also one of Short's themes, specifically a drawing commemorating the heroic first responders on 9/11 and a striking portrait of Trayvon Martin with the inscribed question: "What if Trayvon Martin was your son?" Short also includes an arresting drawing of two gloved fighters, one labeled "Cancer" and the other "The Cure." The Cure is in the process of KOing a cowering Cancer, a contest Short accurately portrays as "The Greatest Fight In the World."

As moving as these drawings are, Short's obvious strength is evident in his portraits, including a rendering of President Obama that could almost be described as a trompe l'oeil. This is juxtaposed with an equally impressive drawing that captures the thoughtful intelligence of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prison artists are limited in resources, but that hasn't stopped Kennard Short from exercising both his imagination and talent in this brief portfolio. If we're lucky, we'll see more from him in the future. (artvv)



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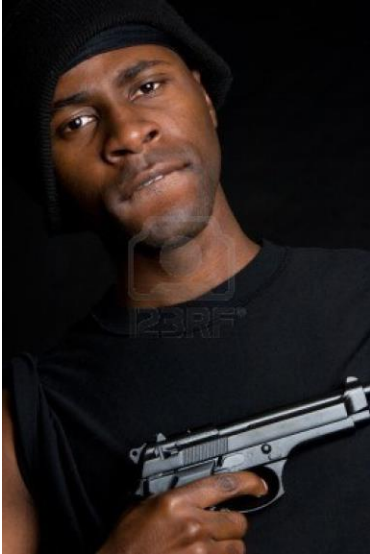
Sean Riker insists that he is not an artist, and yet his collection of *Drawings and Pix* shows us otherwise. As he points out, each drawing took a substantial amount of time to create, and any product of the imagination that finds expression on the page qualifies as art; the individual responsible for that creation is therefore an artist. The only question is what that art evokes in the viewer.

The drawings themselves are optically challenging, formed from an intricate combination of calligraphy and eclectic themes, from the *Shawshank Redemption* to the dark side of psychopathology and the Klan. Each is certain to demand both attention and interpretation, especially if your aesthetic runs to Vikings and runes.

Accompanying the drawings are a series of photographs of Riker, extending from his childhood to his current prison yard picture. This could not have been an easy journey for him, either in indulging the memories of a far better world and sharing them with a wide audience. Most prisoners chose to remain intensely private about their families, either from some atavistic protective instinct or from the attitude that families are nobody else's business. Sean Riker is a different breed, wanting us to share in his joy and

eager for us to see where he had been, compared with where he is now. As he states, the work is dedicated to his father, who "still holds him today." And that says it all. (artvv)

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At first glance, Kory Saunders's memoir, *Mi Vida Loca*, is the typical ex-banger's recantation of the dysfunctional lifestyle he pursued and eventually came to regret. A closer reading, however, reveals that it is much more. Certainly, the usual elements are there: parents who were addicts and dealers, including an equal opportunity pervert of a father who molested both Saunders and his sister, and criminal behavior before the third grade. No wonder the author endured school as a shy, introverted kid with low self-esteem and a need for social acceptance.

Unfortunately, Saunders gets snared early for minor crimes and gradually escalates until he earns his third strike and seventeen years, no surprise following a first arrest at eight and jail sentence at fourteen. Only after the plunge did he sit down and take a hard look at himself.

But the book deviates from the norm, both in form and function, morphing from a narrative to a combination of poetry and brief, insightful observations, all overlaying a subtext of strong religious faith. As Saunders tells us, serious introspection is necessary for change. Using biblical stories as illustrations, he devotes large sections of his book to his concern about today's children. Instead of recruiting new gang members, Saunders urges them to resist the temptation to follow

his younger self into a life that indeed turned out to be crazy. He criticizes America's materialist, acquisitive society that requires both parents to work fulltime, thus sacrificing valuable time that should be spent with their children.

The poems tell the story far better than I can, detailing what happens when you follow La Vida Loca into prison. Pieces like "Nobody Cares" and "Where Are They?" remind the reader that all those homies who promised to take care of you fade like snow in August. "Need Someone Who Cares" likewise points to the intense loneliness that comes from such abandonment. As an antidote, Saunders offers the poem "Troubles," in which he urges young men and women toward self-reliance: "You must find a way to look inside you." Kory Saunders found that way and has negotiated the path with impressive results. (memvv)



POETS' CORNER

Mark Bonilla's dedication does an excellent job of explicating the thematic contents of his new book: the best revenge is living well. And Bonilla does indeed live well inside his verse. The first poem, "Blinded," sets the tone, the speaker caught up in a world he never anticipated and paying an immense price for the choices he made. From that point forward, each piece is an examination, often with unanswered questions, of how and why people act so self-destructively. And yet, as one poem ("Hopeful") assures us, "Then a new life will ignite/And we will finally be alright."

Introspection is the key to any individual's growth, and Bonilla's poetry reflects his personal excursion down that rarely traveled road (e.g., "The Light" and "Inner Thoughts"). These flow into more meditations on the prison experience, what has been lost and what has been gained. As he reminds us in "Change," we can't simply rely on vague concepts like "destiny" to bring us what we want. Each individual must do the hard work.

Mark Bonilla has done that work and produced a thoughtful collection of poems that will resonate with anyone who has made similar choices and reached similar conclusions. Congratulations to him and those who have supported him in his search. To the others, they are probably still trying to figure out what happened. (poemvv)



Abdul Olugbala Shakur (James Harvey) has served over thirty years in Pelican Bay's control unit. That alone would qualify him to comment on both physical and psychological assaults and try to enlist a "spiritual cavalry" to reclaim the human spirit that has been the victim of those assaults. His book of poetry, *A Spiritual Dilemma*, is remarkably similar to Augustine of Hippo's attempt in the early 5th century to explain human failures. Both view history as a conflict between, as Augustine put it, the City of God and the City of Man. Shakur would reframe the terminology as war, in Pauline terms, between the spirit and the flesh, with everything connected with the latter contaminating the former.

Shakur tells us that the root of all human troubles derives from a literal interpretation of Genesis, when Adam decided to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Human intellect is therefore the source of all woe, because it drives us to explore sensual matters when our focus should be on the spiritual. It is Shakur's chosen quest, therefore, to "resurrect the human spirit" in order to bring forth a "new beginning," one in which matters of the flesh will be superseded by concern for one's spiritual progress.

Noting that his poetry encourages a violent opposition to the repressive nature of slavery in all its forms, he explains that violence demands an intense response in order to "break its physical entrapment." He rejects contemporary religion as a false edifice upon which to build his new beginning and acknowledges that he might die in his attempt to wage war against the evil that he has identified, evil personified by George Bush and Dick Cheney, for example. Thus, he adopts the roles of "destroyer," "predator," and "hunter."

Shakur's poetry is a powerful indictment of oppression but also a reminder that the human spirit can survive and even transcend physical limitations. The guards at Pelican Bay placed the prison's stamp on every page of this manuscript, obliterating some of the words in the process in a move designed to show disdain for the writer and his work and the power to censor it. For anyone who might doubt Shakur's thesis and the necessity to confront and combat evil, simply pick a page and read, keeping the prison stamp in front of you as a reminder of the poet's determination, like that of Ulysses, "to seek, to find, and not to yield." (poemvv)

If you remember only two lines from Vincent Johnson's poetry, let it be these: "The brain is prehensile/The thoughts branchy limbs." That neatly summarizes what this poet brings to us in his book *Poet Land*. Structurally, his poems deconstruct the modern preference for free verse, instead using rhyme to enhance and focus each piece. As Johnson tells us in a prologue, the poems vary thematically, ranging from sad to funny to thoughtful meditations on nature and animals.

The opening poem, "Vinny's Children Found," begins with a fear for lost children but closes with a father's warm remembrance of better days. In keeping with the subject of change, Johnson gives us "Jerry Foster," a tour through a bittersweet landscape that is no longer what it once was. From there, the collection makes its way through a series of illustrations (also by the poet) and works about fish, toys, and a utopian land that resembles prelapsarian Eden.

The poems about animals reflect not only Johnson's intense love of the natural world but also an impressive knowledge of animal behavior, plumage, and location. Clearly, Johnson is more than a mere observer; he is also a remarkably adept student with a fine eye for detail. Tennyson's nature might indeed be "red in tooth and claw," but Johnson's is a more nuanced world, one in which beauty, not danger, is the guiding principle and where the females of the species, including our own, are the "emblems of all life."

One of the most striking poems, entitled "Poet's Room," gives us a glimpse inside the poet's imagination, a place he is unafraid to share in order to provide some idea of what lives inside and serves as inspiration for his work. Vincent Johnson has taken advantage of that inner world and produced a book that is a delightful read. One hopes that he will continue to share that imagination with an eager audience. (poemvv)

**Make the best use of what is in your
power, and take the rest as it happens.
Epictetus**