

Tarred

Michelle Saint-Germain

My buddies are jealous because they're in the pumpkin patch, and I get to wear green. I deliver their food trays and have access to a mechanical pencil. I guess I'm trusted a little more this time.

I know why I'm here, but I don't know the exact moment when my life took this road. One minute I was a kid trying to act like an adult, and the next minute I was addicted and convicted—in trouble for doing things my parents have been doing for years. I never thought of myself as a criminal—just a kid tasting life—which meant sometimes doing stupid things. Dad said he did plenty of stupid things when he was a kid. He's still doing stupid things like leaving us, divorcing mom, and writing to the judge. He told her that I was a threat to myself and society, so she gave me another three months. It won't help. They don't understand that I can't escape myself; no matter how much they want me to stay clean, I can't. They also don't understand that I want it more than they ever could. Why would anyone want to live this way given a choice? Do they think I have a choice? There is something in my head that is stronger than I am. It's a force like gravity that pulls with uncontrollable power toward those cravings I can't live without, like food and water that sustain life.

I sit motionless in my cell watching, observing.
Sometimes the walls breathe, in and out, inhaling and exhaling
in rhythm. They keep a beat like a metronome permanently
planted in my brain. Almost every minute I hear a beat; music,
the language I speak when I have my guitar in my arms back in
my other home—the one that's far from here.

There's a little 'm' etched into the painted wall in the
corner where I sleep. I touch it and close my eyes and try to see
the person who wrote it. Where is he now? Is he out on the
streets free from here, or is he really free at all? Could he
escape himself? I want to know if this place worked. Did it
change him? Did he hear the voices, too? Did he see the walls
breathe? What does the 'm' represent? Is it a clue to sanity?

I think about good and bad and wonder if God thinks
I'm bad, or if He thinks at all. I read the Bible during the day,
and sometimes His disciples appear and talk to me. They
whisper my name over and over again: *Adam, Adam, Adam*. No
one else can hear them. The first time they spoke I clasped my
hands over my ears, but it didn't help. Now when I hear them I
sing loud and off key because that's the only way I know how.

There are only certain times that I'm allowed to leave
my square. I don't have access to the key, so others decide
when I can get out. The bars are in between what's in and
what's out. I sit on the floor with my blanket around me and

stare at them, willing them to open—like in the super hero movies. The bars laugh at me, flaunting their straight and perfect teeth. They taunt me with their snide smiles, and I fall for it every time. Enraged, I swing at them and flinch at the pain while they snigger at my stupidity.

The ceiling is gray concrete—man-made stone. Once upon a time there were free men above me pouring the liquid before it turned hard, their backs to the gray sky and the stars and the galaxies above. Is it their breathing I hear? Maybe they left their air behind when they poured the walls. I envy them and the freedom that allowed them to work, their bodies bulking and sweating, as they bent and stooped to pour and level the gray matter—away from the voices and the gravity that pulls me toward the addictions.

The floor is cold beneath my feet, and my bunk mattress is stiff so even when I sleep I don't forget where I am. I can't dream that I'm some place else because my discomfort wakes me and reminds me. No matter how tight I wrap myself in this blanket there's always a chill. It's a damp breeze that smells of black tar. I've looked in every corner and can't find where the stench is coming from. Even when they let me out to distribute the trays or sweep the floors, it consumes me and fills my soul. It's from the ghosts, I'm certain.

When I shut my eyes I feel these ghosts. They are from the souls before me. They linger here—all of them bad. Sometimes they swoop down and stare at my closed eyes waiting for me to open them so they can make me jump. Their cold breath dampens my lips. I refuse to acknowledge them. I chant. I will not open my eyes. They are filled with evil, and I know this because my heart tells me so.

When they leave to taunt another man, I open my eyes, fighting to see the air on the other side of the bar where I would be free. For a second I feel free. The air is a clean white color with a little amber. If I focus on the glowing color I feel warmer, but it doesn't last. The embers grow dim. Then it's cold again, and the ghosts return.

I hum and force myself to think good thoughts like turkey and apple pie and music; all the time it's music. I think of the daffodils in mom's garden, and the cardinals swooping down to eat the seeds in the feeder, and the sun shining down on my pillow and the way it reflects off the red of my guitar. I see the strings waiting alone for me to pluck. Day after day after day they wait. Some times they call to me. I hear their sound, their cry, their electric vibrato, and call back to them in the same voice. We mourn for one another like a mother in the wild after losing her baby. I ignore the men who shout at me to stop. I won't. It's the only good thing left.

I open my eyes when keys rattle against the bars and a baritone voice says, "Let's go. You get to go home today."

I want to leap and run and dance and shout, but I don't. I know better. I've left here before, but it doesn't mean anything. I'm stiff and it takes me several minutes to get off the cold floor and place the blanket on the bunk and shuffle to the guard. I walk past the teeth and into the white air hoping that the ghosts stay behind, but I take a deep breath through my nose and feel one following me. He's waiting to scare me when I least expect it, but now I'm on to him. I know he's beside me because he wants to make sure I come back. He follows me like my history and enters my body.

The voices continue their conversation. I wish they were fading. There's no hope. No one understands, and no one ever will. I follow the guard and wish that my body could jump into his shoes and that he could switch into mine, so I could be free of the voices. I think about asking him if I could try on his shoes, but I look at his feet and know they're much larger than mine. My feet would swim in his shoes, and the bad air would filter in around the sides, so I don't ask.

He leads me past the men in orange and beyond the big wall to the locker room. No one complains of the tar stench following me. Don't they smell it? The outside calls to me as I hurry to change into my street clothes that I haven't worn for

ninety days. My body craves that which I shouldn't have and haven't had for a long time. I salivate, knowing it won't be long before I fulfill my need. Soon, real soon. I practically drool.

My mother, with her graying hair and yellowed teeth, sits in a lobby chair. She smiles and jumps up, grabbing me into a bear hug. She smells like home—frying oil and cigarette smoke. When we exit the building the bright sun makes me squint. The old lady hands me the car keys even though she knows my license is suspended. I climb in and don't bother adjusting the mirrors because gravity is pulling me, and I don't want to lose a minute. I'm still salivating. Ignoring my mother's small talk, I nod, obsessed with the cravings.

A half an hour later, I pull into the garage, walk into the kitchen, open the refrigerator, pop a cold one, grab a cigarette and run up to my room. There's my guitar, waiting. I pick it up, caress it, and guzzle my beer. The old lady tells my younger brother to leave me alone. I sit on the floor and strum, pausing several times—once to finish the beer and again to holler to my brother to bring me another one. Then I drift off. The stench isn't as bad now, and the music is drowning out the voices in my head, but I know it's only temporary. As the buzz numbs me, the ghosts begin to fade, but my escape won't last. The ghosts will find and possess my soul and leave their stench.