
AMERICAN
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JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

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Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

American Orphan is made possible through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. We are grateful for their support.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Photograph by John M. Valadez
Cover design by Mora Des!gn

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020951745

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Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 4 3 2 1

I owe much to many for their emotional support, inspiration, understanding. I dedicate this book to my wife Stacy, my brilliant kids, professors, teachers, activists, poets and writers all over the world who came before me and set the bar high, who never relinquished the highest literary standards to which I aspired in my work.

To my friends Nora Edelstein and David for your courage and staunch friendship and to the many others who I don't have room to mention. They all offered their life experience and literary expertise by reading and commenting on this work. I am especially grateful to Ronald and his sharp insights, to Dr. Ben D. and to Arturo Sandoval for believing in me.

To the thousands of Chicano kids and grown-ups locked up with whom I worked with, sent books to, conducted writing and reading workshops with, visited. To those suffering addiction. To those abused by religious, civic and correctional authorities, this is your book, a humble compensation for the horrors you've suffered.

Lastly, to my brother who died an addict in an alley because he could not endure the trauma of being abused by priests . . . this novel written in his memory.

1

WHEN I FIRST GOT HERE, I got the name Ghost Boy from the other kids because I didn't talk for a long time. Nobody knew anything about me. The state only had details on me, mostly all wrong, but they looked good on the official papers they had to fill out to keep me locked up for as long as they did. The details were turned into numbers that made the statistics look good, the statistics made the counselors and guards look good job. It was all made up.

My grandma told me once that when someone suffers something so bad and horrible that the soul cannot endure it, the soul leaves for a while. That happened to me I think. I was suffering from *susto*, where a part of the soul is so terrified by a bad event that it leaves you incapable of speaking or responding in any way. You sort of go into hiding from the world.

My brother Camilo told me our parents left because they were addicts. He said they were long gone by the day we were out playing in grandma's yard in our village and the authorities showed up in a blue government car and took us away. Camilo didn't explain any more. I think it hurt him to even think about that day. I don't remember it. He said our older sister Karina was taken away to live with a *tía* in Albuquerque to work cleaning people's houses.

Bad things happened to the kid I used to be and not to Ghost Boy, so my nickname was also a kind of chance to start over. Bad things still happened the first few years at DYA, the Denver Youth Authority, but at least they could pass right through me because Ghost Boy was a ghost, right? The bad things went right through me and didn't stick in my memory. They emptied into a big black hole in my brain.

Even the COs started calling me Ghost Boy. Everybody knew I had no family, didn't actually come from anywhere—no past, present or future. I blocked out a lot of stuff when I first arrived. After a year and a half or so though, I started to talk again.

I liked my name. I like being Ghost Boy. It was not only going to be hard to get used to my other name again, but weird. My real name was connected to the outside world—now it was time to take it. I was finishing my seven-year sentence for smuggling weed: locked down at fifteen, released at twenty-two. Seven years in the DYA. I was going to take back my real name because out in the world, that's who I used to be, and still was, I guess.

My strategy for a smooth return to society had as much to do with haphazard reasoning as with my belief that angels were watching over me. Back then, I was not the type given to protecting my welfare. When lapses of sound calculation failed me, my angels came to the rescue.

Leaving my angels aside for the moment, people were curious how I survived, once I was out. I was naïve, sure, as any twenty-two-year old is, especially one with hardly any experience living in society. My reentry into the world was horrific. But I was lucky; I went to live with Camilo, then twenty-three. He could build or fix anything when it came to wood. In his letters he kept telling me not to worry, he had everything set up. "*No te preocupes, carnalito*, I got this shit

lined up." The plan was to renovate old houses. He'd teach me the trade. Work was what I needed to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that sent most juvies back, and I was all about making it. I had spent almost all of my life in institutions, and to be honest, I hated them. No more, I promised myself, a million times. Never again.

~ ~ ~

I was released in August 1980, and I was scared. But like I said, I had big plans, *chingón* plans. After I landed at Albuquerque Airport, I boarded a city bus. From my seat, looking out the window at a place I once knew but which was now unfamiliar, all the way from the airport to my brother's, I got anxious because I knew nothing about being free. I mean, how does one handle freedom when he's never had it? What does one do with it? What even is it? I just assumed, with a cavalier attitude, that getting my life going would be hard, but I could do it. I was nervous. I needed to walk, so I got off the bus and took off across fields.

I got to thinking about the DYA, how I had stressed if I'd ever get out. I was so tired of the broken windows, gashed and grime-spattered walls and floors, visiting room tables graffitied with gang signs, leaky ceilings, electrical outlets with exposed wiring, the main yard phones all ripped out, the perennial stench of pepper spray from staff breaking up fights, the spitting and biting and gang banging, the living with tense situations daily, the violent eruptions of kids who lost it mentally, the assaults on staff and the solitary confinement that followed. . . . Everything carried the signs of our frustration and despair; even the basketball goal post was bent. I was tired.

While waiting in my cell for my release, I was assailed by a relentless fear that I might never get out. You know, like those Mexican kids (a lot of them) who came here as refugees or asylum seekers and ended up incarcerated and forgotten. It freaked me out. They were forgotten for years, until one day, being too old for DYA, years after their sentence had expired, they vanished. These guys in Border Patrol uniforms showed up, took them out, dumped them in Mexico, I supposed. Just like that. Gone.

I didn't want that to happen to me. In my cell, I remember pacing, caught in the grip of a grim despair that something had to go wrong and that, yes, the BP would show up and take me out to the desert, and who knew what they might do? Rumors had it that they buried a lot of kids out there. It's the world we live in, you know.

I often skipped dinner. I felt full of dread. I couldn't control my paranoia. My mind kept telling me that I'd waste away in this youth facility. It kept telling me: You're kidding yourself, they'll never let you out, you got nobody on the streets who cares to make them release you, nobody's going to know if you stay. You'll join the rest of the homeless kids who have nowhere to go and no one out there who cares for them. You are one of the forgotten ones, just like them. You are what they call a no-future person. No future. An only-now person. A no-tomorrow person. You only exist now, not tomorrow, not tonight, you have no future, and you don't know what will happen next. A no-future person.

Exhausted one night by hours of heart-wringing worry, I managed to nap a bit. I dreamt I stood in an empty courtroom in front of a black-robed judge sitting high up on his bench. "I sentence you to seven years," he declared, "and like a magician, I pound my gavel and make you imaginary, make you vanish. You're gone, bitch! With the bang of my gavel, you

will be like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Life as you know it will disappear. No matter how many times you click the heels of your brogans, you will never return to society."

"But I've changed," I heard myself say. Rousing from sleep, rubbing my eyes, I muttered, "I'll be good . . ."

That's when a voice came from beyond the margins of my dream. I looked up, my dream still in my eyes, and saw a guard in shadows, rasping, "Get your crap."

Keys jangled at his waist and a walkie-talkie crackled from his black belt as he shuffled me out with a methodical ordinariness that conveyed nothing special about my release. I was just one more to escort across the yard. I dropped my box at the Property Room, picked up my hundred bucks, a pouch of bus tokens, a YMCA room voucher and an airline ticket to Albuquerque.

When I stepped over the threshold of the giant DYA gate and my foot hit freedom ground, I felt a palpable easing in my throat. I could breathe again without that tightness, that strain in my chest.

On the inside, it had felt like some evil presence had put me on my back, straddled my chest, pinned my arms down with its knees, choking me. As soon as I crossed through that gate, the evil grip went slack. As I walked away, an expectancy of what the world might have to offer me now rushed over me. That's when the invisible monster vanished once and for all. Whatever it was that kept torturing me all those years, hurting me every day, vanished. I could feel myself again. The fear, the panic, the paranoia were gone. And it was all replaced by me.

I would have fought it if I could see it, but I understood in a vague way that it was a system made of rules and regulations upheld by corrupt judges, lawyers and cops to break me, a system I could feel pressing down on me every day, a

force as real as my blood and bones. The system turned us against each other because of the color of our skin or ethnicity or the gangs we belonged to in order to make us wage war against each other. The system broke us down day by day.

I would have taken the barber shears and stabbed it. During the time when all the kids were moving in lines, during the work detail call, I would have hit it over the head with a baseball bat. But you couldn't reach out and touch it, couldn't speak to it, couldn't reason with it. It was a faceless system,everywhere and nowhere, present but never visible. Its mission was to destroy us, criminalizing us in ways we could never recover from, teaching us to hate each other; blacks against whites, Chicanos and Indians against whites and blacks, turning us into racists—greedy and manipulative, when we never were before.

It depressed us. It disgraced us. It made us hate ourselves until we were no longer like regular kids but fit only to join the military service, where we wouldn't have to think, just carry out orders when commanded to kill men and women and kids. I really thought we were being trained for that, until the second I walked over the threshold of that gate and inhaled fragrant desert air, sweet dirt, pebbles and dew. I saw stars and a horizon without bars or wires or walls obstructing the view for the first time in years, all sync'd up to a God plan. I tapped my chest with my fist and kissed two fingers to my lips in thanks to God that I made it out.

The only other time I had ever felt such joyous freedom was in the orphanage, when we went to pick apples in Corrales. I was an orphan boy of twelve years after the day of the blue government car. Even today I still can't believe I was there from age five to seventeen. But there were plenty of good times too, and one of them was going out to pick apples and then coming back, riding in the truck bed on top of a huge

mountain of them. I stood up and waved at motorists and pedestrians and felt like a king.

And now, leaving DYA, I embraced that joy again, lifted my face to the moon, thinking, *Ahhh, no more eyeing you between guard towers or with razor wire running across you, no more peering at you through a scratch in the painted window.*

I thought as I stepped toward the waiting van, *One small step for the criminal kind, one giant step for Orlando Lucero!*

From there to here, the feeling still stays with me, even now, hours later, on my way to my brother's. It's night. I walk in the dark. Everything is still except for barking; the headlights of someone leaving for work, a few porch lights. Darkness all around, but not menacing, not the kind one feels when crossing hostile neighborhoods. It's an affectionate darkness that one sees in gorilla eyes, a dark stillness that wraps everything in its knowing, making plants, trees and earth into magical creatures that know you. The morning light is just as startling in its beauty as it illuminates the new world. A seam of light along the horizon slowly unrolls tapestries of light all over the barrio.

It feels strange to be moving past furrowed fields that reminded me of those I once hoed and raked and pruned all day. They were fields owned by private corporations (GEO Group, Inc., CoreCivic) and ranchers and leased to DYA and its endless supply of free, teenage labor. I was one of the hundreds who worked eight-hour days for years.

The fields knew: leafy, rooted greens knew the injustice mulched into the dirt. The roots absorbed our blood, sweat, tears and despair. The harvest was shipped to a public dulled with the pleasure of apathy. Slave work smashed my heart so hard it felt like a swollen eye after a beating. I couldn't see or

feel anything but bitterness toward the system and the mostly white male flunkies who managed it.

As I walk to my brother's it suddenly strikes me that not a single person waited to meet me when I crossed the gate into freedom. Not one person in the whole world came to see my release. If you're an orphan, then a prisoner, you get used to those things. No matter. I took pleasure in the feeling that the eye of my heart opened for the first time with a smile, and not a grimace as if it had been punched.

~ ~ ~

I double-check the address my brother gave me and walk down Isleta Street. The possibility for a better life overwhelms me now. I arrive at the address, step into the driveway alongside the landlord's yellow and white frame house and follow the gravel path to the back yard, where a cinderblock rental squats in a corner with an old, red pick-up next to it. Inside the cab, torn apart carbs, fuel pump pieces, rubber gaskets, radiator hoses, beer cans, whiskey bottles, cigarette butts, hamburger wrappers, fast food cartons. I check the address on my scrap of paper again, thinking maybe I wrote it down wrong.

I walk to the front house, knock on the back door. I ask an old Chicano man still in his pajamas about Camilo, if it's his place back there.

"*Sí*," he answers.

"*¿Y no sabes ónde está?*"

He shakes his head no. I nod. "*Bueno*."

I figure the truck must be someone's junker, walk back to the rental and knock. No answer. I go around the *casita*, calling, "Camilo, Camilo, *pues abre la puerta, pinche vato*." Open the door. Open the door.

He must be working, I think. I decide to sit on the stoop and wait. After ten minutes, I get up and start walking away, thinking I'll check out the barrio, maybe grab a burrito or taco somewhere. But I hear a sound come from behind me in the brick house. I pound on the front window, back door, bathroom window, until the front door creaks.

I squint my eyes to adjust to the murky interior, make out an old face, a scrawny body knuckled with jutting bones in boxer shorts. He's gaunt. I look past him to see an after-meal of chicken bones littering the room.

"Excuse me. I'm Orlando, Camilo's brother. Do you know where he is?"

I go in, eyes blinking to the dark. I follow the silhouette shuffling to the kitchen sink, where it cups a glass meth pipe off the counter and turns toward the bathroom.

"Cam . . . ilo?"

I can't believe it's him. The healthy, robust bother of mine, of my memories, turns, and I see the manic look of someone who's ceased to struggle to free himself, who's let the meth carry him in its jaws until his will to fight was reduced to a mere wish. I'd seen it in many kids inside, who when they came in were raped or beaten so badly they surrendered their souls to the devil.

"Be right out," he says and locks the bathroom door.

I sit on the couch and wait. So much for his letters, I think, where he wrote me all was well and that he had everything set up.

Brakes grind and tires skid on gravel outside. I peek through the blinds at a dirty, multi-colored panel van. It idles, smoke curling out of the muffler. I see the driver pour powder on the dashboard, cut three lines, one for him, one for the two others.

Camilo hollers through the door. "Almost . . . there."

I try to flick on a lamp. No bulb. I draw the gnarled blinds. Sunlight spreads over the wrecked interior. Dust floats on the air. I search through the filthy dishes on the counter, find a steak knife, slide it into my waistband.

I'll be ready.

Camilo comes out. "Let's go."

I hesitate.

"Come on. Come on, *vato*!" he snaps. "In the plans . . ."

~ ~ ~

I'm in the back of the van next to a guy I don't know, eyes on my brother up front, sitting shotgun. I don't detect anything for a while, but I feel it. Then I see the first sign of trouble: the driver's hand slides across and drops a pistol into my brother's lap.

I just got out! a scream in my head goes off.

He turns to me. His eyes warn, *Stay calm, little brother, I know how you are, don't be jumping crazy, be cool. I got this.*

We pull into a 7-11, and the guy next to me slides the van door open. All three strut into the convenience store. My mind goes blank, my body numbs as I watch my brother hold a pistol eye-level at the cashier and demand money. The other two scramble through the aisles. One at the coolers grabs six-packs of beer. The other one dumps whiskey bottles into a grocery sack.

Then we're speeding off. They're talking about drugs and brindle pitbulls and what they're going to buy their girlfriends. We get back to Camilo's. I'm too paralyzed to move when Camilo tells me to get out, but when I manage to move. I drill my eyes into the others with a promise that if I ever see them again, I'll mess them up.

We go inside, Camilo grabs the truck keys and tells me, it's time to celebrate. He holds the door so he can lock it behind me. I follow him out the back to a fence. We climb over, walk into the field, stop at a thicket of weeds.

"See? . . ." He parts the weeds.

I stare at a pile of salvaged 2x6s and tangled fencing and broken fixtures and rubbish.

"I been taking material off job sites so you and I can start our remodel business. And here . . ." He steps a few paces to the left, tosses off old rotten plywood, broken benches and tables, and pulls off shredded blankets and carpets. "Yours." He smiles, indicating a desk with three legs and a chair with a cracked seat. "I'm going to fix them up, varnish them for you."

That moment splinters me. Do I show my gratitude with a false smile that our lives are good and we have a future, or with the fatal acceptance that our lives are fucked up?

I mean, he meant well. I tried to act happy. For the first time since I left DYA, I saw my chances of making it going down. Was it even possible for me to make a new life out here, in a place where I feel as out of place as any human being ever felt? An anchor drags across my heart, digging deep with the answer, *There's no way you can do this reentry thing.*

I don't know what to say. I'm sad, confused. Afraid. I walk around in the weeds looking at the ground where someone dumped a bunch of trash. Old *Rolling Stone* magazines. Headlines: Nixon resigned; Vietnam War ending; Jimmy Carter; *Roe v. Wade;* Jim Jones; 900 people in Guyana die in a mass suicide; Iranian militant students seize the US embassy in Tehran; César Chávez; Brown Berets; Black Panthers; Patty Hearst and black revolutionaries. George Wallace is shot; Elvis dies. What I read makes me feel like I'm waking up from a decade-long coma. At that moment, I realize while I was in the devil's daycare, time had left me behind.

~ ~ ~

We drive to the foothills in silence. It's August, early afternoon, and the sun warms the Tijeras Canyon. At a steakhouse, we drink a few tequilas. Camilo is wired from meth. We recall the old times.

"The keggers after the games, *vato*, and all the chicks . . . man . . . you had a sweet jumper."

"You remember . . . what's her name? María?"

"You kidding? I had the biggest crush on her, but she only loved you."

"Yeah! She takes me on the ditch bank in the trees to make out, and I caught you spying on us." He laughs.

"Man, was I *soooo* embarrassed," I say, feeling great that we're bonding. "I remember when you were at the Cactus Motel, all you talked about was meeting Evel Knievel."

"Yeah. . . . Remember we souped up that Karmann Ghia, we cruised Louey's hamburger joint for chicks?"

Camilo nods, cheeks and forehead blushing. As we toast our third shot, his eyes glaze. A second later, he threatens to kick my ass. His words hit me like a wrecking ball that comes out of nowhere, crashing between us, shattering me.

Fears surge up in me at his threat. I want to warn him that I'm different. In DYA, another part of me was born out of survival, a necessary evil. Ghost Boy. When *he* takes over, he doesn't care about anything. I don't know where Ghost Boy came from, how to reason with him. All I know is that he is the angry part of me. The one with no memory, uncontrollable when he surfaces. He emerges when I'm threatened. I want to tell Camilo to pull back, chill, he can't threaten me. He doesn't know that if he touches me, Ghost Boy will bare his claws and lunge.

I wanted to say, "We change, Camilo," but I don't.

He is not the brother he was a minute ago. He raises his hand to slap me. I catch it midair, stare, gritting my teeth.

"Please," I say, ". . . some . . . thing happen-ed-to-me."

I can't breathe. I hold my palm to my mouth, like I'm about to weep or puke, to motion him stop. I feel heat all inside me, rushing from my heart to my veins all over my body. My hands shake from the burning, my head and neck tremble, and Camilo swings and hits me with his free hand.

A dark force whirls inside me, suffocates me. I cough. I choke on the bitter bile in my mouth, in my nostrils. My mind goes into a white-out. The whiteness spreads to my knees, and I can't, I can't take it. I leap out of my chair, grab Camilo and shove him outside.

"Quit hitting me!" I yell, tears in my eyes. "Man. Some. Thing. Happened. To Meeee!"

The whole world beyond the steakhouse collapses, fills with those who have betrayed me since I was born: parents, teachers . . . I see me roaming the streets, scared, scared of women and men, boys who bullied me, frightened of shadows and strangers and being unprotected, a homeless boy, exposed and at the mercy of rapists, murderers, brutal police, drug dealers and gangbangers. Alone and hated by white society, stigmatized by every glare and every cruel word etching its condemnation onto my heart, telling me that I am worthless.

I strike Camilo. I knock him down on the asphalt. I swing at the malicious violations against me, at all the guilty perpetrators who scoffed at me as Camilo's grin does, as my own grin used to sneer at enemies beating on me. His smile says to me, *Beat me, little brother, break me into pieces that can never be put back together,* and I want to wipe it off his face, because the pendulum blade swings back to a time when I too grinned at all the pain and sorrow as if it didn't hurt or matter. It did, it did. It hurt bad, but I never let anyone know.

His eyes mock me like mine once mocked the world, saying, *You're doing right, little brother. We came into this world through a drug addict's vagina, skittering like rats in the trash. Hit me!* Every drop of his blood I spill on the pavement affirms my worthlessness, that I do not belong except on the ground with the world beating me, with me leering, my don't- care grin—until I am gone, until I return to the nothingness from where I came.

Just then, he gets up and starts beating me. He picks up a board and hits me. I don't fight back. I find love for him in my helplessness, solace in my surrender, because it is the only way I have of showing him I love him.

He says with his smirk, *Yes, little brother, I'll beat you until you can finally sigh with relief that you are no more, that this world can no longer hurt you. Like you, I crawled into this life owned by others to beat and starve, not allowed to speak, with no right to feelings, no right to my face or hands or feet or sleep or dreams. I am a mistake to erase from the page of the living. Make my blood wash over me and make me forget, force me to fade away, to drift into the unknown where men like you and me, unknown men, arrive unknown and live unknown and are removed as if they never existed. Remove me, little brother, please, like I remove you.*

I want him to stop, but he keeps on until Ghost Boy whispers, *Never go down.* I want to scream to drown out Ghost Boy's voice, but it comes: *Don't let life do this to you, fight back with every breath!*

I attack. I try to wipe away the look in Camilo's eyes that keeps saying in the language of the oppressed and hopeless: *Hit me, make me vanish.*

"Defend yourself!" I scream, and I beat and beat him until I can't swing anymore.

When I stop, I don't recognize where I am, except that this region of hell is unnamable. I back away in remorse and shock. I move but feel immobile, pant but can't breathe, really frightened but fearless, in the world but out of it, looking in at me standing bloody-fisted over my brother.

I trudge back to town like a sleepwalker. A sad scene, me walking down that mountain road, embracing myself with my arms, head down, all the sorrow in the world rising to my eyes as I hold my tears back and refuse to cry.

Soon, I worry about him. So I return to the restaurant and find my brother has left. A cop car is in the parking lot, the cop questions me, handcuffs me, puts me in the back seat. On the way to jail I have the feeling my whole life is a crime scene, and I am a crime that corrupts everything I touch.

They take me to a hospital and X-ray me to check if anything is broken. The clinician comes out from behind the curtains to ask if I am wearing anything metal, a medal or chain, and I say no. She shows me the X-ray, dozens of scattered beads radiate light over the black plastic. I tell the clinician I was shot once, they're bird-shot pellets. Thirty-two of them. I think the X-ray looks like a night sky with stars—Orlando's night sky.

They let me go. I check in at the downtown Y and sit down in my room on the floor, feeling the floorboards shake with the industrial washer and dryer downstairs cycling the Y's bedding. Late morning, I walk down 4th Street to a coffee house.

Caló, my people's secret dialect, fills the air—*voces de la plebe*, *mi gente*, *la raza*, from Chicanos and barrio *vatos y locos* to *abuelitos,* city workers, college students, *profes*, tattooed *pintos*, political gangsters, muralists and Chicanas as beautiful as they are powerful thinkers and radicals. Their voices sooth my soul with the Chicano slang I grew up with:

¿Pos qué, chingao?
A la verga, bro.
¿Cómo estás, abuelita?
¡Quiúbole, carnalito!
Fue un pinche desmadre.
¡Rascuache, mamón!
¡Paga la cuenta, baboso!
Te amo con todo, preem.
¿Qué onda?
¡Aliviánate, pelao!

I order *pozole* with cubed steak, garlic, red onion, lime wedge, potatoes, *chile con cilantro*. While I wait for my food, I eavesdrop on conversations.

"*Quiúbole, ese*, wanna get buzzed? I'm talkin' lit up, all neon, Sunset Boulevard, shit. . . . I got some good *coca!*"

"*¡Qué papote! Vato, ¿qué chingao tienes?* . . . You're always going to be a fiend, *pinche ese*."

"Not today," his friend says with conviction and smiles.

A guy rolls up, slaps another guy on the shoulder: "Come on, *vato*, kick the *chanclas* and get your toes in the sand. What you doing?"

"You still a *loco*."

"Always."

"Whatever, Za-Pa-Ta, dial me up when you want, *ese,* and we'll get down with some *rucas*." He struts off, bumping his fist to his chest to mean, *We're down for the brown.*

It's our *onda*, our way, *güey*.

After I finish eating I sit and think, then pull out the envelope I've been carrying since my release. I place it on the table and study the airline ticket Lila included in her letter.

I use the café payphone, call collect and tell Lila I'm coming. We can do what we wrote in our letters. I'll move there.

We can make crazy love all night and day. Making love in every possible way we can imagine is almost all we ever wrote about. After being locked up as long as I have, my imagination has really gone wild. Now, after talking to her, I can't wait to see her.

I take another way on my walk back to the Y, past the zoo, where I hear caged elephants moaning, lions roaring, bird cries raking across the hot sky. I sit down on a concrete bench and listen.

Across the street I can see a couple under a steel canopy in the park. I get up and walk toward them. I slow down on the sidewalk. I hear her reading him her poem. Or a letter maybe. I kneel to tie my shoe, which doesn't need tying, and listen. It's about them being in a forest, blanket on the ground or on a boulder next to a creek, enjoying cheese and wine and crackers while birds swoop in and out of branches, shaking sunrays from the leaves that light their faces with love.