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# HUCK'S PICKS

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In her one-act play, *Murderers*, Patricia Prewitt has once again demonstrated her ability as both a playwright and someone who isn't afraid to confront the unpleasant truths about the prison food chain. Her opening scene has a prison psychologist interviewing a prisoner (Prewitt). The exchange illustrates the typical result: disbelief and apathy. In an environment in which the statistical probability of guilt approaches one, a legitimate claim of innocence is simply discarded, leaving the prisoner to cope with an alien world where the weak get eaten by sharks.

Fortunately for the prisoner, a hard-talking slammer-jammer gives her a quick lesson in survival techniques, the first of which is to announce to all and sundry that she is doing life for first-degree murder. Patty discovers that although she is innocent

of whacking her husband, the conviction will serve her well. Why? If she's already killed one person, she obviously has the capability of taking care of anyone else who wants a piece of her. Life inside isn't always that simple, but a murder rap will often deter many of the wannabes who are scared of becoming somebody's house mouse. I mean, if you're gonna pick a cell to rob, who do you go after, the child molester or the killer?

Along the way, Prewitt gives us more illustrations of counterintuitive prison rules plus graphic examples of why a murder conviction has so many permutations. As usual, her dialogue and the actors' comments to the audience validate the playwright's experience and insight into this most dismal of worlds. If you want the real deal when it comes to drama, always look for Ms. Prewitt's name. (dramavv)

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Rafael Vasquez's *Lights, Camera, Analy!* opens when Navy lieutenant Richard Santiago, Otter to his friends, has just moved into some off-base apartments. Before he can unpack, eleven-year-old Analyn knocks on his door. She's selling cookies to raise money for her school's theater department, and after a rough start, Otter ends up buying her entire inventory. So far, so good, but no good deed goes unpunished. Two neighborhood cretins show up to hustle protection money from both. Otter is kicked to sleep while Analyn runs home, her cookie money now in the pockets of the two high rollers.

From there, Vasquez presents a feel-good story that offers implicit advice that a pure heart and good intentions will prevail over the most difficult obstacles. Otter eventually proposes to Analyn's mother and wins over the daughter, who initially rejects his new role as stepfather. Analyn even convinces a Clint Eastwood prototype to allow her school to use the Navy base's theater for their production. Vasquez frames his work in terms of morality play, freighted with biblical verses for authority. Predictable, yes, but one can't help thinking that Otter, Amanda, and Analyn achieve happiness because they are decent people in their own right. In the end, whether humanist or theist, the reader will come away smiling. (dramavv)





It's always interesting to see the reaction of someone who has bought the myth of equal justice before the law and presumption of innocence when they discover that the myth has no basis in reality. Jon Krug's memoir is a classic example. No stranger to the criminal justice system, he nevertheless cannot contain his shock when faced with lying witnesses, manufactured evidence, and an appointed defense lawyer whose day job is actually a city prosecutor. *Self-Defense Pro Se* is a cautionary tale of what can happen when the police, prosecutor, and judge decide that he--or any defendant--is guilty of whatever crime has been committed.

As Krug discovers, jury trials are no more than theater, each side trying its best to convince the jury of the "truth." Whichever side tells the best story wins. Of course, the prosecution has the advantage in manpower and money, especially when the defense relies on either a public defender or appointed counsel. Krug quickly discovers that the jury thinks he's guilty simply because he's sitting at the defendant's table. And they don't waste any time validating his fears.

The saddest part, however, is the appellate process. You know, the one that takes you on a fantasy trip of high expectations and no results. Poor Krug can't even get to the jail's law library to file a *pro se* brief after his P.D. has screwed him. The litany of errors, some deemed "harmless" by the courts, is familiar territory, and for anyone who thinks the courts are bound by legal precedent, a cursory review of the Supreme Court's recent opinion on the Voting Rights Act should cure that error as well. As Krug found out, they do what they want, when they want, and how they want. Now he's got 37-1/2 years to do, but at least he's moderated his expectations with respect to the legal process. (nonfictvv)

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Tolstoy observed that "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." *Letters to My Imprisoned Father* by Darrin Sobin validates that philosophy and clearly demonstrates the distinct form of unhappiness that continues to plague the Sobin family. Dennis, the current director of Safe Streets Arts Foundation, served federal and state time, which naturally put a strain on the family, but initially, he and his son were able to maintain a stable relationship. This remarkable collection of letters, however, subsequently written to him after his son's graduation from law school, reveals the depth of animosity that continues to poison the atmosphere between them and prevent, as far as can be determined, any reconciliation.



Things weren't always so. During the first part of his father's sentence, Darrin was a faithful correspondent and visitor, accepting his father's conviction for racketeering and remaining a dutiful son. Later, after graduating from law school and becoming an attorney--a pursuit some would also characterize as a form of racketeering--Darrin's attitude shifted to one of unmitigated hostility and a persistent determination to sever all ties, based on Dennis's activities and Darrin's interpretation of them. In a poignant forward to this collection, Dennis offers a synopsis of his son's tactics to keep him as far away from his family as possible, including invoking a restraining order to have the father returned to prison.

This sad, tragic story does indeed channel *Anna Karenina*, except that instead of a character leaping beneath the train, the protagonist gets thrown under the bus. (nonfictvv)

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*Death by Deception* by Sam Barlow is the familiar story of a social pathology that continues to plague far too many young people. Born and raised in a totally dysfunctional family, Barlow's life follows a predictable arc, beginning with petty crimes, skipping school, and eventually being drawn into the "wrong" crowds. Bounced around between two cities, he is rootless, a product of abandonment, orphanages, and foster homes. Even a brief stay with loving grandparents cannot preempt a life that effectively ended when he was only eighteen.

Barlow's prologue discusses the behavior of the children of incarcerated parents, observing that such children are far more likely to be incarcerated themselves. His personal story graphically illustrates the destruction wrought by absentee parents who place their own gratification above their children's welfare. Barlow's early behavior--vandalism, theft, truancy--all point to an ineluctable future with no silver lining. Graduating to robbery, he and two codefendants rob a Pennsylvania bank and are immediately captured. Although he did not fire any shots during the robbery, Barlow and both codefendants are convicted of felony murder and sentenced to death. This was four years before the US Supreme Court eliminated capital sentences in *Furman v. Georgia*, so all three were subsequently resentenced to life.

As tragic as this narrative is, the larger picture, acknowledged by Sam Barlow, is one of a racist judicial system, one which persists in conferring on teenagers the same ability to make critical choices as that enjoyed by adults. The result, until another Supreme Court decision, was life without parole for certain juvenile offenders, even those, like Barlow, who did not actually kill anyone. This is a finely detailed work that reminds us that America's claim as the world's moral arbiter needs more than a little fine tuning. (nonfictvv)

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If you've been following this newsletter, then you will have seen some impressive imaginations on display. Given that, you haven't seen anything until you've read *Done Deal* by Adam Martin. Martin is doing life in the federal prison at Terre Haute for a series of bank robberies, and it's unclear whether his work is a memoir or a movie script. His prologue and format make it appear more fact than fiction--until you get into the details. Whatever it is, his work makes use of his experiences as a connected "businessman" to create scenarios that rival anything dreamed up by Hollywood writers at their most creative.

At age four, for example, he owns championship horses and a talking dog. That's what I said: a talking dog. Never mind that canines lack the physical capacity for speech and the human gene that enables our conversations, Martin insists that his talking dog can say "Mama, I love you" intelligibly. Not bad for a start, but the story gets wilder from there. Martin's father is a serious gangster and wife beater, leaving his family after a nasty divorce. He and Martin reconnect when Dad is in Leavenworth for robbing a bank, using his own car by the way. During a month's worth of visits, Dad hands Martin \$500 each day, never mind the guards, cameras, and other security measures in the visiting room. On Dad's instructions, Martin buys four ounces of pot and brings it back into the visiting room. He eventually gets a piece of that action as well. You get the picture. This is purely out of central casting, including the numbers Martin throws around.

He pays \$250,000 to a lawyer to help spring his father but gets busted himself in the process. But, as luck and the script would have it, Dad calls his son in jail from Leavenworth (go figure) and makes arrangements for Martin to hit the street with probation. Launching another scheme, Martin makes \$350,000 in two months. Yeah, I know, but it doesn't stop there. He also makes another \$240,000 forging travelers checks, and eventually claims to have been making a cool million per month. Not bad for a kid not yet twenty.

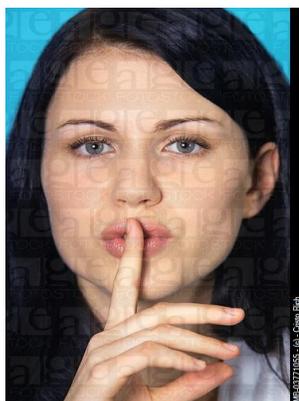
Eventually Dad hits the street again but only after Martin and his partners have paid--get this--three million for legal fees and bribes. Father and son start robbing banks to the tune of another \$2.5 million, money Martin needs because he walked away from all that other money and--wait for it--hitched his way to Texas. Sure, I can imagine walking away from a million bucks a month. Can't you? I mean, a man's gotta leave room for change.

Had enough? Not yet. The 2.5 mil Martin and his dad stole was too bulky, so they bought diamonds and gold. Gold isn't bulky? Anyway, they bury this treasure in the desert, where it presumably still resides, unless Dad has sneaked by and collected it. Rather than retrieve the buried loot, Martin opts for forging postal money orders for around \$500 a pop. So we go from million dollar stickups to chump change.

Oh, I nearly forgot to mention, Martin cops to two homicides, and tells us that his dad was one of the three shooters who killed President Kennedy in Dallas, a plot that included Vice President Johnson as a co-conspirator. It's taken nearly fifty years to get to the truth of the most investigated murder in the country's history, but at least now we know.

All the above happened in 19 pages with more on the way. Talk about your action-adventure concepts! One thing about this story: it moves with the pace of a F-18 on full afterburner. Whether you believe any of it doesn't really matter. You'll enjoy this cast of characters and their exploits. (screenvv)

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In *A Good Man Is Not Hard to Find*, Hifiece Salter offers his version of a "fidelity guide" for all women seeking a permanent relationship that won't leave them disappointed, frustrated, and physically abused. This is obviously a tall order, but Salter believes he is up to the task.

He designed his book to accommodate what he feels are the ten most important subjects and proceeds to serve up homegrown philosophy stirred with a generous amount of personal experience. The first thing a reader notices is Salter's a priori assumption that all women who are not involved in loving and rewarding relationships are somehow at fault. His advice then turns out to be suggested correctives on how women should clean up their acts to avoid being abandoned or beaten for their mediocrity. It apparently never occurs to him that good women are abused because their men are moral imbeciles.

Salter also addresses the subject of infidelity, placing the blame for a cheating husband or boyfriend squarely on the female partners, who are somehow derelict in their conjugal duties. Why else would the man run around? Because it's what we do. Duh. Salter, however, maintains that infidelity is a Western practice, compared to, say, African mores that allow a man three wives. One could question how having sex with three different women in a tribal environment is any different from having sex with three different women in a condo in Miami, but perhaps I'm splitting hairs. More to the point, he ignores the lengthy history of strong black women raising families without the assistance of a man in the house. His insistence on a woman's adoration of her man borders on heresy, since most people believe that only a god can command his subjects to worship him.

Sex, of course, plays an important role in relationships, but again, Salter places the blame for failed physical relations squarely on the women. It's their fault if their partners watch porn or go to strip clubs. He follows this observation with an admonition for women to appreciate their men by buying him things like sweaters, sneakers, and sports equipment, which will presumably keep him home nights. Oddly enough, he warns women about placing too much emphasis on *their* concern for what a prospective partner might be able to provide her and her children in the way of tangible benefits: a job, home, transportation, and comfort items, advice he contradicts when he discusses his sister's relationships and in the chapter titled "Keep It Funky."

This is not to say Salter doesn't make some good points. His emphasis on the need for a woman to educate herself is excellent advice. He also underlines the necessity for a woman to know herself--to have "the mentality of a winner"-- and how to exploit her strengths and minimize her weaknesses, cautioning her not to be influenced and seduced by contemporary standards and ads. In closing, he admits that women deserve better than to be played and abused, something he himself is guilty of at one time. Mr. Salater has now achieved a sort of enlightenment. It's a promising start. (nonfictvv)

## POETS' CORNER

Angela Avery's collection of poems, *Prompted in Prison*, opens with "History's Hell," a stark reminder that society tends to judge an individual exclusively by the last bad thing he or she did. Never mind the human capacity for change, Avery confirms that for those running the country's prisons, reformation is out of the question. The prisoner will always be a prisoner, and the guard will always be society's savior. Avery's "Untrue Words" describe this false dichotomy with the observation that things will not always be as they are now. She takes on this subject in other powerful poems, such as "My Friend Chena" and "They and I."

Avery's poetry demonstrates a remarkable capacity for a balanced treatment of the people she has encountered. In a moving tribute to Abby Hale, she describes the lessons Abby has taught her and the benefits that have accrued from following her example. Memory also plays a crucial role in these poems, as does the ability of books to enable a child's--or a prisoner's--escape. We also hear personal regrets and a strong personal narrative in the poem "I," in which the poem's speaker wishes she had given more thought to the planning of her life. Don't we all.

Since Avery is doing her time in Vermont, weather plays a dominant role in her poetry, complete with seasonal allusions to change and transition. These themes are consistent with the poet's obvious faith in the mutability of the human spirit, perhaps adopting Percy Shelley as her muse. Either way, this skillfully wrought group of poems will be an inspiration to men and women on both sides of the walls. (poemvv)

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Stefan Chrisbasan's collection of poems is aptly titled, most of the pieces reflecting his powerful love for that one special person. *My Love for You* is replete with natural imagery: snowflakes, roses, seasonal changes, most placed in a religious context of strong faith. Chrisbasan also expresses a confidence in the spiritual renewal promised by Christian scripture and a belief that he and the person to whom most of these poems are written share an unbreakable bond that unites them forever. And yet, the poem "Don't Forget" reveals the angst that accompanies such long-distance love affairs. Still, the poet insists that the beauty of the shared love overcomes and overshadows any potential obstacle. He, however, in "Marriage Perverted," doesn't extend the same grace to same-sex couples, characterizing them as "society's dilution" and "reason's apostasy." This attitude strikes the reader as an unseemly intrusion into and a diminution of the loving commitment exemplified by the rest of the work. (poemvv)

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*Kaos in Motion* by Kenneth Gilbert Garcia, Jr. is a powerful meditation on life itself and the microcosm of prison. Quickly letting us hear the experienced voice, Garcia adopts the wisest attitude: "I Stand Alone," in which he schools young wannabes about the treachery that haunts every prison environment. Solidifying that position in "I Am a Loner," Garcia's themes of solitude and isolation permeate these poems, the poet describing himself as a creature of the night who wears a thousand masks, none of which are him. Indeed, in a world of fools, it's always better if no one knows your name. Life is short where these creations arose and unpredictable, an experience that teaches harsh lessons about dust returning to dust in the blink of an eye.

Garcia, however, is no whiner. Certainly he laments lost love, a cherished relative ("Uncle Bob"), and everything the real world has to offer, but he is reconciled to his status. As he tells us in the opening poem, "I'm Something," he will rest but never surrender.



And yet, his poems detail an interest in things other than the solipsistic existence Garcia now endures. His concern about his community, his brothers and sisters oppressed by a racist and class-driven society, demonstrate the courage required to love and care for someone else. But prison is where he must work and think, and it is refreshing, at least for this reviewer, to see that the classic polarization between an inmate and a convict persists, at least in Colorado.

Kenneth Garcia is a man with something to say, and he says it very well in this collection of poems, especially to an audience experience to validate--what page. (poemvv)

Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself.

Harvey Fierstein

with the appreciate--and he brings to the