

My body was accustomed to a 9 x 12 world, and freedom was so large and endless it dwarfed me to a speck.

ing. I was a different man; moving lightly on my feet, looking at earth from a whole different perspective—the dirt, the weeds, the trees so close and weighted made them seem to be thriving and vital, and I greeted them with a slight nod as if their essence could acknowledge my release. I managed to carry myself into their world, heel to toe, into the nothingness of the dark heart of freedom.

I'd finished my time, yet a sadness shrouded me—the sadness of leaving so many friends behind—and it clothed me like the feverish temperature of my skin when I had a cold.

But slowly, between the gate and the van, my life tore from its familiar ruins, and the state prison paperwork that condemned me as a criminal scattered behind me in the dawn, and a whole new narrative of my life was about to begin.

I mentally noted a goodbye prayer for those left behind, and a help-me-Lord prayer as I stepped toward the white van idling in the employee parking lot.

We drove away.

I glanced behind at the prison that now seemed to have a strange force drawing me back, but I had no regrets or reluctance.

I wasn't coming back.

As the guard locked the van doors and shifted into gear

and we turned down a road, that massive spaceship of steel and concrete, that hulking empire of the doomed, sailed away into the dark horizon without me, collecting more debris of more broken lives and I tell you LOUD, LOUDER, the morning moon shone on me and murmured her affirmation, whispering, You, O Soul Shifter, you endured the dreamer's ritual and became a spirit-man.

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Moments like this cry out for an epiphany—a climax—like in those Ben-Hur and Moses movies I watched as a child: walls topple, steel melts, a prophet appears wielding a biblical lightning staff to command legions of lions roaring and scattering across the desert, Gods on winged horses descend from mountaintops—but no, in a time such as this of epidemic mediocrity, pervasive corruption, and endless wars, if a cello player were to appear and strum the sweetest dirge to commemorate this memorable crossroads, he'd be arrested for trespassing and playing without a permit and have his cello confiscated.

Nothing but the exhaust pipe sputtering, Waylon Jennings on the radio, a dumb guard smoking discount rez cigarettes, and three other convicts threatening to kill each other.

One black, one white, one Chicano, just like in *The Dirty Dozen* movie with Clint Eastwood, except we were a Dirty Four of grungy outlaws. I could hear the whistle used in those spaghetti westerns singeing the air.

I smiled with irony at my reflection in the window—no four romantic knights were we, released by the king after rehab to go forth to retrieve the Grail—nay, brother and sister; nor were our spirits lifted buoyantly in awe of this wonderfully enchanted morning—we were criminalized into fucking killers, robbers, drug addicts, our souls maimed with a seething vow to avenge our suffering on the innocent.

It was business as usual, happening twenty thousand times all over America every single day with men like us who'd been broken into resentful brutes, who had waited a long time for this hour to fall on our hearts to purge our rage on society for the torture inflicted upon them.

These three? Having lived in cells next to each other for decades with nothing to do, had spent each day fantasizing horrible ways to kill each other. Well, sometimes

ALBERTO YBARRA

El Camino Largo, 2011
Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in



COURTESY, THE ARTIST