DONNA BOURNE

Secluded, 2011
oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

courtesy: the artist

DALE PENDELL

Solitary

I came of age in prison. When I was eighteen I was in a prison in Mexico. When I turned twenty-one I was in a federal prison in Texas. By nature I'm a solitary, but that was my time of socialization.

I'm a solitary because I stutter. Not all stutterers are solitaries, but most are, and those who aren't, you wish they were. In prison, solitary is special treatment, at least today. In County, solitude would be a gift. Wouldn't you prefer a private cell to the tank? Well, maybe not, but which would a solitary prefer?

Your preference doesn't matter, because you don't get to choose. That's because you're a loser. Born to, as in. It's bigger than you. You lost, so surrender your sword. You can't, because we just took it. So grovel. So get used to it. Go sit in the corner, with your blanket.

Solitaries don't like the real world. They want their own world, a world they create themselves. They might think they crave the real world, the social world of people and friends—something like a high school club—but they don't. Not really.

* * *

It was 1965 when we went down to Mexico, me and Mike and Kelly and Frank Red Buttons. The fifties were turning into the sixties. The Watts riots, the anti-War movement, the first Grateful Dead concert. Back then most of my friends called me Jonah.

Getting busted in Mexico turned out to be easy. About halfway between Hermosillo and Guaymas, Mike said that he was sick so we stopped the car and Mike got out and threw up. Then we couldn't get the car started. It was vapor lock but none of us knew that and we ran down the battery turning the engine over. We were going to push the car and pop the clutch but Mike said that he wanted to see a doctor and he and Kelly hitchhiked back to Hermosillo. They said they'd send help. Frank Red Buttons and I stayed with the car. After about an hour Frank and I rolled up half a joint out of our bag of stems. Just after we had lit up, a police car rolled up beside us and stopped and two Mexican policemen got out. Frank put out the joint and swallowed the roach but the big cop drew his gun and told us to get out of the car and put our hands on the roof. The other cop frisked us and then turned us around and handcuffed us. We were stupid enough to try to bribe them without knowing how to do it.

"You have money?" the big cop said.

"Yes, in the suitcase," we said.

"Bribery is a crime," he said, "shall I charge you with that also?"

"No," we said.

So we were arrested. When we finally got our suitcase, of course, there was no money in it. And it had been a lot of money, about four hundred dollars—several thousand today—enough to bribe cops, judges, prosecutors, the whole shebang. We'd been planning to buy weed.

The cops drove us back into Hermosillo, handcuffed. First we went to the police station. The police station was off of the plaza, where there were trees and a small park. A big colonial church faced one side of the park. It was dusk but still quite warm and people were walking around on the streets and sidewalks. Inside the police station they took our names and had us sign some papers. Then they took our picture. The picture got around a lot. It was on television and in

some Mexican magazines. A friend in the States gave me a copy when I got out and I was pretty shocked when I saw it. Man, we looked bad. In our wrinkled shirts and unkempt hair and handcuffs all I needed was a slouch hat to be the Kid. Frank Red Buttons looked like a cross between Bill Hickok on a bad day and the Indian who'd just killed Custer.

Then they put us in the back of a van where there were metal benches on the sides. They didn't bother to put anyone back with us—there was a steel grill between us and the driver and the deputy and the back was locked from the outside. Besides, we were still handcuffed, and they'd put shackles on our legs. We drove off through the downtown area through a mile or two of narrow streets. Frank Red Buttons looked at me.

"This doesn't look good," he said.

I think I nodded. I was completely disoriented. The van began to climb up a narrow twisty road on the outskirts of town, up a small mountain with some little shacks built off the road. Halfway up the mountain the road ended and they stopped the van and opened the back for us to get out. We were at a prison. It was then I began to feel fear. It wasn't a jail cell in the police station; it was a prison. I could see the high stone walls and guards with rifles and a high stone tower, and the barred windows of the two-story brick building at the top of the steps.

I leaned toward Frank Red Buttons and whispered: "This doesn't look good." Frank Red Buttons looked at me as if I were insane.

The cops marched us up the stone steps, through a barred gate, took off our shackles and handcuffs, and handed us over to the warden. The warden was a youngish-looking man in a clean and ironed green uniform. The warden made some notes in his log book and then three very serious-looking guards marched us through a corridor and through another barred gate into a small courtyard. Men were shouting at us from the cell blocks. They marched us up some wide stone steps and over a small bridge that spanned the courtyard we had just gone through. Then there was another barred gate. The guards unlocked it, pushed us through, locked it behind us, and walked off.

We were in a small enclosure, about ten by ten. Later I called it the "airlock." There was another set of bars opposite those we had come in. Every part of that opening was filled with half-naked screaming Mexicans. A hundred sweaty arms were reaching through the bars toward us and waving like the tentacles of a giant sea anemone. Dante portrays the entrance to Hell, if ominous, as rather quiet and pastoral. In Hermosillo it was the middle of August and hot and everyone was sweating and shouting stuff at us that we couldn't understand. It was, well, scary. Later I learned that Hell is basically a boring place: it didn't take a lot of novelty to rile the place up.

Several large men came out of the cells adjoining the airlock enclosure. They said stuff to us also but we just shrugged, shouting back "No comprende." Men began shouting for a man named Oscar. We could hear the name being relayed around on the inside.

"Oscar Sis-neros Dominguez, Oscar Sis-neros Dominguez."

Soon a short, balding Mexican, naked to the waist, emerged from the crowd and entered the gate and spoke a moment with the biggest of the men crowded around us in the little alcove. He told us his name was Oscar and that the "Big Guy" needed our names so he could assign us to a tank. The Big Guy didn't seem to like our looks much, but he did his job. Oscar said he would lead us to our cell. Then we moved into the crowd and there were damp sweaty arms thrown over my shoulders from both sides and someone pulled my hair. We walked through some corridors with arched ceilings and then we were at our cell.

We sat on the floor. There was no other place to sit. The cell tank was already full. More than full. We were the center of attraction and lots of men were talking and asking us questions. All the men looked like the banditos from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, with mustaches and crazy eyes and crooked teeth. The faces were curious or smiling or leering.

The cell itself was about ten feet wide and thirty-five or forty feet long, with eight sets of wooden bunks and one steel cot. The ceiling was arched the whole length, like the corridors outside, and both the walls and the ceiling were covered with pictures from magazines, plastered on like wallpaper, and there was graffiti on top of that. Someone had painted a jet taking off on the back wall, but the there was something wrong with the perspective. At the back of the tank was a rusty funnel shaped object made of iron and enamel that must have been a commode.

All the Mexicans asked for cigarettes. We gave out our cigarettes until we didn't have any more. I think the Mexicans remembered that, because afterward we received various small acts of kindness. Everyone had questions but Frank Red Buttons and I didn't have very good Spanish so the conversation was pretty basic.

"*¿De dónde vienen?*"

"California."

"¿California?"

"*Si.*"

"*¿Tu likee marijuana?*"

"*Si.*"

(Laughter.)

"*Pas un cigarro.*"

"When do we get out?"

(Laughter.) "*Oh, mañana.*"

Some of the kids, the young prisoners, kept asking us if we wanted to take a shower with them. We said no. Then it was time for lights out. Even with the eight wooden bunks and the cot that still meant that four or five men, sometimes more, had to sleep squeezed together on the cement floor. One of the Mexicans gave us a big piece of cardboard. Another one gave us each something that passed for a blanket and said we could pay him later.

It was all kind of interesting, as tourism goes, but since we were getting out the next day neither Frank nor I were very worried. It was just one more experience on a great road trip.

At dawn in a scene of loud clanking and much commotion the guards came in to unlock the cell and make count. We had to get up in a hurry and stow our blankets and our cardboard under a bunk and line up. Then everyone counted off: *uno, dos, tres. Diecisiete, dieciocho, diecinueve.* I think one time we were at twenty-three. The order didn't matter—it was however we lined up. The guards just wanted the right bottom line.

Then we lined up with the rest of the prisoners out in the corridor for breakfast. Breakfast that morning was a thin rice gruel, the same, as we were to learn, as every other morning. But there were fresh rolls, still warm from the prison bakery. Each man got one and they were good. A little guy named Jelly Roll who spoke English gave me a bowl and a spoon. Later, after we got settled, he reminded me that I should pay him. He also told me that newcomers were supposed to mop out the cell in the morning and fill the water bucket for the commode, but that since I hadn't known he had done it for me, and that I should pay him or take his turn the next time it came around.

After we'd eaten our gruel we saw that there was a pot of water set up at the end of the corridor and we washed our bowls like the rest of the men. I couldn't remember who'd given me the bowl so I stashed it with my blanket on the floor of the tank in the pile that constituted my possessions. I walked back to use the commode. It was all scary because of the lack of privacy and maybe because of that time I'd locked myself in a bathroom when I was four, but I had to go. There was no door to lock, and also no seat: just the rusty commode. Next to the commode was a box with magazines in it to use for paper and another box for the used paper, which couldn't be put in the commode because it would clog the plumbing. Coated paper is terrible for wiping. Then there was a five gallon bucket of water for flushing—which I stupidly used all of. It actually took only a gallon or so of water to flush the stuff down. Then I had to go to the end of the corridor to refill the bucket and haul it back to the cell.

Then Frank and I wandered around. It turned

We spent our days waiting. Waiting for something to happen. We waited another day and then another day and then another day. When a representative of the United States government did finally contact us, he just shrugged and said that there was nothing he could do and that maybe we should hire a lawyer.

out it was a Sunday. Mostly I remember the teeming confusion and not knowing what was going on. It didn't take long to see the whole place. The prison was basically a rectangle within a rectangle. The outer rectangle was the wall that the guards walked. The inner rectangle, about twenty feet within the walls, was the two-story cell block about a hundred and sixty feet long and eighty feet wide, with a long courtyard in the center. Prisoners in the downstairs teemed around in the courtyard. We could look down from the balcony. The long eastern side of the rectangle was divided into four tanks: two, like the one I was in, facing out and two on the inside above the courtyard. Two long corridors and two short corridors divided the inside tanks from the outside tanks. The big cells looked as if they had once been barracks. At the midpoints of the corridors and in the corners there were alcoves. One was a chapel to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Some of the others had been converted into tiny one-table restaurants. Some were just open alcoves where people congregated or sat on the floor. Individual cells opened off of the narrow inner balcony on the western side and there were individual cells opening off the corner alcoves. There was a shower room with cold water that came from a tank on the roof. Somebody told us that the place had been built as a fort to fight the Yaquis. I learned later that wasn't quite right: it had been built *by* Yaquis, by Yaqui prisoners. For Yaqui prisoners.

In one of the alcoves there was a kind of store attached to a guy's cell. I had a little change in my pocket left over from Nogales and I bought a pale blue notebook with the Virgin of Guadalupe on the cover and a pen and a pack of Delicados, the cheapest Mexican cigarettes. I found a place to sit where I could lean my back against a wall and tried to write but I was continually interrupted by the Mexicans, many of whom wanted to write their names or draw a picture in my notebook. Frank Red Buttons must have borrowed it also because there is an entry there in his handwriting:

> *today is visitors day, so we had to leave the cell. Since it is Sunday, we cannot expect to be released until tomorrow. Therefore we have nothing to do but wait.*

Waiting was like watching a parade. There were more asymmetrical faces than I'd ever seen in my life: faces that slanted or zigzagged, a cheekbone jutting to the left or a chin to the right. Being visitors' day everyone was wearing their best, but for at least half of the men that was just the same rags they wore every other day. Some of the men looked crazed and it turned out they were. The wives and families of the prisoners added to the confusion and I gave up on trying to make sense of any of it. A Mexican preacher was holding a revival in one of the alcoves.

Lunch time came. We retrieved our bowls and lined up. Some of the visitors lined up also. Other men were eating food that their wives had brought them. Lunch was a bowl of soup and a tortilla. The soup contained some onions, some potatoes, a few other vegetables, and whatever rice was left over from breakfast. My bowl contained a big piece of bone, so they must have made the soup from scratch. It wasn't bad, actually, but too hot for my taste—I wasn't used to hot peppers.

After that we sat around. The Delicados were going fast and Frank's suitcase and my rucksack were in the car that I guess was impounded someplace and there was nothing to do but wait. All the bootblacks were out with their gear. The barbers set up stools in the corridors, and men were trying to sell whatever they could. One man offered tiny monkeys that he'd carved from apricot pits. A lanky man about six foot six who was kind of crazy and was called Chiquilín was trying to sell a model sailing ship he'd carved for fifteen pesos.

Finally the visitors left and it was dinner time. Dinner was a ladleful of beans and a tortilla. Red beans. Pinto beans, I guess. Mexican beans. There was nothing wrong with them: they were just beans. One of the men had purchased a little coarse salt folded in a piece of paper and offered me some. I took a pinch and thanked him.

Then there were a few hours of warm evening before lockdown, but there wasn't really anything to do and there was no place to do it. Mexicans were still coming up and introducing themselves but there were too many to remember. And then some would come by a second or third time and try to make conversation because there was nothing else to do. Then it was lockdown and we went back to the tank and there were a couple of hours before lights out when the Chief, the tank captain, pulled the cords on the two light bulbs hanging from a wire stapled to the ceiling and there was still nothing to do.

Monday was the same as Sunday, except there weren't any visitors. Frank and I tried to find someone to talk to—that we needed our belongings, that we wanted to see the American consul, that we wanted to see a lawyer, that we needed to talk to the warden, but there was no one to talk to except the other prisoners. We went to the Big Guy's tank and told him that we needed to see the warden, and that we wanted to contact the American consul. The Big Guy said "mañana" in a voice that wasn't particularly friendly and went back to his cell. We were out of cigarettes and almost out of money.

* * *

By the third or fourth night both Frank and I had dysentery, and I entered a hazy hell realm and lost track of time. A couple of days passed, lying on the cement in misery and hitting the commode in an endlessly repeating cycle. A weekend passed. On Sunday we would have had to leave the cell because of the visitors. I guess we moved to the shower room, but I don't really remember. On Monday the warden sent up a pill for each of us, something like a Percodan but stronger.

The Percodan seemed to cure us completely. Or maybe we were already almost over the diarrhea, and the percs were just the *coup de grace*. They were strong, whatever they were.

Just not being sick made the world look a lot better. Still, we spent our days waiting. Waiting for something to happen. Why wasn't anyone doing anything? Why couldn't we speed things up? Why couldn't we see a judge and have a trial and pay a fine or something for our bag of stems? Why hadn't we heard from the American consul? Why hadn't Mike and Kelly bailed us out? So we waited. We waited another day and then another day and then another day. We didn't know that we would never meet the judge. We didn't know that Mike was back in California. And when a representative of the United States government did finally contact us, he just shrugged and said that there was nothing he could do and that maybe we should hire a lawyer.

The older prisoners mostly left us alone—they had

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their own routines—but the young bucks hassled us a lot, baiting us, asking if we liked "la banana" and saying that we were sissies because of our long hair. Frank Red Buttons and I played a lot of cards, but I don't think I was very good company, because Frank began spending more and more of his time with the Mexicans. Maybe he was just more social. Soon he'd earned a nickname. They called him "Psychodeelic." I guess I was like always, quiet. I didn't get a nickname.

I did spend some time talking with Oscar, to get his perspective on our situation. Just from the things he wouldn't say I figured that, one, we weren't getting out soon, and, two, that there was nothing that I or a lawyer or the American consul or anyone else could do about it. I wrote letters to everyone I could think of whose address I knew, telling them where I was and asking for books and money.

Then Frank Red Buttons told me that Oscar had said that he could score us some dope. Five pesos for a joint. We put aside a couple of pesos for a pack of Delicados and some stamps, and gave the rest of our money to Oscar for two numbers. In about an hour Oscar found us sitting on the railing near the gate and gave us a nod. We followed him to his cell, on the opposite side of the prison from ours. Oscar showed us the numbers. They looked like two pieces of used chewing gum wadded up in their foil wrappers. Oscar gave one to Frank Red Buttons and carefully opened the other one. He called to one of his cellmates and the man gave him a scrap of brown wrapping paper—thinner than the paper of paper bags in the U.S. and the preferred rolling material in the prison. It was pretty harsh. The joint Oscar rolled was very skinny but the grass was good and we all got high. Over on another bunk four other men were passing a number around. Los Marijuanos were taking over the cell, and even those not participating seemed glad for the new vibe. I only got two hits but they were deep and I felt a big rubbery smile pasting itself onto my face. Frank Red Buttons was grinning also. So was Oscar. Then he laughed.

"Well, that's a little more like it."

Frank Red Buttons and I both laughed.

It wasn't even that I was that high—like there were any visuals or anything, or that I was stoned. I was a long way from being stoned. But it was like there was a vanishing point: not like disappearing but like perspective. Such as the pleasantness of the air, the way it was hot and dry and the way it was moving a little—coming through the bars of the windows, and just the surreal bizarreness of the tank, with the layers of graffiti and peeling paint and Frank Red Buttons with his dangly gold earring and ideas for a travel poster: "Boys, see the real Mexico."

"Well, you boys wanted to see a bit of Mexico, I guess," Oscar said.

We all laughed again.

"Is it always this nice here?" Frank Red Buttons said.

Oscar smiled and made a sound like clearing his throat. "Well, actually, no."

We all giggled. The other group of marijuanos grinned at us from across the tank. Maybe we'd be okay. Maybe we could live in this place.

* * *

After a week in the prison word came up that Frank Red Buttons and I had to have our hair cut off. We didn't like that, but the Chief said there was no choice. The Chief was a short gray-haired man who looked like he was mostly Indian. He was our tank captain and slept on the steel cot. The Chief made cutting motions with his hands and shrugged. There was a barber right in our tank named Louis.

Louis was tall and skinny, about six feet three, with lanky black hair and a neat mustache. He wore a white shirt, tattered but clean, with the tails tied together in the front and a pair of slacks that were too short, and he talked to himself. Louis was an educated man but twenty years of the *Penal del Estado* had transported his mind to a pleasanter land. I said he talked to himself but he really talked to two imaginary friends. Louis's talking was all slurred buzzing sounds of *jzzz-* and *jsss-* and *shhh-* that he made with his mouth half open. With his inflections and facial expressions and occasional hand gestures , the words almost made sense. His friends seemed to be men of wit and learning, and he seemed to converse with them at an outdoor café, perhaps with coffee or beers in front of them.

If we were high, Louis's friends would acquire faint glowing outlines. Frank Red Buttons and I would stare at him for minutes at a time, eavesdropping and becoming entranced in his hallucinations. Then Louis would notice us and sit up straight, as if he'd been caught doing something shameful, and say *"Hay no más y ya."* That was all Louis ever said and no one would tell us what it meant. Louis would hold his dignified pose for five or ten seconds, trying to look normal, but then one of his friends would make a joke or throw in a new remark that Louis would have to answer and it would all start again, Louis agreeing or disagreeing or shrugging his shoulders or lifting a finger to emphasize his point.

It always seemed to me that they talked philosophy, or maybe philosophy along with some politics and commentary on current events that probably had occurred before I was born. Or perhaps there were discussions of human nature or on the foibles of certain mutual friends. All philosophy is like that, actually. Writing is like that too—that is, conversing with invisibles. Like now.

I watched Louis often. He and his companions never seemed to run out of things to talk about—there was always a new subject, a new *mot juste*, a new witticism or a dry irony, or, sometimes, clearly, a heartfelt question or the flitting by of a small tragedy that would arouse Louis's sympathy.

Barbering was Louis's trade, the way he earned a little money. Besides cutting hair for the other prisoners, Louis would set up his stool in one of the corridors on visitors' day and sometimes a charitable visitor would buy a haircut. So Louis put his stool out and I sat on it and Louis draped a dirty sheet over my shoulders and he cut my hair short. Everyone in the tank was watching—somehow watching the two hippies get their hair cut was the funniest thing that had happened in the cell in a long time—so Louis tried his best to be professional and focus on his job. Louis did his best but he could only maintain his comportment for about a minute at a time. Then one of his friends evidently had something very funny to say because Louis would crack up. He started buzzing and zz-zing and even when he went back to his scissors he had a big grin on his face and kept talking to his friends—about me I guess. Then he'd catch himself and say *"Hay no más y ya"* softly and very delicately and then cut some more but still with that big grin. After the haircuts were finished and the Mexicans had laughed at us until it wasn't funny anymore Louis swept up the hair with a broom and sat down on his bunk and rehashed everything that had happened with his two friends. They said Louis was in for molesting a girl. He never had any visitors. Frank Red Buttons would say *hay no mas y ya* to Louis sometimes: "Hey Louis, '*hay no más y ya*?'" Louis would always nod his head and answer. *"Hay no más y ya."*

The day after we got our haircuts we heard our names called out by the trustees and Frank and I were herded downstairs to the warden's office. The warden

was smiling and looking very professional and seemed pleased with our haircuts—proud of us even, in a kind of fatherly way. They had my rucksack and Frank's suitcase and guitar.

Frank opened his suitcase and went through it looking for the money but it wasn't there. Frank told the warden that someone had taken his money. The warden seemed very interested in the missing money, wanting to know exactly how much had been there. But once he knew how much money it was he just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head and said that the suitcase had been guarded carefully the whole time and that there wasn't any money in it. He was probably going to put the bite on the cop who'd arrested us for a cut.

We took our stuff and they marched us back upstairs and through the air lock.

Hay no másv y ya.

* * *

Once Frank Red Buttons was put in solitary. Solitary in Mexico was called "The Hole," and it wasn't solitary. Frank Red Buttons was put in the Hole for a week for fighting, and he said it wasn't any worse than up above. He told us how Juanita, the transvestite, was down there and that she did a striptease except she didn't quite show her penis, just the pubic hair, and everyone loved it and clapped.

A few years later I was back in prison in Texas. I knew a guy there called Crow who got put in solitary. The cons were split on Crow. He wasn't a snitch, but he was too wild and out-of-control to be a dependable man. Nobody doubted his integrity, but his allegiance was to something beyond even himself, so in that way he wasn't a good con. The things he did didn't really have to do with being a con. He wasn't a cop, but he wasn't a con either. He was too crazy, so nobody could ever be sure which way he would jump. Half the cons could dig him and thought he was great. The other half found his capers too unpredictable and therefore unbecoming of a good convict. Too crazy by half: too crazy for half. That's how I wanted to be—like Crow. But I wasn't.

Crow told stories about Dada and Marcel Duchamp, and he had a great story about getting out of the army. When Crow had been in the army he'd started driving around in an imaginary convertible. To go to the mess hall he'd take the keys out of his pocket, unlock the door of his car, start the engine, shift into gear and walk to mess in a half crouch, moving his hands as if he were steering. At the mess hall he'd do the reverse and then just be like everyone else until mess was over and then he'd drive away. Crow was scrupulous about his car. Like a good mime, he could delineate the contours so perfectly that other people began to see it also. He didn't wash the car, or wax it, but once he used his handkerchief to clear some bird shit off of the window. This went on for weeks. The officers ignored him because they just thought he was trying to get his Section 8, but they finally gave up and discharged him. After the final stop, at the final desk, after he had signed his final paper and just as he was about to unlock his car to drive off the base he turned around and handed the keys to the officer, telling him "here, I won't need these anymore," and just walked off.

In prison Crow started wearing his shoes to bed. He took his socks off, but then he put his shoes back on and slept in black shoes and skivvies under a sheet. The doctors gave him thorazine but Crow wouldn't take it so they put him in solitary, where they take away your shoes even if you don't wear them to bed. It was called the "barefoot ward."

Crow still wouldn't take his thorazine and he began shouting loud caws, like he was Peter Pan, crowing, except that he was cawing. Sometimes he'd caw when the guards or the doctors asked him a question. After Crow had been on Barefoot for a week four big guards came in with an orderly holding a hypodermic. They told Crow that either he could take his medicine or they would give it to him. Crow should have answered with a caw but instead he said "Gee, let me think about that a minute." The guards jumped him.

The United States is the world leader in prisons. The country has five percent of the world's population but twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners. America puts more people in prison than any other—both in total numbers and by percentage of its population. So we call ourselves "the Land of the Free." In the imaginations of its citizens, it is other countries that have gulags—the bad countries. Where people aren't free.

Americans believe that prisons are a necessary, even natural, part of society, and that there have always been prisons. That having prisons has to do with "human nature." If you were to tell them that prisons are part of a police state, or a "prison state," which, after all, is the foundation of a police state—they would think that you were talking about some other country—one of the bad countries.

"It's the way things are," is what the cons would say.

"It's wrong," I would say.

The cons would all laugh.

* * *

Now I've returned to solitary. I'm in a tiny cabin on Buzzard Peak near Elk Ridge. I've always done my best work in solitary, until the solitude drives me crazy—then I long for the prison. In prison, for the first time in my life, I was accepted for who I was, as I was. I've stayed out of prison for thirty years. Or have I? Why don't I feel as free as I did in the *Penal del Estado* in Hermosillo? Why do I lack the discipline I had at the federal prison in Texas?

Craving solitude is a disease, a pathology of civilization. But fear of solitude is also disease: the fear of facing our true condition. To hide the solitude, we fill our lives with trinkets and noise. Televisions and radios are left on all day. We fill our minds with intriguing puzzles. Or we fence out the world. Both fencing and solitude, however, have long histories—once we piled thorny bushes around our camps at night so the lions would not take us in our sleep, and no one knows how long we have been walking deep into the wilds to seek visions and songs.

Still, at bottom, we are a social species. The state buttresses its walls by keeping people apart and in fear. Demands on the citizens are increased until someone cracks. Then the cracked person is held up as an example. "See, it's human nature," they say. "We need law and order, an armed state." That's the Hobbesian argument. But Hobbes was really describing the nature of money—the psychology of capitalism—rather than the nature of people.

In prison I grew strong. There was no solitude in prison, but solitaries carry their own. With solitude inside, it was easy to be social. So I've returned. I could be in a lookout in the north Cascades. Or I could be in a garage in Ocean Park that I never leave. I am allowed books. I have a radio but I never turn it on. I have a computer and receive email but I never answer.

The cabin here on Elk Ridge is eight by sixteen feet and has no insulation. There are cracks in the siding that let in the wind. The roof is corrugated plastic. That's good for light, but after a storm huge clumps of snow break loose from the high branches of the grandfather oak tree. When the clumps hit the roof the corrugated sheets bend and snowflakes swirl around in the room. If I close my eyes the crash of the snow hitting the roof becomes the clanging of the gates on *celda* 63 at the *Penal del Estado* in Sonora. Or I'm back in Texas and the crashes are the slamming of the doors on ward 4B2. It's solitary again, and I can tell my story.

Dale Pendell's books include the Pharmako Trilogy (*Pharmako/Poeia*, *Pharmako/Dynamis*, and *Pharmako/Gnosis*); *Walking with Nobby: Conversations with Norman O. Brown*; *Inspired Madness: the Gifts of Burning Man*; and *The Great Bay: Chronicles of the Collapse*. Once a resident of Santa Cruz, he now lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.