

2006 BECHTEL PRIZE FINALIST

Broken Lines

Writing Behind and Beyond the Walls of San Quentin

CHRIS MALCOMB

I AM A GUEST TEACHER in my friend Susan's writing class, ENG 99b, inside San Quentin State Prison. The students have been composing analytical essays for nine weeks, and she has invited me to join the last segment—eight classes between Thanksgiving and Christmas—to help teach a fiction unit. These will be the first short stories the students have ever written.

My first night is cold and foggy. I've seen San Quentin—this breathtaking, waterfront real estate at the base of Mt. Tamalpias—a hundred times. Tonight, however, it feels heavier, more immense, like a slumbering concrete dragon overwhelming its tiny peninsula. Behind it, amber lights freckle the darkened hills of Marin County; a sleek, bright passenger ferry glides soundlessly across the mirrored water towards San Francisco. Everything glows like the set of a sepia-toned film.

I dig my hands deeper into my coat pocket as we approach a 35-foot turreted wall embedded with arrowhead-shaped, barred windows. Below each window, rust-colored streaks stain the cement. There is a door at the base of the wall, capped by a semi-circular window with bars that radiate like the black rays of a small sun. We step under this sun and into the prison.

The Education building has whitewashed cinder-block walls, black cement floors and several classrooms. Our room is littered with thick wooden desks, antiquated motivational posters, and dozens of grammar books from the 1970s. A year from now, this building will be shut down; we'll learn then that it was actually condemned in 1939.

I'm staring through a mesh-covered window looking at the yard when the students begin trickling in. As expected, they are dressed in blue: jeans, pressed cotton shirts, oversized denim jackets. Most wear white sneakers; several sport black beanies or baseball hats tucked down over their ears. They are Black, Caucasian, Mexican, and Asian. They have dreadlocks, buzz cuts, and thick, tattoo-covered arms; they haul bright yellow mesh bags filled with note-



A San Quentin inmate, who is pursuing his AA degree, studying in his cell.
Photo by Heather Rowley.

“Why a dress code?” I’d asked Susan. “So we stand out in case of an emergency, a riot or something,” she said. “If we look different from the inmates, we’re less likely to get shot.” I’m amazed she convinced me to do this.

books, pencils, and folders. Several wear mammoth headphones and bounce to hip-hop beats. A few have small bags of candy or mugs of coffee. They greet each other with brief head nods or quick knuckle taps, then fan around the room to claim their desks.

I begin to circulate, nervously shaking hands, asking questions, introducing myself. I try to sound confident; I feel intimidated. I stand out in so many ways: my skinny frame, my blue eyes, my college degree, my compliance with the volunteers’ dress code—no orange, blue, green, or grey.

“Why a dress code?” I’d asked Susan.

“So we stand out in case of an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“A riot or something. If we look different from the inmates, we’re less likely to get shot.”

I’m amazed she convinced me to do this.

Susan writes a warm-up on the whiteboard: write about a fictional character that you like. The students begin, but continue their banter: the evening’s football practice, today’s *San Francisco Chronicle*, the pressed turkey Thanksgiving dinner. Within twenty minutes, everyone has arrived. Class starts. I drift to the side.

“OK, guys,” Susan says, glancing at the board. “What do you think?”

Hands shoot up. “Jason Bourne from *The Bourne Identity*,” exclaims a handsome black man with a goatee, baggy jeans, and a black nylon skull cap. His headphones dangle around his neck like a small python.

“Great, Latrell,” replies Susan. “Why?”

He smiles. “That dude is off the hook. Always escaping from something nasty!”

“Yeah! Remember when he’s trapped in the house?” someone yells from the back row. “Next thing, stuff’s blowin’ up and he’s driving away in an Audi!”

Excitement erupts. The guys volley their favorite action movie scenes.

Susan waits, then re-directs. “OK, Latrell. What *traits* does Jason Bourne possess that help him escape?”

Latrell slouches back in his seat. Exhales. Stares at the ceiling. “Well, I guess... yeah, he’s smart and tough—he uses his intelligence.”

“Good,” replies Susan. “Important point. Characters’ behaviors translate into traits. Who’s got another one?”

The guys now realize this isn’t a rap session about their favorite action movies.

A short, young Asian man raises his hand. He’s wearing a black Giants cap over a gray bandana. His face is broad, his eyes narrow. A few black whiskers protrude from his chin. He is younger than me.

“Tai,” Susan calls. “Whatta ya got?”

“That kid from the movie *Big*. He wanted to be bigger so the bullies would stop

picking on him.”

Laughter. Susan quells it. “Why do you like this guy?”

“Got picked on,” he says. “That’s why I joined a gang.”

“Great point,” Susan notes. “We identify with characters with whom we share traits. Anyone else got a character that mirrors their own personality?”

They do. For Demarcus it’s Freddie Krueger because, “He took revenge on the society that wrongfully locked him up.” Jamal feels akin to Steven Seagal’s character from *Under Siege* because, “That dude just kicked some ass.”

After ten minutes, Tai rejoins the conversation.

“Santiago, the boy from *The Alchemist*,”¹ he says.

Wait. One of my favorite books. I speak up. “Ah, could I ask something about that?” I say, my voice trembling.

Susan nods, gives me the floor. I stand. The guys shift their dark eyes towards me. I’m shaking. “Tai, why do you feel connected to that character?”

He taps his pencil. “I dunno,” he smiles. “He’s just a boy, but he wants to realize his personal legend. He’s willing to take risks.”

“Is there a trait for that?” I ask.

His face brightens. “Adventurous.”

The room is suddenly silent. I lean against a desk. “Any other traits? Maybe ones you share?”

Tai shifts. His oversized shirt undoubtedly hides a chiseled, tattooed physique. Yet he seems just a boy. “Well, the world is so new to him. It doesn’t always treat him nicely, but he keeps trusting.”

“What would you call that trait?” I push.

“I think...” He pauses. “I don’t know.”

“Sure?”

He exhales. “Wait...,” he says. “Yeah. Innocence.”

Our eyes lock briefly before we have to move on.

I tell them we’re going to design a class character. “Make it as realistic as possible,” I say. “Draw on your own experience if that helps. Who wants to start?”

Silence. Is this too fast?

“C’mon guys,” Susan says. “You’re better than—”

“Carroll!” interjects Randall. He is black, handsome, in his early 40s. His hair is cropped close to his skull; his clothes are neatly pressed. He sits in the back row. “Call the character Carroll. That way nobody’s offended—could be male or female.”

Mumbled laughter.



An inmate in the education program at San Quentin.
Photo by Heather Rowley.

¹ *The Alchemist: A Fable About Following Your Dream*, by Paul Coelho.

“Fair enough,” I say. I pen the name inside a large circle in the middle of the whiteboard. “But we need commitment. Male or female?”

“Dude!” shouts Jamal, another black man with ebony skin, loose jeans, and an oversize denim jacket riddled with pockets. He sits next to Randall, twirling his hair into tiny dreadlocks. “And he’s an *emo!*”

More laughter. I look at Susan. She shrugs.

“An emo?” I question. “What’s an emo?”

“An *emotionally sensitive man,*” quips Latrell. “You know, a dude that’s in touch with both his masculine and feminine sides.”

“He’s a womanizer, but he loves to cook!” someone shouts.

“And he’s got a dog,” cries Tai. “*Emos* always got dogs.”

“And he’s definitely a *playa,*” continues Latrell. “Got so many dates, brotha’ don’t know what to do.”

I scribble furiously on the board. *Dog. Cook. Playa.* Now I’m laughing.

“Wait a minute, gentlemen. Wait, wait, wait,” interrupts Cody, a young, stocky, slightly balding man with caramel-toned skin. Once he seizes the floor, he takes a long sip from a grungy plastic cup of coffee. “Now let me articulate a critical miscalculation. You can’t be a *playa* and an emo. That’s an inappropriate combination of personality traits.” Cody grins and leans forward in his chair like a judge. The guys look at him like he’s from Mars.

I quietly write a question mark after the word *Playa.*

“OK,” retorts Latrell. “I *respectfully* disagree with Mr. Webster over there.” He rolls his eyes at Cody then sits up. “Carroll is well-rounded and treats his women fine—that’s emo; but he’s trippin’ on the whole commitment thing—that’s a *playa.*”

“I hear that, dude!” Jamal slams his palm on his desk.

The room becomes a stock-exchange trading floor, voices flying. Can one be both an emo and *playa*? The arguments get personal, but remain polite, respectful. An answer evolves: yes.

Cody concedes. I erase the question mark.

For twenty more minutes, I scribble as the guys bring Carroll to life.

- 30 years old
- Biracial
- Recovering alcoholic, sober four years
- Has a sponsor
- Exceptionally intelligent
- Speaks five languages
- Loves salsa dancing
- Domineering father died of emphysema
- Tight with his mother and twin sister

Carroll’s traits are still on the board as the students leave. I stand by the door, shaking hands.

Tai is the last. “Santiago, huh?” I say.

He smiles, grabbing my hand. His grip is thick. “Yeah, man. I love that guy.”

“*The Alchemist* is one of my favorite books.”

“Naw, dawg, really?”

“Yeah. That personal legend stuff is real.”

“Off the hook. Got that book in my cell. Just like how he didn’t give up. I’m gonna read some when I get home tonight,” he says. “See you next class.”

We tap knuckles and he’s gone.

ENG 99b class characters

- Bonnie: 26-y/o, independent professional woman questioning her sexuality
- Carroll: Intelligent, non-committal 30-y/o lawyer from Chicago
- Cassandra: Beautiful, lonely 14-y/o girl from the Oakland ghetto
- Dasheme: Rich, brilliant 26-y/o African-American from New York
- Jeeto: Sweet, lonely 70-y/o Sikh woman living in Fremont
- Michael: Independent 18-y/o Chinese-American man from Richmond
- Pharoah: Brilliant 32-y/o CIA assassin
- Tracy: Beautiful, successful 26-y/o Brazilian immigrant
- Tucker: Crestfallen 38-y/o Colorado rodeo cowboy

THE second class is two nights later. The guard at the east gate is Flaherty, a short woman with dyed auburn hair and an olive-colored jumpsuit. She is pulling decorations out of a large cardboard box. The ground is littered with plastic snowmen, strings of white and colored lights, and small sparkling cardboard letters spelling out the words, MERRY CHRISTMAS. She turns, holding up a limp string of dusty lights, tangled in knots.

In class, we make a timeline of Carroll’s life.

“His dad died—eight,” shouts Cody.

“Mother taught him to cook—twelve,” says Jamal.

“Dad gave him a necklace—seven,” calls Latrell.

“Some brotha stole his chick—sixteen,” quips Demarcus, grinning ear-to-ear, a mouth full of silver teeth.

I cut in. “Why is that significant, Demarcus?”

He pauses, twisting little curls into his mahogany hair. “Cuz she ditched him for his best friend! Never recovered. That’s why he can’t keep a relationship.”

“That’s right dawg!” Randall calls out. “It all begins...”

“What begins?” I ask.

“The playa’ lifestyle. The womanizing. He’ll be frontin’—acting cool and stuff—but he’ll always bounce.”

Frontin’? Bounce?

Roy, a quiet white man in his mid-forties with short gray hair and day-old stubble, raises his hand. His arms are slathered in tattoos of guns, skulls, dragons, and naked women. “He can’t commit,” he says, “because he can’t trust women.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” says Latrell. “Once betrayed, neva the same!”

“Truth,” several guys mumble.

- Age 2: Michael's family immigrates to the USA.
 Age 7: Cassandra moves to the 85th Village projects in Oakland.
 Age 17: Tracy emigrates from Brazil to Florida.
 Age 19: Dasheme earns MBA and accounting degrees.
 Age 22: Bonnie learns that her younger brother is gay.
 Age 26: Carroll's best friend is killed by a drunk driver.
 Age 29: Pharoah is paroled from federal prison and hired as an assassin.
 Age 37: Tucker is thrown and trampled by bull "Blind Fury."
 Age 50: Jeeto leaves India.

The following week, there is a sparkling silver tinsel garland stapled around the white prison sign. Below it, Flaherty is kneeling down, rummaging through a new box. She sees us, smiles, and hoists herself to her feet. Behind her, propped against the box, are two folded, creased cardboard characters: Frosty and Rudolph. The prison rises up behind them in the distance.

TAI playfully bumps my shoulder during the break. "Oops, sorry!" he laughs. Physical contact between volunteers and inmates is strictly limited: handshakes only. I step back, surprised.

"Hey, nice shoes," he says, pointing at my feet.

I look down: hiking boots.

"You like to hike?" he continues.

"Yeah. Don't get out as much as I'd like, though." I regret my words immediately.

He lets me off easy. "Man, when I was on the outside, I was always in nature. Mountain biking, hiking. I'd hit those trails like they was nothin', dawg."

"There's some good ones," I mumble, heart pounding. We're advised to steer conversations towards common topics—news, sports, movies. I look away. Hiking trails?

"I'd do anything for a hike," Tai says.

I stub the toe of my boot into the shiny black cement.

"Sometimes," he continues. "I'm standing on that yard, and Mt. Tam seems *so close*. Those winding little brown paths, and the wind whipping the trees at the top." He shrugs his shoulders; his eyes narrow. "But all I got is asphalt and razor wire. It's so *flat* in here. I wanna go *up*, ya know?"

"Yeah." I nod my head. No clue.

"Still hope, though," Tai continues, backing away and slapping his fist into his palm. "I'm a lifer. But guys get dates all the time."

A lifer. A shiver jolts my body. I grip the edge of my desk to conceal it. "Dates?"

"Parole dates. Gotta chance in 2012. Only eight years."

Only.

"My family kind of gave up on me," Tai continues. "Moved to Texas. They still send stuff sometimes—Asian foods, pictures, cards—but not so much anymore. I'm kinda on my own."

I think about the holiday care packages my mother has sent me over the years, stuff I just threw away.

“But I still have dreams,” Tai continues. “Wanna have a life, you know—a wife, kids, a real job, my own house. I’d just lay on my lawn looking up at the sky all day.”

I nod. Break ends. We return to our fictional characters.

Driving home, I ask Susan if she ever wonders about our students’ crimes.

“All the time,” she says. “But part of me doesn’t want to know. Right now, they’re just my students—not drug dealers, thieves, rapists or murderers. Besides, some of them committed their crimes so long ago. Like Roy. He was 17. He must have done something horrible. But look at him now. He’s the librarian. He meditates. He’s read three times as many books as I have.” She pauses and sighs. “I don’t know. I just can’t believe they’re still the same.”

I once heard Bo Lozof, founder of The Prison Ashram Project. “Imagine being known for the worst thing you ever did in your life,” he said. “Everywhere you go. Forever. Imagine that.”

We drive on, creeping through traffic on the San Rafael Bridge. Several lanes are undergoing an earthquake retrofit. I crack my window; the cool, foggy air slips into the car.

Susan breaks the silence. “I took the tour last year.”

“The tour?”

“The cell blocks, dining halls, and the yard.”

“Really.” We drive a few feet further. A small boat sails under the bridge, red lights blinking on its bow.

“I saw our guys in their cells,” she says, leaning against her window. We’re stopped again. “They were excited to see me, but also embarrassed. It was nauseating. I cried all the way home.”

“Did they let you into a cell?”

“Yeah. Two steel slabs for a bunk-bed, two small shelves for clothes, a toilet, and a sink.”

“I’ve heard they’re tiny.”

“I could touch both walls with my outstretched hands.”

“Jesus.”

“The guys say if an animal shelter were caught confining two dogs in a space that small, they’d be breaking federal regulations.”

I close my eyes and think of our students moving freely around the education building. The traffic lightens and we gain speed on the bridge.

Driving home, I ask Susan if she ever wonders about our students’ crimes. “All the time,” she says. “But part of me doesn’t want to know. Right now, they’re just my students—not drug dealers, thieves, rapists or murderers.”

Good fictional characters have needs.

- Bonnie needs to admit her attraction to her female supervisor
- Cassandra needs a friend at her new high school
- Dasheme needs to rid the U.S. mint of some of its contents
- Jeeto needs someone to push her wheelchair
- Michael needs to discover his Chinese ancestry
- Pharoah needs to make one more hit
- Tracy needs to return to Brazil
- Tucker needs to decide if he should leave the rodeo

HARJIT is a gentle, unkempt middle-aged Sikh man with dark, liquid eyes. His hair, allowed to remain long because of his religious faith, is tied up in a knot. Several black strands fall lightly around his ears, some blending in with his scraggly, raven-colored beard. His wrinkled blue shirt hangs out over his jeans, his enormous sneakers are untied.

He is always smiling.

Harjit rarely attends class, but somehow has seven crumpled pages of notes about his character, Jeeto. Tonight, he reads them to me in his lilting Indian accent and broken English. The story is brutal, heartbreaking.

I suspect it's true.

When he finishes, he points to the red string I wear on my wrist. "What is that?" he asks.

A protection cord. I explain my Buddhist meditation practice.

"Do you believe karma, Chris?"

"Good actions bring good results, right?"

Harjit smiles and nods. "Karma why I'm in prison. Previous lifetime, I do something horrible. This lifetime, I pay. In jail, God prevents me to harm others. God helping me be free."

I've heard Ajahn Brahm, abbot of the Bodhinyana Monastery in Australia, say that a prison is "any place you don't want to be." A job, a relationship, a meditation retreat. Even San Quentin. All can be places of confinement. Or liberation.

It's simply a state of mind.

"Harjit," I say. "Do you know Jeeto?"

He nods. His eyes moisten.

How stringent are the lines between fact and fiction? Can they be broken?

Jeeto

- Married at 14 in Punjab. Widow at age 28. Re-marry not allowed.
- Jeeto's sons join Sikh Student Federation after Indian government attacks Sikh Golden Temple.
- Police jail sons; Jeeto pay bribes for his release. Sons hide.
- Jeeto in jail. Police do bad things, like sex and beat her. Tell her to "be quiet."
- Jeeto hide from police in Bhopal Madha Pardesh state.
- Jeeto escapes to USA for asylum.
- Jeeto live alone with statues of Shiva and Natraj next to her TV.
- Jeeto have stroke. Family cannot get visa to come to USA.

During the fifth class, Susan and I shake things up: we arrange the desks in a circle. “They always sit in the same seats, don’t they?” I say.

“The whole semester,” she says.

The guys pause as they enter. Some slide their desks to the side, joke about being “non-conformists.”

We insist. They come back.

We read and discuss “A Game of War,” a short story by Herb Karl about three young boys playing an imaginary game in a Florida swamp. After each section, we discuss literary concepts: conflict, narration, dialogue, and plot. They debate about which boy actually “wins” the war.

As class ends, Demarcus offers an observation. “Story’s just one afternoon,” he says. “But we learn hella lot ‘bout those boys. Damn good writing if you ask me.”

Slice: a thin piece (a story) cut from a larger object (a life).

Bonnie: lunch with her supervisor.

Carroll: an afternoon with his girlfriend.

Cassandra: one week at her new school.

Dasheme: a meeting, a heist, an escape.

Michael: a trip from San Francisco to China.

Pharoah: 24 hours on assignment in Berlin.

Tracy: six years—from Brazil to Florida and back.

Tucker: 12 hours on the ranch.

The pages of Tai’s notebook contain an elaborate series of neat, precise brainstorming charts, and flow maps about Michael. Beside them on his desk is one clean, smooth sheet of empty lined paper.

He is staring at it.

“I dunno, man,” he tells me. “Just can’t seem to get the writing going.”

“You know what you want to say, though?” I nod towards the notebook.

“Yeah.” He pauses. “He wants to meet his Chinese family. Figure out who he is. Like that boy in *The Alchemist*. I just like the idea, man. Finding your truth. I’m gonna call his story ‘Identity.’”

“But you have to write it first.”

Tai laughs. “Yeah, I hate that part.”

ON a mediation retreat once, a teacher told me the story of Milarepa and the demons. Milarepa, a 9th century Tibetan yogi and poet, once opened the front door of his home to discover three vile, nasty demons. He recognized the demons as his own inner critics, those ghoulish, derogatory voices that littered his mind with guilt, hatred, anger, regret, jealousy, and self-judgment. Their arrival at his door, he concluded, was an opportunity. He invited them in for tea and asked them questions for an hour, learning how they had targeted his mind. When they had finished their tea, Milarepa escorted the demons to the door. “You are always welcome here,” he said. “But I will never speak to you again.”

Tai's demons are in the room. In front of him, a growing stack of half-starts and crumpled pages. His story is due in two days. "Tell me about that voice," I say. "The one in your head that starts up when you begin writing."

"It's hella loud, dude." He slouches in his chair. Most of the class is working on their final drafts. Outside, a cold December rain pounds at the mesh on the window.

"What does it say?"

"It's all wrong. All messed up. Everything always come out confused, not like I want. It's like I don't know nothing."

"Like all that stuff?" I point at the pages.

"Yeah."

"You ever just kept writing, no matter what?" I ask.

He laughs. Clearly this sounds like smoking a cigarette through his nose. "That writing would be hella' horrible."

"Precisely," I say. "But good writers learn to be OK with crappy first drafts. Just write. And keep writing. Don't stop, no matter what. Worry about fixing it later."

"So just pick up the pencil and write. Don't stop?"

"No. Not for misspelled words, not for punctuation questions, not for Latrell tossing candy wrappers at you. Nothing. Try five minutes at first. Don't think about anything else but the story. When those voices come into your mind—this sucks, your story sucks, you suck—tell them you are busy. Period. They have to wait."

"What if I can't think of what to write?"

"Write that. Until you think of something else."

"You trippin'."

"Maybe. But most blocks are just fear. Critics' voices. Those writing demons."

He leans forward. "So I should just... start?"

"Why not? Story won't write itself." I pat him on the shoulder and tap my finger on his paper. He leans over and begins scribbling.

I walk away, fingers crossed.

LEADS ARE THE BEGINNINGS OF STORIES.

RANDALL

Bonnie Bight: Coming Into Womanhood

The winter rain always brought a sense of loss to Bonnie: loss of many boyfriends, the parents she never knew, and the loss of her brother's safety because he loved a man.

DEMARCUS

Heavy Machinery

"Back up, Charlie."

"Or else what?"

"Don't make me do this," Dasheme says.

The two guys stand facing each other on the roof of a twelve-story high-rise. Everything had turned from sugar to shit in a matter of minutes.

TAI**Identity**

Beep-beep-beep-beep — Michael turned off his alarm clock, sat up and stretched out to shake off the sleepiness. In a white tee-shirt and basketball shorts, he headed down to the kitchen.

“Happy birthday, honey,” mom exclaimed. “What do you have planned?”

“I think I’ll help you set up for my party tonight.”

LATRELL**Pharaoh**

Pharaoh arrived in Germany eager to start his last mission before his prison record was erased. The government had kept close ties on him, the childhood genius turned bad guy, since he paroled in 1992. They’re still after the billion dollars Pharaoh had stolen.

THE last class is two days before Christmas. At the east gate—now awash in silver garland, gold tinsel, and strings of lights—a TV news crew is filming a segment. A blonde female correspondent in a pressed tan pantsuit and long, black wool coat speaks into a microphone. Behind her, colored bulbs twinkle and the prison sign glows like snow in the bright camera lights.

The only hint of festivity near the Education Building is a single strand of colored lights hanging limply around the courtyard guardhouse. Five months from now, when I finish teaching my next semester, those lights will still be there.

We’re not allowed to bring food, drink, or gifts inside, so we’ve organized a sharing. No religion, just words. A celebration of language. Randall, Jamal, Demarcus, Cody, and Latrell choose to read their stories, which are action-packed and entertaining. Roy passes; Harjit isn’t in class. Tai hasn’t finished.

Susan and I celebrate the growth of each writer, but secretly wish we had more time. It feels like we’re just beginning. We could talk more about setting, development, teach different dialogue techniques. It’s odd really. Wishing for more time, here in a place where Christmas lights stay up for months, where eight years is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Tai approaches me at the end of class. We tap knuckles. “Sup, Chris?” he says.

“Nothing much. Still thinking ‘bout the stories.”

“Some good stuff. Demarcus’s was off the hook. That dude is funny!”

We chuckle. “Yeah.” I pause. “So how ‘bout you?”

He smiles nervously. “Aw you know, lotta stuff going on.”

“Yeah, end of the semester.”

“I’ll write it,” he says, shifting.

How do we make room for our writing? Can we get out of our own way?

“Hey, you got plans for Christmas?” Tai says.

“Not really. Probably pretty quiet.” I reply.

“Yeah, me too,” he smiles. “Well, have a good break, dawg.”

He reaches out, grabs my hand. Before I realize it, he’s pulled me towards him.

My forearm brushes against his chest; our shoulders touch briefly.

Then it’s over.

