

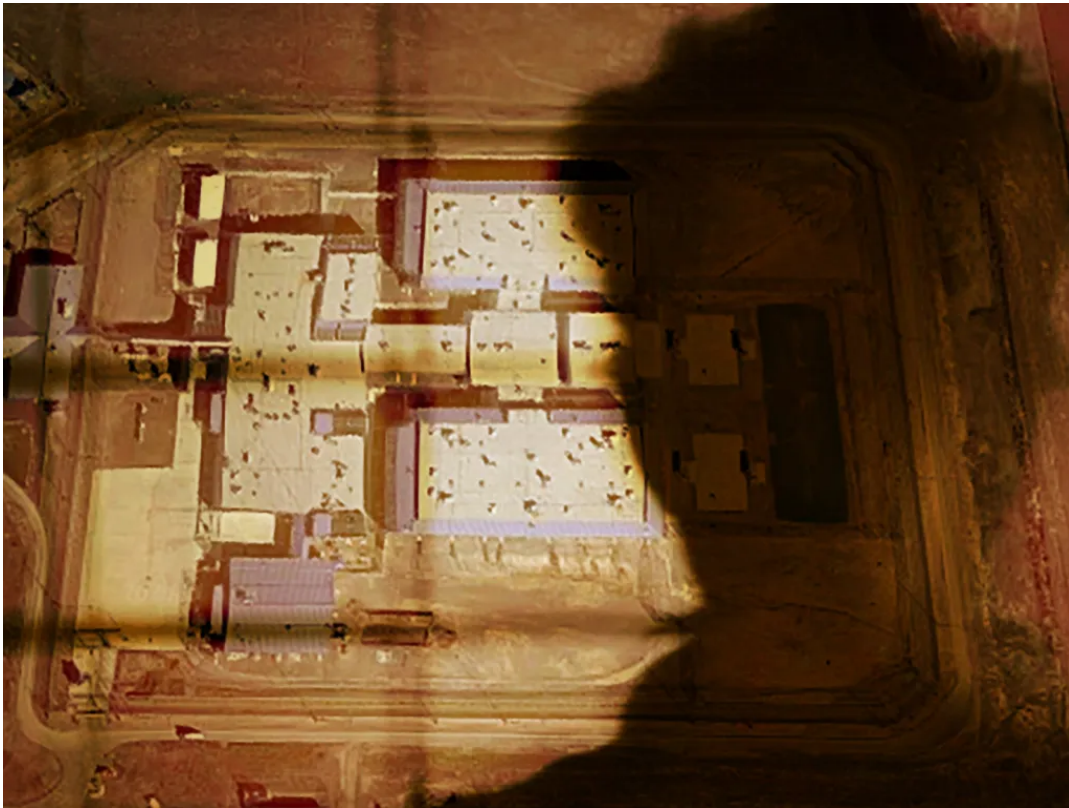
PERSPECTIVE

Will There Be Anything Left of Me When I Leave This New Mexico Prison?

If you let it, the system will scrape away all that's left of your empathy.

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Next to me, on his bunk, I sense my cellie straighten his body. I can't read his face, but his frantic murmurs suggest night terrors.

I came to prison at age 15, after being tried as an adult for first-degree murder. Nearly 30 years later, I still wonder if I'll survive the terrors of incarceration and all they've done to me. Chief among these consequences? My diminished capacity to humanize and be responsive to the feelings of others.

In prison, we don't talk about how the rain beating on our grated windows makes us sad. Or how the fresh scent after a cloudburst compels us to run outdoors and smell the air.

And we don't talk about love — how it inundates us but crawls into the hidden chambers of our souls.

When I arrived in prison as a boy, stranglings and murders and other acts of violence were commonplace at Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas, just south of Albuquerque.

During my first month locked up, I remember my neighbor getting stabbed and the sound — pop! — of the shank cracking open his skin.

That moment triggers a cascade of other violent memories. More stabbings. People being stomped out and carried away from the yard screaming, covered in blood. People running. People unconscious. People on stretchers.

A sampling of public data tells part of the story. In 2018, for example, there were 39 assaults by prisoners in New Mexico correctional facilities that resulted in serious injury to their peers or to staff, according to the [New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee](#). That figure marked a 10-year high. Meanwhile, [Source New Mexico](#) has documented “a long and ongoing history of abuse” by guards against prisoners at facilities across the state, including Northeast New Mexico Correctional Facility in Clayton, where I currently reside.

It is horrible to see another human being cry out, “Why?” as they're being victimized, and to have no one answering. In my memories, all I hear are taunts and vicious chants. And just like that, the victim is gone. It's over, never happened. Assault amnesia sets in. It makes me ashamed of my own humanity.

During the night, I dream about the times my former partner and I spent together. I remember how we tried to find hope in a hopeless situation. She drove hundreds of miles across the New Mexican desert just so we could stare into each other's eyes.

But, then as now, prison constantly assaults my capacity to love and to hope. When my physical safety is under threat, no room remains for emotional vulnerability. When I am surrounded by loud, raucous energy ricocheting off the concrete walls, it is hard to think of life outside at all.

My former partner and I held on for six arduous years while I was locked up. In the end, the system won, by waiting us out. But still I cherish those moments. In our conversations and correspondence, we yearned for and envisioned a life we might someday reach.

In conjuring those images of what-could-be, we built a shelter on pillars of pain, a refuge for when the isolation became too strong to bear.

I desperately need to visit those images every night.

Sometimes I worry about the effects prison will have on my future relationships. I imagine having to explain the parts of me that the system has chiseled away, if not killed off entirely.

I imagine being exposed as a sham of a person because of what I let the system make of me: an emotionally defective and despondent human being.

There is nothing irrational about these fears. I only did what self-preservation demanded of me in an environment of unspeakable brutality and the incessant belittling of life.

And yet the cost is profound. Most days I cannot imagine seeing myself partake in any of the privileges that require human interaction — the kind of stuff that makes this thing called life worth living.

Despite how impossible it feels to remain human, I still continue to reach. I hope. I keep my heart open to empathy, trying to resist the brutal onslaught. But still I wonder: Will there be anything left of me when I leave here?