

New Nonfiction: “A Bridge” by Kent Jacobson



Take me to the alley

Take me to the afflicted ones

Take me to the lonely ones that

Somehow lost their way

Gregory Porter

The twelve-foot chain link capped with concertina wire said, *Whoever you are, you aren't welcome*. The penitentiary sprawled on a barren hill in a forgotten tract in Connecticut, far from houses or schools or the next town. It was 1990, the dirt and rutted parking lot empty. Maximum security didn't pull many visitors, and this would be my first time inside. I recognized no fear, not at first.

I remembered waiting as a boy in a lot outside another penitentiary. I perched in the passenger seat of the state car my father drove, the black 1950 Chevy with the siren and flashing light. Dad exited the facility smiling. The men inside fashioned signs for the Rhode Island Forest Service and were likely paid very little. The work, Dad said, was always good, always professional, and always on time.

Great oak trees surrounded that old place.

Here, there were no trees, no flowers, not a planted bush. A twilight overcast pressed down as I made my way to a squat, concrete-block building that appeared to be the welcome center, beyond which crouched the penitentiary, a low mean spread of menace which housed two thousand inmates. I explained to the officer hovering behind dark, inch-thick glass what I was there to do. He grunted.

He asked for a driver's license and peered into the worn briefcase Dad had gifted, checking for anything an inmate might want as a weapon. He dropped the license into a drawer and extended a laminated pass through a small hole in the glass, and with the sweep of an arm, he motioned to a steel gate through the chain link.

Dad had been a hard man. While he never came clean about his earliest days, I realize now he was aware a ghetto kid like he had been, loose with brawlers on a drunk through Providence speakeasies, could have landed in a prison making signs. Possibly he smiled as he left that Rhode Island penitentiary

because he felt lucky.

He'd floundered as a student and dropped out at sixteen to do piecework in a factory where he poured out work with speed. A threat to more senior men and making hardly any money, he turned back to finish school. And throughout the Depression, without support except an immigrant father's scorn, Dad bulled a path through college. He worked a year and enrolled in school the next.

He died a decade before I entered Osborn Correctional.

I flinched as the steel gate clanked shut behind. I crossed a dirt yard on cracked asphalt to an officer in a head-to-toe black uniform, and I flashed my laminated pass.

"Wait here."

His glower said, *Forget it. We have more to deal with than you.*

"Screw 'em," Dad would say, "whoever the hell they are, whatever the bastards do. Sometimes, you've got to stand and be counted."

Black uniform ordered me through a second, heavier steel gate where more guards lurked behind more dark glass. My Harris tweed jacket, the worn briefcase, and the evening hour said who I was.

I'd been warned about the guards.

The second steel gate clanked shut behind me. My stomach churned. Will anyone open these doors when I want *out*?

There seemed to be no laughs in this dwelling, only these cold mothers and their freaking gray walls.

"Why you here?" a voice barked from behind the glass.

"I teach in the college program."

Books won't help thugs, Mister, I was ready for him to say.

He gestured down the wide hall.

"Take a right down there and go till you find a guard."

Still no waste of words.

I did what he said and took a right into an enormous, extended corridor. Voices blasted off the walls and concrete floor. Inmates exited a room far ahead, most of them bulked up bodybuilders in identical tan shirts and tan pants. They thundered toward me four abreast, one pack after another. I stepped faster and avoided eye contact.

They ran over 225. I was an Ivy League poster boy in tweed and corduroy. Their faces said, *Who's the punk? Who invited him?*

What had I expected? I'd joked the inmates might have two heads and keep cobras as pets.

A woman at a party asked why anyone would teach in a prison. Wasn't the place dangerous?

I said teacher-pals declared prison the best experience they'd had in a classroom and didn't say more. Their conviction was absolute and I bit. They'd crossed a bridge they hadn't supposed was there and learned something, though they didn't say what.

Bedlam grew as more streamed from what was maybe the dining mess. Masses of them, and too many to count. They howled.

What am I doing in this place?

I showed my pass to a guard I found. I said I taught the English course. He smiled and proceeded down one more hall to a room assigned to Jacobson.

"Is this experience new for you?" he asked.

The guard seemed curious, not at all prickly. He wished me the best.

Inmates passed and nodded to the new guy. They smiled.

I thought, I must be in a different institution.

The room that was mine had an immense oak desk and a matching oak chair. I wasn't going with that; I wanted no barricade. I took a plastic chair-desk from the front and turned it to the other chair-desks in neat rows facing the front, the oak desk and chair and the blackboard behind me.

I tried not to think what men had done to end in maximum security. Murder, pedophilia, armed robbery, rape, the worst crimes were the most likely. A section of my brain spat images of fiends.

Get a grip. You can't teach fiends. Dad drank with Tommy Pelligrini, a man rumored to be in the Providence mafia. Tommy wore a navy suit and a modest tie. His memory seemed to quiet my mind.

I understood little, nonetheless, about the actual men I was teaching. I'm certain I looked grim. I picked fingernails and fooled with the marriage ring on my finger. Men were finding seats. I rooted in my briefcase for a pen, a pad of paper, for nothing. My back had a knot the size of a golf ball.

Would I recognize anyone? I scanned the roster.

An inmate asked a question and I gave a too brief answer. I didn't initiate conversation like I usually did in a new class.

I glanced at my watch and a voice inside chirped, *You've crossed scarier roads than this, boyo.* A buddy remarked once on my cool in a crisis and my son, Morgen, cracked: "Dad's good in a crisis. It's ordinary life that gives him trouble."

He was ribbing, though I hoped tonight he was right.

I counted twenty-three men in all. Half, I would learn, had killed someone. Most had spent their childhoods in fractured homes, abandoned by fathers whose savvy might have pointed to a better pathway.

The men sat in four straight rows, seats directed at the teacher like we had in grade school. I didn't ask them to form a circle because I planned to hog the talk tonight. They were black men except one, everybody in a tan uniform with a buzz-cut. White people can't tell one black person from another, a smart observer said.

The single white sat in a far corner. Outside, darkness had fallen and inside it wasn't bright. He wore deep-ink shades. What lay in wait there?

I'd memorize their names and offer that much consideration.

Now. Let's go.

I called the roll and scribbled a note when a man responded. One had red hair. A coffee-colored inmate displayed freckles. One was Goliath, a second a featherweight. Another wore a bandana. Still another had a sweeping scar on a left cheek.

I went one by one, up a row and down the next. I used the scribbles and named each inmate correctly. Bodies straightened. The room perked. Two mentioned how little respect they received in Osborn and others nodded.

The next would be easier, I thought. I would describe in general terms what we'd read and their writing would analyze in coming weeks: American writers from Irving to Twain to Baldwin to Tobias Wolff, with a handful of accessible poets.

I started to speak and couldn't get the words out. My hands shook and my voice fluttered. Fear had taken a public walk. I stopped. I couldn't teach like this.

A hand shot up three seats away. The Goliath, maybe in his twenties and close to three-hundred pounds, a football player once, I bet. He plowed holes for running backs.

Head down, he waved a hand, hesitant.

“Can . . . can I say something?” He spoke with a stutter.

“Sure,” I said.

He held a beat, reluctant to say what he wanted to say.

“You . . . you seem nervous.”

“You got that right.”

The room exploded. Laughter, every single man, belly laughter, even No Eyes behind the ink shades.

Without a prompt except my fear, the men spilled their first hours in Osborn, last week or years before. The shakes, the diarrhea, the sleeplessness, the stares into the dark, the dread, the guards, the threat they might not live.

They did their best to talk me back from where I'd shrunk. They'd been there. They understood. Don't be ashamed. We managed. You can too.

I'm old. I forget names. Days are shorter and they fly too soon. I admit it was a tiny episode in a prison, years ago, hardly worth a mention.

The moment stays.

We are you, they said. We are you. These men who were like the mill kids I grew up around, only older, and in more serious

trouble. Men who brought me back to my brawling father.

They weren't foreign. They weren't strange. For a moment, they saw me as I was. Like them, afraid. They were me.

I came from no fractured home, I hadn't been abandoned by my father, I hadn't ever been so continually disrespected. Yet here I was, at a bridge my father knew.

And there they were too, waiting.