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October 20, 2017

Honorable Governor Greitens,

In August of 2011, after ten years and two months' wrongful imprisonment for first-degree murder, I submitted a petition for executive clemency—specifically, a pardon—citing evidence of my actual innocence. Accompanied by the writer who's advocated for my release since the publication of his book The Skeptical Juror and the Trial of Byron Case, my mother met with your predecessor's legal counsel, Michael Barrett, a few months later. Mr. Barrett was a receptive audience and seemed to accept the truth of my innocence.

Nevertheless, years passed. As you know, Governor Nixon granted clemency to a few former prisoners before leaving office but left the vast majority of petitions unacknowledged. Mine was among them.

The meeting now scheduled with your counsel on clemencies will mainly deal with evidence. This letter fills in some of the gaps left by mere facts. Better knowing what I do, where my moral compass points, and who I am might make your decision in this matter a more assured one.

"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."

—Epicetus, Discourses, Book III

Being highly literate and awkwardly intelligent always sustained and tormented me equally, but never more than during my imprisonment. I can't relate to most around me here. They aim only to kill time with gossip, sleep, sports, and, well, criminal behavior. Even in prison, time is too precious to squander; I treat mine as an investment. This is most obvious by my writing.

Although focused on writers and poets in the Pacific Northwest, redbat books published my collection of essays and poems, The Pariah's Syntax: Notes from an Innocent Man, in 2013. (Two copies accompany this letter.) The book was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award, which recognizes "salient writing" and "independent voices," and reader reviews have unanimously validated my efforts there. Now I'm working on a novel-in-stories about personal identity at odds with others' perceptions, and the unexpected ways in which weaknesses can become strengths.

My prison writings have appeared in anthologies from TulipTree Publishing, University of Massachusetts Press, Harper Perennial, and the Simon & Schuster imprint Fireside. In addition, I've published work in literary magazines and journals nationwide, and accumulated ten years of posts on pariahblog.com, the archive of my personal dispatches.

A writer is first and foremost a reader. I've immersed myself in enriching texts during my imprisonment. Within the past year alone, I've read philosophical treatises, memoirs, contemporary literary fiction, discourses on the literary arts, nineteenth-century mysteries, tech manuals, religious tomes, short-story collections, Gothic novels, and poetry anthologies. A window to the world remains open to me, and my mental horizon expands accordingly, as long as I have good books at hand.

"We are free of a suffering only by experiencing it in full."

—Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time, Volume VI

My initial years in prison were a hell. Long stretches of inactivity were punctuated by instances of mortal dread. I weathered the kind of storms all pretty boys do when they first "come down." The tedium was arguably worse.

There are any number of ways to combat boredom, and I tried many of them. Crossword puzzles, drawing, letters for friends and my mother, TV, listening to music, SCRABBLE, napping, and daydreaming about a reversal of my conviction were never enough. In prison but not of it, I had no interest in the drug or gambling circles, yet my doings weren't much different from theirs, in principle. We were all just seeking distraction, ignoring the fact that, even if we passed today there was still tomorrow to contend with.

I kept jobs—taking photos in the visiting room, doing minor electrical

repairs for the maintenance department, serving meals in the staff dining room —but these never provided lasting or meaningful benefit. I felt adrift. My dreams took on unsettling vividness. Patterns emerged in the pockmarked ceiling above my bunk. I fixated on memories of happiness now denied me. The people I love stared back from the pages of my photo album, untouchable and far, far away. A couple of them I'd never see again in life.

I took this misery and turned it over and over. I honed it. After a while its edge cut through priorities, certainties, delusions, expectations, desires, and all manner of bullshit. I gradually flayed away layers of the superfluous, the way a butcher removes fat from meat. I wanted to see how lean things could get.

Spartan living became the norm. There was a petulance behind it, I admit, as if choosing to do without loosened my jailers' grip. But mostly my self-imposed deprivations were tests, proving that what I wanted and what I needed weren't necessarily the same. I quit smoking, cold turkey and for good. I gave up coffee, purely to savor this luxury more after my abstinence came to an end. I went on fasts to see how long I could endure going without food.

After half a lifetime of sitting at desks, I started doing pushups and jumping jacks in my cell after work. Then I took up bodyweight training. Today I'm doing uneven pullups and one-legged squats, wall-walking bridges and handstand pushups. On days I don't work out, for flexibility and focus, there's yoga. Writers aren't stereotypically physical types, so I'm proud to be improving my body as rigorously as I always sought to improve my mind.

"Life begins on the other side of despair."

—Jean Paul Sartre, Nausea

I've never given up fighting for my freedom, proclaiming my innocence even when the system turned a deaf ear. At the heart of pity lurks the sense of defeat, acceptance that a terrible lot is all that one's got. I've never pitied myself nor accepted it from those I love.

One longtime friend jokes that I've become his guru by living a life of even-tempered resolve, with purpose and joy. Another calls me her therapist. Another, his life coach. Another, her career advisor. Helping them makes me happy. Everyone I know compliments my outlook, claiming that they couldn't be positive in my situation. Even Crossroads staff notice: a caseworker recently

said, "You're always in such a good mood! What's your secret?" I simply believe that there's enough discontentment in the world without dwelling on mine and spreading it around.

Considering all that prison life throws one's way, most are amazed that I stay out of trouble. Abiding by the rules isn't exactly hard when you're an organized, disciplined, nonviolent person by nature. My three conduct violations over almost seventeen years were all for minor infractions—having a pen-pal ad, making a three-way phone call to be interviewed about my book, and possessing a small sheet of Avery file folder labels. Each infraction was the unfortunate byproduct of ambition within a system hostile to growth.

My friends, my mother, and readers of my blog tell me how I inspire them—to find happiness despite their problems, to create their own purpose, to cherish every little thing, to practice greater mindfulness, to get physically active, to keep a balanced perspective, to do at least one thing in the name of personal growth every day, and to not let limitations dictate their ways of thinking.

I love that doing what comes naturally to me can positively impact others' lives. Applying what the past sixteen and a half years have taught me to the boundless opportunity of a life outside of prison, what goodness might I help people find? You can make possible my learning the answer. I want to be an engaged, generous, productive member of a real community and thoughtfully do my civic duties. You can make this happen. I hope beyond hope that you will see fit to do so by granting me pardon.

With all sincerity and respect,

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