Try To Make It Real
a short story by Clayton Hardiman

The way he felt went past most of what he had heard. It was beyond that initial light-headedness children feel against park benches with open wine bottles in their laps. It even went past that almost casual religion sophisticated play a part of social gatherings or those nappy headed paragons of guilt sleeping it off on the clinders down behind the bar. It made almost no sense.

There was nothing to compare it with.

It was actual numbness. It could have been a lie. He told himself that, staring at himself in the mirror sucking his lip. Holding himself between his legs as if he had really just finished pissing. As if he had really missed a little and dampened the floor. It could have been one of those lies. He should have been cold. There should have been pain somewhere. He didn’t even wrinkle his nose at the very real smell of human shit. He didn’t even care that the floor was rugged cement. His face was that calm. He knew he wasn’t going to stay here. A cop came in and found him drunk and weeping against one of the commodes.

It could have been a myth.

It was a weight much too heavy to play with. He pushed out of the latrine and made his way back up to the row of cases, propped bar to his own empty booth. He pushed back into it, out of everybody’s sight, wanting to believe he could bury himself in the leather cushion. He knew he was being childish but he finally realized that childish was exactly what he wanted to be. He had to make himself remember that what he was feeling now wasn’t childishness. It was numerous drunks, second-hand chairs, and second-hand bodies he had been seen from time to time crumpled on someone’s front steps.

He hated thinking these sick thoughts. He could see it already. The whole bar smelled of what he was thinking. Of age and dead life. He supposed he had been thinking, no one in that building could have been very close to death. They were all his contemporaries even if only in the sense of having been, by chance, at the same time but he was as foreign to them as he was to them. None of them belonged in churches, furiously sleeping on their knees behind numbered pews and it was only thru their own eyes, or maybe an excess of communion wine that they were sitting in this bar now.

And some of them had to be the dark half shadows he saw passing on the street in early morning when he stood at his open door driven up out of sleep by his own hazy thoughts. It infuriated him, thinking about those people and their ignorant attempts to save their own lives. Some recited prayers. Some committed crimes. None of them could have known he was there. He flopped back against the cushions and growled at whatever was directly in front of him.

And he knew all of them thought of themselves as god in one capacity or another. Poets and criminals, Christians and winos, they were all going on his roaring drunk beyond the point of vomit and make new rules for the destruction of the world. They would all be shaken by whatever it is enrages people and would react with screams in various language.

He sensed that later he would have to laugh at this. At these people giggling effeminately at each other. Although people they were never completely useless. That is, each one of them could have claimed something. To have succeeded somewhere, to have been something. To have lived. To have made it, perhaps, with a pretty daughter or the man behind a statue on one of the traffic islands downtown. All of them must have had some standard worth, some redeeming factor. They were, after all, unique people in that context. Two Greek mechanics nonchalantly moving their stools and predictably near the end of the bar closest to the door. The old wino sulkers, some scattered carelessly along the bar and others clumped together in various booths, all of them managing somehow to chew their whiskey. High class whores, hair pulled into tight buns and cheeks scrubbed, wives of tired helpless businessmen engrossed in their backhanded eyers. The proprietors bustling behind the bar and scowling specifically his way, needing his booth or wanting his money or watching him smile loudly at his fingers.

And he himself was, after all, a human being. It was enough that he could look at and recognize people without being recognized himself. He knew that he was unimpressive, that to anyone looking he was lost in his huge ugly grey suit. That he was small and hug eyed and seemed to have lost control of himself, slouching elegantly down the front of his shirt. That he was very evidently drunk and the transparency itself was ridiculous. He knew someone must have thought he was a cop in horridly plain clothes. Hell, it wasn’t actually him sitting there almost curled with anguish in a corner of the booth. He was sure he had not would have recognized him.

He glanced up and saw the proprietor with what must have been the bill in his hand coming toward him, dressed in a suspiciously clean apron and long baggy pants, still scowling, a clear intimidation, but he was hoping the proprietor would see how stupid and useless an act it was. He supposessed it was meant to frighten him into paying and quickly moving his melancholy ass somewhere else but in a happier mood it wouldn’t even have made him want to smile. The proprietor silently placed the bill on the table and stalked off, the bill turning out to be no bill but an envelope with his name written across the front.

His face was in one hand staring senselessly at the table and everything on it as if it would be, in the end, everybody’s sensed over life. If the night were left for him to interpret, he had been dragged in from the street for the more nomenclature reasons that lonely people use their empty lives thinking of. No one wanted to feed him or save his soul. He concentrated his stare on the envelope, wanting to believe that he didn’t have the slightest desire to know what this was about. Who had sent it. The simple why.

He took away the hand holding his face, slapped it hard against the table and the sound was louder than he had wanted. He watched the people at the bar turn around and stare, shifty amused smiles plaguing their drunken faces. Some nodded at him possibly out of embarrassment. Out of forgiveness for him for shattering the concentration they had cultivated and directed toward their drinks. When he glanced up again he saw a young woman out of some other time or bed staring at him from under her mass of red unnatural hair. Sad lewd grin barely touched him. He was half afraid she would beckon to him and wreck his mood.

“Just all them,” he said but not very loud. “Just spread your thighs over the emblem of that stool. Find your face in that glass. Don’t try to involve yourself with me.”

He was smiling and she had been watching his face. She laughed, knowing he must have said something amusing and empty. He saw that she wanted to close the space between them.

No, I’m not hungry or even desperate. I’m just sitting.

She pointed in his general direction. His hand floated instinctively between his legs until he realized she referred to the envelope. His eyes were on her, then on the envelope and he ripped it open. A welcome back card. “Glad to see you back” and her name scribbled over the last lines of print inside.

And he sat there puzzled at whatever it was he had just died in him on that fifteen cent card until he looked up at that really vulgar smile she had on her face. It must have been her drunken evaluation of what she thought she saw when she looked at him. And looking at her, he finally placed her and came from some time that was already dead in his life. And understood what that smile meant.

He said something just loud enough for her to hear, just unreasonable enough to understand. It was too heavy to play with, but he wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t remember this later and try, at least, to laugh about it. He opened his lighter and set the envelope on fire. Holding it above the table and making her see it. Fanning the smoke toward the bar.

People turned back around without their smiles this time, some of them still clutching their drinks and looking very ready to dash out if the place was really on fire and the proprietor was (continued on the back)
The Art of Inmates

Editor's note: This critique of inmate art exhibit now on display in The Kellogg Center was done by William S. Gamble, associate professor of art. Gamble has served since 1962 as consultant to the art program for inmates at The State Prison of Southern Michigan in Jackson. Although some of the art works that Gamble mentions are not shown here, his observations capture the style and temper of the artist.

BY WILLIAM S. GAMBLE
Associate Professor of Art

Imagine yourself, if you can, as having been convicted of a crime. You are incarcerated in a state prison and enrolled in an art program that is within the prison's school. Now, what would you paint? Chances are, these circumstances would involve you in a conscious or unconscious attempt to express yourself and to find yourself — to establish your identity as an individual of worth and dignity.

You have a past to live down, expiate (even to the point of desperation). Depending on your personal or psychological disposition and the progress of your rehabilitation, you think of yourself as having been unlucky or guilty. You see a lot of your fellow inmates, the prison guards, staff, but far too little of your family or friends.

This could be your first real attempt to express the strong complex of emotions that have been seething inside you, for you find that in art these things find expression more easily and fully than in any other way. Though prison has heightened your bitterness, the artwork which reflects your rancor is more readily accepted than if you had put your feelings into words.

If you happened to be black, your search for identity would be involved with the social - educational - economic problems of your minority group, compounded problems which exist in a 

diverse and complex society.

If you were in these circumstances, what would you paint? That is the question to ask yourself when looking at IAM9: Inmates' Art Ninth Annual Exhibition, now hanging in the south corridor of Kellogg Center. These works, by inmates at the State Prison of Southern Michigan in Jackson, will remain until June 18.

The quest for identity is certainly visible. It is seriously intense, subjectively involved, varied, and to a large extent concerned with black themes. With this perspective, it is surprising to observe what has been painted and how it has been painted.

Little of this art is escapist. You will not find the common prison-art themes: pretty girls by untrained artists, religious folk-art or romantic landscapes.

What you do find is much more sophisticated. Take the two pieces that relate to landscape. John Woods' "Song of Earth" is a paean of color and movement, like Mahler's symphony, Aaron Gilcey's "Reaching for the Sun," actually a group of four small pieces, also uses a somewhat similar approach.

Johnnie Jackson's small oil called "City Scapes" is so rich in glowing night lights and a dramatic fountain of fire that it is primarily a tension of mood rather than a depiction of city. Does it symbolize the welling-up of the Detroit riots? The fire fountain certainly can be seen as an awesome and fearful thing in the midst of the city. Edward McLaughlin's "Peace & Black Realization" more specifically details the turmoil of blacks in the city.

Vernon Maxey's "Untitled" silkscreen print has the structured beat of color and form that also is based on his involvement with jazz. His "Sacrifice to Ogun (God of Iron)" uses the window contained within eight squares to present an African theme. Jackson also uses African subjects for two of his paintings, "Walking and Weaving" and "The Spirit Looks at the Creation of God from the Sea." This latter painting has most unusual imagery that is myth-oriented.

Jackson's water color, "The Book of Life and Knowledge" uses a striking near-symmetrical design, an "X" that divides the picture: above, the book toward which a hand points and a head looks; below, a crouching figure blows a conch horn, left, a suckling child; right, Wilt Chamberlain looks toward the center where a figure is inferred by placing a red eye on a pair of legs, and a cross on top the eye. All the figures are slate black.
Another striking black piece is Carl Smith's relief-sculpture "Reflection." Constructed of painted wood with some collage, it is unusually well-crafted. On a black, grey and white background one sees the back of an inmate 96953 in a central cage. To the right a black-headed figure, death or time, climbs the steps of years; to the left a brown Eve holds an apple. Above this are other symbols ranging from jazz on the left to a view through a window at the right. The only other piece directly concerned with prison life is Gilleylen's "Roach Walk," which pictures a cell.

The broader conflicts of society are featured in two other works. McLaughlin's "War" is a collage that mingles starving Biafrans with victims of war in Indochina. Laffarrel Furlough's "Rebirth of the Azul Eagle" shows two eagles fighting. The one in chains is shackled to columns symbolizing the "Establishment." One chain is broken. This is the American eagle in double image. The "hawk" eagle and "dove" eagle, two parts of the same thing, battle each other – most unusual imagery.

The enigma of personal identity seems to be behind Gregory Harvey's "Inn Man," a water color featuring a seated figure holding a large eye. Several other works vary the enigma theme. Larry Sim's "The Puzzled Image" uses puzzle-like pieces fitted loosely together to configure a large figure against a black background. William Cocker's "Kipendo Chentsi" uses black line to inseparably entwine two figures in a double-image.

Finally, two pieces have written messages. Gilleylen's "Black Anthem" reads as follows:

Lift every voice till earth and heaven ring –
ring with the harmonies of liberty.

Snow the road we trod,
bitter the chastening rod –
felt in the days when hope unborn had died.

Yet with steady beat
have not our weary feet
come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come a way
that with tears has been watered
we have come, treading our path
through he blood of the slaughtered.

Avery Evans' "History" shows the head of Sonto Monqund against an open book with chained hands below. On the left page is "His-story" and on the right "Our-story." The text of these two pages is given in this order:

When we look with unclouded vision on the bloody shadows of the American past, we will recognize for the first time that the Afro-American who is so often second in freedom was also second in slavery.

In 1617 the white man created a system of white slavery that lasted over two hundred years, as they sold their own like cattle. The white slaves who were property of a master were branded like other livestock. 1692-1700, the black bondman became numerous on the plantation. 1668, the blackman was bred with the white woman to get big and stronger slaves, mostly Irish girls were used. This started in Jamaica in 1668. It was not rare for the colonial savants who near the end of the period were sometimes grown up from place to place to be sold to the best advantages . . .

The text on the right reads:

Masters given to flogging often did not care whether their victims were black or white. Cheap labor to tend tobacco's immediate requirement of the struggling American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries and the system of procuring and employing such labor was perfected with the white man indentures before it was imposed on the black man. This is a letter of the past, who to say what I am but us. Whatever it takes to get my freedom, then I do it. I once thought that the whites hated me because of my blackness, but I know now because of what I might find out. For this story is me, our story, not his story. I think Malcolm X, King, and the two Black Panthers who gave their lives for us, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. For I know who I am.

— Sonto Monqund
of face. It knew. The said Christ’s when to air wait. He lying would knew anything. It was raging catching do at street. As he thought he was lying in front of him, “I paid him. He’s better than you ever were.”

She hit her with the flat of his hand. She took a step backward. The figure on the bed may have rustled a little. His hand throbbed powerfully. For an instant he saw nothing. He was leaning against the wall without knowing how he got there.

She was laughing at him outright. He saw it, he couldn’t see how he had ever missed it. She knew he was feeling pain. There was no way she couldn’t know it.

I paid him. He’s better than you. Ever.

“You can say that! Knowing who I am, you can stand there and say that? Your face soft and your smile crooked and gas rumbling thru your belly and you can say? This nigger is old, baby, he’s not long in this world. How much strength can he have? He ain’t for you, baby he’s dead already.”

“Don’t do that. That kind of talk won’t help. It won’t change anything. Do you know how much like a simple bitch you sound? I thought you knew something. You drag in some old derelict, the smell of piss all over. I know something. How much can he mean to anybody? You tell me, how much is this man I see shaking her head. Slick disgust. Everything he was doing, everything he said. He was lying. He was going to hurt her, if he could, without turning hysterical but in the end it wouldn’t matter. I’ll tell you, he ain’t the man does that make you?”

She went to the stove and threw the toss she had been cooking into the trash can. She put the pot into a badly stained sink and turned to face him. Her hand was above her eyes. Shielding them possibly or shoving away the ache she felt. Her belly bulged thru her clothes with hurt and sounds. Her dress was clinging in the place a whore’s dress will cling. Her whole face pockered and he thought she would cry but she seemed laughing almost too softly. No, I paid him. He’s better.

“You beggar, you freak, what a piss poor trick you try to play on people. Damn what it makes me,” she said and her laugh got louder. “What does it make you, study?”

I paid him. I paid him.

Her voice was wild and rasping. Horrified him. He wet his lips and started protesting. She was laughing too loud. She screamed at her to shut up. She screamed his whole image at her. She screamed everything he had thought before at the bar. Age and everything he had gone through in all capacities, only words now instead of ideas. Words she screamed, like a Liar. Like a Whore. What about me? I paid. I paid. Screaming beyond any sound he had ever been right, it didn’t matter. Only she was still laughing and he hit her with all his might. His hand throbbed. He hit her again. And again.

“Okay that’s enough,” the old man said to him from the bed.

He turned around clutching his hand against his stomach. He eyed the skinny bearded little nigger who was out of the shop and he gave him fifty jeans up over his ankles. He made his voice disgusting and said, “You want some too?”

His hand was worse now, he wasn’t going to be able to do anything. He stared at thin naked steel and shook away from him. He merely rustled a out that didn’t even sound like his. Then he realized he didn’t have to try. He said okay and backed to the door, then turned and dashed out up the steps, leaving the old man on the bed and the old man’s silent shouts.

He was hung up in the aesthetics of the thing. His hand was unbearable now but knowing it would worse gave woe a sickened beauty. He had no idea where he was going and didn’t care. He wasn’t going home and there was no place he could think of to go without ultimately laying to himself. He knew only that he was walking in the crowd of thousand-year-old niggers and the old man’s voice was still in his ears.