

## Emancipated Stories

The following essays—one by Kelli Doughman, one by Amy Zielke—were written in Spring, 2021 as part of the Bernard and Rita Bernatovich Jail Literacy Program (BJLP) that partners the U. of Wisconsin-La Crosse English Department with the La Crosse County Jail to provide programming for inmates.

The program hopes to cultivate a lifelong appreciation for reading and writing, to facilitate discussions enriched by diverse inmate perspectives and experiences, to model positive, respectful interactions between inmates and co-facilitators, and to provide opportunities for inmates to create and share their writing.

Since its launch in Fall 2015, nine faculty members volunteer on a rotating basis to offer bi-weekly sessions in poetry, nonfiction, short stories, and creative writing for 24 participants (12 males and 12 females) per session. Inmates often generate their own writing and receive feedback from each other and from faculty. Numerous pieces are now published in *Emancipated Stories*, an online collection of writings meant to showcase stories from incarcerated individuals across the nation ([www.emancipatedstories.com](http://www.emancipatedstories.com)).

The BJLP has participated in the La Crosse Reads program every year since its inception, providing free copies of the year's chosen book to interested inmates and organizing special events such as the visit of nationally-recognized poet, memoirist, lawyer and prison reform activist Reginald Dwayne Betts, who visited La Crosse in 2017 as part of a program that featured Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. Incarcerated at age sixteen, Betts served eight years and credits the reading of poetry and literature for his survival in prison and his success after his release. In 2016 he graduated from Yale Law School and later completed his Ph.D. in law at Yale.

The BJLP received the 2020 Eisenberg Award from the State Public Defender Board. The award is given each year to a person or program that has had a substantial impact on criminal justice and the indigent defense community. The UWL English Department is grateful to La Crosse County Jail Administrators such as Mike Kiefer for supporting the program, as well as to the daughters of Bernard and Rita Bernatovich, who donated financial assistance to support the program as a way to honor their parents.

*Steam Ticket* is proud to publish the following essays.

### Getting Shot Saved My Life

*Amy Zielke*

Getting shot saved my life. If roles were reversed, I would have done the same, with results ending in tragedy. He only shot once and had great aim. I would have kept shooting, with disregard to aim. I'm not mad; I'm grateful. In the depths of my addiction, I was finally stopped in my tracks, literally.

In need of another bag, I looked around until I saw a light on at the business up the road. At this point, I was a full blown “meth monster.” I already had over a dozen burglary charges pending. Meth tricked me into thinking that breaking into businesses wasn’t hurting people because they could just write it off on insurance, right? That’s how reckless I had become.

I pulled up to the business and popped the trunk so I could layer on clothes and a ski mask. I shut the trunk, which I later learned woke up the owner living upstairs. I jimmied the door open and entered into what looked like a waiting room, entryway, and hallway all in one. I walked past three chairs then left into the dark room with desks. I was digging in desk drawers when the lights came

on, and I heard a man yell “STOP.” I stood up slowly with my head down and eyes focused on the carpet. I was scared and confused so I crept to the office door, keeping my head down. As I turned my body towards the front door, the man shouted “STOP” again, so I paused momentarily. As my leg advanced, in attempt to walk, I was deafened by the loudest noise I’d ever heard. The entryway was hazy and smelled like something was burning. I was terrified to move. My heart was beating out of my chest, sweat beading up on my forehead, and disoriented by the piercing noise and smell of fire. But the door was only a few feet away. My car was right outside that door. As I was reaching for the doorknob the pieces came together; I figured out what had just happened. There was blood soaking my pants and running down the front of my leg. I took off the ski mask and looked behind me to see the man holding a gun. He looked shocked, and still had the gun pointed in my direction so I sat down in the chair next to me.

I’m grateful in so many ways for being shot that night. The bullet entered the upper back of my thigh and out the front above my knee. I didn’t need surgery, stitches or glue – Nothing but a bandage. Nice shot! I could have easily been killed or paralyzed; but I’m not because he had good aim.

People kept asking if I was mad that he shot me from behind without announcing that he had a gun.

No, I’m not mad.

Yes, he shot me from behind as I was walking away.

Yes, I would have done the same if roles were reversed.

Yes, I’m grateful he shot me.

I’m alive because that man stopped the “meth monster” instead of killing me.

As I sobered up, I began to reflect on my addiction. Meth made me abandon my morals and values. I can’t believe my addiction got to the point that I made people feel unsafe in their own home. That man lived upstairs with his wife and son. The mom in me would have done the same to protect my family. I’m grateful he had good aim so that I could sober up and bear the consequences.

If ever allowed contact with this man, I would send him my Deepest, most sincere, apologies! I hope shooting me, a woman, hasn’t haunted his thoughts. I wish he knew that shooting me was actually a good thing. I’d say this: “I’m so sorry for making you feel unsafe in your own home!

Shortly after my release from prison, I had a conversation with my uncle about how grateful I was. He told me that the man who shot me is his friend and has quite the sense of humor. They saw each other at a restaurant a while after I was shot. The man smiled at my uncle and announced, “I couldn’t find a card at the store that said, ‘sorry I shot your niece’” to which they both shared a laugh. Hearing this made me smile and shed tears of relief that shooting me isn’t haunting his thoughts. I will forever be grateful for that man’s great aim. Getting shot saved me from the depths of my addiction.

## Nine Miles From Civilization

*Kelli Doughman*

Nine miles from civilization. Nine miles into the desert at a treatment center along the Hassayampa directly translated to “Hidden River.” A few experiences of that winter will be forever burnt into my memory.

Just moments after shedding top layers in anticipation of what was guaranteed to come next, the hot sun began to rise over the mountains. Planted firmly in my saddle and stirrups, holding the reins loosely and gazing over the ears of my horse, Sonny; I stared deep into the unforgiving desert. While some struggled to still their horses or come to terms with the dry, thorny terrain—which was to be our home for a minimum of ninety days—Sonny and I were completely in sync, and my mind was fully at peace.

While I loved that ranch, I strongly despised the process of digging deep and recognizing true, underlying fears. My ninety days became one-hundred-twenty days and during that time I found myself in sync with a number of animals who had no trouble reflecting those inner fears.

At one point of particular frustration, I rebelled by taking an evening hike up the base of the mountain at sunset—a particularly dangerous time in the desert. I stood at a fork between the darkness and a staff member who warned me of the trouble I would face if I continued to act out of compliance. It wasn’t the consequences from the treatment center that turned me back, it was the mother coyote that appeared in the other direction and barked at me in a language I was not about to argue with.

I was not ready to “comply” so I chose to walk as far as the stables, stopping in front of Sonny’s run. Well aware of the trespassing ticket I could buy myself by climbing through the bars, I sat on a rock just outside. Sonny came out of his stall, walked up to me, and lifted a hoof to place on the lowest bar at my shoulder level. By then the staff member had pulled up in his truck, perpendicular to us to shine his brights at us. As the spotlights shone on me in the dark of the night, I was fully visible to anyone and anything, including the ranch’s free-range bull.

Had you asked me then—I wasn’t afraid. Not even as the beast lowered his head, stamped his front hooves, and kicked up dirt under his giant belly. I froze, holding tight to Sonny’s shin. Soon, the bull started toward me at a fair speed, head down with angry eyes. I’m not sure what he’d had in mind, but my friend by my side had a different idea. From behind the barrier which I was forbidden to use, Sonny reared onto his hind legs, banged his front hooves on the bars, and landed hard. Swinging his head over me, he sent a message that stopped the bull in his tracks. Not a moment too soon.

For much of the incident I felt small, but even fear was not a word I would have used to describe my emotion. NO, I was exhilarated! I learned from a young age—if you never try something new, even if it scares the life out of you, you may find yourself stuck in a state of perpetual stagnancy. You may never recognize true danger. You may end up defeated by fear. Or so I thought.

While I learned to welcome this type of fear, to embrace the feeling of complete abandon, I have stifled my own emotions to a point of ignorance. Though it was in fact quite blissful, I came very close to losing myself from the inside out.

On the day I chose to accept the fate of my temporary life in treatment, I’d first chosen to walk the sandy road to town. My boots had rubbed blisters into my heels so I was carefully calculating my barefooted steps (but still occasionally stopping to pull thorns out of my soles) when I watched my foot land in a giant paw print. Judging by the size and depth of the print, it was no doubt a mountain lion. The sight of my own footprint alongside a wild cat’s was unnerving and went on for about 100

meters. But it wasn't until the sand intersected with the paved highway when my heart began to pound. I was suddenly filled with fear and immediately chose to go back.

I decided to stick out my time there, then nine months at another center and six more in a transitional placement. But as fate would have it, I didn't really recognize why I'd had such a profound change of heart. I hadn't thought twice about my decision after that day on the nine-mile path. Today I know it was fear that drove me, but what I was afraid of wouldn't become clear until ten years later. Almost four months prior to today's date.

Over those ten years, I brought purpose to life through working with underprivileged kids, adults with disabilities, children with autism, training service dogs, and alternating between educating at a community garden and working at a ski hill. With the loving support of my family, a one in a trillion soulmate, and acceptance into the college program of my dreams, I had everything I could have ever asked for. Unfortunately, it was all eventually overshadowed by a few other things—four to be exact. Over those ten years, I also gained four counts of drinking and driving, along with a full-blown case of alcoholism. Because I managed to receive the third and fourth charges back-to-back, I was sentenced for both in the same hearing. One year of jail time for each—minus the two months I'd already done when charged.

Out of extreme fortune, an alternative was presented. If I completed a program called OWI court, the sentence would be considered served. Along with required classes, continued therapy, and a probe into life, a major requirement for graduation was sustained sobriety. After ten months on bond, which also required abstinence from mind-altering substances, I had proven to myself I could do the sober thing, so I accepted the offer without hesitation.

I will never forget that first day in OWI court. After an initial thirty days of house arrest, I attended my first hearing. As I watched person after person stand before the judge and confess the times they had drank over the past week or so, my mind started to spin and lines became blurred. Even those who had merely been caught through testing were sentenced to no more than a few hours of community service, one night in jail, or two at the very most. Immediately, the fear that had held me to the straight and narrow, the knowledge that if I drank, I'd be sent straight to an extended stay in the country, began to plummet. Though my logical brain was fully aware of it, my primitive brain—the same party where alcoholism reigns—seized its opportunity. Life as I'd known it began to shatter. I cried the entire way home on the city bus.

The next eighteen months were spent in never-ending inner turmoil. My conscience battled constantly as my alcoholism insisted on "testing the waters" and finding the line. Eventually, I accepted the fact that complete abstinence was the only way to get off of the nauseating merry-go-round I had made my life into. But by that time, I was too dizzy to stop on my own. The alcoholism was full-blown and I was at its disposal.

Any sane human would have argued that the path I had chosen was clear, that the cliff was foreseeable. And while I would admit deep down I'd always known I was walking a slippery slope, I didn't understand the true reason why until hitting bottom. When ninety days between jail and residential treatment quickly ended in another relapse, I finally came face to face with fate.

The first two weeks in jail consisted of twenty-three hours a day, alone in a cell with a mat, a sink, a toilet, and a book. For one hour I was let out to shower and make emotional phone calls—usually at fifteen dollars apiece. Quarantine. After multiple anxiety attacks, which for me have a tendency to turn into partial seizures, I was graciously given a deck of cards and coloring book from a guard who had personal empathy. Denial of mentally accepting the next twenty months of my life was my only salvation at the time.

The day after Christmas I was led to general population. This isn't my first stay here, but for some reason, walking into the cold, windowless block instantly felt different. As I looked up the

stairs to my new room, in my new home, regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't stop my eyes from welling up. Someone immediately said, "Don't start that cry baby shit."

As the first few weeks passed, my reality began to take on a strangely familiar shape. I found myself reliving my past from ten years. Like the vast uninhabitable desert, I am surrounded by bricks that draw lines around a living space. The nights are cold and the air is dry enough to suck the water right out of your body. Though the only wildlife here is an occasional sewer bug, instead of coyotes, there are guards down every path to direct us. And every inmate here is comparable to a free-range bull. With heads down and angry eyes, we attempt to claim our territory. While we strive to maintain our freedom, the truth is, we are in the custody of a rigid system.

Aside from the level of negativity and noise that resonates in these walls (my head is pounding as I write this—undoubtedly magnified by the amounts of salted ramen seasoning I add to the bland meals), I cannot ignore one truth. I am terrified. The fear that began to consume me was only recognizable at first, but until recently I could not describe it. As the months pass and my mind becomes clearer with sobriety, the hardest part has been seeing and fully understanding my life-long underlying fear. The one that has always been my most influential, for better or for worse. A fear I believe we alcoholics and addicts identify with and inevitably bring upon ourselves until we learn to overcome our diseases: the fear of failure.

Knowing life is passing me by while I lose time terrifies me. And knowing that alcohol has the power to jeopardize every relationship and platform I have ever built for myself scares me even more. Alcoholism has blinded me for a long time, even after admitting it to myself. That is exactly what alcohol does, what it is: "cunning, baffling, powerful," as stated in the book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Defining this fear has brought light to my truth, and admitting powerlessness is, ironically, the first step to taking away alcohol's power over me.

After an extensive request to the judge, then a sincere testimonial in front of him, I have been granted the eligibility to spend the last three hundred days of my sentence on an ankle monitor. Initially, I was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. While the physical reality of a harsh jail stay does not scare me, nor did the physical realities of a harsh desert terrain, during the past thirty days since that last hearing I have come to one solid truth: the fear of failure will never leave me. However, what I know now is it's within my power to shift the fear, to blur the lines and spin my perspective. While it served me well at the end of the desert, keeping me where I needed to be at the time, today I will embrace it. Part of me is still terrified to return to civilization where freedom may be a blessing or a curse. But interestingly, without these months' experience, I might not have realized I have the values, principles, and motivation to use my fear to drive myself. As Elon Musk says, "Failure is an option here...If something is important enough, even if the odds are against you, you should still do it."

Tomorrow I go home, but not before being fitted for a G.P.S. tracking device. Though I will be a blinking dot on a map for three hundred days, I refuse to feel small. With the love of my life as my Sonny and family as instinctual coyotes, I will be in full acceptance of my fate, leaving deep tracks along my path. I am in full acceptance of fate and choose to be exhilarated by fear. This experience will be forever burnt into my memory.