

Hope is a yellow fire hydrant on State Street. Viewed from a window on the fourth floor of Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. Beyond the steel bars and over the thirty-foot concrete walls and past the manned gun towers, the hydrant sits next to the flowing water of Mill creek that runs under a traffic bridge. I stand in the window watching cars while hoping to be able to walk to the hydrant and touch it.

The window is in the Chapel library where the quiet space offers reprieve from the rest of the prison's constant noise, hostility and suspicion. Last night, a man who appeared to be white was placed in long-term solitary confinement after notifying the sergeant he couldn't return to his cell where the guy housed there first refused to have a roommate of a different race. The guy was given a "direct order" to return to his cell and upon refusal was placed in "the hole"—a punishment the United Nations has declared a form of torture and one that Department of Correction's top administrators have publicly professed goals of reducing the use of, yet, I watched a man fearful for his well being get handcuffed and led away. Four years ago, there was another guy who reported he was having problems with his cellmate but instead of refusing the direct order he returned to his cell and got choked to death with a guitar string later that night.

Here though, looking out that window, I see birds landing near the water, joggers trotting down the sidewalk, cars pulling in and out of the prison driveway with the freedom I hope to one day know. The freedom to walk among the tree lined landscapes viewed in the distance, to sleep in a comfortable bed in a quiet room, and most importantly the freedom to create legacy defined by more than my worst failures. Alas, I serve a life without parole sentence and thus may never know liberty.

When friends I've known for decades leave, we know it's unlikely we'll ever see each other again. Thus once they walk out the prison's front door, they head straight to the Yellow fire hydrant and wave back to the window from which I stand watching them go. Hoping they cherish every moment of liberty.