When we talk of the SHU and the affects the conditions have on the psyche, it's not a simple construction one can wrap his or her mind around. Understanding the treatment of Pelican Bay inmates takes some getting used to. Understanding this sickness that runs rampant in the minds of prison officials leaves knots in the pit of bellies.

Nothing can really prepare you for entering the SHU. It's a world unto itself where cold, quiet and emptiness come together seeping into your bones, then eventually the mind.

The first week I told myself: It isn't that bad, I could do this. The second week, I stood outside in my underwear shivering as I was pelted with hail and rain. By the third week, I found myself squatting in a corner of the yard, filing fingernails down over coarse concrete walls. My sense of human decency dissipating with each day. At the end of the first year, my feet and hands began to split open from the cold. I bled over my clothes, my food, between my sheets. Band-aids were not allowed, even confiscated when found.

My sense of normalcy began to wane after just 3 years of confinement. Now I was asking myself, can I do this? Not sure about anything anymore.

Though I didn't realize it at the time—looking back now—the unraveling must've begun then. My psyche had changed—I would never be the same. The ability to hold a single good thought left me, as easily as if it was a simple shift of wind sifting over tired, battered bones.

There's a definite split in personality when good turns to evil. The darkness that looms above is thick, heavy and suffocating. A snap so sharp, the echo is deafening. A sound so loud you expect to find blood leaking from your ears at the bleakest moment.

The waking is the most traumatic. From the moment your bare feet graze the rugged stone floor, your face begins to sag, knuckles tighten—flashing pale in the pitch of early morning. The slightest slip in a quiet dawn can set a SHU personality into a tailspin: If the sink water is not warm enough, the toilet flushes too loud, the drop of a soap dish, a cup … In an instant your bare teeth, shake with rage. Your heart hammers against ribs, lodges in your throat. You are capable of killing anything at this moment. Flash attack; a beating, any violent outburst that will release rage.

This would be the time it's best to hold rigid. Take a deep breath. Try to convince yourself there's an ounce of good left in you. This is not a portrait you wish anyone to see. And then a gull screeches passing outside—another tailspin and you're checking your ears for blood.

And this is a good day.

Eleven years has passed since I entered the SHU on gang validation. This year I'll be 52-years-old. My cognitive skills over this past decade has taken an odd turn. The deterioration is discernible. When I first arrived I was attentive and if you'll excuse the expression, bright-eyed. I thought I could beat "this thing" whatever "this thing" was. I confess—I was ignorant.

Today, I could be found at my cell front. My fingers stuffed through the perforated metal door—I hang limp—a mechanism forged of heavy gauge. My head angled in a daze. My mind lost in a dense fog of nothingness. I'm withering away—I know it—and I no longer care. Hopelessness is a virus I hide under my tongue like some magic pebble, as if the shiny stone could assist in organizing thoughts; decipher warbled language from convicts without stones without tongues in a cellblock of grunts and floods of ignorance. Concentration is an abstract invention for those with half a mind if half a mind is a terrible thing to waste. And someone screams behind me, "waste not want not." But what's to waste when all you are is a virus that no one's allowed to touch.

Funny … when I think of validation, I remember Fridays after work—cashing my paycheck—handing over a parking ticket to the bankteller, asking to be validated and I thought, how cool is this: validation for free!

Yes, this is me—the ignorant one. Today, wasting what's left of the other half.

If I were to imagine life outside of Pelican Bay, outside of the SHU—I'd have to imagine a hospital. And between me and you, I don't like hospitals. I don't like the stench of sanitized sheets, industrial strength ammonia. Gowns that open from the back. Polka dots and paper slippers. Looney tunes in looney beds, leather straps and leather masks. Shocks and shots and broken ribs.

The truth is we're all broken in our own way. We've been undone, unwound. The inside of our plastic skulls—raked and routed. A composition of cracks and fissures where nothing will ever be the same again.

To put it in better perspective or at least one you'd understand:

Once, long ago, I adopted a puppy. He was a minature red doberman. Naturally I named him Red. Red had been abused so terrible, that in house-training him if I raised my voice without warning, he'd shake something awful until he wet himself. I remember I had to hold him to feed him, otherwise he'd starve himself. Maybe he thought he was so bad he didn't deserve food. So loathsome he didn't deserve to be held. It took a long time for him to warm to me. I think what did it for Red, was when I chose to sleep on the floor with him in my room. He must've seen me as his equal. I really liked the way he pressed he wet nose against my neck, in the middle of the night. I think in his own way he was thanking me for treating him—dare I say—humane. Like family. Like a friend. And today, I imagine life outside the SHU and a terrible sadness overwhelms me. I can't help but wonder, what will I not be deserving of?

At 70 who would want to hold and care for me?

The hardest thing about spending years in the SHU is that it's not "just" years. Call it what it is: a circle of perpetual sensory deprivation that spans an entire lifetime. Inmates have been confined to isolation, based on gang validation since the early 70's. This is noted in Wright v. Enomoto, 462 F. Supp. 397, where arbitrary gang segregation first started.

So … confinement does not end. The psychological damage does not fix itself. Does a rape victim stop being raped after the act? What about the boy who's been hit

by a car, dragged for 100 feet, dragged until the meat is scraped off his bones? Does he flinch at the sound of grating metal?

The same way these victims are affected, is the same trauma a SHU inmate suffers when a chain is snapped around the ankles, cinched at the waist. When metal doors slam shut, tumblers in a lock spin. Loudspeakers blare through a silent cellblock. Though more suppressed, less visual, the damage is there.

The hardest thing? Nobody cares.
Worse? Nobody wants to care.

And the rules are constructed to further the damage. To encourage abuse over the SHU inmate.

Focus and concentrate on this—imagine if you will:

Before leaving your home—the key to getting beyond that door—you must expose yourself to a stranger. Strip naked and show him your genitals. Bend over and show him the inside of your anus. Does even the thought of this make you uncomfortable? Is it enough to startle your moral consciousness?

How would the observer react to this display before him?
What if he liked it?

What if he signed up to appear at your front door every morning to witness this very act? To force you to go through the motions slowly? Cautiously enough so he watches every move you make? Inspects every fold of your skin with a leer?

In you, what emotions would burn deep within: Shame? Anger? Humiliation? Would you want to know what he's thinking? Would you be able to withstand the ritual every day of your life?

What about your family:

Imagine this if you will—your family comes to visit you. During this visit officers are tearing through your personal belongings: your underwear, cosmetics. Sitting on your bed reading your letters. Confiscating: books, pictures, magazines.

Your family notes tension on your face sitting before them. You're thinking of your room being ransacked. The invasion. Your body language is rigid. Awkward. They ask, how are you? How do you keep a straight face—telling a bold lie—to your mother? Father? Your children.

What is your emotional state?

The hardest thing? Weathering indignity.

Degradation has a disaster about it. That choking filament that can cut air down to quarters; turn eyes purple, puffy and watery. Drown skin and soul in chemical agents, outrage, some post-traumatic flashing.

Our oppressors of humanity—a breed apart from others. Their leathery faces stink of feces. Their unwashed bodies oily, in crisp soiled uniforms.

And on a whim, without provocation, reason or justice, SHU inmates are accosted by these foul smelling guards, plucked from their cells at random and thrown into freezing tanks: empty of furnishings, fixtures, running water—handcuffed. Forced to defecate in a seatless chair in a bucket in restraints.

Refusal to turn over a stool sample large enough to please the indignant guard, inmates may remain in isolation—handcuffed—for days with no end.

Innocent inmates may even be subjected to forced penetration with surgical forceps—scraping the anal cavity—pinching tissue, skin, intestines. The more degraded the inmate, the more pleasured the guard; sergeant watching. Glee spilling from their faces mixed with sweat.

In every corner of the world, forcible penetration of the anal cavity with a foreign object is RAPE. In California's Pelican Bay SHU it's protection for public safety, smiles and all.

In a recent Superior Court case, when an inmate housed in Pelican Bay SHU, claimed prison officers had created a policy which allowed them to confine inmates to their cells with no access to showers, no outside exercise, no clean laundry, no cleaning supplies—indefinitely, Justice Philip Schafer stated, "Such policy decisions are peculiarly within the discretion and judgment of the Prison Administration."

Established case law states otherwise.

The hardest thing about spending years in the SHU? Nobody cares.
Worse? Nobody wants to care.

The most painful parts of being in the SHU?

Manic guards off their meds.
That last good photograph stamped with a boot.
Classification hearings postponed for potlucks.
The daughter whose eyes fill when you ask innocently, who are you?
Sons who are bullied and black-eyed at school because nobody likes the son of a felon, especially sons of law enforcement.
Summers that last for 3 weeks, winters for 10 months. And somewhere in the middle you're caught praying for global warming.
Sunburn blisters from two minute's warmth.
Optical nerves damaged from light.
Wrists that snap wringing clothes.
Tendons that tear when reaching for a towel.
Knees that don't have a leg to stand on.
Teeth caught in toothbrushes.
Toenails that fall off into socks—rattle like loaded dice.
Ankles that buckle jogging in place.
A spontaneous nose bleed on that last clean sheet, laundered shirt. Filling the sink, the toilet, splashing across the floor.

Making your own funeral arrangements, notifying the next of kin—only to receive a return to sender: Unable to forward as addressed.

The only piece of mail you've received in years.

Seven-year-old daughters who think glitter is what father needs on his Father's day card, but the mailroom disallows because what they don't need is an over excited prisoner.

The tearful mother who explains to everyone who asks, "He's away at school. Don't you know, it takes years and years for a good education these days," and she buries her face in cupped hands.

Do I think it's possible to be a "normal" human being while in the SHU?

Normal …?

Can we first focus on this "human being" thing? It seems I heard that phrase somewhere before …

Oh yes, now I remember. The phrase. Karl Marlantes described it best when in his novel, Matterhorn, his protagonist is struck with a realization:

> He suddenly understood why the victims of concentration camps had walked quietly to the gas chambers. In the face of horror and insanity, it was the one human thing to do. Not the noble thing, not the heroic thing—the human thing. To live, succumbing to the insanity was the ultimate loss of pride.

That's the character I want to be.

I'm sorry … what was the question again?

There's a sadness to psychosis. We learn this from poet, Peter Blair, his ode to the beautiful Donna Lee Polito. Five tries at suicide: sleeping pills, tranquilizers, a bathroom razor, before racing blind out an 8th floor window—her dark cropped hair wild in the wind—the bright splash below across railroad tracks. What I wouldn't give to know the freedom of that moment. What I wouldn't give to race blind for just half a block.

And still, here I am. A decade later—the dog part of me grappled at the nape of the neck. Held under water, drowning. My tired limbs flailing. I can understand the helplessness, the trapping of the adopted Red. How he must've held his breath so long, until he too understood---sometimes death outshines life.

Then he lapped up every drop of water, every string of saliva, only to be jerked from the skin of water to again taste every sting of air.

The psychological and emotional trauma are real. The anxiety, lethargy, sleepless nights … down to loss of appetite—my drowning.

It happens as often as I hear the jangle of their metal keys, hatred flung from their foul mouths, as if I was the one responsible for everything bad that ever happened in their lives.

Once you reach this inhumane way of living all you know is stooping. The curvature of the spine—remnants of ducking insults. There is no way to feel better when you're bent on bitter.

You cannot call it sleepwalking when there's no place to walk. When all you do is paddle in a circle in your cell and moths and mosquitos and mice quietly watch the spectacle, until you crawl back to bed with some restless something syndrome.

Each morning wakes the potential for disaster. Each morning starts with anger before the anxiety. My body tired, only has enough energy to get a few last twitches in for good measure. Then there's those mornings where the spinal spasms will buckle me and suddenly I'm on the floor, reaching for what? I don't know.

And you'd like to know what I think, what I fantasize, what I dream about? Careful what you wish for.

Irrational anger spills out in flashes. Sometimes it happens when you bite your cheek from chewing food too fast. When your jaw cramps and locks from chewing too slow. Unusual uncomfort for a mouth that doesn't see much action. Where talking to an inmate, talking period, can extend SHU confinement another six years. If silence is golden, I'm chained to Fort Knox. Call, Bernanke, to lower the rate. And someone please buy me a vowel.

Over sensitivity to stimuli? Now we're getting somewhere!

Education and books … and I'm running in circles.

Though in the SHU, you have to keep it the best kept secret. Books are limited to ten, even though you're allowed six cubic feet. So I have to hide books under my pillow, my mattress, in envelopes, strapped to my waist. I wake up damp with sweat just to pour over another verse. My eyes bob over pages 2, 3:45 a.m. One good chapter or stanza will set me straight. My best books I've read ten times over and still I'm hungry for another reading.

Education … I thought I was really something. A 49-year-old, 8th grader studying for a G.E.D. I traded my favorite books for theories on algebra. I thought I hit gold when I found: Algebra for Dummies. Then couldn't afford it. I studied signed numbers, two-step equations. Listened to lectures—on TV—on science, literature.

Weeks before my last practice test, all my work was confiscated. "Who's the dummy now?" kept ringing in my head. And I'm spinning in circles.

The two things that turn me looney—stripped.

Oversensitivity to stimuli? Who's the dummy now?

In the SHU, the thought process is confusing enough trying to put two and two together. Thrown in some pale walls, bouts of rage and a dash of listlessness, and you'll be lucky to form a single thought at all.

That's why I keep notes for everything. Notes on colors, names, words that look confusing, emotions, social protocol (Should I ever meet another human being, I'd like to be ready), books, magazines, quotes, phrases … you name it, I probably have it on a note.

I have a scant sense of reason, only know how to spell rationale, and often when I'm nervous I do things backwards. Why? Your guess is good as mine. Oh yeah, my reading level—documented at 5th grade. Maybe that's why I enjoy reading books ten times over. I never thought of that. And there you go—a single thought. I'm good for another six months.

Social withdrawal in the SHU is easy enough to spell out: Social interaction is prohibited. So in the light of day, I can be found pinned to the corner of my cell—buried around my books, surrounded by my mounds of notes. I don't like doctors. I don't like psychs. I don't like guards. And the idea of someone touching me, has me bouncing off the walls.

Chronic depression—okay, here's the thing: I once read in a psychology book, how to overcome depression and negative thinking.

Yes … I know … you're probably wondering what's a 5th grade reader doing reading a psychology book. Well, call me crazy—wait! Bad choice of words. We don't want to say that too loud. In minutes we'll have 10 psychologists at my cell door, pens poised over tablets, salivating, bifocals fogged.

Dark images, sad memories, negative thinking—to the chronically depressed—is euphoric. I'm talking that: heart pounding, palm sweating, eye rolling, dizzying effect.

And of course, on every level wrong.

The book I read warned me, that I have to fight these feelings. Create a positive place I want to be at. A positive project I'd like to build. A positive goal I'd like to someday accomplish. The problem with that, in truth, none of these things are possible in the SHU. There is no future "anything" for the SHU inmate. Once we're confined, we simply wait to die.

I'll tell you too … it was a good thing I had to trade that book in for an algebra book. It was too depressing.

Emotional flatness and mood swings are generally eclipsed by depression.

One night, a fight between two inmates broke out in front of my cell. At this point, guards do not come into the unit until the combatants are down. But this particular evening, the guard in the tower was having trouble (morally) pulling the trigger—close range—on her gun. So the inmates remained engaged exchanging blows. That is, until another female guard rolled on the scene—livid. "What are you waiting for?" She shouted. "Shoot! They're just fucken animals. Shoot!"

Four ear-splitting shots range out before they went down. There was blood everywhere. On my cell door. The tier. The floor. The roof.

And her voice: “Fucken animals” kept ringing in my head. My blood boiled. My fists swelled. I felt my face reddening.

An hour later I cooled. She’s right, I thought. We’re supposed to be animals. We’re only here to die. This is our purpose. The prison administration is paid to put us down. The undesirables. The malignant misfits who have no right to breathe.

Last year, SHU inmates joined in a hunger strike, advocating to be treated more humane. One week into the strike, a burly red-haired guard came into the cellblock yelling, “You want to starve yourselves to death, go ‘head. Ain’t shit gonna change.”

I didn’t bother looking up from my book. I didn’t laugh. I didn’t get angry. However, one image did flash quickly: inmates in wheelchairs, on gurneys—crowded in a hallway—hollow cheeked, paper skin. Some slumped over. Some dying. Flies in swarms, in a black fog. My one good thought for the whole year … please let “mine” be a closed casket. Then I went back to reading my book.

When it comes to physical harm produced by SHU confinement, the direct links are easily traced through documentation:

June 2007, my rotator cuff tears
September 2007, arthritis in the spine
April 2008, hepatitis
August 2009, a thyroid condition
November 2009, high blood pressure

Although the conditions are being treated with medication (except hepatitis), what’s odd about them is that they all developed after six years.

Six years is a single term for SHU confinement based on gang validation. But because California has an indeterminate policy for gang validation, the six years is rolled over again and again—indefinitely.

For inmates such as myself who are not gang members, there is no chance for release—ever. To be considered an inactive gang member (eligible for release), you must turn over gang information. But if you are not a member, what do you have to turn in?

Nothing.

As a result, the sentence never ends. The medical conditions continue to develop.

Costs continue to rise.

Mental health deteriorates.

There's a lot to say about Pelican Bay SHU …

There's a lot to say about the prison guards; the judges …

And when Pelican Bay developed a policy prohibiting inmates from speaking, from human contact, they knew exactly what would be left unspoken.

When I think of the endless confinement, the endless abuse, one notable quote from TIME magazine weighs heavily in the air:

> "There's something especially loathsome about torturing helpless creatures for fun and profit."

I hope this letter proves beneficial to your legal research. I hope this letter is able to find a voice.

Thank you for your time and cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,
C.F. Villa