

# Living in the SHU

C.F. VILLA

*Cesar Villa, fifty-five, has been held in Pelican Bay State Prison's Security Housing Unit (SHU) since 2001. He grew up in San Jose, California, and was one of the thousands of young people given life sentences under California's three strikes law. Villa was sentenced to 348 years to life after his third conviction for robbery. He was "validated" as a gang associate in 2001 when another man in prison became an anonymous informant, telling gang investigators that the name "Pancho," which they found written in the wall calendar he had hanging in his cell, referred to Villa.*

*In California's prisons, "evidence" such as a letter, name, drawing, or possession of the wrong book is enough to "validate" someone as a gang member or associate, which results in indefinite placement in solitary confinement. Many "validated" prisoners have never committed a violent act in or out of prison, but they are deemed guilty by association. The only chance they have to return to the prison's mainline is to "debrief," which means providing information, often false, about other prisoners. Villa was re-validated by gang investigators in 2008, then again in 2013 when a corrections officer said he heard Villa hollering a phrase down the corridor in Nahuatl, an indigenous Mexican language banned at Pelican Bay.*

THE FIRST WEEK, I TELL MYSELF: IT ISN'T THAT BAD; I CAN DO THIS. THE second week, I stand in the dog run in my underwear shivering as I'm pelted with hail and rain. By the third week, I find myself squatting in a corner of the yard, filing my fingernails down over coarse concrete walls. My sense of human decency dissipates with each day. At the end of the first year, my feet and hands begin to split open from the cold. I bleed over my clothes, in my food, between my sheets. Band-Aids are not allowed, even confiscated when found.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, the unraveling must've begun. Now I ask myself: Can I do this? Not sure about anything anymore. My psyche had changed. 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.

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 you bare teeth, shake with rage. Your heart hammers against ribs, lodges in your throat. You are capable of killing anything at this moment.

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

And this is a good day.

Fourteen years have passed since I entered the SHU on gang validation. This year I'll be fifty-five years old. 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 can be found at my cell front, my fingers stuffed through the perforated metal door—I hang limp—my head angled in a daze. My mind is 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 a magic pebble. If only that shiny stone could assist in deciphering warbled language in a cellblock full of grunts and floods of ignorance from convicts without tongues. 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. Concentration is an abstract invention for those with only half a mind—and half a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

If I were to imagine life outside of Pelican Bay, 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.

Once, long ago, I adopted a miniature red Doberman. Naturally, I named him Red. Red had been abused so terribly that if I raised my voice he'd shake until he wet himself. I had to hold him to feed him; otherwise he'd starve. 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 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'd press his wet nose against my neck in the middle of the night. I think he was thanking me for treating him—dare I say—humanely. Like family. Like a friend. Today, I imagine life outside the SHU and I can't help but wonder, at seventy or eighty, who will want to hold and care for me?

The truth is 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. 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 1970s. Funny . . . when I think of validation, I still remember Fridays after work—cashing my paycheck—handing over a parking ticket to the bank teller and asking to be validated. How cool is this, I thought, validation for free!

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 one hundred feet, dragged until the meat is scraped off his bones? Does he flinch at the sound of grating metal? It's the same damage 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. Although more suppressed, less visual, the damage is there.

The hardest thing? Nobody cares.

Worse? Nobody wants to.

The guards: our oppressors of humanity—a breed apart from others. Their leathery faces stink of feces. Their unwashed bodies oily, in crisp soiled uniforms. 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—so he can inspect every fold of your skin with a leer?

Imagine this: Your family comes to visit you. Before this visit officers tear through your personal belongings: your underwear, cosmetics. They sit on your bed and read your letters. Confiscate books, pictures, magazines.

Your family notes tension on your face sitting across from them through the glass. 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—tell a lie—to your mother? Father? Your children?

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. If they refuse to turn over a stool sample large enough to please the indignant guard, inmates may remain handcuffed for days with no end. 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 pleased the guard or 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 of public safety, smiles and all.

The hardest thing? Nobody cares.

Worse? Nobody wants to.

Indignity. That choking filament that can cut air down to quarters and turn eyes purple, puffy, and watery. Drown skin and soul in chemical agents, outrage, some post-traumatic flashing. 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, especially sons of law enforcement, likes the son of a felon. Summers that last for three weeks, winters for ten 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 it because what they don't need is an over-excited prisoner.

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. Karl Marlantes described it best in his novel *Matterhorn*, when 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 protagonist I want to be.

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. Poet Peter Blair, in his ode to the beautiful Donna Lee Polito, writes of five attempts at suicide: sleeping pills, tranquilizers, a bathroom razor, before racing blind out an eighth-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. I can

understand the helplessness. 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.

Once you reach this inhumane way of living all you know is stooping. The curvature of the spine—remnants of ducking insults. I often stoop as I hear the jangle of the guards' metal keys, hatred flung from their foul mouths, as if I was the one responsible for everything bad that ever happened in their lives. 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. Then there are those mornings when the spinal spasms buckle me and suddenly I'm on the floor, reaching for what? 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 discomfort for a mouth that doesn't see much action. Where talking to an inmate—talking at all—can extend SHU confinement another six years. If silence is golden, I'm chained to Fort Knox. Call me, Bernanke, to lower the rate. And someone please buy me a vowel.

In the SHU books are limited to ten. 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 pore over another verse. 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. A forty-nine-year-old eighth grader studying for his GED! 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. Over-sensitivity to stimuli? Who's the dummy now?

In the SHU you're 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. When I'm nervous I do

things backward. Why? Your guess is good as mine. Oh yeah, my reading level—documented at fifth 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.

The idea of someone touching me has me bouncing off the walls.

One evening 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 in exchanging blows. That is, until another female guard rolled on the scene—livid. “What are you waiting for?” she shouted. “Shoot! They’re just fuckin’ animals. Shoot!” Four ear-splitting shots rang out before they went down. There was blood everywhere. On my cell door. The tier. The floor. The roof. And her voice: “Fuckin’ 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. 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 humanely. 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.