

Profession

by Joel Page

I am in a narrow room, approximately ten feet by fifteen feet. Its walls are steel, and its floor is grey. It is absolutely clean but smells vaguely of sewage. It is lit with a penetrating floodlight that stretches into every identical corner and overpowers the eyelids. When it is dark, it is absolutely dark, and the walls, mercifully, seem further away.

I stand up in irregular unplanned intervals and sit down shortly thereafter. This does not occupy time, and certainly does not pass time—no time can be passed here, because there is nothing to look forward to, and death remains no less frightening though its boundaries are blurring with those of my life. I touch the walls occasionally to see what they feel like; I have discovered that the mind cannot recall the sensation of touch with the precision that it remembers sights and sounds, so repetition of the same tactile experience can retain a certain novelty. I approach the walls and corners periodically to examine the differences in perspective. And I have a heavy wool blanket, to which I am allergic, and wrap it into different shapes in a process approximating sculpture. Other pursuits—stories, memories, and math problems—devolve quickly into nausea without paper on which to record them. I can hear sometimes the noises of other men through the vent, but no words. For some reason, I feel that I can identify their race when I hear their movements. This may or may not be so.

Twice a day, a guard comes with food through a slot in the door. The food is tan, square, and gelatinous. In pretrial detention, I was told that this is called “food loaf,” but here it doesn’t have a name, because nothing has a name if it is not discussed. When they open the door to

bring the food, a strong odor of coconut enters the cell. It is an oil available through the commissary to lower-security inmates in an adjoining block. I can only imagine that it is capable of crossing a seldom-opened metal door, filling an entirely different hall, and then entering and filling my cell because it is used perpetually for masturbation.

On a single occasion, I said hello to the person bringing the food, who responded, "I am not your friend." One day, perhaps, I will work up the nerve to tell him or her that I love them.