



ON THE YARD
MALCOLM BRALY

INTRODUCTION BY
JONATHAN LETHEM

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ON THE YARD

MALCOLM BRALY (1925–1980) was born in Portland, Oregon. Abandoned by his parents, Braly lived between foster homes and institutions for delinquent children, and by the time he was forty had spent nearly seventeen years in prison for burglary, serving time at Nevada State Prison, San Quentin, and Folsom State Prison. He wrote three novels behind bars, *Felony Tank* (1961), *Shake Him Till He Rattles* (1963), and *It's Cold Out There* (1966), and upon his release in 1965 began to work on *On the Yard*. When prison authorities learned of the book they threatened to revoke his parole, and he was forced to complete it in secret. Published in 1967, after Braly's parole had expired, *On the Yard* received wide acclaim. It was followed by his autobiography, *False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons* (1976), and a final work of fiction, *The Protector* (1979). Malcolm Braly enjoyed fifteen years of freedom before his death in a car accident at age fifty-four.

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INTRODUCTION

THE MIND flinches from the fact of prisons—their prevalence, squatting in the midst of towns and cities, their role in so many lives, and in the history and everyday life of our country. And when the mind does find its way there, it wants the whole subject covered in hysteria and overstatement. Let prisons be one simple thing—either horrific zoos for the irretrievably demented and corrupt, or inhumane machines which grind down innocent men. Let them stand apart as raw cartoons of black-and-white morality, having nothing to do with the rest of us—we who live in the modulated, ambivalent, civilized world “the novel” was born to depict. We might secretly feel prison doesn’t *need* a novel, that it instead needs a miniseries or the Op-Ed page.

Malcolm Braly’s *On the Yard*, temperate and unhysterical as its title, is the novel prison needs. It’s also a book any lover of novels ought to know, for its compression, surprise, and wry humor, for its deceptively casual architecture, and for characters and scenes which are unforgettable. Of course, readers may be compelled to read realistic novels set in war or plague or prison by uneasy cravings to know particulars of lives they hope never to encounter more directly. And Braly surely has knowledge we don’t, tons of it. During a miserable, nearly fatherless childhood, Braly began acting out his grievances through a series of petty and eventually not-so-petty burglaries, until, in the company of some reckless partners in crime, he found himself in an interstate chase which

climaxed in a gun battle with police, then capture and imprisonment. Upon his first release he slipped back into a desultory pattern of minor crime; eventually managing to spend a majority of his first forty years of life behind prison walls without having murdered or raped, without having even stolen anything of much value.

Apart from knowledge, Braly possesses an insouciant tone of confidence which causes us never to doubt him, and which is more persuasive than any fact: if these things can be taken as givens, taken almost lightly, then truly the prison is another world as real as our own. But beyond reportage, or tourism, *On the Yard* succeeds because through its particulars it becomes universal, a model for understanding aspects of our self-wardened lives. Inside and outside prison walls human beings negotiate, stall, bluff, and occasionally explode in their attempts to balance ecstasy against ennui, to do more than merely eke out their narrowing days on earth. But Braly skirts allegory: his book is much too lean and local to bother with that. The reader supplies the allegory.

The novel could be said to center on the plateau and fall (we never witness his rise) of Chilly Willy, a prison racketeer who deftly controls a small empire of cigarettes, pharmaceutical narcotics, and petty bureaucratic favors, orchestrated by a routine of minimal violence and, as his name suggests, maximum cool. Despite his name, and the outlines of his career, he's a deeply real and human character, even a sympathetic one. We watch as Chilly manipulates the razor's-edge power dynamics of the prison until a single miscalculation causes him to lash out. It is then that the prison administration undertakes Chilly's destruction, by the simple act of placing a receptively homosexual cellmate in his previously solitary cell. The new cellmate serves as Chilly's mirror—not for a repressed homosexuality, but for the fact that his manipulations had always had concealed within them a grain of solicitude, perhaps even disguised family feeling. The men Chilly

commands are under his care, however apparently dispassionate a form this care has taken. Sex becomes the means of Chilly's self-destruction—but then nearly every character in the book is shown in a second act of self-destruction inside the prison, which recapitulates and confirms an initial act outside.

The novel *could* be said to center on Chilly's fall, except it barely centers anywhere, moving by its own cool strategy through the minds and moments of dozens of characters, some recurrently, some only for a sole brief visitation which nearly always proves definitive. Three or four of these are into the minds of the prison's keepers, including that of the morose, long-enduring Warden. The rest are a broad array of prisoners, some "hardened" repeaters, some newly arrived at San Quentin, some floating in between and trying to measure the rightness and permanence of their placement inside those walls. All but the craziest and most loathsome—like the shoe-sniffing, anal-compulsive Sanitary Slim—are presented at least briefly as potential audience and author surrogates. All of them are rejected, either gently or rudely, by the end.

This is Braly's brilliantly successful game—he's a master at exploiting the reader's urge to identify with his characters. The results are estranging, in the best sense: both funny and profound. Each character undergoes a sort of audition. The first pair of candidates is offered in Chapter One: Nunn, a repeat offender shuffling his way back inside and trying to come to terms with his propensity for self-defeat, his missed opportunities during his brief stint outside, and Manning, a sensitive and observant first-timer who has overturned his innocuous life with a sudden and incomprehensible crime of sexual perversion. The reader begins to squirm in a way which will become familiar—ordinary guilt and innocence will not be our map here. Braly is enormously conscious of the effect of withholding the criminal histories of certain of his characters, while blurting others. His writerly pleasure

in this game is tipped in comic miniatures like this one: "He lit his cigarette, then held the match for Zekekowski, noting again how finely formed Zekekowski's hands were, actually beautiful, the hands of a . . . of an arsonist, as it happened."

If the men glimpsed in Braly's San Quentin break into roughly two groups, Manning and Nunn are typical of each: those who are career criminals, and those who have committed single crimes of impulse—the molesters and wife-killers. Braly leads us gently to the irony that the former commit relatively harmless crimes and yet are compulsively recurrent, whereas the latter are morally abhorrent yet less likely to return to the prison after their release. The impulsives are frequently bookish and bourgeois, unlike the careerists in outlook or temperament, and with a tendency to look down on them as lessers. At the extreme we meet Watson, a priggish impulsive: "Watson stood with culture, the Republic, and Motherhood. . . . He had killed his two small sons, attempted to kill his wife, . . . all because his wife had refused a reconciliation with the remark, 'John, the truth is you bore me.'" Watson defends himself in a therapy session, claiming, "I see no point in further imprisonment, further therapy, no point whatsoever since there's absolutely no possibility I'll do the same thing again." And he's immediately teased by the raffish, Popeye-like career criminal Society Red, who says, "That's right. . . . He's run out of kids."

More sympathetic is Lorin, a fragile jailhouse poet who cringes inside fantasies of Kim Novak and notebook jottings like "*Yet I am free—free as any to test the limits of my angry nerves and press the inner pains of my nature against the bruise of time.*" Braly doesn't hold such sensitivity up for either mockery or admiration: like other responses to the condition known as San Quentin, it is simply presented as one possibility among many. Nearer to the author's own sympathies—or so a reader may suspect—is Paul Juleson, Lorin's sometime mentor and protector. Juleson at first glance seems

the most resourceful and best equipped of the prison intellectuals, and therefore both a likely survivor and a good bet for author's proxy. In a flashback we learn that he killed his wife; the hell of his short marriage is portrayed with devastating economy and insight, and the violence of his crime doesn't impede our inclining toward Juleson's sympathies. Richard Rhodes, in *The New York Times's* original review of *On the Yard*, came out and said it: "Juleson is probably Mr. Braly's alter ego." Yet I don't think it's so simple as that—and certainly Braly denies us the usual satisfactions of rooting for this character when, despite all his wiles and wisdom, Juleson puts himself in the path of Chilly Willy's contempt by a dumb play for a few packs of cigarettes.

From that point Chilly and Juleson catalyze one another's destruction. It is as though each man has been fated to expose the weakness in the other. So if Braly has an alter ego in the book, it is split, in an act of symbolic self-loathing, between these two men. Rhodes, in his otherwise admiring review, went on to call the book "curiously ambivalent, as though the author had not yet sorted out his own attitudes when he wrote it." I think this ambivalence, far from unintentional, is in fact the essence of Braly's art. The criminal professionals are not so different from the middle-class murderers after all—they are united in self-destruction. San Quentin exists, at some level, because these men need a place to solve the puzzle of their lives by nullification. It also exists because of our society's need to accommodate that nullification, giving it four square walls, a pair of coveralls, and a number, as well as a few perfunctory hours of group therapy a week.

In other words, if it's difficult to discern with whom Malcolm Braly identifies, this is likely because Malcolm Braly doesn't identify with himself. Not exactly. This becomes plain in Braly's *False Starts*, his extraordinary memoir of his childhood, and of his pathetic criminal and prison careers. In this second masterpiece, published ten years after *On the*

Yard, Braly marvels extensively at his own tropism for the prison, at those miraculous self-sabotages which led him again and again to the miserable comforts of incarceration. We learn that during one break-in he actually managed to accidentally leave behind a slip of paper bearing his full name and address, as though desperate to devise a path back inside.

Standing outside *On the Yard's* character scheme is the lanky teenage sociopath, Stick. Leader of a mostly imaginary gang of fascist hoodlums called The Vampires, Stick is a cipher of human chaos, and he eventually brings down an unlikely destruction on the prison. Stick's uncanny near-escape is by hot-air balloon, one painstakingly constructed by his cellmate and stolen by Stick at the last moment. This reveals a vein of dreamy masturbatory fantasy, a childishness, which our fear of criminals and prisoners usually conceals from us, but which Braly doesn't want concealed. The balloon is an unusually direct symbol for any novel, but especially Braly's. Nonetheless, it bears evidence of that ambivalence which marks all the characters and their strivings: when examiners consider the crashed balloon they find it scored by excessively reworked sewing, which has weakened the fabric: "[the stitches] suggested an analogy to hesitation marks in a suicide." Stick also, it seems to me, reveals *On the Yard* as being a 1960s California book, and San Quentin in the Sixties as being oddly subject to the same propensity for utopianism and social experiment as the Bay Area within which the prison darkly huddles. In an eastern prison Stick might more likely have been drawn into some preexisting gang or mafia: thirty years later he'd be a Crip or Blood. Here he's free to self-invent, and so becomes a prognostication of Charles Manson or Jim Jones.

Malcolm Braly's life was sad, triumphant, and sad again. He lived mostly inside for twenty years, until his writing, together with the will and generosity of Gold Medal Books editor Knox Burger, provided a rescue. He died in a car accident

at fifty-four, leaving behind a wife and infant daughter—Knox Burger has said he was “fat and happy.” His peak as a writer came in the two complementary books, the novel and the memoir, and in the memoir he says about the novel, “I was writing over my head.” A reader needn’t explore the earlier books to confirm this, for Braly is working over his head in *On the Yard* in the sense that any novelist is when he has moved beyond his tools, or through them, to experience a kind of transubstantiation with his characters. At those moments a writer always knows more than he ever could have expected to, and he can only regard the results with a kind of honest awe. The book is no longer his own, but a vehicle by which anyone can see himself both exculpated and accused, can find himself alternately imprisoned and freed. Braly’s novel is something like Stick’s borrowed balloon, in the end, a beautiful, unlikely oddment rising from the yard of San Quentin, motley with the scars of its making and no less perfect for showing those “hesitation marks.” It rises above the prison walls in a brief, glorious flight, before gravity makes its ordinary claim.

—JONATHAN LETHEM