

“Before the cold spell hit the other day I went out to the rec yard and walked around. Somehow some leaves had blown into the yard. I and the other guy out there noticed that right off because leaves are sort of nonexistent where we are. These obviously had to have blown over a building and through two fences to be in our rec yard. They were pin oak leaves and I remember thinking it was kind of late in the season for pin oak leaves to be dropping. And then it occurred to me that I really didn’t know what had or hadn’t dropped—or what shape the grass was in or how moist the soil was. Or where the stars were for the season. Once upon a time, Ruth, I knew by the feel of the air and the changing of the clouds when the phases of the seasons’ changes came—I knew the faces of the seasons’ changes. I knew the cycles of the leaves dropping and which animals came and went with those changes. I used to go to the orchards when the pecan leaves fell (they all fall at once in almost a single day, ya know) and I was always ready for the night(s) of the Perseid meteor showers. A blue moon would have been cause for a party with my friends (the next one after this one won’t happen until after 2000). I hate to come across sounding like Running Wolf of the tribe or Jim-bob o’ the Pines, but it really struck me just how separated from the reality of the earth I am any more. All those rule changes and subtleties which were intimate aspects of my day-to-day reality are alien to me and have been replaced by subcultural behavior, the subtleties and changes of this prison that one has to have in order to make it best in here. It just hadn’t occurred to me until I was hit with those leaves how much of that part of my reality was gone. I’ve thought about it before, but for some reason the reality just hit me particularly hard that day. I guess that might be because I don’t see any trees at all where I am now. Prison walls surround three sides of the rec yard and the other side faces the side of the garment factory which is itself seen through two fences, one with sheet metal covering it. The only sky I see has to be during the day and it’s through “xxxxxx”s of chainlink fencing. When I was on the other wing my cell was on the third row and I could see the horizon and some trees in the distance—that was something. Now, nothing. Except what blows over the buildings and the fence, and those leaves are dead. I was truly in tune with nature (god, that sounds so damn corny), which was my environment. Now I’m in tune with this environment. Kind of a shitty trade off, really. All that because of a leaf.”

Excerpt by an anonymous death row inmate in *Welcome to Hell: Letters & Writings from Death Row* by Jan Arriens, pp. 66-69, Second Edition, Northeastern University Press, 1997

For more information watch Paul Hamann’s 1987 documentary *Fourteen Days in May* and to write to a death row inmate currently incarcerated in the US visit: <http://www.lifelines-uk.org.uk/>

