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O'Hagan, Sean. "Interview: 'A roadmap to redemption': how a photographer helped a prisoner see beyond his cage." *The Guardian*. October 29, 2020.



'Surviving a harsh environment shouldn't be the definition of justice' ... C Fausto Cabrera. Photograph: Emily Baxter, SEEN

After a Minnesota inmate wrote to Alec Soth on impulse this year, the two began a freewheeling exchange of ideas on culture and isolation that developed into an astonishing new book

In January this year, having completed a working road trip, Alec Soth returned home to his native Minneapolis to find a letter marked Minnesota correctional facility. "Please forgive the audacity of this letter," it began. "I reach out in great admiration and respect. For years, I have relied on photography for reference material, given my incarceration, and have developed a great admiration for the genre."

The letter was signed C Fausto, short for Christopher Fausto Cabrera, an inmate who on "sheer impulse" had written to the photographer with "no real expectation, but to connect with other artists". Intrigued, Soth decided to respond. "There was

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something about the letter,” he recalls. “A politeness and a sense that the guy was really bright and self-aware.”

So began a correspondence that is ongoing and provides the raw material for an intriguing new book, The Parameters of Our Cage. Its title is taken from one of Fausto’s characteristically ruminative letters: “We all confront the parameters of our cage eventually. What we do when we reach those bars helps define us.”

Deftly edited by Soth into a manageable epistolary narrative, the book tracks the first nine months of their dialogue as they get to know each other and exchange thoughts on literature, art, freedom and confinement, as well their dramatically different life experiences. It is an oddly engaging, often revealing, read. At one point, Soth acknowledges his “privileged background”, but also his childhood sense of otherness. “My dad was a lawyer,” he writes, “and I was lucky to have a stable home, financially and otherwise. But I was always a weirdo. I was shy and had some traumatic stuff happen when I was young. So I kept to myself.”

I ask Soth, who has a history of publishing 'zines on his Little Brown Mushroom imprint, why he decided to turn their private correspondence into a very public book. “When we began,” he replies, “there was absolutely no intention on my part to do anything with it. But it became so interesting that it took on a life of its own.” Part of that, he adds, “is down to the richness of Fausto’s way of thinking, the fact that he has no real experience of the internet or social media. He has the mindset of someone who sits down and takes the time to think in – and construct – complete sentences. When I get a letter from Fausto, it’s full of information. It’s meaningful.”

Through Soth, I manage to contact Fausto by email. He recalls initially seeing and being intrigued by a Soth photograph of a makeshift knife that was used on the cover of You Must Remember This, a book of poems by Michael Bazzett. The image is part of Soth’s 2010 series Broken Manual which, ironically, is about individuals who have chosen to disappear from the mainstream. “I knew Alec was local,” Fausto explains, “which felt like the first and most basic connection. I started to wonder what this photograph was about, if there was an intentional thread that somehow connects to prison.”

Fausto first began channelling his creativity in the more liberal Stillwater correctional facility in Minnesota, where he thrived as a self-taught artist and a creative mentor to other inmates. Three years ago, however, he was transferred to what he describes as the “wasteland of a prison in Rush City”. There, he

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shares a small cell with another person and his reading is “limited to 10 books and files that must fit into a two-foot locker with all my other property”.

Unsurprisingly, one of his earliest letters touches on the idea of photography as a “portal” through which the viewer can somehow escape. As if to distill his own feelings of isolation, he quotes the US novelist Marilynne Robinson: “When do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it?”



*Fort Jefferson Memorial Cross, Wickliffe, Kentucky 2002, from Alec Soth's Sleeping By the Mississippi.
Photograph: Alec Soth*

Soth tells him about his experiences of photographing in Angola state prison, which is situated on a former slave plantation, for his book Sleeping By the Mississippi. “For as long as I can remember,” he writes, “my biggest fear has been prison. But this has less to do with the isolation than the social dynamic, the various power structures, the abuse. I couldn’t survive it. One interesting thing about being a photographer is that it has allowed me to explore this fear.”

In contrast, in response to a request from Soth to describe the eight images he would take to a desert island, Fausto gives a list that includes family snapshots, a

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photo of his cell and an imagined picture of the singer Demi Lovato, relaxing in a room filled with “personal items: photos, notebooks, talismans infused with their own nostalgia, things I could pore over to figure out what they say about her journey”. This inspires Soth to organise a competition among his Instagram followers for the best Photoshop recreation of the same. The five shortlisted images are included in the book.



A finalist in Alec Soth's Instagram competition to create a photograph of Demi Lovato's imagined bedroom, from The Parameters of Our Cage. Photograph: Aaron Maurer

As their written dialogue progresses, though, Fausto's letters from the inside become longer, touching on literature and philosophy as well as photography, and including fragments of his life story. Throughout, the chasm of difference between their respective lives is a constant, if often unconscious, undercurrent, no more so than when Fausto, unprompted by Soth, matter-of-factly describes the violent circumstances that led to his incarceration. "One night, I'm drunk and high and I go into the Stardust bar (now Memory Lanes) [in Minneapolis] with my dirtbag big brother and get into a fight over some girl," he writes. "I'm too arrogant to realise I'm being disrespectful."

After he was maced by the bar's security guard, events quickly spiralled out of control. "All my rage and darkness was oozing anger and adrenaline ... I flushed everything down the toilet. I recklessly shot up their car. The man who had the least to do with it was killed. It was all bad."

Convicted of first degree murder, Fausto has been incarcerated since 2003. His current release date is 2030. "We are responsible for atrocious acts that we must be accountable for," he says in a long reply to one of my emails that is a kind of personal manifesto for prison reform. "But surviving a harsh environment shouldn't be the definition of justice. We must actively seek to do more, to be

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more. We are from dark places but refuse to give up on ourselves. Through the arts, creative writing, education and restorative justice, we have set up a roadmap to what redemption could look like.”

The often intense correspondence between the two unfolds against an increasingly tumultuous backdrop, as a divided America grapples with the spread of Covid-19 and the sustained protests that erupted in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in their native city, Minneapolis. “It’s still hard to make sense of it and the fact that it was so close,” Soth says quietly. “It happened on my bike route between my house and my studio in south Minneapolis. I live here. Chris comes from here. We’re locals.”



Alec Soth's iPhone photo from a daily visit to George Floyd memorial site in Minneapolis. Photograph: Alec Soth

In a letter dated 30 May, Soth describes seeing the video of Floyd’s death for the first time, adding, “the world has been turned upside down since”. In reply, Fausto writes: “I keep seeing the word ‘justice’ being thrown around and it’s frustrating. For years now I’ve watched these absurd killings by police from a cell. Then people cry out for ‘justice’ like we even have a grasp on what that means.”

Not for the first time in their correspondence, there is the sense of two lives lived in relatively close proximity, but that are worlds apart. “At one stage,” says Soth, “I was in lockdown in Rome for two weeks, which basically meant I had to stay in my hotel room and order room service. Meanwhile, I’m aware Fausto’s in a small cell with another inmate just a few feet from him when he goes to sleep. It struck

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me that I have as much freedom as a human being can have. I think about that all the time, now.”

For all that, their friendship deepens. I ask Fausto, in conclusion, if he is happy with the result of their unexpected collaboration. “I’m extremely happy,” he writes, “but what the reader doesn’t see is the personal bonding that has transpired. Alec is a real dude who has helped me through some darkness and continues to have my back. Through his openness and our shared interests we have become good friends. That has been the most rewarding part of this collaboration by far.”

- [The Parameters of Our Cage](#), by C Fausto Cabrera and Alec Soth, is published by Mack.

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