Tiny shadows flickered from the votive candles. Two groups of men crowded around the flames. An old bearded man lay on a warming piece of cardboard, the 40 ounce bottle of Colt 45 clutched tightly in his smooth hands, sporting not one callus.

Sans cardboard, I lay on the smooth flat rocks; the masonry work done well by the Army Corps of Engineers. The hushed speech of my neighbors was indistinguishable to my ears.

No friendship or inclusion forthcoming, I lay alone, frightened and awake. My mind was drawn to the smell of vegetation rotting on the banks of the river. I lay surrounded by cement, rocks, sand and thistles. Silhouettes dancing on the cement walls of my refuge reminded me of better times long gone when I, as a child, made hand shadows on kinder, gentler walls.

Then I became aware of the roaring whish of wind rushing through the cold, damp tunnel of concrete. To comfort myself, I put my arms around my giant brown dog, thanking God for his gentle protection. My breathing mirrored the timing of quick, shallow canine breaths. I embraced the big dog’s neck and chest passionately, feeling the safety and refuge that only an old lover can give.

No one spoke. Infrequently, a grunt or word could be heard over the screams of the cold roaring wind. I knew better than to look or stare at the men alone now in their chemical euphoria.

My hips screamed in agony on the unforgiving rocks and I fitfully fell asleep. My eyes flew open at dawn, focusing on the gorgeous art work on the walls. I was looking at the brilliant colors and intricate patterns seen by very few, recognizable gang colors and slogans indecipherable to my mind.

I looked around. I was alone, except for the dog. No signs of any humans were left to indict. No garbage, no sleeping bags — even the candles were gone. Was it a dream? No, I knew that when the darkness again fell on the river, the men would creep back, one at a time, to cook their chiva in dirty spoons over tiny votive candles and attempt to find an inviting vein by the dim flickering light.

Into their veins would go the golden fluid — no longer to get high, just to get well so they could sleep through one more night.