

# **BLEAKHOUSE REVIEW**

## **ISSUE #2, JANUARY 2009**

### **The Prison Librarian**

a short story by Sonia Tabriz  
& Victor Hassine

### **The Courtyard**

a short story by Leah Pope

### **Meet the Death Team**

a short story by Angela Smith

### **Not to Us**

and other poems by Amelia Schmidt

### **Eulogy for Sorie**

a poem by Elmo Chattman

### **Descartes Revisited**

an essay by Charles Huckelbury

### **Art and Autonomy Behind Bard**

an essay by Erin George

### **Poetry of Social Justice Movements & Living Definition**

poems by Hannah Hanson

### **Cold Comfort**

a short story by Jamie Kamlet

### **The New Guy**

and other poems by Marie Schaberg

### **His Last Words**

a short story by Kellee Fitzgerald

### **Sunday Morning Phone Call & Stuck at Life**

poems by Thais Miller

### **Dry Surfaces**

and other poems by Yvette Louisell

### **A Cottage of One's Own**

an essay by Martha Andrews Donovan

### **Time Spent Doing Time**

an essay by Susan Nagelsen

### **empty spaces**

a poem by Sonia Tabriz

# The Prison Librarian by Sonia Tabriz & Victor Hassine

Damn! After 10 years in this hell, I'm finally ready to take that long walk down the corridor to freedom, and all I can do is think about a story an old convict told me when I was still a new fish. Shit, it's probably made up, but it's in my head and I got to get it out.

You shoulda seen me when I first came into this joint. I was scared and soft, and all I could see was "Sink or Swim" written on every tattoo, uniform, and wall. I decided that I had to swim. I didn't want to end up like one of them floaters: weak cons treated like prison debris to be pushed, pulled, and used by anybody for any reason. A lot of fish – newbies – come up floaters.

I ain't proud of what I ended up doing in here to stay right. But like the old man taught me, I had to do whatever it takes to keep cons, guards, and insanity from creeping up behind me and taking away my pride. No sir, prison ain't no place for the weak. A man's got to stay angry, vicious, and heartless to swim with the sharks in these treacherous and hungry waters.

I'm not sure why, but that old convict schooled me well. Now I don't worry about nothin' cause I learned how to lurk silently, like a shadow, leaving cons anxious, wonderin' when I'll strike. The old con could have just as easily decided to drown me in the black depths of this angry sea, where no one would listen or care about my cries for help. But he didn't. Instead, he took me in and told me this story that I keep remembering, the one I'm gonna tell you.

I guess he decided to make me the keeper of his story so that I could pass it along when he moved on, like he did. I ain't ever before been the keeper of anything but trouble and bad luck. But I guess he just took a chance, hoping that there was still something more human than criminal inside of me. God, I hope that old bastard was right.



The story he told was about a man, born Jack Jones, the meanest and most vicious street thug around, a man whose hard life had turned his heart stone cold. Those who knew him then said he was a "hell-raiser," a demon who cared little about himself and even less about others. And this joint didn't make him any better. He became even angrier, with nothing to live for no more. He told everyone he wanted to maim and kill as many people as he could, so their souls could be as empty, miserable, and dead as his own. So, Jack Jones became "Murder and Mayhem," or M&M Jones, a more appropriate title.

A swift and solid hulk of a man, M&M started his bit with only a five-year sentence for a savage beating that he inflicted on some folks whose only offense was to be happier than he was. But, within a few years, his sentence was increased to thirty years—for stabbing fellow convicts who he felt were not as strong, angry, or hateful as they should have been.

Eventually, M&M did stop stabbing people, but not because he had a change of heart or worried about getting more time behind bars. Not at all. It was just that, after years of being terrorized by M&M, cons and prison guards alike had learned to stay as far out of his reach as possible. And that was fine with M&M, because he was eager to do his time and leave prison. Then he could take his mission to the unsuspecting people in the free world who he blamed for his cruel and heartless ways.

It eventually became a custom for passing convicts to shout out questions to M&M – from a safe distance. It was always the same kinds of questions which always received the same answers. But the cons didn't mind and apparently neither did M&M, because he spared the fearful convicts their lives.

"What's happening, M&M?" cons would ask.

“Murder and mayhem when I get out; that’s what’s happening,” would come a stern response.

“What you so mad about?” would come another question from behind.

“Cause I ain’t killed nobody today,” an angry M&M would reply.

“What you gonna do when you get out?” someone would always ask.

“Make ‘em pay,” would be the answer, in a deep and deadly growl. And then the questions would start all over again, in an endless cycle of provocation and angry response. Now, to free world people, this endless daily routine of identical questions and responses would seem unbelievable and considered the product of exaggeration. But, as any convict knows, prison is nothing but repetition and redundancy. Everything that a con says or does, is something he’s said or done over and over again.

And contrary to common belief, being a thug ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. No ladies, no nice cars, no nothin’. Just chipped paint on concrete, icy metal bars, trays of cold food, and your rep. You gotta stay hard, can’t show no emotion around here or talk bout no feelings. Only way you’ll last in here is to act cold and tough, and eventually that’s all you become, but at least you’re still alive. That’s what the old con taught me before God answered his prayers and carried him outa this hole. You gotta find somethin’ to keep you from going crazy, losing your brains. The old con escaped by tellin’ stories to new fish like me. And M&M, well, he escaped by reading stories, one in particular, as it happens. That’s right, reading. In a world where most people communicated with their fists, enjoying a good read isn’t how you’d expect a guy like M&M to handle his uncontrollable rage. But crackin’ open a good book was the only thing that didn’t incite or provoke Murder & Mayhem to act on his name, and crack open a few heads.

Once a week, for exactly two hours—which is all the prison rules allowed—M&M could be found in the small and shelf-bare prison library, sitting alone at a weathered wooden table, quietly turning the pages of a tattered book that he gripped awkwardly with his mighty, oversized hands. At first, other cons in the library would attempt to provoke M&M into one of his angry outbursts – like always, from a distance.

“Look who’s got a soft side!” Or, “Hey! Is that a tear I see? Didn’t know M&M stood for Mushy and Mellow.” But no matter how much they tried, as long as M&M was in that pathetic prison library, he would not respond to any of their questions. It was as if the book he read possessed him, engulfing him in a world so distant from his own that the massive, tattooed frame of his body could do nothing more than sit transfixed, awaiting the return of the M&M the cons all knew and feared.

The shabby prison library was run by a librarian, Sophia, a petite woman with long, fine strands of misty brown hair that cascaded down to her shoulders and fluttered like a dense curtain of weeping willows with every step she took. She would have drawn no special notice if she’d worked in a library on the outs, besides perhaps the snickers of young teens. But amidst the windowless gray walls of the prison library and surrounded by large men with angry tattoos, faces set hard to make them look tough, such a small and delicate creature seemed as out of place as a warm smile.

It was truly a sight to behold when the kind and innocent librarian would stand near the big and angry men as she made her rounds through the library. “Still working on that one? Let me know when you’re ready for the next. The county cleared out their duplicates again this month so I have some fresh books in the back,” Sophia would whisper calmly, in her soft voice, so as to not disturb the others. “I put aside a few mysteries, Nancy Drew I think. You may like them.”

And the cons treated her right for the most part, knowin’ the guards would make their lives hell if they gave her any shit. But even with two guards standin’ at the library doors counting down minutes, the cons in the library flinched, averting their eyes, the first time the librarian approached M&M. They did not want to witness what they thought would be a savage attack upon the fragile Sophia by a monster who openly detested kindness, as if it were a deadly enemy.

One man called out, ready to warn her, but she didn't hear. The unsuspecting librarian stood alongside the seated M&M, leaned over and said, "Hi! I see you here a lot but you never ask for help. I'm Sophia, the head librarian here, and can help you find anything you are looking for. Do you have any genre or topic in particular you're interested in?" Nothing. "Alright, well let me know if something comes to mind. A lot of the guys here like reading mysteries and spooky stuff so I grabbed one off the shelf for you. If you like it, I can find you more of the same." Again nothing. M&M didn't even lift his head, intent on making out the oversized words on the colorful page he was so enthralled by.

But as she started walking away, she heard a faint "thank you." Just barely over a whisper, she knew M&M didn't want the other cons to hear him sound soft, so she kept walking... like she hadn't heard a thing. He appreciated that. Sophia helped him the next time M&M came to the library, and the next visit as well. From then on, they were regulars. The sight of the two of them together was so astonishing that the small and usually empty prison library soon began to fill with cons who would come to watch the unlikely encounter. Once a week, in an inexplicable union of opposites, M&M and the librarian would meet to exchange books and discuss which he would like to read next.

"Perhaps you'd like to read some poetry? Here's one, Tales from the Purple Penguin. It's poetry in the form of short stories. Or something about a lovely childhood in the South?" She would bring over a few books, and with a simple nod or gesture, he would indicate the ones he wished to read. He moved slowly through the text and Sophia didn't want his requested books being torn up or tossed. She'd put them away in the back, labeled with his name on a sticky note: "Jack".

Their encounters were brief, easy, and almost natural, the old convict would tell me, which was entirely unnatural for the prison. She called him Jack and he was fine with that. "Hi Jack, how's it coming along? Looks like you put a good dent in that one. Check these out and let me know if you want me to keep them in the back for you."

And he would nod his head, rarely lifting it towards her direction. She would never ask about content, she wouldn't even mention characters or author names. Some questioned whether he could actually read the words inside the books he grasped with such gratitude, and she didn't want to embarrass him if that was in fact true. Unlike the rest of 'em, she didn't want to humiliate him or taunt him. The guards would spit in his food and cons would try to rile him up so he'd act out and get sent to the hole. But Sophia treated M&M differently than they did, by treating him the same way she would treat anyone else.

For decades, the cons were disappointed that M&M seemed to have a soft spot for the librarian. It's not that they disliked the librarian, but in a world full of hate and anger, her kindness must have reminded them all of things they'd been denied for most of their lives: care and respect. She treated them not like cons, but like people. People who mattered. And M&M treated her like a person too, a person who mattered to him, rather than an object of his hatred for a life he found to be nothing but unjust. But no one dared to bring this up to him, for once he stepped out of those library doors, darkness returned and M&M was reborn.

Finally, thirty years after he had first arrived at prison, M&M's sentence was complete and the man stood ready, in front of the long corridor that would lead him to freedom. Every con in the joint stood near so they could watch M&M move one slow and heavy step after another, closer to the free world of unsuspecting victims. Decades of incarceration had certainly aged him, but they had in no way diminished his vitality or his rage. And, it was this undying, pent up fury that made M&M as dangerous as he had ever been. It was a frightening scene, as blood-thirsty cons cheered; eagerly anticipating M&M making good on his promises, fulfilling his mission with a vengeance shared by the inmates he left behind.

But, moments before M&M was about to reintroduce his rage to the public, Sophia walked out from a side room, stood directly in front of the walking mountain of hate, and stopped him in his tracks. As the story goes, every con stopped cheering to silently watch what they thought would be his first attack on the free-world. Instead, what they witnessed was something they would never have expected. The tiny librarian said, softly so no one could hear: "Don't forget to read your favorite book, Jack. It heals the soul." He nodded. Jack knew it was a sin to kill a

mockingbird. He knew there lived a mockingbird in the heart of every person. But most importantly, he knew that prisoners, even the so-called hardened cons, were people too.



“Well, that’s what happened for real,” the old con told me. But as you might imagine, there are many variations to this story, with each recalling a different version of the words spoken between the two, and what book was given. Some even swore seeing M&M grin humbly, an act of humanity the monster had never before exhibited. But, whatever was said or given that day, everyone agrees that when M&M continued down the hallway, there was a new air about him. It was as though something heavy and unwanted had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders. The grudge he held against those whom he blamed for his misfortunes seemed to dissipate as his stern march turned to a proud walk, and the glare in his eyes began to reveal a broken soul, anxious to start anew rather than hold on angrily to the past. Despite this noticeable change in the man they had feared for so long, the cons resumed their cheers, maybe spurred on by hope for themselves, clapping and hollering long after M&M had left the prison.

For weeks, months, and even years, those who remembered M&M eagerly searched newspapers, expecting to read that M&M had in fact implemented all the murder and mayhem he had spoken of. Never happened. Instead, a decade later, an article appeared in the local paper announcing that M&M had been named the “Citizen of the Year” because of some charity work he had done. The article explained that upon leaving prison, Jack Jones had gotten a job, gone to school, and gotten married. With his wife, he had opened a bookstore, *Burnt Offerings*, which had become a very successful enterprise. The reason for the award, the article revealed, was that Jack Jones had donated a substantial sum of money for the building of a free public library in his old neighborhood. And at the end of every month, when he would clean out his shelves to stock newly released books, Jack would bring by any easy or interesting reads to the prison where Sophia, the librarian, would offer them to the cons as she had done with him years ago.

His life was changed, Jack explained to the columnist, not by thirty years of incarceration, but by a book he had received and the kind librarian who had given it to him. He wouldn’t name the book, but simply stated that it taught him that inside a tough man beats a tender heart.

So, this is the story I’ve been thinking about as I find myself ready to walk down the same long corridor to freedom. The cons are all watching me get the last of my stuff, and I feel alone and scared. You see, like Murder & Mayhem, I too spent most of my time here tryin’ to be hard, waitin’ for my chance to get back at people on the outs, who don’t seem to have a care in the world. But truth is, freedom ain’t about takin’ off the cuffs or walking out of this prison. It’s about leavin’ behind all the anger and the hate that got me here in the first place. That’s what the old con taught me before he found his way outa here.

Man, I don’t even know if his story is true or not. All I hope is that as I walk out of this terrible place, someone kind stops me and gives me a reason to leave the M&M inside me behind, like Jack did. Only then, can I truly be free.



**Sonia Tabriz** is a junior at American University, majoring in both Law & Society and Psychology. She is an active member of the University Honors Program, and also volunteers as an AU Ambassador to provide guidance and support to new students. Sonia was awarded the Outstanding Honors Sophomore Award for her achievements, and has earned a spot on the Dean's List every semester during her tenure at American University. Upon visiting the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, Sonia was intrigued by the intricacies of prison life and was inspired to explore an underground world with which most people are not familiar. Since then, Sonia has been published in and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. She looks forward to attending law school upon graduation and aspires to continue writing and creating art on issues of criminal justice and deprivation of liberty.

**Victor Hassine** is the author of the widely used text, *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* (Oxford University Press, 2009), as well as several works of fiction, including *The Crying Wall* (WilloTrees & Infinity, 2005), which he co-edited and which contains several of his short stories. Official accounts indicate that Victor took his life on April

27, 2008, during the 26th year of a life sentence he was serving in the Pennsylvania state prison system. Victor Hassine was a vibrant voice for reform, a living embodiment of the humanity of those we confine in our prisons, and a person and artist who will be sorely missed.

## Cold Comfort by Jamie Kamlet

William lives at the end of the hall. Cold floors, frigid walls, depressed atmosphere. In the battle for his life William is a loser. He knows it. Seconds, moments, days pass and William waits. He sits in his bed, with little choice in the day's activities, shifting around in clothes that aren't his, a uniform that matches everyone around him. He grasps his comforter, an item whose name deceives. There is little true comfort in this place.

William resides in room 12, hallway B at Collier Hospice Center in Denver, Colorado. He has been diagnosed with cancer, the hidden killer that is slowly taking his life, and he has been given 1 month to finish living. The world of medicine has given up on him, he has been defeated, and now it is just a matter of time. Time is the invisible and invincible enemy, the ultimate murderer. His room smells a bit like daffodils, William's favorite flowers, a bunch of which rest neatly on the windowsill. The walls are painted a faint peach, a color scheme envisioned by an interior designer with grand intentions of bringing some sort of inner peace to the building's inhabitants.

Bill lives at the end of the hall. Cold floors, frigid walls, depressed atmosphere. In this life Bill is a loser. He knows it. Days, months, years pass and Bill waits. He sits in his bed, with little choice in the day's activities, shifting around in clothes that aren't his, a uniform that matches everyone around him. He grasps his comforter, an item whose name deceives. There is little true comfort in this place.

Bill resides in cell 512 of the Polunsky Unit in Texas. Bill is a killer, sentenced to die. He is a murderer, society has given up on him, and his life rests heavily in the hands of the state of Texas. Bill is given no deadline, only the simple phrase of "sometime soon" to know when his day will come. He is branded one of the worst of the worst, scum of the universe, a monster. The concrete blocks that make up his cell wreak of hopelessness, fear, and death, his only friends in this foreign land. There is no color scheme here, no grand intentions, and absolutely no inner peace.

William and Elizabeth have been married for fifty-some-odd years, everyone but them has lost count. Elizabeth is the apple of William's eye, his crutch in times of need, and his partner without whom happiness could never have been possible. Their relationship is the definition of love, selflessness, and joy. Elizabeth can feel every exam, every needle, every prodding doctor's finger. She spends hours on end sitting patiently in the hard, wooden chair next to William's bed. She caresses his forehead, strokes his cheeks carefully so as not to wake him, and rests her head atop his hand. There is nowhere in the world she needs to be, no other purpose at this moment. Elizabeth wishes so desperately that she could kiss it all away, but if modern medicine can no longer help him, what chance do her kisses stand? After all, love is not enough.

Bill's mother, Betsy, is the woman in his life. Her deep wrinkles and gray hair betray her, revealing her age beyond a doubt. Betsy may have coddled Bill, sure, but he is her youngest, how else could she treat her bouncing baby boy? Betsy gave-up on watching the news years ago, she couldn't stand what they were saying about Bill, her Bill. She knows he isn't a monster, just a confused man, someone who got himself in over his head. Hugs and kisses are things of the past, and the memory of the texture of Bill's hands fades by the day. Now she can only feel the cold of the glass between them. She is ushered in at 4 by the towering guard and deported out of the room promptly at 4:30. Betsy takes off work to go see him, conceding a day's pay. But Betsy doesn't mind, Bill is her purpose, the focus of her energy. Betsy is not naïve enough to believe she can make it go away. After all, love cannot conquer all.

The staff at the hospice could not be kinder, every action done with more than a hint of loving care. William's four-year-old great granddaughter plays with crayons outside his room, never fully aware of what is going on. The

family gathers to support each other, to share in the tears, the uncertainty, the impatience. The oncologist is in the room with William, examining for signs that death is creeping up. The nurse explained earlier what would happen to William's body, sparing not a detail. Elizabeth cringed as the nurse described how his eyes would show the first signs of expiration. He would lose his sight, his hearing, his ability to touch: all the things that had made William, William. At the same time, Elizabeth would lose the ability to be seen by him, to be heard by him, to be felt by him: all the things that made Elizabeth, William's Elizabeth. The oncologist opens the door and calls Elizabeth and her three children away from the group. An update is delivered and tears are shed. William is staying stable, not improving, not yet giving up. The wait continues.

The prison guards could not be colder, every action done with a sense of routine intended to keep a safe distance from the dangerous Bill. To them, Bill is just another inmate, another body to be escorted down the hall to the death chamber. The execution team understands exactly what will happen to Bill's body. There are three concoctions so as not to simplify such a complex event. The first will make him sleep, giving the impression that Bill has slipped into a peaceful oblivion. The second will paralyze him, never allowing Bill to show any pain. And the third will make his heart stop, sealing the end of a life. Betsy waits at home, nervously smoking a cigarette as she pleads for the phone to ring. The quiet noises of inhalation and smoky breath escaping are all that Betsy can focus on. Her eldest son sits beside her and flips through television stations, attempting to find something to which he can escape. Finally, and not a moment too soon, the phone jumps off the hook. Betsy answers and listens intently. An update is delivered and tears are shed. The appeal has been denied, but they aren't giving up, the lawyer assures. There is still more hope. The wait continues.

William is slipping and Elizabeth knows it. He spent all of yesterday sleeping, breathing heavily. He was awake this morning, but now has fallen asleep again. Elizabeth pleads with the nurses to take William outside—give him one more chance to see the world. The nurses oblige, anything to make this even an ounce easier on Elizabeth. William's bed is on wheels, easily escorted to the outdoor garden. He looks strange, a pale face enveloped in a generic gown and hospital linens, a bed in the middle of a garden. William's family pulls chairs out to the courtyard and encircle the bed. They are relieved to have a breath of fresh air, and raise their voices above a whisper. Elizabeth stares at William's pale face basking in the sunshine, and, always the worrier, she begins to fret that he might get sunburned. Her eldest son, without missing a beat, removes his baseball cap (a Colorado Rockies hat, of course) from his own head and places it on his father. Despite the fact that William has yet to open his eyes, his second son slides a pair of sunglasses beneath the hat. Finally, Elizabeth takes the sponge-on-a-stick the nurse had given her and dips it in a cup of cool water slipping it just past William's chapped lips. After just a moment of hesitation, William begins lightly chewing on the stick just as he had chewed on so many straws before. William looked like himself, Elizabeth thought. He looked so normal, so content, so at peace.

The appeals are exhausted and the day of execution has arrived, and by midnight Bill will be gone. In one final act of manufactured humanity, the state of Texas will allow him to have a last meal—give him one more chance to taste the world. Bill requests fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and mashed potatoes because it is comfort food, food that reminds him of home. Of course, his doting mother will not be slaving over the stove all day to prepare the meal, and he won't enjoy the food sitting next to his big brother. Instead, the meal will be prepared in the kitchen of the prison, and the only guest at this soiree would be the guard who is stationed outside Bill's cell—watching and waiting for any signs that Bill might take his own life before the state has the pleasure. The warden brings the lukewarm food to Bill's cell just past five o'clock. The food doesn't look nearly as appetizing as Bill's mama's home cooking, and the plastic knife barely has enough strength to cut through the skin of the chicken. Despite the fact that Bill knows this is his last opportunity for normalcy, he can barely taste the food, much less enjoy it. His mind is racing with the knowledge of what the rest of the night brings. None of this feels normal, he is not content, and certainly not at peace.

The rabbi comes to visit, the third time this week. He sits for a while with Elizabeth and her family outside the door, offering prayers of healing and listening to their thoughts and feelings. The rabbi has been a close friend of the family for years and his presence brings a feeling of comfort to everyone. He spends some time in the room with William. The door is closed so no one can hear the sacred words passed between them. Privacy is valued and promoted here. Elizabeth assumes that the rabbi is offering William the opportunity to pray with him and assuring him that whatever happens, God will be there every step of the way. William's diagnosis was no surprise to

anyone. He'd been a smoker for twenty years at least, so lung cancer was the unsurprising result. But no one mentions that now, no one points the finger at him, and no one asks him to apologize for what he did. Elizabeth's questions of "why" are directed more at God than at William.

The priest comes at 7 o'clock. Bill has met with him once before, but he resents the fact that his own priest has yet to show his face at the jail. Instead, he is forced to join in prayer with a stranger. The priest tries his best to offer Bill some comforting words, but he is trying not to get too involved, after all, he has to be able to put his head down to sleep tonight. The priest is charged with making sure Bill is at ease when the warden comes to call his name for the last time. The priest offers Bill a chance to ask for forgiveness, one that Bill happily accepts. Bill is sorry, he'd say it a million times if anyone would listen—and if it would change anything. The court and the family of the victim demand that Bill utter those words of apology, and yet they seem unsatisfied when he does. They believe that this is what Bill deserves, that he made his bed now he must lay in it, that he brought it upon himself. Is an apology really an apology if there is no one there to accept it? Bill knows that asking for forgiveness won't save him from the inevitable; it won't keep him from breathing his last breath at midnight tonight. And yet, he cannot help but declare, "I'm sorry" one more time.

Elizabeth paces outside William's door. She is trying to keep her strongest face so as not to scare her family, but she knows that it is just a matter of time. The aides at the hospice keep telling her to be patient, that waiting is the hardest part. Elizabeth wishes she could know when it will happen so she can prepare, but she knows that life and death don't run on a specific time schedule. The aides keep telling her that William will choose when he wants to go, when he's ready to go. They keep saying that he will decide who he wants to be in the room when he goes. Elizabeth struggles with the idea of William making this choice, and making it alone. Does William want her to be there, or will he go when she's away, maybe on her way home at night? And if this is all up to choice, can he choose to stay? Elizabeth's mind races when she feels an arm slide across her shoulder. Elizabeth turns to see an aide and she could tell by the look in her eye that the time was here. Elizabeth takes a deep breath, feels her heart skip a beat, and slowly pads into William's room. She takes her place in her wooden chair and slides her hand over his, feeling close to him for the last time. She closes her eyes and says a small prayer to herself. William barely even looks like himself anymore, the color has drained completely from his face, and he looks as though he'd aged a hundred years in the last week. Elizabeth does not want to remember him this way, she will not remember him this way. She leans over the bed to kiss his forehead, and tell him one last time how much she loves him—as if he would ever need a reminder. Her two oldest sons and her daughter are in the room with her, holding hands, each with minds racing about a mile a minute. The room is completely silent save for Williams' heavy breathing. Elizabeth focuses on the rhythm of his breath and paces hers as well. At 3:08 William takes a deep breath and exhales. Elizabeth squeezes his hand tightly feeling him get further away as the last breath escapes his body. A silent tear runs down her cheek and she can hear the quiet whimpering of her children behind her. At 3:08, William made his choice.

Bill can hear the stomping of the execution team approach his cell. Their rubber soles make a thundering pound with each step. The leader of the team is the first to arrive at the cell door. He tells Bill to rise and put his hands behind his back so the guard can secure the handcuffs before the door is open. Bill does not think he is ready for this but he obliges, knowing there is no sense in arguing. The inevitable has come. Bill hears the door slide open and before he knows it, there is a man on each side of him with their arms linked, the leader in front of him ready to make that long walk, and another man behind him ready to stop Bill should he try to protest. At the same time, Betsy is pushing through the mob scene that has gathered outside the death house. There are some with candles, singing quiet prayers of hope and forgiveness, others screaming loudly with signs declaring the injustice of capital punishment, and still others (equally as loud) celebrating the death of a cold blooded-killer—justice at its best. Betsy is overwhelmed by the noise and steadies herself by holding her oldest son's hand. The two of them are escorted into the observation room, a sterile looking room with a large pane of glass in the front. A curtain is drawn shortly to reveal Bill on a gurney, every inch of his body tightly secured down. Betsy winces at the thought of what Bill must be feeling now and agonizes at the fact that she cannot talk to him, tell him she loves him, or hold his hand one last time. She gently places her hand on the window hoping that her touch would somehow transcend the barrier and let Bill know he was not alone. A microphone is lowered to Bill's mouth allowing him the chance to say a few last words. Betsy, so consumed by her emotions, can hear that he is talking, but she cannot understand the words. It doesn't really matter anyway, this isn't how she is going to remember him. At 12:19



Betsy watches the guards signal one another and she knows that this is it. She desperately tries to contain herself, but the emotions are too much and a scream escapes her mouth. She bangs her fists against the glass. They are killing her son and all she can do is watch. Her eldest son wraps his arms firmly around her and restrains her a bit. Betsy watches as Bill closes his eyes and slips away. At 12:19, the state of Texas made their choice.



**Jamie Kamlet** is an undergraduate honor student at American University majoring in Psychology and minoring in Justice. She will graduate in May 2009. This short story was inspired by Professor Robert Johnson's Honors Death Penalty course at American University.

## The Courtyard by Leah Pope

There is a small university in a city of some importance that has many isolated alcoves where one can feel completely sheltered from the world. One of these hideaways fits between the two wings of the student accounts and foreign language building such that three sides are blocked off by three stories of an outdated, Communist Poland-style compound. There are plants all around. A single concrete path, perhaps ten feet wide, leads down from the street, with two landings and two sets of stairs. A maple tree sprouts in the center, while the path circles around it, with two benches each on the north and south sides. Another set of steps leads down to the lower area, where there are no benches, but the bounding ledge of a small plot of roses does just fine.

The primary tenants of this courtyard are the birds. Not special birds, not by a long shot. These birds are neither sleek nor colorful. They are not impressive in size or shape, nor do they have a particularly unique social structure. These birds are simple sparrows, brown and dull. Though fluffy, no artist would find such as these to be worthy subject matter. And the birds are not alone. There are also the usual denizens of gardens such as these: tiny snakes, spiders, insects and possibly a few mice. It is the birds that visitors notice, though. They flit from bush to bush, teasing the eye as they pass just out of view.

The sparrows do not live here year round. Indeed, they fly south to escape the harsh winter winds and snow of this particular part of the world. The winters here are mild by some people's standards, but most of those people are the type that will brag that they were born outside in a blizzard, possibly in a haystack. Regardless, students from North Carolina, California and New Jersey trudge through the snow in their peacoats and scarves, muttering about those self-same harsh winter winds. The courtyard is sheltered from the wind; the air is quite still here. In the third week of October, when autumn kicks in and the leaves start falling, these leaves are never torn from the trees and blizzarded about in a brightly-colored maelstrom of dead plant matter. Here the leaves float softly to the ground, as if in premonition of the light snowfall to come.

The leaves are falling now. A particularly large maple leaf breaks from its stem and hovers – just for a moment – before gravity takes hold and it coasts on a leisurely path to land on the edge of a bench on the north side of the courtyard. The leaf never makes it. Just two feet above its next resting place a large hand swiftly snatches the ill-fated leaf from its course. The hand is delicately built, but calloused and rough. Nonetheless, it grips the leaf with surprising dexterity, as if it were a blown-glass doll or a love note that accidentally went through the wash.

Like most hands, this one is attached to an arm, which in turn is attached to a shoulder. This pattern continues until we find that there is, in fact, an entire man sitting on this bench. Legs and feet, head and hair—all of it's there. He is uncomfortable, and out of sorts. He bears the look of a younger man, perhaps of the academic type that crowds the main quad not too far away. But there's something about the tilt of his head and the tightness in his jaw that betrays the deepest of hurts. He is nineteen. His eyes are closed, but were they open, they would be clouded with grief. Behind the fog would be a piercing blue, pale as an iceberg, clawing through the mist, but held back by some primal desire to hide. He examines the leaf briefly, then folds it into his hand. The fragile leaf is crushed and pieces of it spill across the bench, dusting the concrete with a softer, organic tint.

Given the deep furrow of his brow as he leans over his knees and clasps his hands, one would think this man to be deep in thought. Truth be told, he is not. This man is trying very hard not to think at all. He knows he's in the courtyard, because he feels the chill on his skin, hears the rustle of the trees and just saw a sparrow flit past out of the corner of his eye. But he will not think. He will not acknowledge the courtyard. If he does, he'll have to see the blood dripping down that lower set of steps, pooling at the bottom. He'll notice the way her soft hand, still smelling of the body butter she always loved, is falling helplessly against the stone.

No, he won't think. If he thinks, she'll be alive again.

*No, don't think, he warned himself.*

*Anyway, that was many years ago. He didn't yet know the chaff of his orange jumpsuit. And the concrete he sat on now was much colder than that of the benches in the courtyard; for all that the chill in the air was in no way related to the temperature. His cell was actually quite warm, almost uncomfortably so. It was summer, and though the humidity crept in, the concrete walls and floors retained no heat. The prisoner would have been comforted by their cool touch if he were not haunted by the ghosts of this place. He had been a prisoner here through years of appeals; he should have been used to it by now. Every summer it would get muggy and oppressive and the resident of each cell would make use of his now-hated blanket to block the sun at the grated window, hoping that the shade would bring some relief.*

Many of the birds that live in the courtyard participate in a surprising group activity, behaving in an odd and downright adorable way. As you walk into the courtyard, on your right side you'll see dimples in the dust. It's almost as if a tiny meteor shower chose this small patch of dirt to plunk down. This is where the birds fluff about in the dust, nesting down into these pockets. It truly is an adorable sight, but the birds are almost bashful and will retreat to a nearby bush at the slightest hint that anyone is watching.

*The denizen in question did not groan at the heat, the way the others did, nor did he flop about in bed at night, searching for the least sticky corner of the sheets. Either he slept, or he didn't, and more often than not, he didn't. On those nights, he read. He read anything. Poetry, non-fiction, prose – he read a biology textbook once. He had avoided what he called "serious books" for years, but over time he'd developed a liking for Dante, Homer and Virgil. He wasn't picky, though. Any world but his own would do.*

*Last night he'd slept. He'd expected not to be able to sleep, and he'd borrowed The Iliad from the library to keep him company. He'd read maybe two pages before dozing off and resting soundly until the sun rose at 6:48 am. When the sun lit his room, he calmly got out of bed, as was his habit, and splashed water over his head and face. He looked out the tiny window at the now-empty exercise yard, the mess hall and just beyond, a small, isolated, one-story building.*

*He crossed quickly to the front of his cell. No one else was awake yet. The others, after tossing and turning all night, would keep a tight hold on their dreams until the breakfast call. Ordinarily, he would have done the same, but not today.*

He leans heavily against the raised rose garden, almost falling back into it. A rose, fully blossomed, brushes against his cheek. Thorns scratch at his arms, drawing blood, and in some places, cutting deep enough for tiny, white scars to form and stay for years.

She looks like an angel. Reddish blonde hair spills over her shoulders and curls around her face. He knows her hair is matted with gore, but from this angle it is far too easy to pretend that she's only sleeping. That's it, she's just sleeping. Any moment now, she'll wake up and chide him for watching her.

Frozen between reality and disbelief, he waits for her to wake up.

A shriek slices through the air like a hot knife. He snaps to his senses. His eyes are blurred with emotion, but he can just make out the figure of a girl at the mouth of the courtyard. She has dropped her books and is screaming

without pause for breath. He stares at the intruder, dumbfounded. He cannot reconcile the last however many minutes with the world he thought he lived in.

Instinct tells him to run. They'll be here any minute. Public Safety, then the real cops. The ambulance will arrive, and students will congregate to speculate. He already knows he'll be arrested, simply for having been found with the body. He knows he'll be tried, found guilty. The evidence will betray him, fingerprints and DNA won't have to lie. The prosecutors won't even have to twist the evidence to prove that he did it. But they will twist his motive. Give him a reason to have planned it out. They'll say he wanted to kill her. That he wanted her dead.

And why not? He can't prove what he was thinking. They wouldn't believe the truth if he told them. So he'll be convicted and sent to prison. He'll be there for years, maybe even the rest of his life. He's never been to a jail before, but he's seen them on TV... they're not happy places. But they're isolated, protective... His life will never be the same after this. Even if he doesn't go to jail, everyone will know... he'll be disowned, expelled, he'll end up in some minimum-wage job. His family will shun him, and his friends will hate him for her sake. And without her...

Prison is beginning to look like a mighty fine alternative.

So he kneels down next to the body of his closest friend and kisses her lightly on the cheek, mercifully left unstained. He stands, calmly steps over her and up the stairs. He takes a seat on the bench on the north side of the courtyard, and does not think.

*At noon, the guards came to take the prisoner to the tiny building behind the mess hall. The guards were more tense than usual. They seemed to think the prisoner's docility was feigned and that he was more of a threat now than ever. But the prisoner walked between the guards calmly, and tried not to make any sudden movements.*

It's a Thursday. Not too long before sunset, he awakes to the buzz of his phone.

"Are you busy?" She says. "Come meet me in the Asbury courtyard, I have something to tell you."

He mumbles something to indicate an affirmative, and hears her hang up. He flips his own

He looks around. The room is lit with an orangish glow as the evening sun shines through the tapestry hung over the window. The room is chilly, his roommate probably turned off the heat. After taking a few moments to rub the sleep from his eyes, he climbs out of bed and pulls his pants on. It's going to be even colder outside, so he grabs a jacket as he heads out.

*As they crossed the yard, he asked to go slowly, so he could gaze up at the endless sky, blue and crystal clear. A couple of clouds gathered on the horizon, but above him, there was only the sky, open and empty. Some sparrows caught the prisoner's eye, they were flocking around the gate. One of the guards kicked a pebble into a larger rock, and the clank of it startled the birds. The prisoner followed them as they flew over his head, tiny shadows against the sharp blue above.*

It's overcast. The sky is a swirling ocean of greys and blues, and the air has that fuzzy feeling that it gets just before it rains. As he walks across campus, he hopes the clouds won't break while he's out. The puddles still haven't dried from the last time it rained, and the campus has such poor drainage that in a downpour the main quad feeds a myriad of streams reaching down to lower parts of the campus.

*His mother and father were waiting for him in the visitation room. When he walked in, they were sitting on a bench, holding hands. His mother kept her head down as he entered, trying to compose herself for his sake, but his father looked up and met his eyes. There may have been something like love in his father's eyes, but it was clouded by anger, resentment and regret. The prisoner knew that his father held no pity for him. The father stood and crossed to stand in front of the prisoner. Eyes still locked, they shook hands.*

*The prisoner's mother was still weeping, and when she saw her husband and son exchanging such a casual gesture at a time like this, she could no longer restrain her sorrow. With a wail, she ran to her son and clung to his shoulders, as if she could somehow will him back in time, to when he was just a little boy. Her little boy.*

*The two guards outside the open door frame tried to ignore the weeping. This was the hardest part for them. It was easier when they spoke, exchanging last words or memories. But when they cried... The guards all knew that there is no sound on this earth like a mother mourning her child before he's even dead. The guards exchanged an uneasy glance, and wished that they would speak.*

*The prisoner comforted his mother the best he could and, in time, her tears dried and cold acceptance set in. She was very still as she memorized everything about her son, from the look of resignation in his eyes to the smell of his prison garb. As she looked at the prisoner, he could see that her eyes were darker than they had once been. She hadn't been sleeping lately. They looked at each other, each absorbed in their own thoughts, wondering what to say.*

*So they looked at each other. There was nothing left to say.*

His heart stops and he forgets to breathe. He's not sure that he's heard her right, but there's no other set of words that sound like that.

He staggers away in shock, almost tripping up the steps of the courtyard. "What?" He is confused. He doesn't know what she means.

"Don't make me say it again; we both know you heard me." Her blush belies the tease.

"How can you say this now, after we've been friends for so long?"

"I thought you'd be happy. It fits so perfectly..." Her face reddens further, and her eyes shine with tears. "It was always going to happen."

The wind picks up and they can hear it howling through the parking garage beyond the foreign language wing. But the courtyard stays calm, and the leaves only shuffled in place on their branches.

"Where do you get off, saying this now?"

*He sat down for dinner. He hadn't really known what to ask for, so he'd just chosen steak. It seemed like the thing to do. So he sat at the tiny metal table, with a plate full of steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, plus a fruit salad on the side. He picked up his fork and knife.*

"Look, I—" She stops herself. "Just listen—"

"No. No, I can't."

"Can't what?" She cries. "I'm not asking for anything!"

"Yes you are, you're asking for everything!"

"I'm not asking for you to change anything." She has his hand in hers. "I just wish we could stop lying to ourselves and—"

"No! I can't! I won't!"

"You already do."

She reaches up to touch his cheek, but he shoves her away. “No!” He cries. She stumbles, sprawls and lands head-first on the middle step. He goes numb when he hears the crunch as skull meets concrete.

*The steak was juicy and delicious, he knew, but his mouth was dry and didn't appreciate his last meal.*

*He ate methodically through everything on his plate. When he had finished, the execution team took him to a bathroom of sorts, where they shaved his head and the bottom of his left calf. His clean-shaven skin was still wet when they reentered the passageway, and it was sensitive to the drafts in the hall as he walked to the final chamber.*

The autumn breeze blows cold on his face. He is walking down the steps into the courtyard, still mostly asleep.

*There were spectators lined up to watch behind a pane of glass. The pastor was there, praying over a Bible, and his lawyer, too. As he looked at them, he could see his own reflection. When he gave his mother an encouraging smile, he found he had to smile again for himself.*

She is waiting there for him, seated on the ledge that surrounds the rose garden. She is dressed comfortably and thoroughly adorable. Smiling in greeting, he sits next to her.

*He sat in the chair. It was made of unvarnished wood, but years of bearing the condemned to meet their maker had left it smooth, almost soft, to the touch.*

He swings his feet a bit. He breathes in the roses' perfume, along with the distinctly female scent drifting over from his companion. He turns to see her smiling. Such a lovely smile.

*The warden read the charges aloud, but he wasn't listening.*

“How's life?” She asks.

*The warden asked for his final statement.*

*There was a pause. He cleared his throat.*

*And as he opened his mouth to speak, there she was. In the glass of the window, he could see her. Right there. Next to his own reflection. Her hair was long and curled, the way he liked it best—she'd worn it that way ever since he told her as much. She was looking down, and her hair fell forward to hide her face, but he knew it was her. Her shoulders hung limp, defeated... But no, there was tension in her back, she was supporting her own weight, she was supporting herself. She raised her chin and looked straight at him.*

*She was crying. He shook at the sight of it. He could never stand to see her cry, and now—*

*He'd seen her many times since she died, but he'd never been able to see her face, to actually look at her face and look into her eyes, until the part of the memory where they no longer glowed. As he sat there, his eyes met hers and he felt as though his heart had disappeared and left a hole, gaping and raw, in its place. He could barely breathe.*

He takes a deep breath as he considers how best to summarize how he's been.

*Her eyes were green. They always were brighter when she cried. Especially when her face got all red. Her eyes were green like shamrocks, like moss. Tears, like dewdrops, clung to her eyelashes and when she blinked, they fell, sparkling and pure. Shadows danced under her cheekbones, as if unsure of just how gaunt and hollow she really was. Her lips were pressed tight, holding back the flood as internal convulsions of raw emotions flared like the aurora borealis on her face.*

*She swallowed hard. He did the same, trying to suppress his own tears. He felt his diaphragm quivering from the tension. She took a deep breath and mouthed those same words. And he knew, after all this time, and after what he'd done, she still did.*

*He couldn't handle it. He closed his eyes, but she was still there. Looking at him. Looking through him.*

*He leaned over and pressed his face into his hands, trying to rub out the image, but he just couldn't make it go away. He curled over, hyperventilating. The guards tensed and the witnesses on the other side of the window leaned forward in their seats.*

*Eventually his heart rate slowed and he could think again. He was still for a few moments as he gathered his wits about him.*

*He sat up straight, flat against the back of the chair.*

*"Ah, well, it's life, you know how it goes. What's up?"*

*He nodded to the warden, who said something into a radio. The prisoner sat in the chair, stared blankly ahead and waited.*

He waits for what seems like hours for a response.

She takes his hand in hers and looks up at him. Her face anticipates the weight of her statement, but he doesn't see the warning. He is distracted by the way her hair curls under her chin.

"I love you."

A few feet away, behind a bush and under a small tree, a sparrow falls off the long, thin branch it had been exploring. After tumbling to the ground, it sets itself to rights and looks quite embarrassed. The sparrow shakes off the dust and flies away.



**Leah Pope** is a sophomore at American University, where she is a literature and political science major, with a minor in theatre. Leah was born and raised in Seattle, Washington.

# The New Guy by Marie Schaberg

## The New Guy

The new guy looks confused.  
I see his eyes glance back and forth,  
He looks askance at the trudging others,  
Trudging, trudging down the pier,  
Their eyes hardened and full to the brim  
With emptiness.

He looks in awe at the prisoners  
Tucked cozily away in their cozy cages.  
They look at him appraisingly,  
Every hesitating step is noted,

Every uneven breath is heard,  
And every cringe is taken in with unsuppressed glee.

A snakelike attack, someone bellows-  
"What the fuck you lookin at?"  
His head snaps down,  
Big mistake.

A perplexed blush sweeps across his baby face  
As malicious pleasure sweeps through the noting cells.  
Beep-Clang-Clash...  
The doors are opened.  
The masses spill out and over  
And he's drowning in a mass of wild, starving dogs.

His eyes beg me for salvation.  
I can't help him.  
He needs to blanket his fear.  
His eyes need to harden,  
His jaw needs to stiffen,  
And he needs a bite and a bark  
To ward off even the bravest of the dogs.

He needs to become like the others.  
He has no choice  
If he wants to stay a prison guard.



### **God is in the Cell**

My Savior's face gazes down upon me  
In agonized disapproval.  
Why did you bring me here, he asks.

I thought He would like it here.  
In my hour of need,  
I thought he would bring me comfort.  
I thought he would want to comfort me.

Now I think of comforting Him.  
He wants to escape the sounds  
Of the new boys' screams  
Their voices coming together  
To form their own prison choir.

He wants to escape the sight of me,  
His lost sheep  
Kept in this white-walled cage.

He can't stand looking at what's become of me.  
If it were possible to unscrew Him,  
I'd let Him climb down from the cross on the wall,

I'd let Him escape through the bars.  
And I would pray He make it back to Heaven.

He wouldn't have to go very far.  
After a lifetime in this cell,  
The parking lot is Heaven.



## **Duc**

"I'm not really Duc anymore."  
Well who are you then?  
And who were you?  
Were you the victim of cultural acceptance?  
No.

It was okay that you were pushed around and beaten,  
Don't you get it?  
That's how things worked in your country  
And we can't interfere with culture.  
Were you the victim of an inept justice system?  
No.

You associated with gang members.  
You didn't talk to the nice police woman,

Don't you get it?  
If you had let her,  
She would have helped you,  
She wouldn't have betrayed you.

Are you a murderer? An attempter murderer?  
Yes, well, so they say.  
You were in a car.  
You didn't shoot anyone,

Don't you get it?  
It doesn't matter that you didn't do anything,  
Or that your Dad routinely kicked your ass,  
Or that you're still a kid.

And it does not matter who you are.  
You aren't Duc anymore.  
You're a prisoner.  
And that's all that matters.

Don't you get it?



## **Isolation**



My life is 10 x 12.  
That's all I need.  
Just a bed and a toilet,  
A shower, and a sink.  
That's all I need.

My life is 5 X 7.  
The walls are white bricks.  
No color, no life, nothing.  
But they keep me in  
And they keep others out.  
That's all I need.

My life is 3 x 5.  
Everyday the walls creep closer,  
The ceiling lowers  
Inch by inch.  
They're going to crush me!  
No...they're going to protect me.

My life is 1 x 2.  
I see someone.  
An alien is looking through my box.  
Why is he looking at me?  
He's saying something...  
He wants me to come out.

No way in hell.  
A swarm of them come crashing in,  
They tackle me and I scream.

My life is back to being 10 X 12.  
We'll see how long it lasts this time.



### **Silence**

What is that I hear?  
A buzzing,  
Low and gentle  
Not so much in my ears  
As it is in my brain.

I can see through the little glass window.  
I can see the occasional guard.  
But I can't hear them.  
Why can't I hear them?  
I clap my hands,  
Once, twice, three times a day  
Just to make sure  
That I can still hear.

Then I can't hear.  
Anxious, my stomach revolting,  
I try again.  
I clap and clap  
I shout and scream.  
I hear it and sigh in relief  
...or do I?

Shouldn't I hear my sigh?  
I sigh again,  
There! I heard it!  
Or was it in my head?  
I scream and I scream.

Suddenly the door swings open.  
And it's too loud  
The sounds of footsteps thundering,  
Chains clapping,  
Laughing and shouting guards.  
I can't take it  
I clamp my hands over my ears  
I curl up in my bed and rock back and forth  
My eyes shut tightly.

Then the door closes.  
I'm back to the silence.  
And I cry, not knowing if I felt relief  
Or because I miss the noise.



### **Serving Life Plus Thirty**

Father anxiously grasps  
Mother's hand.  
She is pushing and pushing  
Nurses coo at her  
And wipe her forehead,  
The doctor yells encouragements  
And is waiting to catch.  
Out comes a healthy baby boy.

Mother cries as he is handed to her.  
Father looks down in pride.  
Nurses bustle to clean up.  
Suddenly the door bangs open  
Guns at the ready they shout

"Police! Freeze! Hold up your hands!"  
Bewildered, Father puts up his hands.  
One officer walks up and carelessly says,  
"Not you" points to the baby, "him."  
Mother and Father gasp.  
"You mean..."

"That's right sir. Your baby is under arrest.  
In his past life he got life in prison for murder,  
And another thirty for gang involvement.  
He has thirty more years."  
Mother cries as she hands off her baby,  
Father shakes his head,  
Disappointed that his first born is a criminal.

Officer breaks out the baby cuffs and puts them in place.  
He goes to the door before stopping.  
"You might want to hire a lawyer.  
By dying, he attempted escape from prison,  
And we intend to charge him.  
He'll probably get another life sentence."

A lifetime later,  
Another boy is born  
And another officer takes him.  
And the circle of life continues.



**Marie Schaberg** is an undergraduate student at American University, majoring in Literature.

## Meet the Death Team by Angela Smith

Declan McCoy strode down a long, rather dank hallway, looking like a man on a mission. With his freshly pressed uniform and newly polished shoes, he looked more official than usual. His dark hair was neatly trimmed, and his face was clean-shaven, as always. Actually, all of the men there were: it had been a rule instituted by his predecessor. A fifteen-year veteran of the Tennessee Department of Correction, he was certainly no stranger to the drama unfolding that week. They had executed four people since 2000, and he had been on the team for all of them. But this was new and different for one big reason: he was the leader now. The execution team that he had been part of for so long was now under his command.

He relished the thought, just a bit. Not many people voluntarily took a job as part of the state's execution team. He worked hard to provide for his family, and he was a lot more than a triggerman. Sure, Declan didn't exactly brag to the neighbors about his chosen profession, but he took a lot of pride in his work. He kept order on death row, and when it was time for an execution, he was the one who took the condemned down that long hallway. Blessedly, this particular inmate had not chosen electrocution, so they would not be heading to Old Sparky. Nevertheless, there was a solemnity to the atmosphere that exceeded the usual bleakness of death row. At the end of that quiet hallway, Declan turned into the lounge, folded his lanky frame into a chair, and threw up his feet on the desk before him.

He had no time to get comfortable before there was a knock on the door. "Hey Dec," Officer Hawthorne leaned his head into "the office," the team's room down in the death house. Isolated from the main campus of Riverbend, it was certainly a more solitary existence than most correctional officers were accustomed to. Still, it was that isolation that allowed them to do what they had to do: they waited, watched over the condemned, and took them to their deaths. Declan waved the man into the room and looked at him, more like an older brother than a superior officer.

"Yes, Nathan, what can I do for you?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just don't feel great today. Like, my stomach's all in knots and stuff. I guess I'm just thinking, after all that shit last year with the investigation into our protocol, I feel like everyone's watching our asses and waitin' for us to screw it up." Hawthorne ran a hand across his bald head and leaned heavily into the back of the chair opposite of Declan's. "What if we do?"

Declan shook his head as a smug smile spread across his face. "I appreciate your concerns, I really do. You're right that everyone's watching us, because they are. And you know what? That's a good thing. This is important work, this is huge work! As for the investigation, it was a good thing. It just proved that we've been doing this right all along. We've practiced this a thousand times, you know exactly what you have to do. Just do your part, the rest of us will do ours, and at the end of the day we get gold stars because we do this work, legally mandated work, that very few people are qualified to do. We're the best damn executioners this state has ever seen, and that's a fact. You being worried, that just shows that you care about your job, and that's nothing but a good thing."

Hawthorne started to nod slowly. "Yeah, I guess that's true. We just want to make sure we do it right, cuz we care. Best in the damn business, you're right!" Pure relief relaxed his expression until he looked almost jovial. "Thanks boss. I'm gonna go back and join the rest of the boys, you need anything?"

Declan waved him off. "Nah, man, I'm doin' good."

## The Last Visitation

"The funny thing about this "death watch" in Tennessee is how long it lasts. Of course, if one were being too existential, he or she might say that the entire exercise of life after conviction is a death watch, stretching interminably until the day execution finally comes. Comparatively, three days might not seem that long. I find it somewhat odd that Tennessee chose three days. Tennessee is part of the Bible belt, right? And where does the number three occur in the Bible? Oh, that's right. We all know the answer to this: on the third day, He rose again, and ascended into Heaven. So how disappointingly ironic it is to realize that the great state of Tennessee has turned this Biblical prophecy on its head, indeed to its very inverse, by condemning a man to die on the third day. But no one will rise again. Unless you consider being unstrapped from a gurney to be some sort of great ascension." The inmate laughed mirthlessly.

Jeffrey Porter: brilliant mind, published scholar, cold-blooded killer. His sister Jane could only shake her head in wonder at his philosophical ravings during their last visit. She had come to say goodbye, to try to impart some sense of forgiveness to him or something, anything to make herself feel a little bit better. She had been so worried about him, convinced he was going to be absolutely Goddamn crazy by the time she got there. Strangely enough, he seemed as lucid as he had ever been—though, granted, he had always been a little crazy. Or else he wouldn't have ended up at Riverside.

Jane sighed as quietly as possible. She had done her best for him, but she was only a few years older than he, and she simply lacked the skills to take the place of their oft-absent mother. Even though she tried not to, she blamed her mother and herself for what Jeffrey had become. Or maybe it was something in his head: she never could reconcile the sweet guy he usually was with the asshole he turned into when drunk or just pissed off. Sometimes, he seemed like two totally different people, and unfortunately the asshole seemed largely to have taken over in the past few years. Of course he had kept up with his research and made a solid effort to look like he was the same guy, but Jane had noticed a sullenness and a meanness in him that had never been there before. At first it was easy enough to think he was just stressed, or being unduly influenced by the bikers at his bar. But once he started punching walls and the whole truth came out about the girl from the bus stop... well, she knew her little brother was gone, and now the state was taking him away for good. "At least they let you have visitors up until the end, pretty much."

Jeff snorted in derision. He was in a rhythm now, keyed up as anything.

"You know, Jane, it would make more sense to get this farce over with already. For two full days now, I've been sitting in this room, surrounded every second by these guards who won't even look at me. Now all of the sudden it's the day of my execution, and everyone and their brother has something to say to me. I've got these two jackasses here," he said, hiking a thumb in the direction of COs James and Hawthorne, "talking to me like they have the secret to life eternal or something. Trying to keep my ass calm, they say. We'll I'm not going to be calm!" He slammed a fist on his knee, then dropped his head into his hands. As quickly as it had come, his rage dissipated as he dissolved into a mess of tears. Jane gasped in shock: she had never, ever seen her brother cry, even the day a Hamilton county jury sentenced him to death. He looked up at her through red eyes, pleading. "Janie, you have to go now, I just, I just can't do this." He paused for a long while. "Go home, and forget ever seeing me this way. I don't, well, I don't know how you can remember me any other way, but I need you to."

She slipped her hand around his wrist, as though her grip could ground him for just a moment. "That day when we went fishing with my kids, remember? And you caught that big old trout for Glen but convinced him you had just reeled it in for him, and when Amy was too scared to get on the dock, you put her on her shoulders so you'd get wet first if the two of you fell in the water? That's how I'll remember you, my baby brother. I'll always remember you just like that, and I'll always love you."

Jeff nodded, his eyes still watering but his shudders subsiding. "I love you too, Janie." Her eyes welled up too then, and the guards thought they were going to have to drag her out from his grip. But she blew him a kiss, tried to smile, and backed out of the room before she completely lost her composure. The last thing she saw was her brother's face, twisted into a bitter grimace that resembled not at all the brother she had tried to raise right.

## Final Countdown

It was, in the estimation of the death watch team, the sister's visit that had most broken Jeff Porter. For that, they were eternally grateful. Their biggest fear had been his temper, which he certainly had no issues with displaying. Sure, lots of guys talked sometimes about how they weren't going down without a fight, and how they'd take everyone else with them if they had to, but that was just talk. Usually, just talk. Jeff Porter, however, was another matter entirely. The man was smart, so smart it was hard to believe he'd gotten caught. He was a good-looking guy, in an academic type of way, but he could get angry. Real angry. Everyone at the trial had seen that: the papers couldn't write enough about the tantrum he threw when he testified on his own behalf, replete with highly inventive profanity and an almost indescribable fury that landed him in contempt of court. Declan's cousin had been covering Porter's trial for The Chattanooga Times Free Press, and he had called him in complete disbelief after that one. "Dec, you would never even believe the shit that happened in court today. I'm telling you, there is no way this lunatic won't be under your watch within a month, mark my words."

Declan's cousin had been absolutely correct in his assessment, but Declan was still surprised when his new ward arrived. Jeff Porter was a surprisingly tough guy, considering that he had been some sort of scientist or philosopher in his previous life. At intake, the officers had been stunned by the numerous tattoos that covered his back and biceps. He bore several scars that suggested the murder for which he was convicted was certainly not his first brush with physical violence. The man was totally jacked, clearly a workout fiend, and he had previously relished the freedom for constant workouts before being confined for the death watch. When he was out doing his weight-lifting, he raged to anyone in the vicinity that there was no fucking way he was going down without a fight, no way, no how. He was going to show all those officers who was boss, just you wait.

And through all his time on death row, the officers had believed him. Even during the first two days of the highly tedious death watch, they had believed him. He was still doing push-ups in his cell, boxing with an imaginary adversary, and swearing at the authority of the state like a drunken sailor. Declan had been absolutely beside himself, convinced this guy was going to ruin his first execution as captain. All they needed him to do was to lay still long enough to strap him down and stick the needles in—that was all they were asking! For nearly the entire duration of Jeff's stay on the unit, Declan had nearly torn his hair out in frustration.

But no more. Thank God, Jane Porter had just saved his team a whole hell of a lot of trouble. Usually, the death watch team had to work hard to do what she had done. Sure, their job was to keep the man comfortable, but that was not all of it. Their job, when you got down to the bare bones of it, was to execute a criminal: nothing more, nothing less. So they chatted him up, tried to keep him calm enough, and waited for the death warrant to come down the line. Get his drinks, bring him the last meal, help him pack up his last earthly possessions and choose where they would go.

It was psychologically draining work though, to watch a man prepare to die. Kind of like hospice, but without the friends, family, or degenerative illness (unless you considered raging criminality to be a fatal illness.) And sometimes? Sometimes it freaked the hell out of the guys. Hawthorne was still shaken by Jeff Porter. "He reminds me of my high school biology teacher," he had confessed to one of the guys on the team. He couldn't imagine putting his teacher to death, and it was freaking him out.

"Well, you know what he did, right?" Officer Peyton asked him. Hawthorne shook his head: he had never thought to ask. "I'll tell you what that bastard did. He kidnapped a woman who had been waiting for a bus in the city. And then he took her back to his house, raped her, and slashed her throat to pieces." Hawthorne shook his head in shock. The man who had worn tweed jackets and smoked cigars, turning into a brutal murderer? Incomprehensible. "Then, he cut her body up into a bunch of tiny pieces, and threw it into Chickamauga Lake. So don't feel bad when we take that piece of shit into the death house. Some people just don't deserve to be on this earth."

That made it easier for the team to work. Spending hours with an inmate could encourage camaraderie or some weird sort of empathy. After all, how do you talk to a guy for days on end without getting a little attached to him? They became people when you spent so much time with them. But when you thought of them as their crime, instead of a person, that made it a lot easier.

It was a tough job, but spending all that time with the prisoner had a serious purpose. Declan would never forget what the last captain had told him while clearing out his desk for the newest captain. "You know why we're here, Dec? Because someone's gotta get that man to the gurney. That's what we do. You know you don't want to drag his ass kicking and screaming, that's way too messy. So, you wait with this guy, talk him into accepting his fate, and get his ass on that gurney. And if that don't work, beat his ass down enough that he doesn't care enough to fight ya." It was really psychological warfare: convincing the enemy that he was man enough to face his own certain death. Declan remembered from previous death watches that this process usually took a lot of talking, the presence of myriad religious leaders, prayer circles, and reflections upon mistakes made and things lost. But it looked like Jane had saved them all the trouble of breaking this man down: in less than half an hour, his composure had simply imploded. This man—or the man formerly known as Jeff Porter—was resigned to his fate. He was ready to be taken out.

## **Can I Get a Witness**

"You know, I've covered every execution in the state since I started working at The Tennessean," Mary Beth Allen declared to her newest assistant.

"Great field of expertise," Lindsay Brown muttered beside her new boss.

"What was that?" Mary Beth asked, clearly neither caring nor expecting an answer.

"What interesting work, I said." Lindsay replied.

The two women looked around at the fellow witnesses in the briefing room. The dingy walls of the conference room in Riverbend desperately needed a fresh coat of paint—a change Mary Beth had suggested the first time she went there in 2000. Of course, she was sure they had other things to worry about, but couldn't they try to make the process a little more palatable to the required media witnesses?

As always, media members had clamored for the coveted spots that would allow them to make a firsthand report on the last minutes of a man's life. And, as always, Mary Beth had secured one; two, actually, since she wanted her protégé to be there with her. Mary Beth thought so fondly of the reporter who had hired her twenty years ago, the man who had set her on the path to becoming a bureau chief in the state's largest paper. Now that she was in her 40's, she thought it was time to pay it forward, and Lindsay was as strong a candidate as any. Still, Mary Beth knew that the Princeton graduate-cum- Southern Belle was tainted with the snobby liberalism of her Northern upbringing, and wanted to see how she would deal with the gritty reality of life in the South. An execution was as severe a test as any that could be planned, and this conveniently timed one would offer the perfect proving ground—or illuminate the reasons that Lindsay could never dominate the conservative Southern paper.

"It is indeed fascinating work. You know, you would never have this opportunity if you weren't with the paper, our state doesn't allow civilian witnesses to watch these things. But we are the guardians of democracy, and it is our civic duty to make sure the American people know what happens here. This is where the real news happens."

Lindsay was sure that Mary Beth could expound upon this theme for days at a time if given the chance, but fortunately the warden opened the conference door at that very moment. "I know that Officer McCoy has already briefed you on what to expect here today. Nevertheless, I would just like to remind you that this is a somber occasion, and we expect you to act accordingly. Refrain from any unnecessary outbursts while you are in the witness room. If you need medical assistance, it will be available to you, just let an officer know. Please follow me."

Mary Beth nearly jumped out of her seat, along with the other dozen or so media witnesses. Lindsay was less enthused, but hauled ass when Mary Beth gave her an admonishing look. Lindsay had absolutely not wanted to go there, and she was relatively certain her boss knew it. Nevertheless, it was like Mary Beth held the goddamn golden key to the paper: impress her or be blacklisted for eternity. Lindsay had promised her husband when they left New England for his hometown that she would make a good faith effort to fit in; if she could say she tried, maybe he would consider leaving someday. But for now, she had to do her best to make good on her promise. And that, unfortunately, meant she was subject to Mary Beth's every whim.

As the group hurried down the hall, Lindsay focused on the soft cadence of her heels on the linoleum. Left, right, left, right. She wondered how an inmate could make the journey down this same hallway, knowing what was at the end. The ultimate end, really. Her clicking heels could not distract her from Mary Beth's inane whispers. "You know, Lindsay, the first one is usually the toughest, but after that you know what to expect. Don't worry, dear, I think you will be positively delighted by how painlessly it all goes! Like drifting off to sleep, it seems..." Lindsay did not respond. How painless could it be to lie on a gurney, knowing you were about to die? Maybe holding onto the hope that the governor would call at the last minute and say, whoops, false alarm, let him go. That might even make it worse.

She wondered how painless it was to actually die. All deaths, she imagined, were inherently painful; perhaps it was just a question of how long or how acutely the pain lasted. Still, she remembered the numerous court cases that had begged the question of whether lethal injection was really painless or not. As everyone said, where there's smoke, there's fire, and she had to believe that there wouldn't be such uproar if there weren't something to the allegations that lethal injection was incomprehensibly painful. She tried but failed to suppress a racking shudder that shook her to the core.

The warden opened a heavy door that led into a room with chairs resembling bleachers. They filed in quietly, observing the decorum the warden had requested. Lindsay looked around to the other reporters, most of whom were now staring at the floor, and she wondered if her face had grown as pale as theirs. Most of theirs, anyways: Mary Beth still looked as though she hadn't a care in the world. Lindsay wondered: is she this callous? Or does she have some sort of magical detachment that keeps her from feeling it? As if reading her mind, Mary Beth patted her on the knee and smiled gravely. "You get used to it, Lindsay. You just do."

**End of the Line**

At the same moment that Mary Beth was trying to comfort her assistant, there was a different kind of comforting going on down the hallway. Sitting in his cell, staring morosely into space, Jeffrey was not shackled: Declan had decided they would not be necessary. He almost felt sorry for this man he had ferried this far towards the River Styx. As they opened his cell, his eyes remained glazed and unmoving. Declan motioned to Hawthorne and Worthers, who moved to their positions next to the inmate. Hawthorne gripped his right arm, while Worthers took the left; Declan lined up behind them and grabbed his belt loop. Officially, their positions were to maintain order and prevent the chance of any inmate violence, but by now the men knew that was not going to happen. More likely, they would have to keep him on his feet. It was almost ironic, because in another life Jeffrey Porter certainly could have whipped any of their asses. Now, he was as harmless as a kitten. Declan put a hand on the condemned man's shoulder in a last-ditch effort to comfort him. "Just a few more feet, my man, you can do it. You have to go out like a man, of your own will, don't you want to do that?" Declan swore the man stood up a little straighter in reaction to the admonition; nevertheless, he could feel tremors coursing through him.

"Just sit up on here," Declan softly commanded the inmate. Jeff Porter, former sadistic mastermind, obediently crawled onto the gurney. "And just lay back, there you go." As he lay down, three more officers appeared as if from the ether. Jeff didn't seem to notice them; Declan wondered if the man saw anything at all. The men took their positions: one for each arm, one for each leg, across the chest, and at the head. They moved swiftly, hog-tying him in under a minute. At that moment, Declan had moved over to the IV kit. He thanked God for his requisite EMT training but said a little prayer that he would find a vein easily. Not finding a vein would mean doing a cut-down; he knew he could do it, but it was so much more ghastly to see, and witnesses just didn't understand the necessity. Fortunately, Jeff was compliant on his march to death, and a vein popped up easily. Declan did his work as quickly as possible to minimize the pain. His job was done; only the warden would be present in the room during the execution, since Jeff not surprisingly had declined the presence of religious counsel. The team stoically marched out of the room, and Declan stepped behind a door to the automated machine that would deliver the deadly cocktail. He waited for the word.

The curtains were opened, and Lindsay felt bile rising in her throat. There, just a few feet away behind a pane of glass, lay a man waiting to die. A tiny microphone danced in the air like a fly towards his face.

"The court has issued a sentence of death to be carried out upon the defendant Jeffrey Ray Porter on the 15th of December, 2008, in accordance with the laws of Tennessee," the warden announced to no one in particular. "Mister Porter," he intoned dramatically, "is there anything you'd like to say for your final words?" Lindsay knew she was probably imagining it or projecting, but she swore she saw a tear roll down his cheek as he strained against the table to nod. "Go on then, son, what do you want to say?"

The man's voice shook violently. "I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry. Tell Janie, tell her I'm sorry." His voice trailed off, and his mouth went slack. Mary Beth pointed towards the room. "That means they've hit him with the first round of chemicals," she whispered. Sodium thiopental: a tranquilizer so strong it would induce death on its own within minutes with a high enough dose. Lindsay couldn't move, couldn't even breathe, it felt like she was being paralyzed along with him, and oh God, oh God, why couldn't she breathe?

The machine whirred as pancuronium bromide flushed through the IV lines, causing paralysis of every fiber of every muscle. Lindsay struggled for air but her lungs seemed to fail her. She felt her chest constricting with the third drug, the potassium chloride that was most surely causing instantaneous cardiac arrest in Jeffrey Porter. And even though it was not her strapped to the table, she felt that she too was going to die right there, right in the fucking witness room of a maximum security institution, all because her bitch of a boss had dragged her to bear witness to this colossally foolish pageant of death, and she simply could not breathe while watching the life being sucked from this viciously crazy hillbilly...

She collapsed.

"Time of death, 1:35 AM."





**Angela Smith** graduated from American University's School of Public Affairs in 2008 with a BA in Justice. Throughout her studies, she has focused particularly on Constitutional and Criminal Law. Although not a fiction writer by nature, Angela believes that good writing can be an effective tool for educating the public about the realities of our criminal justice system. She will continue her legal studies in August 2009 at the George Washington University Law School.

# His Last Words by Kellee Fitzgerald

They asked him if he had any last words. The man shook his head. What was there to say? He felt the restraining straps pull tight against his arms and legs. There was a sharp prick in each of his arms, first the right and then the left. He wasn't bothered by the slight discomfort caused by the IV lines running into his limbs. He was more concerned about the drugs which would shortly be injected into the lines, and then take a direct route to his bloodstream. These drugs were intended to halt first his consciousness, then his respiration, and finally his heartbeat. He wasn't worried that death would be painful. He dreaded the finality of it – the push of one button, the carrying out of one order, and it would be all over. No second chances.

He looked across the room to the Plexiglas window, behind which he knew there were people watching him. There were no family or friends in his audience, only official witnesses. He supposed this was better. He hoped the woman who had once been his fiancée had been able to move on during his time behind bars, and that she wouldn't be upset by his death. He knew that his older brother, his only remaining family member, had ceased to speak to or about him since the moment he was sentenced. The man was glad. His nieces and nephews should not grow up with the knowledge that their beloved uncle was a killer so vicious he had to be put down like a dog. They would be happier not knowing.

The man returned his attention to the prison officers in the room with him. They finished securing the IV placements in his arms. This made the man uneasy. He had been prepared for death on two specific occasions previously. Last time the proceedings had gone so far that the man had actually received his last meal. Maybe he was lucky. Not many people get to have two last meals, prepared and served especially for them. Or maybe he was unlucky. For as much as the man felt in his heart that he was about to die, he couldn't help wondering... Maybe that last-minute phone call would come again. Maybe his execution would be stayed again. Even now, as he lay restrained on a gurney, with IVs in his arms, he couldn't help but hope... How could he really prepare for death when he had already been asked to prepare twice before? No, things had never gone this far before... He could feel it in his bones. He was about to die.

The man's breathing became quick and shallow. He could see the execution team preparing for the final stage of the process. One word spoken, an order given to proceed, and he would know no more. Panic began to set in. It was really happening; there would be no stay this time, no second chances. The man's vision began to grow hazy. He tried to make his mind wander, to distract himself from what was about to happen. Shouldn't his life be flashing before his eyes? That's what always happened in the movies. Scared as he was, he had expected more from death. Being injected through an IV was pretty anti-climactic. It was much like a normal stay in the hospital, a trip to the doctor's office even. The man had had an IV drip when he went visited the dentist to have his wisdom teeth removed. Nothing about his current situation suggested anything bad would happen, save for the straps pinning him to the gurney.

The only thing he could hear was the blood pounding in his ears as he began to lose consciousness. The last thing the man focused his attention on was the member of the execution team closest to him. The officer's face seemed surprised and confused, the man thought. But it must have been a trick of the light because, just as planned, the man's world suddenly turned black.



“What’s wrong with him? It can’t be the thiopental, it wasn’t even administered. Why won’t he wake up?”

“Probably just shock, nerves, something like that. Don’t worry, he’s breathing.”

“Well, do something, wake him up. And somebody close that damn curtain, don’t you know how this must look?”

The man slowly woke, hearing only fragments of what the execution team was saying. The lights were very bright to his dazed eyes. His hearing was muffled, a damper on every sound in the room. He was confused, hadn’t he just been subject to the effects of the three-drug cocktail intended for his execution? Was he actually dead – was this the afterlife? Experiencing again and again his final moments of life, here strapped to the gurney, IVs still in his arms? It seemed fitting, to be tortured this way after death – trapped in the execution chamber forever. He would expect nothing less for a killer.

The man struggled to make sense of what was happening to him. Was he dead? Surely this was not how an execution team would behave immediately after putting someone to death. Where were the somber attitudes, the professional yet respectful atmosphere? The man had heard all the stories from those inmates who had been on death row for longer than he. He had even seen it himself – after another prisoner disappeared for good, the prison officers became more subdued, quieter than they usually were. Why were they not acting that way for him?

He opened his mouth to ask, but was interrupted by one of the team leaning over him, with words fading in and out:

“Don’t try to sit up just yet. You lost consciousness for a minute or two. We’re bringing you some water, and we have to have someone in to check your vitals. Don’t worry, you’ll be OK.”

OK? the man thought. OK? But aren’t they still preparing to kill me? Unconsciousness is only the first stage of death here in the chamber. Why did they stop?

One of the staff was removing the IVs hooked to his arms. The man was truly baffled. And then he saw it – still too dizzy to hear properly, he was able to make out the shape of the word spoken by the officer on the other side of the room – pardoned.



Pardoned. He couldn’t believe it. Pardoned? The man had been removed from the execution chamber and now sat waiting for the doctor’s examination. Pardoned... He turned it over in his mind, trying to understand what had happened. The man knew that there had been no DNA evidence linking him to the scene of the crime. He had known it all along. The jury knew it, the judge, the prosecutor. It hadn’t mattered then. No one had cared. The man had told them all along, he was innocent, just look at the scene of the crime! Plenty of places to take DNA samples, plenty of chances to find someone else’s DNA, anyone else’s. His DNA would not be there, the man knew that. His defense attorney hadn’t believed him, of course.

“We’re lucky they aren’t testing the area for samples,” the attorney had told him, “hard evidence linking you to the scene of the crime is bad news for us. They would give you the death sentence without any reservation. Jurors will have a much harder time giving you death without a search for DNA. Life in prison – that’s what we’re hoping for.” He had treated the decision of guilty vs. not-guilty as a mere formality. If this client was on trial for capital murder, then he was guilty, and the lawyer had better prepare for the sentencing phase of the trial to try to spare this man from the death penalty. That was really the only decision to be made in a capital murder trial. Guilt was a given.

No one had wanted to hear that the man was innocent, not even his own lawyer. No one had listened when he begged for DNA testing of the crime scene. The man knew he was innocent. He was the only person in the world who believed that.

So pardoned? Someone had finally taken the time and effort to believe him? To test DNA from the crime scene, and discover that it belonged to somebody else? Pardoning murderers was an unpopular business. He was in disbelief that the governor had taken such a sudden interest in his case and decided that putting a man to death without conclusive evidence was just plain wrong. The tests had finally taken place. Not that it did the man any good as far as innocence was involved. The man had left no DNA at the crime scene. Someone else had. But that did not conclusively prove that the man himself had not been there. All those who had been convinced of his guilt, what would this pardon mean to them? Nothing. That the man was lucky, that was all.

The governor had left it pretty late, apparently wanting to receive the test results before making the call. The man sat slowly shaking his head. He tried to grasp the enormity of what had just happened to him. If the phone call had come only ten seconds later...

What would he do now?



It was just hours later that the man stood receiving his personal belongings, those which had been confiscated when he was first imprisoned. He glanced down at the items, knowing none of them would help him any once he walked out the door. What would the twenty-four dollars in his wallet buy him, other than a few beers, an excuse to start trouble? What would the clothes on his back earn him, other than membership to a club he no longer wanted any part of? Sure, he was given a small stipend for his troubles. A few thousand dollars which were expected to somehow compensate for the nine years the man had spent in prison, spent on death row. This was intended to help the man get back on his feet once he returned to mainstream society. He supposed it would help, a little. If nothing else, it would pay for a few months' rent to whatever landlord he could find willing to give him a room. He would need that – he had no one to stay with. The man vaguely wondered what he would do with his time outside prison walls. He had worked a few odd-jobs in food service earlier in his life, but even restaurant managers performed background checks. He doubted it would matter much to anyone, least of all potential employers, that he had been pardoned of the crime. Even without the murder charge, his record was far from spotless. But even so, after having been convicted... Once a killer, always a killer.

There was no one to meet him at the time of his release. He hadn't expected anyone to come. He couldn't think of a person in the world who would want to see him, yet it was still disappointing. He was dropped off in a neighborhood where he had once been a well-known fixture. Now he couldn't remember a single name to accompany the faces that floated through his head. Most of the people he used to know had forgotten about him, and he had forgotten most of them. He began to walk.

"What are you doing here? I told you I never wanted to see you again. You'll only cause problems." The man's brother spoke to him from over the doorstep, making sure to keep the door open only a few inches. Any hope the man had had that his brother might be glad to see him a free man instantly vanished. His brother did not want to hear that he had no place to go, that he didn't know a single person to call, that he was hoping to see his family.

"You can't stay here. You can't even stand here at my door, you know what I told the kids! They can't see you here, God knows what they would think." The man's brother was angry now, his voice shaking with the effort of keeping his frustration in check.

"They think you're dead. You've been dead for nine years. You knew that. I told you, the second your trial began, that as far as my family knew, you were in a car wreck. My youngest was so small at the time, I don't think he even remembers you. You have to go, right now."

"Come with me." The man spoke, for the first time in what had surely been years. His voice sounded foreign to his ears.

"Please. Just come with me for twenty minutes, an hour. We'll go for something to eat, you know I haven't had a real meal in nine years. You still love burgers, right? There's got to be a place somewhere. Just sit down with me. Let me explain. Let me talk to you. You owe me at least that much respect. I'm your brother! Please."

“Look,” the man’s brother began. “I don’t owe you anything. You’re the one who screwed up, the one who killed her. And you won’t even admit to it! You’re not even sorry. Now if you want money,” the man shook his head fiercely. He didn’t want a thing from his brother except a little trust, to be believed.

“If you want money,” his brother continued, “you can have it. Here,” and he opened his wallet and took out everything inside, shoving it towards the man, still protesting on the doorstep.

“Take it. If you want more I’ll send it to you. But leave me alone. And don’t even think about coming near my kids. I’ll get a restraining order if I have to. They don’t need this in their lives.” And with that, the door was shut firmly in the man’s face. He hadn’t expected his brother to welcome him with open arms. In fact, he had completely anticipated a cold, unwilling reception, as the pardon hadn’t helped the matter of anyone believing his innocence. But the man had thought, in the back of his mind, that maybe his brother would give him a chance, just a small chance. Just an hour to sit and listen to his story...



They asked him if he had any last words. The man shook his head. What was there to say? He felt the restraining straps pull tight against his arms and legs. There was a sharp prick in each of his arms, first the right and then the left. He gasped and sat upright. Still shaking, the man stood up out of bed and turned on the light. It had been months since his brush with death and subsequent pardon from death row - when would the nightmares end?



After the fourth ring he was directed to the woman’s voicemail. This time, he decided, he would leave a message. He started telling his story to her phone:

*He began with hello. And yes, he was sure that it must be strange to hear from him after all this time. And yes, he knew that it had been twelve years since they had spoken. But did she know that he was even still alive? Had she heard that he was pardoned from death row three years ago? That, whatever anyone else believed, he was innocent? Of course, the man agreed, it must be a shock to hear his voice. But he had heard her name a few weeks ago in town, and was so glad she had finally become a surgeon like she had always wanted. The man admitted that it was unlikely...but was there any chance she wanted to see him? Just for an afternoon? He knew that it had been so long, but he had missed her so much – they had been so close, and so in love, back when they were engaged. The man quickly explained that of course he didn’t resent her for leaving him – who wouldn’t leave a killer? But he was innocent, did she know? And he would so like the chance to catch up and hear about her life. The man guessed that her life must be so wonderful. He hoped that she would call him.*

“No, I hadn’t known you were pardoned. I was glad to hear it, even if... after what happened.” The woman sat across from him in a small café she had suggested in town.

“Honestly, I didn’t keep up with your news at all after the sentencing. No offense to you, but it was just easier.” She swirled her spoon around in her mug, and looked down.

“Did you hear that I got married? It happened ten years ago, but I didn’t know if you knew, or how you had heard my name...” She trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

“Yes,” the man said, “I knew. The shopkeeper who mentioned your name must know you quite well, he also told me that you have a child?”

“Of course, my son.” The woman flushed with pride, but also looked slightly uneasy, “he’s a great boy.”

“How old is he?” The man was eager to hear about somebody else’s life, a normal life.

The woman hesitated. “He’s... He’s thirteen,” she blurted out.

She quickly started to chatter, “and he’s so smart, he does so well in school and always does his chores, he never complains, he’s such a good boy, he adores his father and I, and - ” The man cut her off.

“His father? Thirteen? Thirteen? What are you— How can you - what? I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t find out until after you had been arrested,” she said, “there was never a good time to tell you, and then I found out you were guilty, and of course I was devastated and I didn’t even want to talk to you then, and that was that. He is very happy with his father and I, don’t worry.” The man’s head was reeling.

“But...but I’m not guilty. Surely you believe me. I didn’t kill her. I never laid a hand on her. And you...you kept this from me? Your son? My son? I want to meet him. I want to know him. Is he like me?” It was the woman’s turn to interrupt.

“No, of course you can’t meet him! Listen, I don’t think you’re a dangerous person, or an evil person, and I’m glad you weren’t executed, but of course you killed her. I know you did.” She looked away. “And you understand why you can’t meet him, don’t you? He doesn’t have any idea that his father...isn’t his father. He can’t have this hanging over his head, that his real father is actually a killer, a killer who was slated to die himself, and somehow slipped through the cracks. It would traumatize him.”

The woman leaned away from him; her face became stony and set.

“Honestly,” she continued, “I can’t really afford to see you or speak to you either. It was a mistake this time, but I remember how fond we were of each other, and I was curious about what happened to you. Don’t misunderstand me – I’m completely serious when I say I can never see you again, and my son will never know about you. If you try to pursue a relationship with either one of us, I’ll move away, or bring up an accusation against you, anything to make you keep your distance.” Her stern face softened just a fraction.

“It was nice to see you this one more time. I hope you’ll take care of yourself.” With that, she pushed away her mug, stood and strode out the door.

The man sat in his chair, silent, stunned. A son. All the things that could have been, if only he hadn’t been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was many hours before the man could bring himself to stand up and leave the café.



They asked him if he had any last words. The man shook his head. What was there to say? He felt the restraining straps pull tight against his arms and legs. There was a sharp prick in each of his arms, first the right and then the left. He looked across the room to the Plexiglas window, behind which he knew there were people watching him. The man returned his attention to the prison officers in the room with him. They finished securing the IV placements in his arms. This made the man uneasy. His breathing became quick and shallow. He could see the execution team preparing for the final stage of the process. Panic began to set in. The man woke suddenly, screaming this time. He had also fallen onto the floor due to his thrashing. He slowly pulled himself upright, groaning. It had been several years since he had dreamt about it... Not that the memories didn’t plague his every waking moment. His experience on death row had tainted his life, made it impossible for him to make a decent living or form a healthy relationship with another person. And he had been so young, only thirty-five when he was released...so young, compared to his seventy years. Half of his life he had been free from prison, yet the true imprisonment had only begun with his pardon.

He had read about his brother’s death in the paper four years previously, survived by the man’s nieces and nephews. He supposed that meant that his sister-in-law had already been dead. His son would be forty-five by now. The man thought of him every day. It was a rare five minutes that he did not wonder as to the well-being of his son. Of the boy’s mother, the man’s ex-fiancée, he had heard nothing else.

The man thought back to the few relationships he had managed to form after his time in prison. None of the women were willing to stay with him after they learned the truth. None of them believed his pleas of innocence, save one. The sentence and the time spent locked away were proof enough that he was guilty. He remembered the first woman... She had literally run away screaming. The man actually chuckled at this thought. He learned from that experience to always preface his admission to being a convicted murderer with the words "wrongfully accused." He understood her reaction, and was not particularly hurt by it. What hurt the most was the last woman, more than ten years ago. She had been the only one to believe him. The only one, ever. She was convinced of the man's innocence. She was not driven away by fear or disgust. She stayed with him for three years before the social stigma caught up with them. She had not been able to handle the injustices and maltreatment which go hand-in-hand with having spent years on death row, a convicted killer.



They asked him if he had any last words. The man shook his head. What was there to say? He felt the pull of the restraining straps pull tight against his arms and legs. There was a sharp prick in each of his arms, first the right and then the left. He looked across the room to the Plexiglas window, behind which he knew there were people watching him. The man returned his attention to the prison officers in the room with him. They finished securing the IV placements in his arms. This made the man uneasy. His breathing became quick and shallow. He could see the execution team preparing for the final stage of the process. Panic began to set in. Shouldn't his life be flashing before his eyes? Scared as he was, he had expected more from death. His vision began to grow hazy. The only thing he could hear was the blood pounding in his ears as he began to lose consciousness. The last thing the man focused his attention on was the member of the execution team closest to him. The man closed his eyes.

The man opened his eyes. The face of the prison officer swam in front of him for a moment, and then his vision cleared. Everything looked crisper, sharper around the edges. He looked around, interested. Usually his nightmares did not allow him to get this far. Nor were they so realistic. Hope sprung in the man's chest. Maybe this was more than just a regular dream. Maybe he was finally going to die, to drift gently to sleep in his old, weary body, and never wake up. This dream would ferry him from one life to the next, he would dream about his originally intended death while really dying, at home in his bed. How wonderful that would be...for it all to be over. He closed his eyes, preparing for the peaceful transition.

The officer closest to the man noticed a restraint on the gurney hanging slack. He pulled the strap taut, unintentionally exerting a bit too much force. The man gasped with the sudden pain. The officer looked down, apologetic for both the discomfort he had just caused and for the task he was about to carry out. The man's eyes snapped open, unease quickly turning to panic once more. He had never felt pain in a dream... Even during regular dreams, not this nightmare, the man had never felt physical pain, or any kind of physical sense at all. Comprehension crashed down upon the man in waves, and he became dizzy again. This dream was not meant to escort him through death. This wasn't a dream. This was reality. The man's entire life stemming from his pardon had been the dream, a hallucination, wishful thinking? Except being pardoned had turned out to be more of a burden than a blessing.

The man quickly looked around the execution chamber. He was acutely aware of his breathing, something he was unable to notice in a dream. Suddenly his reality didn't seem so bad. Sure, he was about to die...but he would be spared the hell of the next thirty-five years. Panic subsided, replaced with a new emotion...relief? Out of the corner of his eye, the man saw a member of the execution team nod to somebody he himself could not see.

"No! Wait!" the man gasped, a little louder than he had intended. The officer looked wary. He had been trained to deal with unruly inmates, but he did not enjoy doing it.

"I have last words," the man continued. The officer nodded, and held up a hand to the concealed person, about to press the button.

"Go ahead."

The man took a deep breath, and looked straight ahead. "Thank you."



**Kellee Fitzgerald** is an undergraduate honors student at American University. She will graduate in May 2009 with a degree in Justice from the School of Public Affairs, and a minor in Italian Studies.

# Not To Us by Amelia Schmidt

## Not to Us

There was a murder in my family.  
That was not supposed to happen,  
At least not to us.

My life was changed forever.  
While I didn't know it at the time,  
I will think about my cousin every day for the rest of my life.

Almost ten years ago my parents sat me down  
And told me Greg had died.  
They didn't know how and they didn't know why  
And being twelve, that answer was enough.

It was sad.  
Too bad someone so young had to die.  
I felt bad for his mom, his dad and his friends.  
I felt bad for his brother Zach who was now an only child.

Greg's death had to be a fluke,  
Maybe he had a bad heart, maybe it was cancer.  
They lived so far away though; I thought we would all move on.

I was wrong.  
My mom started talking to Sue on the phone every night,  
For hours on end.  
When mom was on the phone, we weren't allowed in the room.

I didn't really care though.  
Sue was sad and my mom was being a good friend.

My mom started going to Baltimore every month.  
Sometimes she'd bring my brother  
But I was never allowed to go,  
She said I couldn't miss school.

I didn't really care though.  
Sue was sad and my mom was being a good friend.

The phone calls went on for years  
And eventually I knew that I knew nothing.  
There were too many unanswered questions.

I remember driving in the car  
And Sue called.  
I was sixteen.

It was early in the day, not her usual time.  
My mom told her she'd call back later.  
But I needed to know some answers.

How did Greg die mom?  
She claimed she didn't know.  
Well why do you talk to Sue all the time?  
She said Sue was just sad.  
They really don't know how Greg died?  
They really know nothing at all?

Her expression instantly changed.  
With severe trepidation, she told me Greg was killed.  
What did that mean?  
She told me he was murdered.

Greg had been stabbed.  
They didn't know by whom and they didn't know why  
His brother Zach had found him in their garage.

I thought I was ready to know,  
I thought I wanted answers.  
But after I knew, I wish I knew nothing at all.

There was a murder in my family.  
That wasn't supposed to happen,  
At least not to us.



### **I Wonder**

I wonder what its like  
When Zach is all alone at night.

I wonder if he thinks about the life he would have lived.

I wonder what its like  
When Zach can't call his mom at night.

I wonder if he thinks about the life he would have lived.

I wonder what its like  
When Zach misses his dogs at night.

I wonder if he thinks about the life he would have lived.

I wonder what its like  
When Zach craves a snack at night.

I wonder if he thinks about the life he would have lived.

I wonder what its like  
When Zach is stuck in prison at night.



I wonder if he thinks about the life he would have lived.



### **Man's Best Friend**

The best thing about a dog is that they love you no matter what.  
Good days, bad days, a dog doesn't really care.  
When Zach was put on house arrest, Laser came into his life.  
There were four dogs in the house but Laser was just for Zach.  
A tiny ball of love that didn't know the truth.  
For five years, Laser stayed by Zach's side,  
Since Zach couldn't go outside, Laser kept him company from within.  
Sometimes I think about Zach alone in jail and I know Laser's not there.  
His best friend was taken from him just like everything else.



### **Stressed**

I don't even remember meeting Zach, almost not at all.  
Yet every day I think of him, every winter, spring and fall.  
I overheard my mom say that Zach had lost his hair.  
I tried hard not to care.  
He was only twenty two  
And there was nothing I could do.  
Handsome young men should not have to lose their hair.  
Every time I think of him, I know it isn't fair.  
I suppose the stress of prison would eventually take its toll.  
But while his hair could one day grow back, I worry about his soul.  
I don't even remember meeting Zach, almost not at all.  
Yet every day I think of him, every winter, spring and fall.



### **Belief**

I don't think I believe in God.  
Why should I believe?  
I don't think I believe in God.  
I don't think I ever did.  
I don't think I believe in God.  
He allows crimes to happen.  
I don't think I believe in God.  
He's supposed to us bring faith.  
I don't think I believe in God.  
What happens when faith is lost?  
I don't think I believe in God.  
I'd feel bad if I did.  
I don't think I believe in God.  
Zach wouldn't be in jail.  
I don't think I believe in God.  
But I can't say that I don't.



### **I Hate Law and Order**

I hate Law and Order  
But I watch it all the time.  
It usually makes me sad.

Every People Magazine  
Tells a tragic story.  
It usually makes me sad.

When I think of Lacey Peterson's story,  
Whose murder went so public.  
It usually makes me sad.

When doctors on TV save lives,  
That in real life can't be saved.  
It usually makes me sad.

I've lost faith in our system.  
But it's perfect on TV.  
It usually makes me sad.



### **My Grandfather**

If all the money in the world would help,  
Zach wouldn't be in jail.  
My grandpa tried as hard as he could  
But all it did was fail.  
He tried so hard to fight his pain  
But it was just too much to bear.  
But taking his life from the rest of us,  
Was an option which wasn't fair.  
He went to sleep one afternoon,  
Just like every other day.  
And when my grandma tried to wake him  
She cried out in dismay.  
The ambulance came and took him,  
In and out of consciousness he went  
At 68 he tried to die  
I don't think he realized what that meant.  
Today he is much better  
But he'll never be the same.  
When you look into his eyes  
You can't ignore his pain.



### **Parallel Lives**

I got to get my drivers license,  
Zach and Greg never will.

I got to finish high school,  
Zach and Greg never could.

I got to take the ACT,  
Zach and Greg never did.

I got to have a college roommate,  
Zach and Greg will never see.

I got an A in my first college class,  
Zach and Greg can not do.

I had a party when I turned 21,  
Zach and Greg will not have.

I will get a college diploma,  
Zach and Greg will not do.

I will get married and have a family,  
Zach and Greg were robbed of the chance.

I will get to live my life.  
Zach and Greg never had.

We should have lived parallel lives, Zach Greg and I.  
We all should be grown ups now, Greg wasn't supposed to die.



**Amelia Schmidt** is a recent graduate of American University. She received an undergraduate degree in Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics and Government. She worked for a press freedom group as a staff writer during her last semester of college and is currently working full time as a legal assistant at a DC law firm. She was inspired to write her poetry in one of Robert Johnson's undergraduate courses and looks forward to continuing her writing as she moves into the next chapter of her life.

# Sunday Morning Phone Call & Suck at Life by Thaïs Miller

## Sunday Morning Phone Call

He calls the synagogue on Sunday  
morning, like the girlfriend that he cheated on, still  
hung over from the debaucheries of the  
night before, spit running from his chin, empty  
bottles filled with cigarette butts clanging  
as they roll in the top dresser drawer. The synagogue says  
they are busy—they have Sunday school this morning and

he can hear the children running in the hallway.  
“But it's okay,” the synagogue says reluctantly, like the girlfriend who has  
been through this several times before,  
“you can still come over.”



### **Suck at Life**

I suck at life through a straw  
made for bubble tea. Big bursts of tapioca  
overwhelm me. A few at a time and their flavor is sweet, savory. A bunch at once and I  
skip a breath,  
gulp down too quickly, and lose my train of thought, wishing only  
that I could spit out those globs  
again and digest them more naturally.

I suck at life through a needle  
into a cadaver. Gobbets of dried blood, like mosquito wings, grope  
towards the inside of the cylinder, clinging to the shaft, craving air like a child  
craves his mother—running from the stranger that  
clasps his hand.

I suck at life through a virgin smoker  
at a hookah party. Daintily pressing the tube against my mouth; eyes  
wide watching the other glimmering faces around me. But the  
coal is old and a clump of ash enters my throat and I cough  
for the first time and  
he mutters next to me, “yeah, it’s getting pretty  
strong.” Irreversible shame turns into one dry cluster in my lung, only  
to arrive on an x-ray years later with loving husband tears  
running down the palms of my hands wishing  
he could have the mass instead of me.

I suck at life through a tongue  
in a teenager’s girlfriend. Awkwardly grabbing for as much skin as  
possible, praying that she won’t pull away, unsure that she  
will want me to call tomorrow. With each sip of air another worry  
that luck won’t do it, that even though a sign from  
God set me up with this girl, it’s not going  
to last more than a weekend; this is just a fling.  
Each exhalation of air another reassurance  
that my emotions run far deeper  
than hers, that she only sees  
a good-looking body.

I suck at life through a pool drain  
on a sunny Tuesday. Spiders and rats swim  
fervently away from my strong suction. They get stuck in my filter  
and the pool man must take his long arm and hoist them  
out. I let go of the substantial pestilence but  
retain the bacterial all the same—no  
spermicidal lubricant antibacterial cleanser

can destroy the amount  
I exude.



**Thais Miller** is an undergraduate honors student at American University majoring in Literature and minoring in Music Performance. Her poem, "The First Time I Saw That Place," was published in Robert Johnson's *Burnt Offerings*. Her poetry also has appeared in *Admit2: An Online Literary Magazine* and in *AmLit*. Thais's play, "The Price is Wrong: A Play in One Act with Vignettes," won a Tacenda Literary Award. The play appears in the 2008 issue of *Tacenda Literary Magazine* and has been issued as a free-standing chapbook by BleakHouse Publishing. Her novel, *Our Machinery*, was serialized in *Predicate* (a literary magazine) and published as a trade paperback book by Brown Paper Publishing in 2008. After completing her undergraduate degree, Thais hopes to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing or Screenwriting.

## Eulogy for Sorei by Elmo Chattman

I saw a man die today  
Actually it was years ago  
a million years ago  
but his death has never left me  
It is etched on my eyeballs  
like a lithograph  
Now when I see the world  
it is always red.

"Help me," he cried  
Rather, his lips formed the words  
There was no sound  
Only the silent whisper of death  
His hands clutched at a spot just below his throat  
trying to stop the fountain of red  
spurting from the hole in his chest...  
The little boy with his finger in the dike.

The others looked on for a moment  
then were gone  
turned their backs and hurried away  
lest they be the one accused  
It was as if the poor man had the plague  
In that moment  
he did  
In that moment  
he hadn't a friend in the world.

There were jeers and cheers  
Since when had death become a spectator sport  
Thumbs up  
Thumbs down  
Are we Romans?  
It really didn't matter

His final curtain was coming down fast  
There would be no encore for Sorei tonight.  
I stood there torn in two  
like a valentine from a confused and forgotten lover  
My heart told me to go to him  
but my feet stood fast  
The convict in me knew better.

Sorei died before he was touched by another human hand  
His last taste of mankind  
was not kind at all  
Betrayed by the kiss of the assassin he called his friend  
Something inside me felt the blade and died with him  
The scars in my eyes  
these cataracts of death  
prove it.

Today it is life as usual in the pen  
Broken men wander to and fro  
their anger and passion, pent up and stifled  
becomes the enemy within  
Sometimes I hear them on the yard  
boast to the young boys fresh from the world  
"I was there when Sorei died  
I am a soldier  
Don't fuck with me."

I look at them through the bloody windshields of my eyes  
wondering what planet they are from.



**Elmo Chattman** is a prisoner in the California prison system. This poem is published here with permission expressed in a personal communication dated April 8, 2008, from Elmo Chattman, Jr., mailed from Vacaville, CA.

## Dry Surfaces by Yvette Louisell

### Dry Surfaces

You know, I wake up every day  
thinking I'm gonna get that date  
the one we're all waiting for  
but some of us just a little  
or a lifetime longer  
Twenty years later  
I still wake up  
thinking I'm at home  
rolling over to the smell of  
my dog by the foot  
of the bed  
Street sounds  
Kid sounds

That damn rooster  
my mom drove up from Cincinnati  
the year I turned twelve  
I hear the train rolling  
past the paper mill  
remembering the time  
I almost drowned  
in paper pulp  
taking a shortcut  
not knowing the dry surface  
camouflaged a whole pool  
of muck  
Yeah, I wake up every morning  
Still  
twenty years later  
thinking it's coming soon  
that date  
the one we all hope we're gonna get  
the one that will take us back  
to before  
But then I roll over  
looking down at the same yellowed tiles  
and I know  
that the smile I'm gonna wear all day  
is just like that dry top  
at the paper mill



### **Wisdom**

What my mom taught me  
doesn't come from  
the world of  
"Come in the house when  
the street lights come on."  
What could she really tell me  
except don't do what I did.  
Don't marry a white man  
and put him through school  
when you could go yourself.  
Don't stay in the same town  
when you finally leave him.  
And don't think you can fight  
the system on your own,  
cuz all three of your kids  
are gonna get raised up  
by people who don't want them  
to even know they're yours.  
My mom taught me a lot,  
but it wasn't the words she said.  
It was watching  
her demons  
turn into monsters

that didn't exist  
but blocked the way to everything  
that could have been, even still.  
Running around wearing  
winter clothes in summer  
and talking about stuff  
that happened thirty years ago  
like it was today.  
My mom taught me a lot,  
but it wasn't the words she said.  
It's the ones she still can't find.



### **Divergence**

When he enters,  
I'm never really there.  
Calling out the right name  
and moving at the proper times  
have convinced him  
for so long  
it's not even my fault  
anymore.  
He's the ocean  
and I'm the shore.  
Or, he's a spreading root  
and I'm the soil.  
Touching, yet never  
connecting.  
The way the horizon  
stops short of converging  
with the earth.  
I don't know why,  
but this is always true:  
the parts of him  
that travel in me  
never move.



At age 16, **Yvette M. Louisell** was sentenced to life without parole. Her most recent creative writings appear in *Exiled Voices* edited by Susan Nagelsen (New England College Press, 2008).



# Descartes Revisited by Charles Huckelbury

The overarching theme of prison is punishment via systematic depersonalization of the prisoner. Everything, from the faux military command structure and tactical units to the regimented procedures for eating and working, has as its focus stripping me of my identity, or at least the identity the machine thinks is me. The goal is understandable given what that perceived identity did to gain entrance to the prison in the first place. The obvious fallacy, of course, is allowing my crime to serve as my primary identifier, disregarding in the process anything that mitigates or otherwise argues against such a stark characterization.

Prisons, however, reduce everything and everyone to the least common denominator. Even the classification process restricts itself to only two criteria: possible threat to other prisoners and staff (e.g. the Quay scale) and potential benefit to the facility. Those who resist this simplistic taxonomy generally pay a high price, both emotionally and psychologically-and frequently, physically.

I never bought the party line that told me who I was, at least not consciously, but I was contaminated by it just the same until nearly twenty years into my sentence, when, on a quiet morning around 4:00, I realized that while I was reading or writing, I wasn't wearing "mind-forg'd manacles," in Blake's poignant phrase. Although that might seem obvious to someone on the other side of the wall, prison consumes our unguarded spirits so subtly that eventually the cell is all we know, the number all we are; indeed, for many of us, it is all we care to know and be.

Perhaps I had gone a little way down that path, but I also recall smiling every time I heard Elton John's "Rocket Man," with its defiant refrain, "I'm not the man they think I am at all, no, no." I had not yet slipped totally into the beast's maw when my epiphany came, and at that point, I knew, I absolutely knew, that serious reading and writing were my lifelines to both the real world and to the man who lived under the psychological lash of maximum security. And it has been so ever since.

Even now, I am usually awake at 2:00 a.m. when the cellblock is quiet. I either read by the security light that never goes off or scribble half legible notes for a possible essay or poem I plan to begin in the morning. The reading satisfies my need for information, piques my curiosity to explore, and serves as a constant reminder of who I really am. And then I begin to write.

I write op-ed pieces because I believe I have something to contribute to intelligent public discourse. I write poetry because I am a poet at heart and love the beauty of language. I write essays because they help me hone my critical thinking skills and organize my thoughts. And I write fiction to encourage my imagination to take me to places and do things my body cannot. Most important, however, at least to me, is the awareness that when I am engaged in any of these pursuits, I am confirming my participation in the human experience and validating my worth as a distinct individual, in direct contradistinction to the efforts of the prison machinery's assiduous efforts to prove me wrong.

When I am writing, I am at home-and at peace-with that invisible man society has banished and forgotten, and even when prison attempts to make me believe he no longer exists, my writing proves otherwise. As Descartes might have put it: I write, therefore I am.



**Charles Huckelbury** is a widely published author of poetry, short stories, and prose. His most recent work is a collection of original poems, *Tales from the Purple Penguin* (BleakHouse Publishing 2008).

# A Cottage of One's Own Some Reflections on Intellectual Freedom, by Martha Andrews Donovan

*Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives.* – Virginia Woolf

For five days this summer, I was alone in a cottage on the coast of Maine – no husband, no teenage daughter, no cats, no television set, no phone, no Internet, no bills beckoning. Just five days of glorious, uninterrupted time in the most beautiful of settings, a place where my father drafted many books and my mother began many poems. I was blessed to have been born to writers: my father a political scientist (and an admirer of the Transcendentalists) and my mother a poet and memoirist. My parents' greatest gift to me, besides their love, was the gift of language. It is a gift I have spent the past twenty-five years trying to return to high school and college students during my teaching career.

I recall the day a student complained to me that the essay I had assigned had too many “big” words that he had to look up in the dictionary. I encouraged him to look at this as a gift and not as a burden. I told him that words are buoys we cling to so as not to drown. I gushed on and on about the beauty of language. He just looked at me like I was crazy. And perhaps writers are crazy – to hinge all of our hopes on something as abstract as these scrawls of ink on paper. I confess there are days when I ask myself why I bother to write. But there I was this summer, with five days to myself, *five* days to read and write to my heart's content.

Alas, I was not immediately content at all. In fact, I missed my husband and our daughter; I missed the noises of daily life; I missed the camaraderie of family. The first twenty-four hours loomed before me and I wondered how exactly I was going to fare on my own. As much as I crave silence and solitude, as much as I love *Walden* (and, really, Thoreau wasn't that far from town and neither was I), I came to the conclusion that I am a social creature who is not particularly used to being alone. Thankfully, I had a project that drew my attention away from my lonely, pitiful self: I had been invited to read and comment on *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment*, an anthology of writings by prisoners, criminologists, academics and students.

Reading this amazing collection of work took me to another world and made me realize that I had no idea what being alone, truly alone, is like; those who are incarcerated, on the other hand, know all too well what it means. And I wondered: what are the psychic costs to a prisoner as a result of this forced separation from society, this deep neglect? What are the costs to us, as a culture, in condemning so many people to a life of imprisonment? What poets and playwrights – what Shakespeare, what Milton – have we silenced? Against what odds must caged prisoners battle silence to create works of art?

Tillie Olsen, whose work inspired me to become a writer, notes in her essay “Silences in Literature” (originally an unwritten talk given in 1962 at the Radcliffe Institute):

Literary history and the present are dark with silences; some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all.... These are not *natural* silences – what Keats called *agonie ennuyeuse* (the tedious agony) – that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone, the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.

And I can only imagine what thwarting – what blights, what infestations – writers (like those whose work is being published in *Lethal Rejection*) confront in prison. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to create art in such a dark place as prison.

And, yet, great writing emerges from the darkest of places. I imagine that writing allows a prisoner to remember what it means to be human. I imagine that writing allows a prisoner to escape – if only momentarily – the constraints of prison. I imagine that writing in prison must be a way to transcend the brutality of prison, a chance for the writer to be part of a larger conversation beyond those walls. I imagine that writing while imprisoned is a way to assert one's autonomy, one's freedom of thought and imagination. I imagine writing is a way to say, as does the imprisoned narrator of Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison" that "Stone walls do not a prison make,/Nor iron bars a cage." I imagine that writing is a way to assert, as does the narrator of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* who has been turned away from the library: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." I imagine....

I imagine because I do not know. Like Virginia Woolf who must invent Judith Shakespeare to compensate for the scarcity of facts about Elizabethan women, I must invent the motives of imprisoned writers. Like Judith Shakespeare, these writers no doubt face not only indifference but outright hostility. Like Judith Shakespeare, these writers must endure people pointing at them and declaring: "You can't write. You can't paint." Like Judith Shakespeare, some of these writers must have been poets who died young without having written a word. And, alas, like Judith Shakespeare, some of these writers will kill themselves in grief, as did the beautiful writer Victor Hassine.

Virginia Woolf argues that Judith Shakespeare still lives; "for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh." We must work so that Judith Shakespeare and Victor Hassine can walk among us in the flesh; we should do no less.



**Martha Andrews Donovan** is an associate professor of writing at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *Green Mountains Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Maine Boats*, *Homes & Harbors*, *Marlboro Review*, *Pilgrimage*, and other journals, as well as the anthology *The Breath of Parted Lips: Voices From the Robert Frost Place, Volume 2*, edited by Sydney Lea (CavanKerry Press 2004). Her poetry chapbook, *Dress Her in Silk*, is forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press* this spring.

## Art and Autonomy Behind Bars by Erin George

Art is one of the things that define our humanity. It began with our evolutionary bifurcation from the rest of the primates, which was initially marked by the emergence of knapping flint – the conscious decision to purposefully create tools where unshaped stones and sticks once sufficed. Later, our efforts to master and interpret the world through creative expression blossomed throughout the Paleolithic world, as in the ritual dances engraved in Italy's Cave of the Addaura and Lascaux's Hall of Bulls, sites whose fertile vibrancy was hidden in the inaccessible clefts of the earth. We don't know the purpose of these depictions, but it can be supposed that they were our first feeble attempts to gain power: power over the hunt, the herds, and life itself. From the very beginning, it seems, art has connected us inextricably with our surroundings.

Like the shaman daubing his arcane images in the sunless embrace of the earth, as an imprisoned writer I have struggled to cast spells in darkness: the physical dimness of my narrow cell after lockdown and the emotional darkness of a woman largely deprived of meaningful human contact. I, too, am powerless, but use the few tools I have – cheap paper and pencils worn to nubbins by the battered pencil sharpener in the day room – to devise my own magic. But rather than trying to increase the bison herd or tame a pot-bellied, prehistoric horse, I am attempting to subdue my own wretched experiences by filtering them through poetry.

The environment of prison is, for the most part, not conducive to artistic endeavor. I can't say that this is a deliberate choice by the administration. The prison now offers a small drawing class – although the students are not allowed to keep any of the paintings they create – and sometimes there is a class available in writing or drama (used as a therapeutic tool), but the creative needs of Fluvanna's population are largely ignored. Mindless conformity and obedience are the tacit goals of incarceration, so anything that might cause us to view ourselves as being more than just a DOC number dangerously risks creating an inmate who considers herself to be of value as a human being. And art is notorious for its healing properties.

Almost everyone has the desire to be creative. In prison, the natural media for such attempts are typically visual. Because of the dearth of formal education suffered by many of those incarcerated, most prison artists are not comfortable with the written word. Instead, many turn to making birthday cards or stationery by tracing pages torn from coloring books. Those few with a genuine gift for drawing often run a cottage industry: they trade ink portraits (modeled from photographs) drawn onto handkerchiefs for stamps or cigarettes, or express their art in elaborate prison tattoos. Regardless of the skill level of their execution, all of these endeavors share one purpose – they are used to connect with others, be it personalized cards for a child at home or a lover's name delicately drawn in an unobtrusive place (since tattoos are, after all, against the rules).

Commissary sells a few inferior art supplies-off-brand magic markers that run dry after one use, colored pencils that are so short that they can't be sharpened when they've gone dull, and pads of flimsy paper. We are allowed to buy a bit more than that from an approved catalogue vendor, but the prices of these items are so high as to render them out of reach for the majority of the women here. But anything necessary to more fully express oneself artistically- oil paints, acrylics, modeling clay- is considered contraband. I have no talent in the area of drawing (even tracing would be a challenge for me), but since I'm permitted reasonable amounts of lined notebook paper and pencils, I have found poetry to be my preferred method of artistic expression.

The longing for beauty and artistic meaning behind bars is pervasive, and stems, I think from the absolute absence of any sort of physical or intellectual freedom inside. Everything is decided for a prisoner at Virginia's maximum-security prison for women: her daily 7:00am wakeup call, the beans and rice slopped onto her lunch tray, the monotonous gray of her t-shirts. The environment seems calculated to stifle any warmth. White cinder block walls are, by policy, undecorated by photographs of family or a child's drawing. Gunmetal gray desks and bunks must be kept as cleared as possible. Any attempt to personalize one's quarters is discouraged.

My response to the anomie of prison life has been a cleaving to the written word. Before my incarceration I was a voracious reader of history and prose, but I ignored poetry. A few years after I was locked up, though, a friend dragged me to the Voice Project, a class run by a Charlottesville writer's group. "This cool chick named Amanda runs it, and we do poetry and stuff," my friend said, "and I know you like all those big words and you read a lot. Give it a try!"

The Voice Project has had a profound impact on the quality of the time I have spent incarcerated since that night. From the first class, from the first clumsy poem that Amanda generously praised, it has transformed me from a passive consumer of words into a chronicler of my history, a crafter (I hope) of the occasional resonating hope. Rather than speeding through the novels in the prison library to kill time, I began to wander over the 820s and explore.

Poetry had always been the boring part of English class, though I was glib enough to be able to gin up an acceptable interpretation of a poem's symbolism for Lit class. Sure, I could enjoy the lurid story and hoof beat cadence of "The Highwayman" a poem I memorized in middle school, but the magic of Cummings was lost to me. The few poems I had cranked out for classroom assignments were, even to the most charitable critic, forgettable; the clumsy sonnet about my struggles in chemistry class and my insipid ode to springtime are gladly lost. But through the Voice Project, I rediscovered poetry.

It was a blessing, one of the few positives of my incarceration. The defining characteristic of a prisoner is her silence. In order to avoid segregation or worse, insult and indignity are endured mutely. To protest risks the loss of what little we are still allowed. So when an officer makes a comment in my presence about "you bitches," I never

respond. The emotions are instead tucked away until they can be processed and discarded. For the majority of the women here, the rage and despair are transformed into violence. I prefer to channel mine through words.

At first, this was only a clumsy form of therapy for me. I never intended for anyone to read what I had produced. The poems were raw, little more than free-writing and too volatile to be shared. But as I learned more about the structure and conventions of poetry, I was better able to harness the moil of emotions. The feelings were still powerful, but filtered through poetry they became accessible to the people who genuinely cared about me and my writings.

By this time my writing had become a connection to the people around me. I was gratified that people on the outside saw value in what I was creating, reincorporating me into the human race. Fellow inmates saw their own experiences in my words and we would weep together at our shared losses. Even a few staff members read it and subtly opened up to me in return (a forbidden smudging of the line between inmate and jailer).

It was through my poetry that I was finally able to tell my parents what I had been though and continued to suffer. They both had been staunchly by my side throughout my trial and incarceration, but we had never been able to confront the depth of my pain. They were in too much anguish themselves for me to share my raw emotions. I didn't want to cause them more hurt than they were already experiencing. So we carefully avoided certain subjects at our visits, instead discussing the "safe" topics like TV shows and politics. But through my writing I was able to tell them about the loneliness of my existence, my memories of my children, and my profound sadness. They shared in my writing successes as well. I remember calling my mom after I received a letter telling me that I had won first place in the PEN Prison writing competition. She cried on the phone for the entire twenty minute call, then, as any proud parent would, proceeded to telephone or email every relative and friend in her address book. She still tells me how proud she is of me.

The real audience for all of my writing is my children. Everything I accomplish in prison is inspired by and dedicated to them. They are too young to read most of what I write –the eldest is only thirteen – but I am caching away my experiences for them. I know that it won't be easy for them to read any of it. Most of my poems are about my memories of them or life behind bars, both painful subjects. But, unfortunately, it is the only legacy I have to offer. So I continue to write. My parents assiduously save copies of the magazines and books my work appears in for each of them to have when they are older. There is, I hope, a more immediate benefit for them as a result of my writing, though. As they become teenagers, struggling with their own issues of fitting in and self-esteem, I like to think that it will be easier for them if they can consider their mom as a poet rather than a prisoner.

For that is what I choose to be: a poet. I reject the premise that I am less than human, unworthy of warmth and light. As long as there is an audience, my writing is more powerful than the grinding gears of the bureaucracy that holds me. And even after I'm gone, there will be someone left to read it. It is too late to silence me now.



**Erin George** is an award-winning poet and author of *Origami Heart: Poems By A Woman Doing Life* (BleakHouse Publishing, 2009).

## Time Spent Doing Time by Susan Nagelsen

I am waiting once again for visits to begin; this is my eleven hundred fiftieth in a series of visits that spans the last eleven years. I have watched a parade of humanity pass before my eyes. In many ways it has been akin to watching a full-length feature film, a saga if you will. Today is a typical day. It is Sunday, and it is 12:00, but I am sitting in the cold, orange, plastic chair even though I will not be admitted into the visiting room until 1:00. There is a ritual that must be followed, especially on Sundays. If you are not early, very early, you will not get in until the allotted time is half gone. On Sundays the room is filled to capacity, which translates into about two hundred

people of all colors-shapes-sizes-ages; most are a part of the lower middle class, but as always there are people who represent both ends of the spectrum. You can be guaranteed of two things: it will be loud and it never lacks for interest.

The eighties brought truth-in-sentencing, which brought mandatory sentences accompanied by lengthy minimum sentences; consequently, the same people make the trek to the visiting room, and I have come to know them for that hour spent each Sunday waiting, passing time. I notice when someone isn't there, I listen to conversations, I learn about their lives and their children. I have seen them at their best and their worst, and they have shared with infinite patience and obvious understanding when I was at my best and at my worst. When tragedy strikes, there are hugs and tears and nods of understanding.

So, here I sit. It is January and the temperature is hovering around zero. The door opens, and I hear the woman next to me say, "Oh look, she had her baby." Karen has been visiting her husband here for five years, and we have sat together and talked through more Sundays than either of us wants to remember. Karen loves babies. Her son started visiting his father when he was just an eleven-year-old boy, and is now nineteen and at least six foot three. But through the years, we have heard about his struggles in school, his first date, his first car accident, and the protective nature of this boy-man as he tries to take care of his mother. While Karen is making noises about the baby, I can't help but think about how much her son has changed over the years.

I can remember the years of sitting there on a Sunday when Karen would bring her son along for a visit. In the beginning, they would sit apart from the group, for he was shy and this was new for him. As the years went along, he gained confidence and began to interact; at first it was just here and there, but now, oh what a difference.

All these years later, when this young man comes in for a visit, he is able to give as good as he gets. He has a great smile, and it does wonders for the room when he shares it with all of us.

Karen's voice draws my attention, and I turn in my seat to see a young woman who is probably about twenty, if she is a day. She has barely made it through the door when three women, with oohs and ahs about the baby, a little girl named Tamatha, surround her. She is a little doll, and her mother is clearly very proud. The women help her with the baby seat, her diaper bag, and before too long, she is settled next to them with the baby, a blanket, a bottle, and a handkerchief filled with quarters. This baby is the newest addition to this collective.

These mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, lovers, friends, and children are doing time with the men they visit. When the clock finally ticks off the final seconds and the guards begin to call for visits, there is a collective sigh in the room. The cacophony begins in earnest. You can hear lockers slamming, quarters dropping, feet shuffling, and the children's voices are raised another octave, fighting to be heard.

There is one little voice that seems to be higher than the rest, "I want to see my abuelo," screams Mariel. The room is immediately silent. Then the smiles, then the voices begin. We have been waiting for her to speak for the longest time. She has been coming to this visiting room since before she was born, and we have watched her grow. We watched as her grandmother first carried her in her arms, and then came the stroller, and then the first tentative steps. Mariel went through the typical stages. At first, she would let anyone hold her, but at about 11 months, she only wanted her abuela. At two, she scowls at strangers, her eyebrows meeting in the middle; she slowly and cautiously, on some days, warms up to the room filled with strangers.

We are laughing and smiling and talking. We are clapping and doing the "Isn't she the cutest thing" between ourselves. Her grandmother, a beautiful woman, with smooth café 'con leche' skin and an engaging smile is clearly tickled to hear her granddaughter. It is a happy moment in a difficult place.

I hear my name called, and I head toward the bubble. Behind me I hear familiar voices speaking the mantra, "Have a good visit; see you next week." I walk toward the metal detector, stick my hand through the Plexiglas hole so the guard can stamp it. Then I wait for the door to the mantrap to buzz, and I walk to the front bubble.

"Hey, how ya doin today?"

His voice is gravelly from smoking too many cigarettes. He is one of the guards who holds up the start of visits because he has to go have one last smoke before he is trapped in the bubble for the next three hours. I don't mind it when he is in the bubble; he doesn't care about anything. I smile to myself because it means it will be a low-key kind of visit.

"I'm hanging in there. Could I please have a table on the wall."

I wait to see if my request will be granted. He will usually comply. You learn quickly who will and who won't.

"Table 24," he says.

I smile my thanks and the door buzzes. This is great. I like this table. It is by a window; although the view is a cinder block courtyard filled with pigeons and rows of concertina and razor wire, there is natural light. I stand at the table and survey the room while I wait for my husband to walk through the door. The other reason this is such a great table is that it is smack in the middle of the room, up against the wall, with a panoramic view of the people whose lives are tangential to mine.

I look to see who is sitting on either side of us; it is an important thing to note. There are times when tempers flare, when private business becomes public business, and as anyone will tell you, forewarned is forearmed. The door from the yard opens, and men come through one after the other. I see many of the same men walk through the door each Sunday; they begin as a staggered column and fan out toward their visits. Some might nod as they walk by, and I find that I notice if someone isn't looking well, or if someone is not in the usual crowd.

My husband is third through the door, and he drops his pass in the specified place and strides toward me. His smile is there from the moment we make eye contact. His first question is always the same, "How are you?" Then we hug.

Once we are seated at the table, we begin to catch up. We never play cards, we never play games; we talk. We sometimes marvel at the people who come in to the visiting room and barely acknowledge one another before they begin to play cards or Yahtzee and eat.

We spend time talking about my world, and then we spend time talking about his world, not the nature of prison, but the humans that occupy the space within the walls. So today he said, "You should see Felix; I have no idea when he will make it over here. The last time I saw him was when they cleared count, and he was still in his towel, primping in the bathroom. He is trying to make those gray hairs less visible."

"Have you seen his wife today?" I asked.

He scanned the room until his gaze stopped on Felix's wife. She was sitting there watching Mariel play in the play area. She was wearing a black winter skirt that came to mid-calf. It had beautiful lines. Her boots were black calfskin and stopped just below her knee. Her sweater was red and it hugged her body. She looked elegant, sitting there her hands clasped on the table in front of her, her legs crossed at the ankles.

"No wonder he works so hard. He must be scared to death that he might lose her. It's only been five, and he's got fifteen on the bottom."

"Check out Mariel over there in the play area."

"You've got to be kidding me," my husband said, shaking his head as he spoke.

"She is really turning into a little person."

Our conversation seems to go like that for a while. These people's lives intersect ours; so when things happen, we share them just as anyone would. One Sunday afternoon a couple of years ago, I noticed that a woman and her two kids weren't visiting that afternoon. When my husband sat down, I asked him about Tom. He shook his head.

"He died yesterday evening. I didn't even hear about it until this morning."

I wasn't surprised; it wasn't unexpected, but I felt a wide range of emotions surge through me. How sad. How sad that he died in prison. How sad that he couldn't be with his family. How sad for his children. How liberating for all of them. In many ways, he gave them the ultimate gift; they were all set free.

We had watched his decline. At first it was just little things; he started carrying a pillow to sit on; he had lost a lot of weight, and the chairs were hard on his back. His children, ages five and seven, then six and eight, then seven and nine, and finally nine and eleven, visited their father twice a week for as long as they could. When they were young, Tom was able to lift them in the air and play with them. It was nice to see them happy. As his health failed they found more sedentary ways to enjoy one another. The children were at an age where they could understand the need for more contemplative time. They shared a faith that was strong, and at the end of each visit they would hold hands and pray, until finally it would be time for them to go. I had seen them just the week before, sitting there across the room. Tom looked very bad, but he smiled, and the kids gave him and his wife some time alone.

"Those kids really grew up fast, didn't they? It will be odd not to see them here anymore."

"I can only imagine how they must be feeling."

We sat there in companionable silence for a bit, then the sound of a crying infant entered the space.

"That must be Tamatha; she is only eight days old. You should see her, she is so tiny." I knew that I was smiling from ear to ear. "There is something so sweet about newborn babies."

The crying stopped as the new family made its way across the room; they were going to have pictures taken, the proud father stopping along the way to show off his baby girl. As they passed, I said to my husband, "Do you know him?"

"He's been in the unit for a couple of months, but he isn't doing much, maybe three, three and a half."

They position themselves along the wall as their smiles are recorded for posterity, and then they make their way back to their assigned table.

On Sundays there is a steady stream of people moving up and back between the vending machine and the table, or the table and the door. There are people who are only able to visit once a month, and when they show up it is like watching a series of mini-reunions as they make their way to a table in the back of the room.

The door buzzes and pops indicating someone coming in the room. I recognize the woman, and even though I haven't seen her for a while, she looks basically the same. There may be a few more gray hairs, or some extra pounds, but I would know her anywhere. I don't recognize the young woman walking with her. They head down the aisle and begin searching for the table. I can hear them saying to one another, "Table 53," as if speaking it aloud will help them locate it. The young woman is much closer now, and I am shocked. This young woman is the daughter. The changes are amazing. She has gone from little girl to young woman. I don't know the woman well, only to nod and say hello, but I have heard her speaking to other women, so I know that her daughter is very busy with cheerleading, clubs, school, etc., and she is a full-blown teenager who cannot be bothered with spending time with the family. She has gone the way of all teenagers, as she should. She visits maybe once every couple of months. I don't think I have seen her for maybe six months. I am absolutely amazed.



I can't help but think about the changes that happen while these husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters are locked behind bars. Of course we age; there is no doubt about it, but it isn't so clear to us. We are living it, and we are thankfully unable to clearly remember what it was like to bound out of bed after a couple of hours sleep ready to face the day without a single ache. Our changes become invisible to us. But watching the children, watching them make their appearance as brand new tiny babies and realizing that in the blink of an eye you are staring into the eyes of a defiant fourteen year old. It is in that moment that you realize just how much things have changed.

It becomes a tableau. The world stops for just a moment, and I am allowed a moment to see it all unfold before me. I notice lines on faces, a slowness to a once jaunty gait, less hair on the heads, more hair on the ears, hands that shake and ears that strain to hear; there are babies crying, teenage girls sitting with their arms crossed and backs turned. A group of boys, ranging in age from four to six play with trucks on the floor. You hear a small boy yelling at the top of his lungs, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" He is running full tilt toward a man who smiles from ear to ear as he opens his arms wide. He stoops and the boy leaps into his father's arms. All of these images and sounds present themselves for what they are: the texture of time spent doing time.



**Susan Nagelsen** is Professor of Special Education, Director of the Writing Program at New England College, and Associate Editor of *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. She taught writing classes at New Hampshire State Prison for many years and remains in contact with a wide range of prison writers.

# Poetry of Social Justice & Living Definition by Hannah Hanson

## Poetry of Social Justice

Poetry cried out for social justice  
before the movement started,  
when the movement was challenged,  
when the movement was scattered and lost,  
when another movement came along.

Poetry exists in the shadows and lonely places of a social justice movement  
in the leather journals,  
on the paper napkins,  
in tear sealed letters,  
on jail cell walls.

Poetry reflects the social justice movements  
as the light between injustices,  
as the clarity of purpose,  
as the witness for the journey,  
as the heart's hidden fragments.

Poetry is the cry of social justice movements  
whispered by lone voices,  
proclaimed to inspire new voices,  
shouted over indifferent voices,  
sung by a chorus of relentless voices.





## Living Definition



define social justice:

do we start with cruelty,  
or dignity?

must we characterize power,  
or first, deprivation?

should we delineate ethics  
or equality?

have we explored who it's defined for,  
or could it be universal?

do we denote law,  
or value?

define social justice:

can you open up a dictionary,  
or what about your heart?

will you describe what words designate,  
or can you illustrate?

won't you assign something for society,  
or for yourself?

is it ascertained for the broken,  
or forgotten by your guilt?

do you have a basis to comprehend,  
or will you miss our translations?

define social justice:

because your definition must come alive,  
or our ink will fade...



**Hannah Hanson** is a recent alumna of American University, who began writing poetry as a response to a senior project on the poetry of social justice movements. She is currently heading west to see more of the country and to continue photographing and writing, before working in the human rights field abroad.

# empty spaces by Sonia Tabriz

in this state  
between sleep and wake  
I ponder the pains of others  
in places so far from my own  
lingering  
in the very same mental space  
the break

between daily distraction and sweet escape  
from a pain that awaits  
and a fear to face

loneliness  
too real for us to take  
that perhaps  
this is it



**Sonia Tabriz** is a junior at American University, majoring in both Law & Society and Psychology. She is an active member of the University Honors Program, and also volunteers as an AU Ambassador to provide guidance and support to new students. Sonia was awarded the Outstanding Honors Sophomore Award for her achievements, and has earned a spot on the Dean's List every semester during her tenure at American University. Upon visiting the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, Sonia was intrigued by the intricacies of prison life and was inspired to explore an underground world with which most people are not familiar. Since then, Sonia has been published in and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. She looks forward to attending law school upon graduation and aspires to continue writing and creating art on issues of criminal justice and deprivation of liberty.