

BLEAKHOUSE REVIEW



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Grace Austin & Tatiana Laing, Associate Editors

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BleakHouse Review is an online literary magazine that provides a venue for writing and art on human liberty, both its deprivation and its achievement. Some people find freedom behind prison walls; others, ostensibly free, build prisons for themselves in their everyday lives. The interplay of persons and settings, as well as limits and possibilities, forms the palette on which our writers and artists work, examining their subjects with imagination and care.

BleakHouse Review is edited by Robert Johnson (literary content) and Carla Mavaddat (art and design). For the 2014 issue, we gratefully acknowledge the assistance, support and editorial acumen provided by associate editors Grace Austin and Tatiana Laing.

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My Arrest
by David Keplinger

Annie, tonight
I tried to remember
My life, because it is
A Thursday,
And it is cold,
November 8, 1863,
And I am here
These four days.
Some lights
From the building
Across from me
On this road,
Shining through
An alley called
Dumbarton.
A guard had bit
With his bad tooth
Into a peach
And cursed himself
And his charge
And then was quiet.
I thought how strange
To be here at all,
To be him blowing
Out of candle
While holding
A hand on his mouth,
The hurt tooth,
As in the window
Across from mine
Someone blew
Their own candle out.
Whoever it was
Blew that light out
Had no sense
That I existed.
Four days. I send this
Are giving up
All hope. The moon
Has disappeared
Behind a rooftop
And it is nearly too dark
To write another word.
It hangs there
Shining but not
By its own light
A little longer.
It trembles on the cornice
Of this prison.
It lifts into a cloud

Until this page
And my desire
To remember something
Are the last things
That are lit by it.



"Urban Fire", by Carla Mavaddat

Exit Interview: The Syllable
By David Keplinger

Anderson was acquitted of desertion charges and released from Stone General Hospital, Washington, D.C. in June, 1864

--You joined, and your Pa said?

He shook my hand.

--And your ma said?

She rose to serve the meat.

--That night you had your meat.

Meat. A word I love.

--The word the thing itself.

One sound. One sense.

---As if a grape—

In the mouth of a king.

--It is, I own, the one sound words—

We're the same!—

--are the soul made flesh.

Love.

--Hate.

Pure.

--Right.

One-sound words.

--Cooked by fire, pig feet and fat.

Such words in my head—

--Pig, fire—

Lift me to God.

--Kill.

Bread.

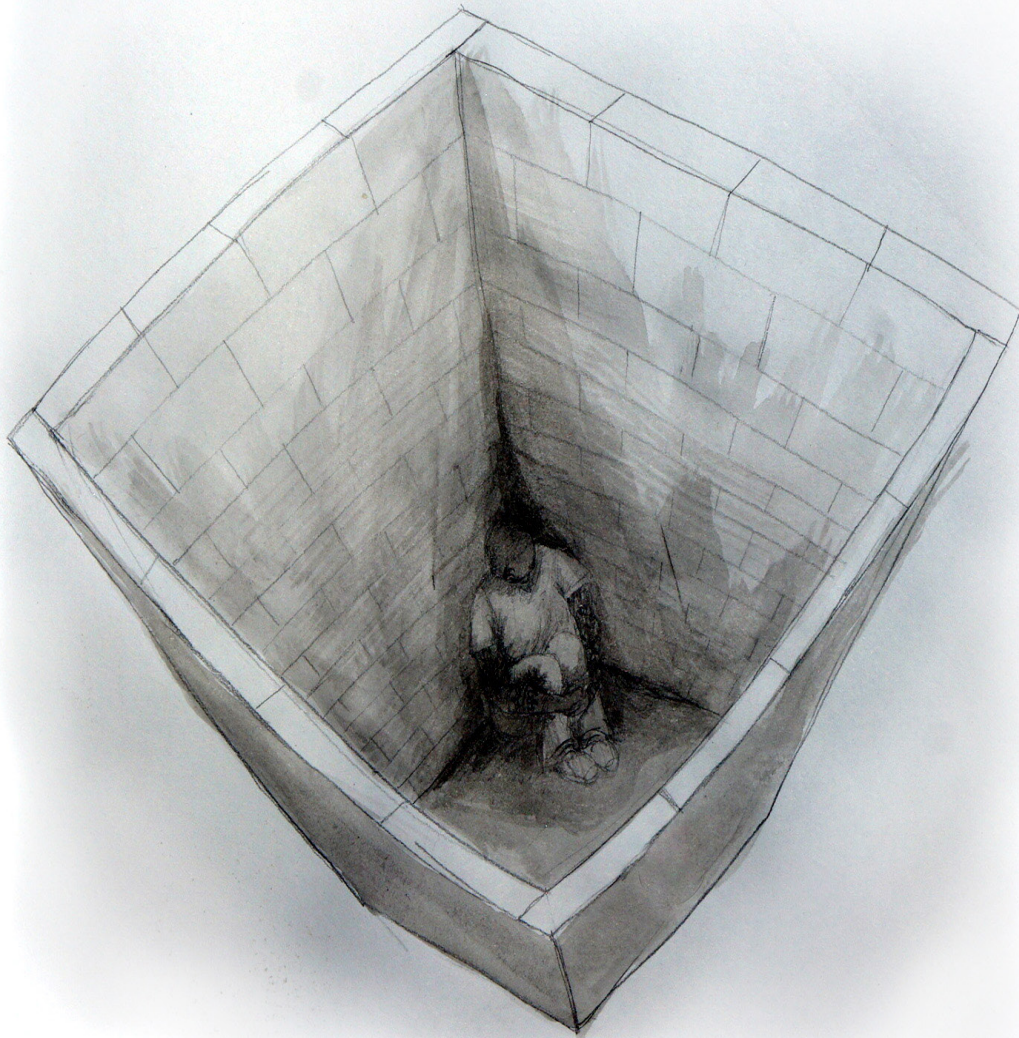
--*Blood.*

Meat

Three Poems Exploring Sorrowful Mysteries in Today's Prisons

By Rev. Mr. Al Rose

Note to the reader, by retired prison chaplain Al Rose, author: The next three poems tell a story with layers of meaning. They can be read as simply telling of incidents that I took part in or witnessed in prisons, or as speaking about human suffering and redemption as part of the human condition. They are certainly that, but I have not intended them to tell that story. Rather, as is suggested by the titles (references to the Roman Catholic rosary), they are intended to show that the Passion of Christ is tragically re-enacted in our prisons. Each of these three poems presents an ironic look at one of the events in the sequence leading to Christ's crucifixion (he was, after all, a prisoner who received the death penalty). To me as a prison chaplain, in each man, regardless of how twisted and tortured his life has been, Christ is to be found.



"The Hole", by Rachel Ternes

The Second Sorrowful Mystery: The Scourging
By Rev. Mr. Al Rose

Look look through the glass
wall of a prison day-room
a masque of violent forms
batons falling in a complex rhythm
that splatters blood
silently

-

Wild with pain
at an appeal lost
he has thrown his body
at the law

-

Look look his twisted limbs
in shackles
supervisor exulting
inmates expressionless
he is dragged to his cell

-

I watch with hands folded
prayerfully
helplessly

The Third Sorrowful Mystery: The Crowning with Thorns
By Rev. Mr. Al Rose

They said he was crazy he
scrawled in his cell
told weird dreams in the yard
So they made mock of him
until he told them he was the Devil
That did it

-
They threw him into the blackness
the South Wing the lowest ring of hell
fetid feces-smear'd urine splattered
where lightless he howled

-
Visit him some inmates said
I declined his craziness
But finally I went
to lean against the bars
into his darkness
where he wept that he wrestled
with someone

-
I'm not sure who

The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery: The Death of Jesus
By Rev. Mr. Al Rose

We sit on the floor
waiting against the cell bars
he propped in a corner of the cage
using yoga for pain
a warden and guard down the hall
unheeding
laughing their youthful felonies

-

Then we walk we four with him
from steel to glass-walled chamber
where strapped on a gurney
his body is pierced
by the lethal invisible needle

-

Curtains opened for citizens
Executioner positioned motionless
To the final question
the reply Get it on

-

And death arrives antiseptically

-

Newsmen busy themselves
over the remains of his story
No one to ask for his body
he is lugged to the morgue
unregarded

No Doubt
By Sarah Bousquet

We watch you
Fight
For life
And pray
As we prey
On you
Your guilt

-

You're guilty
They said
And who are we
To disagree

-

We hear you
Beg
For appeals
And yearn
For the truth
Your innocence
You're innocent

-

Appeal denied
They said
And who are we
To disagree

-

We see you
Die
At last,
When hope
Is gone
And you're all alone

-

At peace
They said
And who are we
To disagree

25 years
By Sarah Bousquet

I like to pretend
I am different,
A diamond in the rough,
Among the rough
In this horror filled cell,
But the jailors remind me,
I am no gem

-
I am dull, plain, cramped,
Tired,
Hungry for real food,
And terrified, each day
But still,
I cling on to hope.

-
They cannot take my hope.

-
I have
No privacy,
No rights,
Nothing to call my own

-
I am turning into the number
Sown into the back of my shirt

-
“Officer, I am innocent,
I swear”
They laugh at my pleas.
“You are a felon now,
Guilty, until proven innocent”

-
25 years.
I am free, they tell me,
Don’t come back, they tell me
If you can help it

-
But once a felon, always a felon,
And I’ve known
For 25 years,
I will never be free again

Save the World
By Sarah Bousquet

I wanted to be a cop
To help people
To save lives
Chase down those
Who break the law

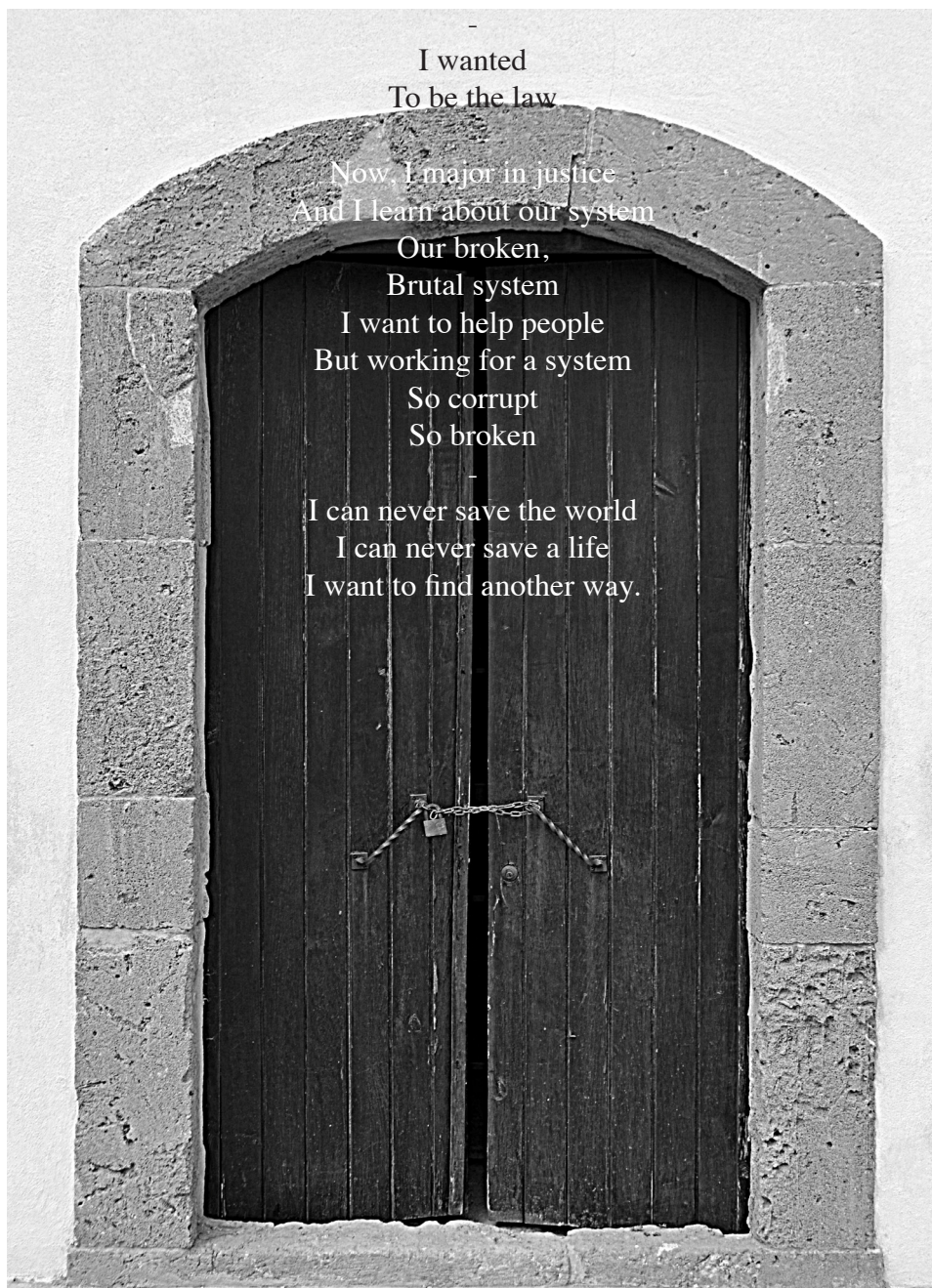
-
I wanted
To save the world

-
I wanted to be a lawyer
Put the bad guys away
Save the good ones
Defend our rights
Defend our lives

-
I wanted
To be the law

Now, I major in justice
And I learn about our system
Our broken,
Brutal system
I want to help people
But working for a system
So corrupt
So broken

-
I can never save the world
I can never save a life
I want to find another way.



"Vendicari", by Carla Mavaddat

Reasons By Emma Lobuono

Why did you become a cop?

When I was eighteen, my mother was murdered. Everything had been going well up until then. I was two weeks away from graduating high school, enrolled at Princeton University and all together happy with life. They found and arrested the guy quickly – by investigator standards, it was a sloppy job. The day after they had him in handcuffs, I dropped out of Princeton and went to the police academy instead.

Why did you become a cop?

I didn't want to at first. I really didn't. My dad was a cop and he was a hardass. All that namby-pamby, throwing-the-ol'-pigskin around wasn't his thing. I guess I joined because I wanted to be closer to him – to understand him more. I spent half a year wondering if I had done the right thing when I made my first arrest. I'd never seen him proud of me until I was leading this handcuffed thug into the station. I'd do anything to see that face again.

Why did you become a cop?

They always tell you, when you're a kid, "If you get lost, tell someone you can trust – like a police man". That's what I wanted to be. Someone people could trust.

Why did you become a cop?

As a child, I was constantly bullied for being the smallest. Now, when I walk past the inmates in their cells, they look at me with the same distaste as my childhood enemies did. Except while the bullies looked at me like I was an ant, the criminals look at me like I'm a god. I hold their lives and their happiness in the palm of my hand.

Why did you become a cop?

I didn't do well in school, man. Hated every second I was there. Force was the only place that'd take me.

Why did you become a cop?

I don't like it when people break the rules.

Why did you become a cop?

I like being able to cut through traffic lights.

Why did you become a cop?

When I was eleven, a man tried to kidnap me. It wasn't like you see on TV – there was no white, unmarked van, no creepy, bearded, middle-aged man offering candy. He looked like everyone else I had passed that day. I was walking home from school and he just grabbed my hand and yanked me down an alleyway. I was so scared, I just froze. I had no idea what to do. Turns out there was an officer nearby and she stepped in and arrested him. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to protect people.

Why did you become a cop?

I-I don't even know anymore, man. I ask myself that every day.

By Nature

By Emma Lobuono

When you're a defendant, you're expected to do a number of things. Sit down, shut up, look your best, don't argue with the judge, accept a plea deal, face your punishment and move on. Except you can never really move on and all you want to do the whole time is what your basic instinct tells you: stand up, scream, get angry, get mad, leave fist holes in the plaster of the barren courtroom wall, grab the judge by the shoulders and shake her so hard, her cruelty and malice falls out of her ears. And when the court guards come, close their too-tight, meaty hands around your elbow and you feel their fingers etch bruises into your skin, your brain screams at you to kick and thrash. It just makes it worse for you.

And then you're back in an iron cage, nursing your injuries and curling so far into yourself, you feel invisible. But you're not and you know you're not because five seconds after you've sat down, someone else is shoving you and cursing in your ear. It's a choice between evils, voluntary humiliation and involuntary humiliation. Whatever it takes to make you a human again, that's what you'll go with. So you take a plea, serve whatever short sentence you're given and then forced to act like you're a lowlife just biding your time for three, four days. When you've finished that, you try to restart your life only to find that, really, the only way to escape the grinding machine of justice is to be branded.

Public defenders defend the criminals; district attorneys defend the victims. Perhaps some of the public defenders should be called DAs as well, because most everyone in the justice system falls victim to it. Perhaps we should bring the justice system to justice.



"Vendicari", by Carla Mavaddat

Fragility

By Emma Lobuono

A young boy of only 15 was once told that it takes less than fifteen pounds of pressure to end another person's life. For a long time, he believed it. As a grown man of 25, he knows now that it takes much less to end a life and that ending a life does not mean that someone ends up dead. The looks aimed his way as he walks through the local supermarket and the terse comments as the cashier slams the register drawer shut and throws his change at him scream that yes, he may be alive, but his life is over. He walks home alone and ignores the fingers pointed at him, refusing to let himself get angry because he knows pointing fingers is what got him in this mess. And when he gets home and shuts himself away from the rest of the world, he breaks down and cries because life is so fragile and once it's shattered, nothing can put it back together.

One of the district's most seasoned prosecutors can put more people away in a day than she can remember by the time night falls. Her job is all that matters to her, the ever-growing responsibility of sweeping the filth off the streets and into big house. She doesn't pay attention to the backstories, doesn't care who these people are. She's a bull on a rampage in a china shop and she can't stop to look down at the pieces of lives that are getting ground to dust beneath her feet. But the world that turns around her knows she's just as fragile as everyone else, though she hides it with shot glass after shot glass slammed down on the bar.

There are times when everything seems to balance on the tip of a knife and a nudge in either direction will leave something feeling like it was sliced in half. A thief, old enough to know better and not young enough to be a thug, knows this better than anyone, as she sits cross-legged and crying next to a small cage barely big enough to house the beautiful golden retriever that is her only friend. She couldn't make it to trial that day, missed it by just a hair. The metro had waited for someone, the bus was late, the line was too long, the courtroom was moved. She did the crimes, sure; she did all of them. She didn't have an excuse for them, but she did try to get to court on time. And now, as she looks at the sad gaze of her best friend staring back at her through the bars, she wonders how something as sturdy and unchanging as life could fall apart so easily.

A serial killer on death row goes quietly to his execution. He's spent the last thirty years in prison. He was guilty and he still wasn't sure if he regretted anything. He remembers each and every one of his victims, how easy it was to turn them from people into victims, how quickly their lives seemed to slip away. The faceless guards above him strap him down, someone reads his sentence. He doesn't pay attention to the proceedings. He's lost in some sort of out-of-body, philosophical experience as he lays and wonders about what makes life what it is. There's nothing to stop the end of his life now but, right before everything's over, he thinks how ironic it is that even someone like him could be so fragile.

Old Man Killer
By Alexa Marie Kelly

I did not think you would be old.

-

But there you are,
Like my grandfather before he passed,
A man with sagging skin.

-

Nothing but time and prison bars and godless nights
Behind your diamond eyes.

-

Where are you, killer?
Where are you, thug?
Could you still pull that trigger?

-

Spill his blood, bury his bones,
Beneath that unforgiving highway?
Or have your hands gone limp, weary, dead?

-

No, I don't think you could kill.

-

We kept you caged so long that you
Forgot how to fight
How to eat, how to cry.

-

You could not hurt me.

-

I know.

A Prisoner's Body
By Alexa Marie Kelly

If a surgeon took
His scalpel to me
No soot would escape.

-

I bleed in red
Beneath my matted hair
Twisted and broken now from lack
Of affection

-

No horns grow
I am a sinner and
My soul is not clean
But I bruise in deep purple
Just like you.

Homeward Bound
By Alexa Marie Kelly

Homeward bound but
Bound to fall

-

Where to go
And what to ask

-

Cycles of sin
Circle the center of me

-

Let me go.
Let me live.

-

Free, free and fated
For what?

The Innocent
By Alexa Marie Kelly

We just sucked out all the poison
From the man who would not win.
There was pain we could not succor
There was time and there was sin.
He forgave us for our trespasses.
He committed none we saw.
We killed him to forget him.
He saves us one and all.
In my life I'll be a Quaker
Fill my days with soft and peace.
The gurney or the crucifix,
Which will help us better sleep?
Convicted demon, damned prophet
There is innocence in faith.
There are no atheists in the death house
Only beggars, prayers, and grace.

Electric Chair Lullaby
By Alexa Marie Kelly

Oh momma won't you plant me a cherry tree?
That's where I'll go when they come for me.
Hey brother won't you buy me a getaway car?
We'll hope right in, and we'll go real far.
Oh sister won't you bake me a birthday cake?
That's what I'll eat before the pearly gates.
Hey papa won't you swing me a wedding dance?
That's what I want; I want a second chance.
Oh stranger won't you smile me a friendly stare?
When you guide me down to that final chair.
Hey sinner won't you find me some God today?
Plug me in, and I'll be on my way.



"Branches", by Rachel Ternes

Stained
By Tatiana Laing

I see the world through a filter
Like looking through colored glass
Everything is obscured

-

Clear sight is but a memory
A memory of who I used to be
Before I was tainted

-

I was tainted by isolation
lack of human interaction
constant presence of guilt in my innocence

-

The guilt seeped through my skin like wine
leaving a discolored version of me
I never gave it permission to take over
but it did

-

I'd forgotten my previous shade when they realized
They realized the color they saw was just a stain
But now I can't wash it out

-

See, the world sees me through a filter too
It's tinted from the outside
To them, I'm dark
Despite the light that I exude
To them I'm dark

-

I was convicted, and that will always be true
Exoneration doesn't diminish the stain

Cruel Unusual Punishment
By Tatiana Laing

Cruel
Crimes unseen and unheard of
Heinous, Bloody, Cold

-
Unusual
How the chains hang from hands and feet
How the rest on the hip like baggy jeans
On the hour a day that they're free

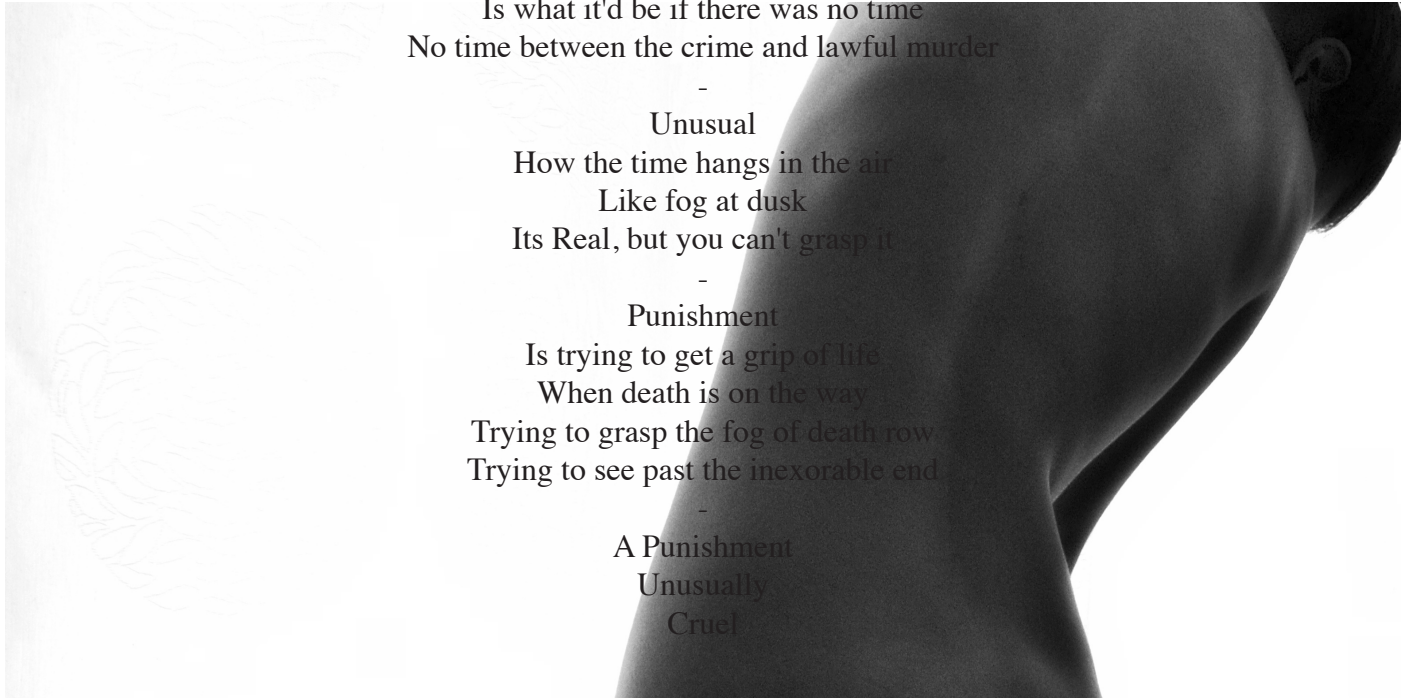
-
Punishment
Rightfully so
Solitary is for those who pose a threat
To society, to themselves

-
Cruel
Is what it'd be if there was no time
No time between the crime and lawful murder

-
Unusual
How the time hangs in the air
Like fog at dusk
Its Real, but you can't grasp it

-
Punishment
Is trying to get a grip of life
When death is on the way
Trying to grasp the fog of death row
Trying to see past the inexorable end

-
A Punishment
Unusually
Cruel



"Serpentine Curve", by Carla Mavaddat

Bare Justice
By Tatiana Laing

Naked bodies
Vulnerable Sensitive
Free

-
To be seen
Stripped
Searched

-
Privacy revoked Modesty Repealed Stripped bare.

-
Bare legs Bare arms bare chest

-
Bare minimum.

Minimal Fabric Minimal thread Minimal stitching Minimal use.
Underwear you can barely wear Before it falls to pieces.

-
Naked Bodies Exposed Unveiled
Reviled

-
For show.

Innocence on Death Row
By Tatiana Laing

They lock us up here
And they forget about us
What are we to do?

-

They lock us up here
Absolute in the verdict
Guilty, state of mind

-

But I'm not guilty
I am not responsible
Simple innocent

-

15 years passes
Innocence counts for nothing
This is hell on earth

-

It's Solitary
With an impending ending
Lethal injection

-

I think of dropping
Dropping the appeals, that is
Already lost hope

-

Why keep holding on
Wasting away in this cell
For no good reason

-

My only real hope
By some random stroke of luck
Exoneration

Untitled
By Tatiana Laing

I'm not a psychopath
I know how to feel
I know how to hurt

-

The guilt weighs me down
A burden just for me
A cross I bear alone

-

There's no taking it back
Once you take a life

-

When you take a life
You lose yours
You lose the ability to live
Death constantly hangs in the air

-

A sorry won't change it
A 100 year sentence won't change it
Forgiveness, won't change it

-

You made a mistake
You can't take it back
You can't go back

-

Learning how to live
To the extent that you can
Despite the guilt and shame
Is the only thing to do
Learning how to live again
Learning how to be you

Look Here
By Jessica Lawson

the more I listen
the more I begin to hear

-
screaming and scheming
the gleaming darkness
overwhelms my ear drums
like rockets of destruction

-
the more I look
the more I begin to see

-
a wrinkled claw
reaching down throats
disturbing the esophagus
just for a chance
in advance to detach our identities
Successfully leaving you and him and me
empty

-
locked up in a cage
Forced to swallow all of it:
the lies that
I'm not worth the depleting oxygen
more like a toxin



"Light", by Rachel Ternes

so pluck the feathers from your back
one at a time, slowly watching
the plumes drop
cropping your beautiful
wings

-

wings that were meant to stretch wide
now abide at your sides
unused, aching, out of practice

-

what does it feel like to fly?
blue sky, pass by, I
don't think I'll ever have a go

-

but the more I feel,
the more I begin to sense
that I was never meant
to fly in the first place

-

And so I will inadvertently
frighten the mentionable with
my deformity—

-

with wings that can't fly
and a face that terrifies;
a mask to cover up the missing pieces
and a reputation that precedes us

War on the Poor
By Jessica Lawson

21st Century,
Modern Design
Take a black man
and make him confined

-
By the straw broom of “justice”
sweeping brothers and sisters
like stale crumbs of bread
into rivers red from our blisters

-
Flowing to the kingdom
Of death and execution
Where the ending defines you
Instead of a solution

-
We will brand you ‘til death
As a criminal and felon
No longer a person with hope
But a man with a skeleton

-
We annihilate the ones
Who couldn’t possibly thrive

-
Dear Sir, play our game,
Where only the “fittest” survive

-
Unless we extend a hand
Of kindness and compassion,
But alas, my good sir,
That stuff’s out of fashion

-
This is a system
Of prevention and control
We will prevent you from success
And control your soul

-
Your body will be broken
And yes, your mind too
Until you bleed and need
And agree to our worldview

-
You are useless
You are dirty
You are wretched,
And unworthy

-
We won’t dare coddle you
Welcome to the caste system
Of the red, white, and blue

Words
By Jess Lawson

Words
words words
whispered muttered moaned
can you hear me because
I need you to know
I need to be known
-
words
words words
suffocated and consumed by the silence of
truth
the truth that refuses to share its own
testimony
-
words
words words
I'll give you the truth
but you'll probably spit it
right back in my face
denial
-
words
words words
sprinkle a few, smear a lot
we live in a war zone
a tinderbox of tension
tread lightly
-
words
words words
bitter broken battered bruised
offended affronted insulted
I just wonder when it will end
will it end?
-
words
words words
my mother called me today—
she couldn't use any
—but her tears spoke of loud pain
shot right through my heart
-
words
words words
mine are frozen in time
but I will tell the trauma story
I will reclaim the innocence
and learn how to
rebuild

The Last Day of My Life
By Taylor Hoehn

I don't remember the day that it happened.
Flash of red, black, white.
That's it.
The day that I killed her.

-
In the morning,
I went to Starbucks to apply for a job.
I had promised my mama that
I would turn my life around.

-
At lunch,
I celebrated a job well done.
Ate a sandwich, got high.
I was back on track, I could do this.

--
In the afternoon,
I had one too many drinks with the boys.
All of a sudden,
It was late and my mind was not my own.

-
That night
Is a black blur.
I don't remember anything
Except her perfect face.



"Le Regard", by Carla Mavaddat

Constitution for the Destitute
by Taylor Hoehn

We the people of the United States...
Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send us these, the homeless, tempest-tossed,
And we shall lift our axe and bring it down upon their necks.

-
In order to form a more perfect union...
We shall lock away imperfection
Stamp it out before it proliferates and
Eliminate all possibility of rehabilitation
Because no one on the outside cares.

-
Establish justice...
That's what we'll call it when we
Wash our hands of our own people
Remove the stain they leave on our world
By locking them up and throwing away the key.

-
Insure domestic tranquility...
Won't America sleep soundly
Knowing that millions of her countrymen
Are safe behind bars, with nothing but the
Screams of their neighbors to keep them company.

-
Provide for the common defense...
We are waging a war
Not on poverty or on drugs
But on the people who are sucked into their vice grip
And cannot break free from their hold.

-
Promote the general welfare...
The needs of the many outweigh
The needs of the few
Kill a couple people in the name of the common good
Who's gonna argue with that?

-
And secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...
Liberty is truly a blessing
A blessing that can be revoked in the blink of an eye
One moment you're standing in the sunshine
And the next you're trapped in a dingy box.

-
Do ordain and establish...
That these men
Branded criminals once
Will bear this name
Forever.

Anger
By Taylor Hoehn

They tell me that I've made my bed
And that now I must lie in it.
But they have knotted my noose
And are strangling me with it.

-

This place chokes me with its grubby hands
The hands that took me from my home
Because I was the
Wrong race in the wrong place.

-

I am a monster to them
I don't even deserve to live.
And so ending up here was
Only a matter of time.

-

I came from a shit home
On a shit block
In a shit neighborhood
In a shit city.

-

They had a description:
Tall, black, male
And I fit it like a glove.
Fuck that.

-

This anger roils inside me
And one day it's gonna boil over.
When that happens,
I'm coming for them.

Bargaining
By Taylor Hoehn

Hey Death, let's make a deal.

-

They told me that in 50 days, I'm yours.
But I have a plan that'll leave us both better off.
In 50 days, you're guaranteed one life.
My life.
I'm offering an alternative.
My cell in this place has a fatal flaw.
You see, I can pop it open at my leisure.
I could open it and spring on the pair of guards that stand outside.
Those bastards have ended my life a thousand times over.
First my dignity, then my spirit, then my mind, and soon my body.
This will be my revenge.
It'll be quick.
Slash.
Slash.
And they'll both go down.
And they'll both be yours.
Two souls where you could've gotten one.
And all for the low low price of one insignificant human life.

-

Think it over, Death.
My clock's ticking fast.
Let's make a deal.

Recipe
By Angie Cook

Recipe

2 cups anger

2 cups abuse

-

1 cup black

1 cup male

-

½ cup revenge

½ cup fear

-

1 tablespoon drugs

1 tablespoon regret

-

A dash of honesty

-

Mix well. Electrocute 30 seconds.

Serve cold.

Punishment Alternatives
By Jen Holthaus

Shrouded in shadows
A cleaver at side

-

A killer awaits
A victim walks by

-

Grab him by the throat
Slit him open, let him bleed

-

Leave him for dead
In a bed of grass, near the trees

-

Walk away, you killer
Continue your royal life

-

A few passersby notice
A glimpse, move on with our night

-

The body rots, withers away
Death feasts on the flesh

-

People ignore and continue
To stroll in their Sunday's best

-

A travesty, you say?
Cold-blooded murder, eh?

-

But the killer in the night
Will surprise you alright
For his name, you must listen
Is our own Justice System

-

Since we murder the man
Who murders another
We contradict ourselves
As we murder each other

I Didn't Do It
By Jen Holthaus

I didn't do it
I whisper as they enter my cell
I didn't do it
I plead as they grab me by the belt
I didn't do it
I groan as they drag me down the hall
I didn't do it
I whimper as they shove me and I fall
I didn't do it
I bark as they shackle my feet
I didn't do it
I wallow as they prepare my defeat
I didn't do it
I shout as they strap me to the bed
I didn't do it
I scream as they restrain my head
I didn't do it
I sigh as they begin to inject
I didn't do it
I cry out as I lurch up in bed
I didn't do it
Ten years later, I wake up and I'm free
I didn't do it
Doesn't matter, they still murdered me.

Dear God
by Christine Hwang

They send in their debt collectors
to make me pay for my sins.
They've come for my penance,
after handing me a death sentence.

-
They stripped down everything
from my clothes to my name.
deprived me of everything
till I was just a number in their game.

-
Yet they tell me to repent,
tell me I need forgiveness.
But I am not the one who needs forgiving,
they are the ones who took my life away.

-
It is they that need forgiveness
for prison is a hell
filled with suffering and sin
but it is not within the cells
where evil truly wins.

-
The real evil lies in those
whose hearts are filled with hate,
those who take the souls of others
and guard the devil's gates.

-
How righteous they must feel,
To think that they can save us from our sins,
When the only thing we need saving from,
Is the hell they have put us in.

-
It is they that need forgiving,
For they are nothing but a fraud.
They do the devil's work,
But play the role of God.

-
Forgive them
Even if they know
All too well
What they do.

Dear Victim
By Christine Hwang

If I could offer you my shame
in exchange for your pain,
I'd bring you my heart,
and hand it to you on a platter,
so maybe you could find solace in knowing,
that it too was shattered.

-

If I could give you anything you named,
reaffirm a thousand times my blame,
arm you with weapons to wound me,
or the words to condemn me,
I would, I would if I could.

-

If I could give you peace in knowing I was dead
I'd place a gun to my head,
guide your hands to the trigger,
make sure you pulled with vigor,
I would, I would if I could.

-

If I could undo the past,
rewind the time,
bring back life,
hers, yours, and mine,
I would, I would do it all.

-

So many things I wish I could give you,
after everything I've robbed you of.
So many things I should've done,
But I didn't when I could've
And now I would've
but I can't.

-

So I have nothing to give you,
nothing to offer you,
except to say that I'm sorry,
deeply,
truly,
Sorry.

Dear Judge
By Christine Hwang

You threw me the key
told me I was free
dubbed me an exoneree
but you never once told me
you were sorry.

-

Is it too much to ask for
a simple apology?
after you took me from my home
robbed me of my life
tainted my innocence and
left me in isolation and strife?

-

Perhaps you feel ashamed
or don't want to feel to blame
for a conviction that hung on a lie
for the innocent man who was told he would die.
or perhaps you're afraid
afraid that if you say the words
you'll actually feel them
that they'll cut you deep
and leave you stained
but you'll never know the pain
the pain of having a crown of thorns thrust upon you
and doing the time for a crime
that wasn't even yours.

-

Tell me
how do you deal with the grief
the grief of losing time
time and time losing your mind
losing everything in the world that mattered
having your spirit be broken down and shattered
only to be spit back out as quickly as you were swallowed
except that a part of you is now hollow

-

You stand there and tell me I am free to go
with not even the slightest apology
not even a simple I'm sorry-
...but I forgive you
i forgive you not because you deserve forgiveness,
but because I deserve peace.
I deserve to finally be free

Tagged
By Marieka Cober

Sometimes I wonder
If there is an invisible tag attached to me.
Something even I can't see.

-

Sometimes I wonder
If people look into my face,
Can they see the story of my fall from grace?

-

Sometimes I wonder
If they walk by me real fast
Can they peer into my past?

-

Sometimes I wonder
If children recognize me
From the dark pictures in a fantasy.

-

Convict.
Murderer.
Killer.
Monster

-

Sometimes I wonder
If it will follow, even if I flee.
Is the label still hanging over me?

Shake Down
By Marieka Cober

Pat downs every day.
Random bunk inspections.
Strip searches.

-

Strip before you see your guests.
Contraband could be anywhere.
Everything is suspect.

-

But the worst is a shake down.
Go through all the bunks,
Shots for anything wrong.

-

Tear apart the beds and drawers.
Rip the pictures off the wall.
Stand outside and wait.

-

Right to Privacy?
Not in the prison Bill of Rights.
Turn around for another search.

-

Constant eyes alive with derision
If you think TSA is bad,
You've never been to prison

A Forgery
for Kirk Bloodsworth
By Alex Patel¹

The rain shines through the halls
The shadows creep around the corner
I can still hear the echoes of the past

-

*They painted me as a different man
A forgery is mistaken for the original*

-

People become brick walls
Empty to my prayers
The cell recedes into silence

-

*If it walks like a prisoner, talks like a prisoner,
then it is a prisoner*

It's easier to throw away the key
Then to forgive an enemy
I was a convenient untruth
Freed by a science in its youth

-

Is Justice worth a price?
When hollowed shells are bound to infinity
A subjective state of mind valued over an objective, scientific find

-

The worst nightmare comes after me
My release is just one of plenty
Yet they still incarcerate the many

-

*Forge the evidence
When they don't have any*

-

The American conscience is waking up
As good men and women speak out
We are finally getting a close-up
The system is now treated with doubt

-

*I am Kirk Bloodsworth
This is my rebirth*

¹This original poem by Alex Patel was given to Mr. Bloodsworth as a gift from the students of American University Honors Class on Extreme Punishments, taught by Professor Robert Johnson in the spring of 2014

“You’re Free”
By Emily Manning

They let me go
without another word
free from what?

I ask
free from your 6 by 10 cell, yes
but what else?

-

I am not free from nightmares
the battle scars
that haunt my evening landscape

-

I am not free from worry
the shaking that overwhelms me
whenever a cop passes by

-

I am not free from sadness
the devastating grief
from missing the last words of my brother

-

I am not free from pain
or anger
or longing
or loss
what a luxury it is that you
can be free of me
maybe a check, maybe an apology
(probably not)
but I can never be
free
of
you

The Door
By Emily Manning

Death:

I wake to him every morning,
Ceaseless as the sunrise
I have not seen in seven years.

-

He stands at the entrance to my cell

Like a doorman:

Constant, uniformed,
Familiar

-

But menacing, he leers at me
As I shuffle out to shower
Or to exercise in the yard
Like a dog in a cage

-

I feel the mockery of his gaze
As I pass;
He knows I am going nowhere
Without him

-

Day after day
He guards the door,
The one that will really
Lead me out of here

-

Hour after hour
His eyes bore into me
And he taunts me
With his endless stare

-

I used to fear him
But now he is the only hope I have
To end this cycle,
This caustic monotony
That wears on the soul
Like so much acid

-

Someday soon
I beg
He will take pity on me
And open the door.

Writing for Others
By Grace Austin

When I was young
and death forced itself into my vocabulary
my mother bought me a notebook
Many notebooks
too many notebooks to fill

-
She told me to write
“Get it all out” she said
“You’ll feel better”
Like my emotions were spoiled
food that I had to
regurgitate on a page

-
I found it hard to write to the dead
It felt awkward
Slightly uncomfortable

-
Like someone reading
Over your shoulder as you write

-
As my own pain diminished
and its expression
found less motivation



"Ascent", by Rachel Ternes

I took up the pain of others
Writing as a form of empathy
to show I'm no stranger to
reality

-

When I learn about the lives of others
Writing for them
helps me feel as though I've validated
their pain

-

It's theirs but it's also mine
At least for a while
At least while I write

-

Sometimes, if it's good
If it reaches a place that hasn't been disturbed in a while
a place I forgot existed
A feeling I let go
grief enters my consciousness
and I cry.

-

It doesn't happen often
and it doesn't happen for long
but when it does I stop to appreciate it
like I would a painting in a museum
transfixed by its beauty, by its stimulation
because who knows when I'll see this painting again

You
By Grace Austin

You never knew need
bottomless poverty
you were born on an elevator
on a one-way trip up

-

When I was young
I didn't understand why I was always so dirty
why I had clothes with holes
that didn't fit that I had to wear
every day of the week

-

There were foods I had never tried
and places I had never seen
until I turned 15 and figured out
how drugs were the blunt object
that could break my glass ceiling

-

That my gang of drug-dealing gun-toting truancy teammates
were my addiction sponsored safety net

-

That focusing on reaching educational achievement
to escape a life of poverty
was like putting a band aid
on a gunshot wound to the head

-

When you were young you had no concept
of the absence of
the need for
or desperation to

-

You were told stealing was bad
and you believed it
because you never went to bed hungry

-

You say you would never commit a crime
because "Money doesn't make you happy"

-

But money doesn't make us happy
it makes us less dead.

“Docile bodies need not have docile minds”

By Grace Austin

A man named Paul
Taught me how to escape

-

Docile bodies
determined minds

-

How to escape these four walls
And walk out the front gates

-

Obedient words
Obstinate thoughts

-

how to drive away the past
And look out towards the open road

-

Compliant actions
Wild inclinations

-

and live a life as real
as I feel inside

-

Daily submissive
nightly headstrong

-

“Your mind is more potent
Than iron or cement.”

-

Acquiescent inaction
mindful imaginations

-

“you are less imprisoned
Than many who are free”

-

Accepting fate
rejecting injustice

-

“The state can take away your life, my friend
But it cannot take away a thought”

-

Refusing Surrender
I have chosen rebellion

-

“And a thought”, he said.
“is all you need.”

The Night
By Grace Austin

The night is quiet
quivering
the air is audible
as you watch the door

-

The hour comes
when they reach for you
Angrily
Desperately

-

They have ropes and fire
And guns for good measure

-

They read your fate
Spit it in your face
It's the death sentence
From the jury of the mob

-

Their need to kill
is evident in their haste

-

Order
In this small southern town
Is earned by the broken neck
Of the black man.

-

you watch them as they drag you around
[a] moment of clarity
out of body
you realize
why they hate

-

why they hate you
and anyone related to you
anyone who looks like you
anyone who recognizes
your humanity

-

they are scared
Scared of the power they think you hold

-

scared because of the color of your skin
how it reflects darkly on their pure white

-

you see the fear flash in their eyes
As they tie the rope around your neck

-

you see the ignorance that engulfs them
The curiosity that eats at them

-

You pity them
As they tighten the rope

-

They'll never understand
how a man painted a monster
could be so beautiful in a different light

Twisted
By Madelyn Daigle

I don't know what happened
But I told them what could have happened
And they took the words out of my mouth
Before I could take them back

-

They took my words and twisted them
Like a tornado
Spinning out of control
Until I was destroyed

-

They took my words and twisted them
Like strands of cotton candy around the stick
Making their treat sweeter
Until I was sick of it

--

They took my words and twisted them
Like the cap of a bottle
Sealing my fate
Until I was trapped inside

--

They took my words and twisted them
Like a rope around my neck
Tighter and tighter
Until I couldn't breathe

--

They took my words and twisted them
Because of their twisted idea
That I was twisted enough
To kill my own parents

Everlasting
By Sebastian Ramirez

You would think,
After all this time,
The feeling would hurt a little less

-
But the pain remains,
Lodged in my heart,
Seeping poison to this day

-
I can't shake the memory,
And I can still feel the pain
And I wonder when will this ever stop?

-
The incident loops in my mind
Like a horror film
Meant to torture me for an eternity

-
I still can't believe
I almost traded a diploma
For a six by eight cell and shitty pasta,

-
To do roll call,
Survive in solitude,
Manage my own monsters

-
To live in complete anarchy,
Barter my life,
Miss my mother's funeral

-
To never to see light again,
Or feel loving lips,
Or gentle hands.

-
And even though I am free,
My mind is chained by trauma.

-
This nightmare will never end,
The fear is haunting and lives within me—
This is everlasting.

Safety First
By Joanna Heaney

This mask took years to build and years to master.
You don't need a mask like this unless you have something to hide
Or protect.

-
You have to blend in, blend into the stony walls and metal bars
So you bar yourself from feeling and showing and acting.
You carve your face into an expression that won't move for anything

-
Until you're alone, and even then you don't want anyone to see.
If everyone saw what you felt, what else would belong to you?

-
Even the stone mask you wear is the same as everyone else's.
Put it on in the morning and take it off at night, like your clothes

-
But when you finally leave, you leave the clothes
And you keep the mask.

Just Business
By Joanna Heaney

Running a prison's good business:
Easier than you'd think.

-

Have empty rooms?
Fill them.

-

How about the boy who stole the radio,
The girl caught with marijuana
Can we get them,
Fit them,
Can we incarcerate them?

-

Sure, if we get a good rate for them.

-

Stock 'em up,
Lock 'em up,
Sell 'em out
Now pay me out.

-

Nothing personal,
It's just business.

One in a Million
By Joanna Heaney

You're one in a million
(Six million, more exactly)

Incarcerated
Incapacitated
Separated
Different.

Different from society,
Apart from the majority,
Unique (that's for sure)
But not in here.

Behind these bars, you're a shell
In a premature hell

But somehow never imagined as so crowded.

You're one in a million sent away
To know a painful kind of hollow
And there's millions more of you
Soon to follow.

Stay
By Joanna Heaney

It's got everything you need.
Walls, toilet, bed, window
(Oh, and sorry we couldn't arrange a better view)
But you can watch TV
Sometimes.

Great security here; no one's ever tried to break in
Which is saying something, the neighborhood's not the best.
You'll get along with the neighbors here as long as you don't talk too much
Or show too much

But at least you don't have to yell at anyone to mow his lawn because Jesus Christ, it's been at least three
months and the crabgrass is taking over.

And guess what? It's free
But you're paying, alright.
You're paying for the rest of your life
With the rest of your life.
Enjoy your stay.

The Alchemist's Quest
by
Susan Nagelsen & Charles Huckelbury

For everyone in Emilio Garza's family, the American dream was a fraud that promised to move them into a neighborhood where night music wasn't punctuated by gunfire but kept them under the thumb of a nativistic poverty that threatened their dignity as well as their lives. It was a cruel taunt that pledged to fill his brothers' and sisters' empty bellies and resurrect his parents' dead eyes, eyes that never looked up and rarely saw anything but the working end of a mop. I looked at Emilio's file a month or so after we met, and it read like tragedy waiting to happen, it was just a matter of time. No adult in his family had gotten past the sixth grade, and neither parent spoke English as a primary language. Now they were in Henniker, New Hampshire, away from the drugs and violence of Lawrence just across the border, but also away from everything familiar, everything that meant something, in a search for something else. They were trying to find a reason to smile, but the future was as bleak as January in Maine.

The pre-sentence investigation detailed contacts with most of the family members. The other five siblings were all good kids, still in school, and working fast-food jobs to help out. Emilio's youngest sister was the dreamer at sixteen and already talking about college. According to the report, she wanted to teach and build a house big enough for the entire family, and she promised the PSI investigator that his brother would have a place to live when he paroled. Maria was smart enough, but I had seen too many similar stories to put much stock in her dreams. Maybe I'm just a pessimist, but if things worked out the way they usually did, she would probably end up waiting tables at Daniel's and thinking about the degree she never got.

But philosophical dreams meant nothing to Emilio. He had been a good wide receiver in high school and with a little luck could have gotten a scholarship to one of the smaller colleges, but his guidance counselor told the investigator that college for Emilio would have been little more than a single-season ticket to fast cars and expensive jewelry before he flunked out. Unlike Maria, he was an underachiever who had quit school in the eleventh grade. For Emilio, life and everything in it was all about attitude. Even so, at nineteen, he had reached a point where college was finally within reach. Unfortunately, that reach extended no further than the walls of the New Hampshire State Prison.

Emilio had come to prison the year before, arrested for possession and sale of cocaine at a time when selling drugs was politically only one notch up the ladder from being a card-carrying member of al-Qaeda. Looking back, he should have seen disaster coming. First came the overture from a scumbag named Rafael Torres, another dealer fresh up from Lowell, followed by the gentle squeeze: a few new street-corner hustlers, a drop in his regular customers, and a casual hint that getting the hell out of town might not be such a bad idea, like Emilio was some sort of New Hampshire rube who would roll over the first time trouble popped up. The DEA, along with the state's Drug Task Force, was already looking at Emilio and knew about the drama between Torres and him, so they sat back and let things develop. It's not an unusual tactic. The hope is that one thug will kill the other one and get arrested for the homicide. That way, the DEA gets two for the price of one. And of course, Emilio was willing to party.

He picked up two Dominicans who ran muscle for him and paid Torres a visit at the strip joint on Fifteenth Street where he hung out. Words led to fists, which escalated to pool cues, which finally produced knives and guns. Emilio and his crew busted up the place and the people inside, shot out the windows, and kept everyone's head down, while Torres kept talking about what he wanted to do to his mother. After that, of course, Torres opted for the traditional form of retribution in the drug trade: he turned snitch and helped the DEA bust Emilio, which compensated for the insult of losing face in front of his crew and concomitantly freed up Emilio's territory for Torres to expand his own operation. Since Emilio was a minor player, the DEA left prosecution up to the state. It wasn't the original plan, but it made a lot of people happy, especially when Torres got busted two months later.

And that's how I ended up face to face with Emilio Garza on his second day in prison. I was the counselor for the Reception and Diagnostic Unit and provided the standard orientation. It's

a brief overview of the prison operation, including opportunities for educational and vocational instruction, but I could tell from the way Emilio checked me out with his best gangsta stare that he wasn't interested in anything I had to say. His only concerns were getting into the weight room and playing basketball in the gym. Someone was putting fifty dollars a week into his canteen account, and he already had a following, a crew that did their best to look, act, and talk like Emilio, so he was all set.

He was starting a fresh six-to-twelve, which always seems like forever to a kid his age, and he had a give-a-shit attitude that was harder than I've seen in a lot of lifers here. I guess he had seen all the prison movies and believed the myths about the convict brotherhood and having to stand tall or risk being a punk. But that's just what the stories were—myths. Maybe prisons were like that once, and I stress the maybe, but no longer. The residents, as we refer to them now, are a different breed, even the inner-city bad guys who try their best to live up to the image. Fortunately for those of us charged with keeping a leash on the animals, there's no sense of unity among the population, which of course makes it easier for us to control the zoo. But Emilio was a kid out of sync with the times; he believed, really believed, in the convict code, and I could see him spending a lot of time in our Special Housing Unit, or as the residents still refer to it, The Hole.

Out of R&D, Emilio wasted no time. He picked up a couple of disciplinaries for insubordination, did a little strong-arm robbery for canteen items and sneakers, and eventually got SHU time for punching another guy in the head over a pool game. For thirteen months, he was his own worst enemy and rejected anyone's attempts at intervention. I took a look at his intake scores, and he had scored 7.4 on the math section and 9.3 on the verbal, which meant that he was functioning at the level of a traditional ninth grader at best. Which is typical. We get young guys in here, many of them high-school graduates on paper, who can't conjugate a verb or solve $3x=6$. For them, it's an easy choice between flipping burgers or selling drugs.

But I still thought Emilio was a kid with possibilities: he had gotten his GED in our program and come from a good family. I always hate to see the ones with a little potential go down the toilet without a fight, so I walked over to SHU to see him a week before he was due to get back into population.

Normally, I would have gone to his cell to talk to him, but he was still young enough to think that my appearance at his door would have looked bad to the other guys on his tier, like he was sucking up or, worse, snitching. So I had him brought to one of the small, sterile conference rooms behind the control room in the rotunda.

When he walked through the door, I was again struck by the combination of innocence in his unlined face and the fuck-you look in his eyes. He was a good-looking kid, five-ten and one-seventy, all sinew and muscle, like a mahogany leopard on two legs. Policy requires all C-5 inmates to be cuffed behind them when out of their cells, so I tried to minimize the time Emilio would have to sit in what had to be an uncomfortable position. But true to his reputation, he never made an issue of it. He just leaned forward a little, checked out my tits, and acted like he was back on the block and kicking it with his homeys. I eased back in my chair and pushed my glasses to the top of my head.

“Emilio, I'm Patricia Aucoin. I don't know if you remember me from orientation.”

He flashed me a grin. “Sure, mama. I know you. You the counselor or whatever that fed us that line of shit about how we could all become citizens in here and get jobs when we got out if we just went to school and obeyed the rules.”

“Well, I've never heard it put quite like that, but yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Emilio nodded slowly. “You still over in R&D, givin' the new jacks that line about rehabilitation?”

I shook my head. “No. I moved over to H-block, which is where you're headed again. You've been

here long enough to know the routine. It's the merry-go-round until you get back to North." The North Unit was our local housing project, the unit where all the gang bangers and knuckleheads usually ended up, at least until they collected enough disciplinaries to win a trip to SHU.

He gave me the grin again. "You wanna know what I was thinkin' the whole time you was talkin'?"

I took a chance, even if I knew what was coming. "Sure."

"You hot," Emilio told me. "And fuck the rules."

He wanted to say, "And fuck you too," but he didn't. I guess he figured he was in enough trouble as it was. With this guy, I couldn't pull out my standard lecture about how that attitude is what got his ass in prison in the first place, so I used the alternative.

"You know, sometimes that's what I think, too, only not the hot part."

His eyebrows went up. "No shit?"

"No shit," I assured him. "But I'm not here to talk about me. Listen, you're out of here in about a week, Emilio. Have you given any thought about what you're going to do? I mean in the way of a work assignment?"

He frowned and looked even more feline. "Hadn't thought about it. You know, been stuck in this shithole and eatin' the slop they feed us, just focusin' on gettin' by." He looked at me for a few seconds. "Shit, if I wanted a job, I woulda had one on the street." Even I had to laugh at the cojones on this kid.

"Good point," I told him, "but you've got to do something, especially if you're headed to H-Block. You know how they are over there about work."

Emilio nodded and shifted a little to relieve the strain on his wrists. "Bad stop over there. It ain't just the work. All the cops fuck with you all the time about nothin', just petty shit 'cause they got nothin' else to do. Made me a real project. Tore up my cell every night. Even took my rec time 'cause I had more stamps than I was supposed to."

I went with it. "Damn shame, a decent guy like you gets caught up in a jackpot like that. I mean, it's hard to understand why the officers would want to hassle you over ten books of stamps when you haven't written a letter since you've been here. Maybe it had something to do with you strong arming the other guys, taking their canteen, calling their sisters, and punching them in the mouth if they don't kiss your ass." I scratched my head for a second. "Or maybe its those five-dollar joints you sell that are 99% paper, so the poor bastard's got to suck like a Hoover vacuum cleaner to get a little ganja in him. Yeah, I can see where you might have a harassment case there."

Emilio looked at me for maybe ten seconds, then he burst out laughing. Except for the SHU pajamas and cuffs, he looked for a second like any normal kid, and that was the tricky part. He got it under control and then asked me, "You know, you ain't like the others. They all so serious all the time, like they real cops or somethin'. You different. You normal."

I let that one go. If he thought I was different, then maybe he would listen to me. So I tried.

"Look, Emilio, I'm not here to bullshit you. You've been around the block, so it wouldn't do any good. But a new program has just started, and I think you'd be good in it."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. It’s four or five college courses—“

He started shaking his head. “No way, man. I did my GED just like you wanted. I sat over there in school, tryin’ to do the right thing, and the teachers were just like cops. ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that.’ One of them even told us if we said ‘fuck’ in his class, he’d kick us out, like he’s some kinda word po-lice or something. Now what kinda shit is that? And you want me to go back? Forget about it.”

I held my hands up in front of me. “Hold on. Just hear me out, and then you can tell me to take off if that’s what you want to do. Fair enough?”

Emilio nodded and adjusted the cuffs behind him.

“This program is different. For one thing, it’s taught entirely by prisoners.” I had to catch myself. I had almost said “inmates,” and that is a dirty word to guys like Emilio.

“Cons teach the courses?” he asked doubtfully. “And nobody else?”

“Nobody else. No civilians in the classroom at all once the security officer takes attendance.”

“How’d you swing that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. It’s not like the prison school you’re used to.”

“This is college stuff you’re talkin’ here? Like I would get on the street?”

“Just like you would get on the street. In fact, it’s from the same school, the Technical College over in Durham. The same courses, same text, same everything. We even have to get permission from the Tech to teach each course, that is, if we can find someone in here qualified to teach it.”

Emilio gave me another skeptical glance. “How you gonna do that in here?”

“That’s the tough part. To teach at the Tech on the street, the instructors have to have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, and most have advanced degrees. I don’t have to tell you that we don’t get many college graduates in here.”

“Too smart to get caught probably,” Emilio offered, and I didn’t argue with him. With Enron and Bernie Madoff on the front pages then, who’s to say he wasn’t right?

“Maybe, but the point is we don’t have many guys to choose from. Right now, we can offer five courses, maybe six, but I’ll have to check. You finished your GED, so that makes you eligible to enroll.”

“What about tests to get in? I thought colleges made you take some kinda exam before they let you in.”

“Some do but not this one. It’s a state school, accredited, and anything you take and pass can be transferred to any other school.” He was definitely curious, so I thought it was time to sink the hook.

“And you get extra visits for signing up, plus it pays about twice what you’re getting now.”

The cockiness came back. He actually sneered at me. “Don’t care about no state pay, man. That shit ain’t even cab fare.”

“OK, but what about the extra visits? You get one extra a week for as long as you go to school. And

I know you've got a lot of people on your visiting list who probably aren't getting in."

"You been in my jacket, man?"

"Hell yes, I've been in your jacket. What do you think I do around here?" Then I pointed a finger at his chest. "Wait . . . don't answer that."

Again the unaffected laugh, then he turned serious. "You really think I could get in this college thing?"

"I know damned well you could get in, and I know something else."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I know you'd kick ass if you did."

Emilio sat back a little. "Let me think about it."

"Deal," I said, getting up and gathering the folder and other papers I had brought with me. "But don't take too long. The term begins in about six weeks, and we need to find out who's interested." I looked up at him. "And don't forget the visits." I pushed the call button for security to escort Emilio back to his cell.

I didn't know what I expected when I left SHU. I thought I had given Emilio my best sales pitch for a program that would provide him with the tools to get out of the dead-end rut he was in. But after so many failures and horror stories in here, I tucked his file away in the appropriate drawer and moved on to other young guys in either better or worse shape. That's the frustrating part; there are so many of them that you think you can help, but most just don't give a damn. And my husband's always reminding me that you can't save every puppy in the pound. No matter what you do, they get out, go back to the same neighborhood, do the same thing, and end up back here with a new number. Once in a while you get lucky, but it doesn't happen often enough.

Two weeks later, I was in the gym, sitting at one of the round tables used for Christmas celebrations but co-opted this time for registration. My job was to check reading and math levels of all the men and verify either GED or high-school graduation from a database. It's grunt work, looking at name after name, but it's got to be done. Serious study was going to be rigorous for most of the men, simply because they had been away from the classroom for so long. And yes, some simply didn't give a damn and were enrolling for only the extra visits. But that was OK; we knew that the bait might lure some our way who really weren't interested, but once there, we could hope that the exposure would prompt them to continue for the right reasons.

Actually, we had two college registrations that day. Along with the Tech, a local private college was bringing three courses out to the prison, and I was talking to Susan Norquist, an English and writing professor about arranging rooms and times to accommodate their faculty. I had just bought his latest novel and was telling him how much I liked it when Emilio strolled through the gym's door, pants at half-mast, collar up, and watch cap canted over one eye, a B-Boy if I've ever seen one. He acknowledged me with a barely perceptible shrug.

"Who's that?" Susan asked.

"One of the Mass guys. They think it automatically confers gangster status. He's pretty sharp and can do better than where he is now."

The gym was laid out to resemble a bona fide college registration, with tables labeled for each

course. A staff member from education sat at each one and provided a brief description of the course and prerequisites, if any, and helped the inmates choose appropriate courses whose schedules didn't conflict.

Susan and I watched Emilio stroll over to the orientation table and fill out the preliminary forms. Grants took care of most of tuition and books at the Tech, but there was still an administrative fee. Susan's college offered courses that were far more expensive but still a bargain at three hundred dollars plus books. The trouble was, for most of the men, that was a year's pay, but their families, at least the ones who could, chipped in and usually covered the tab.

After promising to sign my book later, Susan had to leave for a faculty meeting, which left me entering names and numbers into another database as the forms were passed over to me. I got busy and didn't see Emilio leave, but I discovered his name on the roster for an Intro. to Sociology course. Since I knew his intake scores, I stapled everything together and dropped the packet into an accordion file that I would sort out later.

The response was excellent. Word had gotten around the prison, accompanied by various notices that usually got thrown away in the cell blocks, and we ended up with eighty-six men enrolled in six courses. All that was left was to collate the information, pass it along to the school so the men could be officially registered, and then cut the checks for the colleges and the bookstores. At least, that's what I thought.

It should have been that easy, but one of the first things you learn when working inside a prison is that nothing is ever simple. Bureaucrats have a way of doing things that resemble a dozen blind people trying to design an elephant that flies. So it really was no surprise when my supervisor, the titular head of the college program, stopped me outside his office a week before classes were to begin to tell me that the sociology class had been canceled.

"Leonard has decided he can't teach this term," Carl told me. Leonard was one of Carl's clerks, a defrocked priest doing 15 to 30 for molesting several young boys. But he had a master's in psychology and could teach, which in my opinion made him even more dangerous.

"Why can't he teach? I thought everything was all set."

"Apparently there's a conflict, and he doesn't think he can get his syllabus together in time." He was talking about an inmate, for Christ's sake. My first instinct was to tell Leonard that yes, by God, he would be teaching sociology because we had fifteen students registered, all of whom had paid the fees and bought the books. But you would have to know Carl to understand why I couldn't say that. I was perpetually surprised that he was able to find his way to work each morning.

"So what are we supposed to do about the class? Just cancel it? Have we got anyone else who can teach sociology?"

Carl shook his head and gave me that Orphan Annie look—eyes wide but dark with nothing behind them. "I've talked to the bookstore, and they'll take the books back or exchange them for something else. I thought we would divide up the students and put them the other classes. There's plenty of room."

"But they didn't sign up for the other classes," I reminded him.

"Oh, that's all right. We're just getting started, and I think they'll be happy wherever we put them." He shifted the folders in his hand to the crook of his elbow. "Besides, it's still a good deal for them." He started to move past me. "I'll send you a memo when we get things finalized." I watched him walk off and wondered again how the hell he got his job. I really began to wonder when Emilio Garza knocked on my door a week later.

“You got a minute?”

I closed the file on my desk and motioned him on in. “Sure, Emilio. What’s on your mind?”

He handed me a sheet of paper with the college’s letterhead on it. “They got me in some literature class. Somethin’ about the sociology class getting’ canceled. I didn’t sign up for no literature class.”

He was right; in his infinite wisdom, Carl had taken a Hispanic inmate with the most rudimentary language skills and assigned him to a class in nineteenth-century British literature. A young man who could not identify one modern writer other than Stephen King was going to be asked to make sense of William Blake’s poetry. Talk about a recipe for failure. I told Emilio to sit down. I pulled the list of courses from my in-box and looked at it before handing it to him: biology, geography, humanities, and accounting, along with the literature course.

“See anything else on here you might be interested in?” Emilio looked at the list. “Maybe the geography.”

I agreed and told him so. That was the logical place for him to start, a course that would cover at least some of the things he already knew, instead of tossing him into a classroom where he would hear nothing but alien concepts.

“All right. I’ll talk to Carl and have you moved from the lit. class into geography, and I’ll make sure you’ve got a book before it starts. Anything else?”

He sat there for a few seconds before answering, playing absently with the corner of my desk blotter. “You know, I’ve been thinkin’ about this college stuff.” He paused and looked back at the door. “I’ve been thinkin’ that I might get to like it if I can get in somethin’, you know”

I knew all right. “Into something you’re interested in, instead of some academic stuff that would bore the hell out of you. Is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it. I can’t see me sittin’ in no accounting class. That biology might be all right later. I know a lot about food and workin’ out already. I don’t know what ‘humanities’ means, and I damn sure don’t know nothin’ about literature. Man, I got a look at one of the books, and I can’t understand how those dudes talk at all. It ain’t English, and it ain’t Spanish. I don’t know what the hell it is.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to react that way.”

“So that’s why I signed up for sociology because somebody told me we’d study about the projects, but now that’s dead.”

“OK, so geography’s the way to go for you right now. You’re all set with that?”

“Yeah, I think I’d like the geography.”

He picked up the memorandum from Carl and started to leave.

“Let me keep that for now, will you? I’ll need to refer to it when I talk to him.”

Emilio let the paper drop. “OK. Then that’s all taken care of, right? When school starts, I’ll go to geography instead of literature?”

“That’s it. You’ll get another memo confirming your registration and telling you the time and classroom. We’ll have to get you a book, but that shouldn’t be a problem. You’ll get a memo about that,

too.”

“They sure love memos around here, don’t they? Why don’t they just pick up the phone or send somebody around?”

He had no idea how often I had wondered the same thing. “Beats me, Emilio. That’s just the way it’s done.”

He nodded and left as quietly as he had come in. An hour later I was in Carl’s office, trying not to jump on top of his desk and kick everything to the floor.

“But, Carl, Garza’s verbal scores on the TABE make it pretty clear that a lit. course isn’t where he needs to be. If he took some more grammar courses or maybe an introductory lit. course—“

“You’re new, Pat, so I don’t expect you to understand.” He shuffled some papers on his desk and then tossed them aside. “I can’t put my hands on it right now, but there was a recent article in one of the professional journals that said the best way to improve reading skills is to immerse the student in the literature. If they’re not challenged, they’ll never improve.” He crossed his arms over his chest and sat back in his chair. “Trust me on this one; that literature course is exactly what Garza needs.”

“But we’re not talking about reading skills. This is all about comprehension, and to toss a kid like Garza into a nineteenth-century British literature class is like tossing a wounded gazelle into a river full of piranhas. He’ll fail, period.”

“I disagree, but even if he does, he’ll still learn and improve what skills he’s got. And that’s what our job is, Pat, and what drives our budget. It’s about giving inmates more than what they had when they came in. The courses and grades are incidental as long as we get them into the classroom.”

I gripped the chair’s arms to keep from strangling him. “But at what price? If we set them up to fail, all they learn is that they are failures, which doesn’t do anything but reinforce the self-image that got most of them in here in the first place.”

Back and forth we went for another twenty minutes, but he wouldn’t budge. He lectured me on pedagogy and the DOC’s rules and mission statement. He talked about everything but Emilio Garza and his educational needs. Finally, he told me he had a meeting and gave me his famous plastic smile. I left his office depleted.

Emilio lasted two weeks in British literature, twice what I expected. The course began with Blake and the Romantics, a tough start for traditional students and a real non-starter for a guy like Emilio. He didn’t fill out a drop slip and never told his instructor anything. He just stopped showing up. Two days later, he was back in SHU for stabbing another inmate in H-Block.

I saw him a week after that as he was being escorted to a preliminary hearing downtown. He was coming across the yard on the way to transportation, cuffed and shackled, with an officer in riot gear on either side of him. Our paths crossed near the dining room, and I stood to one side to let the three men pass. Emilio’s eyes met mine. Gone was the laughter that I had seen before. Gone also was the child I had glimpsed behind the laughter. Replacing them was anger, defiance, and a sense of surrender in the eyes of a 24-karat convict. Emilio had given up and made the big leagues; he had become a killer instead of the citizen he ridiculed.

He pinned me with a stare as he passed, and I started to tell him how sorry I was, but the words hung in my throat. Instead, I watched him go by without a word, like the crowds who watched the tumbrels make their way to the guillotine. I was certain that Emilio was convinced that I had betrayed him, just like

everyone else. Then I remembered what he had told me that day in SHU: “You different.” I remembered how proud I had been of that comment by a nineteen-year-old prison inmate. But watching Emilio’s back as he shuffled between the two officers, I knew that he was wrong. I wasn’t so different, only my ego let me believe it. If I had really been different, one man would still be alive, and Emilio Garza would still be a college student instead of a man on trial for his life.

About the Contributors

Authors and Artists

Grace Austin is an honors junior at American University studying Justice & Law and National Security Studies. At American, Grace is a cadet in the Hoya Battalion (Army ROTC), a brother of Alpha Phi Omega, a member of the Women's Rugby team, associate editor of BleakHouse Review, and works at the Dav. Grace has been published in BleakHouse Review and was given the BleakHouse Review's "Best Poem" award in 2013. Her main interests include prison reform, and Grace will be leading an Alternative Break Trip during Spring Break to San Francisco to focus on the issues of reentry and mass incarceration.

Sarah Bousquet is an undergraduate in the honors program at American University, where she majors in Justice and Law. She is interested in studying criminals and their behavior inside and outside of prison, and is curious about what motivates criminal behavior, especially in the case of violent criminals. She has been published in the 2013 edition of BleakHouse Review.

Marieka Cober is an honors student at American University majoring in Communications, Law, Economics, and Government (CLEG). She hails from a small town in central Pennsylvania. She is passionate about social justice and is especially interested in gender equality, sexuality studies, disability rights, criminal justice, and student affairs.

Angie Cook is an undergraduate honors student majoring in communication studies and minoring in marketing. Her other interests include photography and graphic design.

Madelyn Daigle is an undergraduate student in the honors program at American University. She is a Communication Studies major and is involved with the student-run television station, where she enjoys writing for entertainment. Professor Johnson's Extreme Punishments class inspired her to write poetry.

Joanna Heaney is an undergraduate at American University majoring in Public Communication with a minor in Law and Society. Originally from Rhode Island, Heaney came to DC to pursue her interest in government and politics; she has since developed a keen interest in the notions of liberty, justice, and individual choice. She continues to study these concepts within the justice and legal systems. Heaney has a hand in managing operations at BleakHouse Publishing and manages its partner blog The Bare Lightbulb (link?). She hopes that by embracing creative expression in dialogue about the justice system, we can open ourselves to more empathetic discussions.

Taylor Hoehn is an honors undergraduate student in the School of International Service at American University. She is pursuing a double major in International Relations and Chinese Language. Her interests include conflict mediation, international law, and peace studies, particularly in East Asia.

Jennifer Holthaus graduated from American University in 2014 with a degree in Law and Society. Her academic studies as well as her undergraduate internships at the United States Department of Justice and the United States District Court opened her eyes to the prevalence and injustices of extreme punishments. Jennifer currently works as a Litigation Paralegal at the law firm Hughes Hubbard & Reed LLP in Washington, DC.

Charles Huckelbury is a senior consulting editor at BleakHouse Publishing and an associate editor of and a contributor to the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, a peer-reviewed journal dealing with criminal justice issues published by the University of Ottawa. He has taught English literature and writing for a community college and was a contributing writer for the Concord (NH) Monitor. He is the author of two books of poetry, Tales from the Purple Penguin and Distant Thunder, both published by BleakHouse.

Christine Hwang is a senior in the honors program at American University majoring in Justice and Law with a minor in Psychology. Hwang maintains a deep interest in prison reform and social justice advocacy. Her current advocacy work involves drawing attention to mistakes and unfairness in death penalty cases. Hwang ultimately hopes to pursue law school and a career in capital litigation

Alexa Marie Kelly is an undergraduate honors student at American University pursuing a degree in communications. She has a passion for literature and believes in the power of creative works to restore and to humanize. In her own creative pursuits, she writes theater reviews and poetry for BleakHouse. As Chief Editorial Officer for BleakHouse Publishing, Kelly is responsible for all matters relating to the submission, review, and publication of literary works, including press releases and review articles about BleakHouse publications and events. Kelly is one of two editors responsible for the 2014 edition of Tacenda Literary Magazine

David Keplinger is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Most Natural Thing* (New Issues Press, 2013). The poems in this selection come from a book-length project investigating the arrest of Keplinger's great great grandfather, Isaac P. Anderson, who was a Union soldier falsely accused of desertion and held in Forrest Hall Military Prison and Stone General Hospital in Washington, D.C., between November, 1863 and June, 1864. In 2011 Keplinger set Anderson's poetry to music in his album *By & By* (Morpheus Records).

Tatiana Laing is an undergraduate honors student in the School of Public Affairs at American University. Along with being an associate editor for the Bleakhouse Review, Laing writes for Bleakhouse's Blog, The Bare Light bulb. Tatiana has had several poems published in the past and has received Bleakhouse's Best poem award in the spring of 2014. In the spring of 2015, she will be leading an Alternative Break trip to San Francisco on the topic of prison reform. She is majoring in CLEG (Communications, Law, Economics, and Government) for undergrad and hopes to go to Law School to enable herself to someday take an active role in creating social justice. Laing believes that writing can be a powerful tool in bringing forth positive change in the world.

Jessica Lawson is an honors student at American University majoring in Sociology, with minors in Education Studies and International Relations. Originally from Buffalo, NY, Lawson has developed a passion for social justice related to youth, and has a specific interest in the relationship between the education and prison systems in the United States.

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Emily Manning is a freshman honors student currently studying at American University in Washington, DC. She will double major in Political Science and Gender Studies and she is interested in pursuing a career in social justice. She also hopes to travel abroad extensively.

Susan Nagelsen, until her retirement in June 2014, was the director of the writing program at New England College in Henniker, NH. She is a senior consulting editor for BleakHouse Publishing, whose offices are in American University in Washington, DC. She serves as the associate editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, a peer-reviewed criminal justice journal, to which she is also a frequent contributor, published by the University of Ottawa. Her book, *Exiled Voices: Portals of Discovery*, is a collection of writings by women and men in prisons across the country, gathered during her research and fieldwork and is used in writing curricula in a number of colleges and universities. Susan has also published short fiction, most recently in *Tacenda Literary Magazine*, *New Plains Review* (Central Oklahoma University) and *IdeaGems*. Her two great passions in life are writing and education, each inextricably bound to the other.

Alex K. Patel is a senior in the School of Public Affairs majoring in Political Science and minoring in Economics. He is on the executive boards of both the Amnesty International and College Youth in Government chapters at American University. In addition to his studies, he previously interned at the Democratic Governor's Association. Alex is passionate about U.S economic, criminal justice, and scientific policies and hopes to learn more about them.

Sebastian Ramirez is a rising Senior at American University. He is currently studying government and international affairs. He is very interested in countless issues that stem from poverty, such as education, the justice system, and labor. He hopes to become a lobbyist that advocates for improving these broken systems.

Rev Mr. Al Rose is a retired minister. In his 30-some years of ministry, he worked for 15 years in jails and prisons, most notably at the Maryland Penitentiary, where he was the Catholic chaplain, and when that was closed, at its successor, the Jessup Correctional Institution.

Rachel Ternes is an honors undergraduate student at American University majoring in psychology and minoring in French and studio arts. A recipient of the Victor Hassine Memorial Scholarship for her art, her passion for creating art is rivaled only by her interest in using her artistic skills to promote causes of social justice. As Chief Creative Officer for BleakHouse Publishing, Ternes designs visuals for press releases and publicity, and contributes to the visual design and illustration of publications. Her art has appeared in several venues, including the short story, "Cell Buddy," and the novel, *Miller's Revenge*.

Editors

Robert Johnson is a professor of justice, law and criminology at American University, editor and publisher of BleakHouse Publishing, and an award-winning author of books and articles on crime and punishment, including works of social science, law, poetry, and fiction. He has testified or provided expert affidavits on capital and other criminal cases in many venues, including US state and federal courts, the U.S. Congress, and the European Commission of Human Rights. He is best known for his book, *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, which won the Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. Johnson is a Distinguished Alumnus of the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, State University of New York.

Carla Mavaddat is an award-winning artist and student of political science at McGill University with a passion for photography and design. Mavaddat is interested in human rights and social justice, and is a strong advocate against poverty. Her photos have appeared in *Adore Noir* and *Laws*, among other venues. She is the graphics and design editor for *BleakHouse Review*, Art Curator for BleakHouse Publishing, and a Victor Hassine Memorial Scholar.

Grace Austin is an undergraduate honors student at American University studying Justice and Law and National Security Studies. At American, Grace is a cadet in the Hoya Battalion (Army ROTC), a brother of Alpha Phi Omega, a member of the Women's Rugby team, and associate editor of *BleakHouse Review*. Grace has been published in *BleakHouse Review* and was given the *BleakHouse Review's* "Best Poem" award in 2013. Her main interest is prison reform, and Grace will be leading an Alternative Break Trip during Spring Break to San Francisco to focus on the issues of reentry and mass incarceration.

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