

# **Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House & the American Way of Justice**

**By Robert Johnson**

This file contains a full table of contents and many sample poems.

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CD with author reading poems also available

Robert Johnson is the author of several social science books dealing with crime and punishment, including *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, winner of the Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. Many of the poems in this collection, Johnson's first, are drawn from his research in criminology. Robert Johnson is a professor of justice, law and society at American University in Washington, D.C.

See <http://www.american.edu/spa/djls/faculty/johnsonr.html>

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Poems marked with an asterisk [\*] and hyperlinked are available through the Sept 11 section of [StopViolence.com](http://StopViolence.com): Resources for a Just Peace. [<http://stopviolence.com>]

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"Prison life is dirty, deadly, treacherous and invisible to all but its inhabitants. Abstractions from outsiders, even well-meaning outsiders, never reveal a prison's shadow side. But Robert Johnson's poetry is different. Chameleon-like, Johnson assumes the spirit and voice of prison survivors to provide an authentic and compelling expression of the day-to-day reality of prison life."

*Victor Hassine*, a life sentence prisoner and author of *Life without Parole: Living in Prison Today*.

"Drawing upon years of study and research about crime, punishment, imprisonment and the death penalty, criminologist and social scientist Robert Johnson has produced a powerful, vivid and beautiful collection of poems. Johnson's poetry is as provocative and subtle as his prose."

*Rita J. Simon*, University Professor, School of Public Affairs, American University is a noted social scientist who has written over forty books on law and society.

"Powerful and raw, Robert Johnson's poems capture the emotional impact of prisons and death row far better than any prose description can hope for. Whether it's the poignancy of imminent death, or the brutality of racism, Johnson's poems -- both in their words and their meter -- convey feelings that go straight to the heart of the listener. I look forward to using his poems in my "Law and Values" course where they will definitely have a dramatic impact on students and bring home to them the injustices perpetrated in the name of justice."

D. Susan Fain, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Prince George's Community College, teaches courses in Law and Values, Feminist Philosophy, and Introduction to Philosophy: the Art of Reasoning.

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## Poetic Justice Sampler

### I. Perspective

#### Poetic Justice

Build prisons  
not day-care  
Lock 'em up  
What do we care?

Hire cops, not counselors  
Staff courts, not clinics  
Wage warfare  
Not welfare

Invest in felons  
Ripen 'em like melons  
Eat 'em raw, then  
Ask for more

More poverty  
More crime

More men in prison  
More fear in the street

More ex-cons among us  
Poetic justice

[This is one of the first of two poems that open the book]

## **II. Crime and Punishment**

[These are the first and last poems of this section.]

### **Police line: Do not cross**

Bright yellow bands  
bind the black night  
corralling chaos  
containing confusion  
communicating in cold chorus

-  
Caution, stand back, stay clear  
something terrible has happened here

-  
Lights, sirens, suits  
action, but too little,  
too late  
too bad.

-  
Lines have been crossed  
lives have been lost  
long before the police  
were called to the scene.

-  
It'll take more than tape  
to staunch the blood  
bind the wounds  
make us whole  
when we can't  
police ourselves.

## **Demons One and All**

At the bar of justice  
Innocence is no bar to  
Conviction  
Confinement  
Condemnation  
Consignment  
to the junkyard of lost souls.

-  
After the fall  
we brand criminals  
demons one and all  
once and for all

-  
Innocent? Too late,  
Too good to be true  
A technicality, not fate  
Not the real you.

-  
We swallow our mistakes,  
keep them safe and warm  
in the belly of the beast  
where they belong.

### **III. Prison**

**[again, first and last poems of this section]**

#### **A Zoo Near You**

A decent zoo captures  
in miniature, the  
natural environs of the  
animals within.

-  
Prisons don't capture  
the free world of the  
ranging felon

-  
They turn their world  
upside down and  
inside out.

-  
If prisons were more like zoos  
maybe we'd visit them  
and share our families  
and our food  
with the captives.

## Risen from Prison

Risen from prison  
back from the dead  
released convicts  
rejoin the living.

-  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
They have returned!  
It is a miracle!

-  
Every day  
A Miracle

-  
Our prodigal sons  
and daughters  
return  
every day,

-  
From graveyards  
we call prisons,

-  
Each release  
a resurrection  
a quest for  
grace,

-  
For life  
to begin  
anew

-  
Amen.

## **IV. Prejudice**

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination,  
the leading edge of  
oppression  
makes a deep and lasting  
impression  
on folk we offer no  
concession  
yet find in most any  
expression  
a cause for righteous  
repression  
'cause they don't look like  
you or me.

*I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either."*

-- Trent Lott

*at Strom Thurmond's  
100th birthday party*

### **A lott to learn**

We have a lott to learn  
from our Republican leaders,  
'specially the one's who've missed  
the 21th century and stayed in Ole Miss,  
circa nineteen hundred and forty eight  
when everything was black and white  
and white was right  
and black stayed back  
at the end of the line  
on chain gang time  
when things were fine  
in the good ole days  
those lazy, crazy, racist days  
when lynching was all the rage  
and white women wore chantilly lace  
and rap was a sheet for those black of face  
and white sheets were fashionable attire  
for men on horseback lighting crosses afire  
Oh, those were the days  
days we miss a lot  
according to Senator Lott  
and folks who, admit it or not,  
feel a lot  
like him.

## V. Crimes of the Privileged

### The Corporate Book of Criminal Prayer

#### *Psalm of Wonder*

The world is  
my oyster,  
I shall not  
want.

-  
I lay me down  
with fine jobs,  
and wealth to  
flaunt.

-  
It pays  
to have friends  
in high  
places.

[Short section: only one poem included here]

## **VI. Execution**

### **Good People**

“Good people are always so sure they’re right,”  
said Barbara Graham, last woman executed  
by the State of California, back in ‘54  
Immortalized by Susan Hayward in the  
classic film, I Want to Live. Her last words  
may be the last word on capital punishment.  
Good people condemning bad people  
Sure they are right, even as  
Exonerations mount, even as  
We lean heavily, unsteadily  
on our hidden execution rite  
To get us through one more dark night  
And then another...

### **Postcard from Death Row**

Single room, grate view  
round-the-clock room service  
uniformed security staff  
all utilities, medical and dental covered.

Last meal special --  
open menu, all you can eat.

## VII. Carnage and Consequences

### Global Village Life

The image of the world as  
one big Global Village  
has appeal to us, folks  
who've mostly never lived in a village.

-  
Getting to know something  
about everyone on the planet  
sounds so connected,  
so authentic.  
Who could resist?

-  
We forgot about village idiots  
and about chronic malcontents  
whose stupidity and bad temper  
can wreak havoc on our lives.

-  
Worse, we forgot about victims  
of injustice, real and imagined,  
whose resentments simmer and boil  
just below the surface of village life.

-  
And worst of all, we forgot that our Global Village  
was a stepchild of technology  
not the flowering of community

-  
A place where guns and bombs  
and hijacked planes  
can be weapons of terror  
wielded by the wounded,  
who make it their life's work to  
annihilate innocents at will  
in numbers beyond comprehension.

-  
Misery has always loved company.  
It used to be that the miserable  
had only each other's company.  
Now, in our cozy Global Village,  
the forlorn and the rejected  
the isolate and the fanatic  
see the happy, chosen peoples  
at close range

-  
Even if only on TV, radio, or Internet,  
like targets in a shooting gallery  
or in a video game of doom.  
Some of them take aim,  
and the rest is history.

### **September Storm**

Beds of burning charcoal  
pulsating, throbbing  
loiter on the horizon  
up to no good

-  
Full-on storm clouds  
churning, roiling  
lurk overhead, riding  
low over the water  
thick, tufted,  
puffed out, so many  
dark predators  
heavy with menace

-  
Threads of mist,  
fine as spun sugar,  
laced across the sky  
like lassos in flight,  
frame the scene --

-  
Nature's silver lining.  
"This, too,  
shall pass."

Additional sample poems related to Sept 11 are available through  
<http://stopviolence.com/> and include

[It takes a child...](#)

[Dial nine-one-one, Believe](#)

[Living Free is the Best Revenge](#)

## VIII. A Closing Thought

### Beaten in Eden

Adam and Eve sinned  
Soon after conception  
but disobedience, deception  
misappropriation of fruit?

-  
Deviance of a menial sort  
maybe a mere contract tort  
Even with God right there in the tall reeds.

-  
But no forgiveness,  
no reconciliation,  
the human condition  
poised for perdition  
here and ever-after.

-  
Monarchs, would-be Gods, exalted mimes,  
Drew up laundry lists of capital crimes,  
hanging their dirty linen in the public square  
blood-soaked, tear-stained, a hellish affair.

-  
Our Puritan forebears, upright, uptight  
Looked for Satan, found him each night  
Making auditions and confirming suspicions  
In the Wild Woods of the New World.

-  
Their Salem Witch Hunt  
Mock trials, mock sins  
Pure Mischief even then  
Set the Gold Standard for Revenge,  
one we've revisited time and again,  
most recently with  
Demon Rum and  
Drugs in the Slum  
and pretty nearly every  
Raisin in the Sun.

-  
Here's a simple history lesson,  
We can do better than repression.

-  
Punishment bars people  
From the light of day

Excludes them from our way

-  
Prison makes the metaphor real  
a matter of concrete and steel.

-  
Reification, and, over time,  
A prison nation.

-  
Poetic justice, then,  
amounts to this:  
Sanctions that harden  
started in the Garden  
We were Beaten in Eden  
rooted out like weeds  
hence the seeds  
of discontent  
spread so widely  
hence the flowers  
of forgiveness  
spread so thin.

Which raises a question,  
In the inquiring mind,  
Is it the punishment  
Or is it the crime  
That fuels the resentments  
Of our time?

Is it crime and punishment  
That go hand in hand?  
Or does punishment feed the crime  
That plagues our land?

Reconciliation or revenge?  
On this choice  
Our future  
May hinge.