

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.

ORDER FROM PUBLISHER: Conservatory of American Letters P.O. Box 298 Thomaston, ME
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Amazon.com: Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House & the
American Way of Justice (click for info)

Northwoods Press, University Press Division
ISBN 0-89002-367-0 paperback @ \$18.95.
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.
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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.

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.