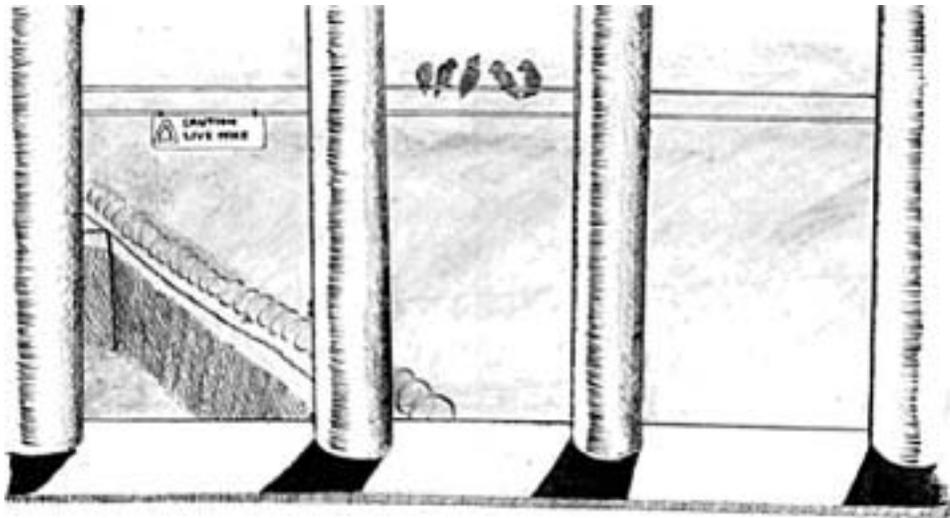


ADMITLMO

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SETTLING SCORES:

A PLAY IN ONE ACT



Jail Birds by Eleanor Potter

by

Robert Johnson, Victor Hassine AM4737, & Ania Dobrzanska

ADMIT TWO

presents:

I Have Names For the Ways They Twitch Their Ears:

The story of one man's flight from his wife's rabbits

by Arlene Ang & Valerie Fox

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Settling Scores: A Play in One Act

by Robert Johnson, Victor Hassine AM4737,

& Ania Dobrzanska

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SETTLING SCORES:
A PLAY IN ONE ACT

by

Robert Johnson, Victor Hassine AM4737, & Ania Dobrzanska

CAST
(in order of appearance)

Correctional officer
Stenographer
Inmate Sanchez
Lawyer
Prosecutor

SETTING

Curtain Closed:
Noises in background: chains, brass keys, and distant male voices.

DIALOGUE

Correctional officer:

Move it Sanchez! (*snapping sound of man chewing gum with his mouth open. . .*) Stay right here. Your lawyer'll be here in a minute. You know the drill, no stupid shit.

Sound of handcuffs, chains, and keys rattling.

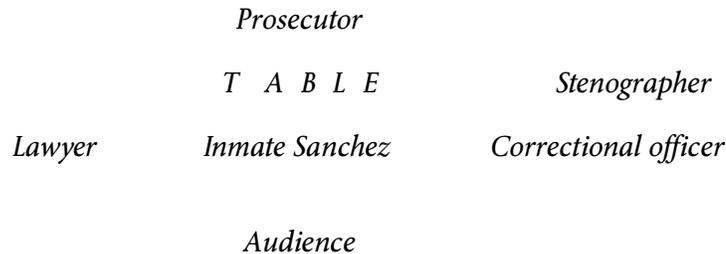
Calling out:

Okay. We're done in here. Ya'll can let 'em come through.

Sound of gate opening and closing—feet shuffling, chairs being moved.

Curtain opens, revealing a large, heavy-set Correctional Officer, a man once muscular but now, in middle age, gone to seed. He is standing near a pretty Stenographer who is seated and wearing a form-fitting gray pantsuit, white silk blouse, and stylish heels. Inmate Sanchez, in a green institutional jumpsuit, is cuffed and shackled to a chair with his back to the audience. The audience can only see the back of Sanchez's head, which sports a long, salt-and-pepper ponytail. A large tattoo of St. Mary in a praying position sits at the nape of his neck. A Lawyer in a standard black suit is seated next to Sanchez on the left side of a table with his briefcase and papers spread out before him. He fumbles with the papers while whispering to his client in a controlled but urgent manner. Meanwhile the correctional officer looks longingly at the stenographer.

Stage Diagram:



Correctional officer:

Soft tone:

Ma'am, ya'll can set up your machine right over there.

He turns his head towards the right corner of the stage, points his chin towards the corner, and nods his head, suggesting the designated location for the machine.

And don't ya'll worry one bit. I'll be here the whole time to make sure nothing happens.

Sternly:

Counselor, (*Lawyer's head jerks up, in reaction*) you can move your chair right on next to your . . . client. He ain't gonna bite ya.

Lawyer pulls his chair up closer to Mr. Sanchez.

Lawyer:

I'll need some time to consult in private with my client. When's the prosecution expected?

Stenographer:

Sexy female voice, with a hint of a European accent, stretching her "R's":

Excuse me. Can you show me where I can plug in my equipment?

Correctional officer:

Upon hearing her voice, immediately ignores the Lawyer:

Ma'am, let me help ya with your—your equipment.

The officer rushes to where the young stenographer is sitting and then bends to put the plug into an outlet. His handcuffs and keys slide to his side, making a metallic noise, getting the stenographer's attention.

Stenographer:

I hope you won't have to use them today. *(pointing to the cuffs)*

Correctional officer:

Don't you worry now. But if I do have to secure the prisoner, I'll just be doin' my job ma'am, just doin' my job.

From bending over, the officer's blood rushed to his head showing a red face. He sighs, lifts up his left hand and runs it through his hair, fixing his "do."

Stenographer:

Thank you. You are so sweet. Really.

Lawyer:

Impatiently but nervously he stands:

Hey, can I get an answer? When do I see my client in private?

Correctional officer:

Ya'll need to sit tight, counselor! *(sighs and looks at his watch)* You got a few minutes, just go ahead talk to your man right here. Nobody gonna listen to ya.

The lawyer begins to object but stops when he hears the rustle of keys and the distinctive sound of a large prison gate swinging open. A woman in a black business suit with a black leather briefcase marches onto the stage, moving in an almost military manner. She positions herself behind the Table, across from Inmate Sanchez, then briskly removes her black, polarized glasses, and places them in her left breast pocket.

Prosecutor:

Sorry I'm late. I was over on death row, checking out the equipment. Everything seems to be working just fine.

She pulls on an expensive looking silk scarf which is knotted at her neck, loosening it, then nods to the stenographer.

Let's get this plea negotiation over with, shall we?

Holding an open file and looking at Sanchez:

Okay. Let's begin. Mr. Sanchez, as you know, I'm from the prosecutor's office and I'm here to negotiate a plea agreement. I hope to convince you to plead guilty to the charges against you in exchange for a more lenient sentence.

Now, let's see. It says here, you were arrested for possession of a substantial amount of illegal drugs that were processed through your house.

Lawyer:

They weren't his drugs. He rents a room to transient folks in the neighborhood—to make ends meet. The room's in the basement; that's where the bum who sold those drugs lived. Mr. Sanchez had no idea those drugs were in the basement.

Prosecutor:

Drugs were found in his house.

Lawyer:

Yes, but they were not his. He doesn't even go down to that basement except to collect the measly rent he gets for the room. It's not like my client lives there.

Where were the drugs found? If they were hidden, how was Mr. Sanchez to know that drugs were even there?

Prosecutor:

Technically, no drugs were actually found in the house. We have reliable testimony that drugs passed through the house—the basement—but no physical evidence.

Lawyer:

No drugs were actually found! How in heaven's name was Mr. Sanchez to know that phantom drugs passed through his house?

Prosecutor:

No need for sarcasm. You know the law. If corroborated testimony establishes that drugs passed through that house, then drugs passed through that house. It goes like this: his basement, his house, his drugs, his case. You follow?

Lawyer:

What corroborating evidence? Traces of drugs?

Prosecutor:

No traces, no. In fact, no drugs were ever actually found. But we have firm testimony from informants that major drugs passed through that house.

Lawyer:

You have nothing but “snitch” testimony? It’s not like these guys are known for their honesty, for God’s sake.

Prosecutor:

They testified under oath; we made it abundantly clear that we would not tolerate perjury. We gave them the opportunity to cooperate, and they took it.

Lawyer:

So my man is going down for owning a house through which unfound drugs allegedly passed through the basement apartment and of which he had no knowledge?

Prosecutor:

We think he knew—or should have known. Again, his house, his responsibility. The so-called “transient” you’re talking about—his name is Smith—copped a plea. He’s on-board. He named your man as part of the deal. That means your man is part of a conspiracy. We offered the transient—uh, Mr. Smith—a deal and he took it.

Lawyer:

Well, that bum—Smith—had every reason to deal, if he was part of a drug conspiracy. Even if he wasn’t, since someone could’ve made up his name, too. Christ, he had nothing to lose by taking someone else down with him.

Prosecutor:

Your man should do the same. You know how this works. Let’s not make it any tougher than it has to be. Once I offer your client a deal, he can take it or roll the dice with a jury.

Pause

But if he gets convicted at trial, he faces a maximum term of . . .

Looking in her file and counting on her fingers.

160 years in prison.

Whistles.

Lawyer:

Quickly stands:

But they weren’t his drugs—if there ever were drugs! I mean, come on, look at my client . . .

Prosecutor:

Impatient, cutting Lawyer off:

That's for a jury to decide! His co-conspirator has already pled guilty. A jury will be impressed by that. Now it's your client's turn at bat.

Lawyer:

Co-conspirator!

Slowly sits back down. Whispers to client, then:

Okay. What's on the table?

Prosecutor:

Eagerly handing over documents to Lawyer:

To make things easy, here's a chart, listing the maximum term your client is facing and the various deductions we are willing to make in return for a guilty plea and cooperation.

Stenographer:

With an index finger on her lips:

Excuse me. Can I get a copy of that — for my notes?

Correctional officer:

Sure, you can.

Snatches the Lawyer's copy from his hand and walks it over to Stenographer and returns.

Lawyer:

Hey!

Stenographer:

Thank you. Thank you very much.

The Correctional officer gazes at the Stenographer until the Lawyer clears his throat. The Prosecutor hands the Lawyer another copy of the document, raising her eyebrows. The Lawyer shakes his head.

Prosecutor:

To Lawyer:

Where were we? Oh, right. Now, as you can see from the nicely laminated chart, the good news is that, simply for pleading guilty, we will deduct a full 20 years off the maximum sentence.

She smiles with tightly pursed lips, highlighted by bright red lipstick.

The bad news is that your client still faces a nice chunk of time.

Lawyer:

A century and then some, for Christ's sake!

The Correctional Officer blows a bubble with his gum, which pops after he is startled by the lawyer's vehemence.

The Stenographer lets out an involuntary gasp.

Prosecutor:

To Lawyer, chuckling:

But you know what the guys in prison say, "You can't play the game if you don't give up a name!" Okay. Let's start at the top.

Pointing to the chart, which can now be seen to be labeled in bold black letters, "NAME GAME."

Lawyer:

What's that small print I see at the bottom? Instructions?

Prosecutor:

That's not instructions. It's more like a motto. One of the guys at the office is an amateur poet.

Stenographer:

Really? I love poems!

The Stenographer hesitates, realizing she has spoken out of turn. In a more subdued voice, she says:

Someone read it and I'll take it down—for the record . . .

No one makes a move to read the chart, so the Correctional Officer rushes over to the prosecutor, stumbling slightly, then takes the chart. He draws a deep breath, tries to smile at the Stenographer, than reads in his best baritone:

Correctional officer:

They bought your drugs
You sold your life
Now we'll make you an offer
you can't refuse

-

You're facing
Five to ten
Ten to life
Life with an out
Life without
Death on a gurney

the ultimate clout

-

The ball's in your court
to your own self be true
Rat someone out
get less time to do
Guilty or not, most
any name will do

Lawyer:

Geesh, what kind of message is that?

Prosecutor:

It means you better go along to get along. We play for keeps. Now listen, here's the mechanics of the process.

Pausing

We figure this must have been a family deal. If your man was in on it—and we believe he was—so were his wife and kids. They all benefited. So, for each member of your client's immediate family — wife, children, anybody else related who ever used that house—that he is willing to name, we'll deduct 20 years.

When we say “name,” we mean implicate and testify against that person in this or any other criminal proceeding.

Lawyer:

We understand that much. He can't play the game if he don't drop a name.

Prosecutor:

That's the spirit! Now, 20 years per name! Pretty generous, when you come right down to it, especially since a lot of criminals come from large families!

Lawyer:

Please, let's focus on this case. My client is not a criminal! (*begins to rise*) He . . .

Prosecutor:

Stands up quickly and dramatically, causing the Lawyer to quickly sit down:

Okay, enough! He's a criminal if we say he's a criminal. It's not like this is his call, damn it!

Pausing, then softening her tone:

Plus, now get this — there is a bonus of 40 years for naming two or more immediate family members. Every two family members you name, you get 80 years off the original sentence! How's that for a plea bargain?

The Stenographer squirms a bit.

Lawyer: *visibly uneasy*
Well, I . . .

Prosecutor: *impatiently*
Naming unrelated codefendants, neighbors, friends, or other relatives will earn a deduction of 20 years each but – listen closely – with *no bonus time deductions* for multiple names.

Lawyer:
There's a family discount?

Prosecutor:
Yes there is. *(spoken with a hint of pride)*

Lawyer:
Compassionate conservatism at work!

Prosecutor:
Smiling coldly, ignoring the sarcasm:
Perhaps. But in any event, you cannot receive any less than a 20-year sentence for your guilty plea.

Lawyer:
So no matter what, you do 20 years?

Prosecutor:
That's the score, counselor. Unless, of course, you have someone real juicy to turn in, like a mob boss, a politician, or a White House intern with an unnatural fondness for Cuban cigars. Then we'll put you on the Witness Protection Program and you don't have to serve any time at all!

Lawyer:
This is absurd!

Prosecutor:
Yes, it is. But it's effective. You gotta love it!

Stenographer:
Tilting her head, coquettishly:
Excuse me. Can I ask a question?

Correctional officer:

Of course, of course you can. Just go right ahead!
The Prosecutor and Lawyer are caught off guard, as it were, reduced to silence at Correctional officer's inappropriate behavior.

Stenographer:

Thank you. This sheet says that Mister Sanchez can get 20 years off his sentence for turning in his wife, twenty years off his sentence for turning in his son, twenty years for . . .

Prosecutor:

Interrupting, impatient.
That's right. We call that our Family Plan.

Stenographer:

Well, why twenty years? Everything is twenty this, twenty that . . .
What's so special about twenty?

Correctional officer:

That's a damn good question! Good for you, young lady!

Prosecutor:

Looking directly at Correctional officer
Well, twenty years is a generation — a score, as in, "Four score and seven years ago."

Correctional officer:

I serve 20 years till my retirement . . .

Correctional officer falls silent when he meets the prosecutor's stern gaze.

Lawyer:

This is crazy. My client didn't do anything. He has no one to name. My client was a model citizen till you guys arrested him for this ridiculous crime. And here we are joking about twenty years of captivity like it's nothing!

Prosecutor:

Well, most folks figure out the score pretty quick.

Lawyer:

All that bum had to do was drop my guy's name! There's no real proof . . .

Prosecutor:

That's all your man has to do, too—drop a name. This drug stuff, a lot of times it's all talk. The evidence goes up in smoke – or coke!

Laughs at her own humor

Lawyer:

I'm glad you find this funny. I can't see the humor in selling people into captivity on something as flimsy as an accusation that is so self-serving it's laughable.

Prosecutor:

Do you see me laughing? This is serious. For sure folks aren't going to turn themselves in. We've got to squeeze one bad guy to get to the next.

Anyway, look. Just because your client has no record and the "bum", as you call him, has been around the block, well, that really doesn't make a difference. Justice is blind; people may be different but when you get right down to it, that really doesn't matter. The law's the law. Do the crime, do the time.

Lawyer:

But he didn't . . . Alright, alright, we're in a bind . . .

Prosecutor:

Now I'm a reasonable woman, and my office would like to settle this. Saves time, ours and your client's. So we'll offer your client a flat 20 years for his guilty plea. That's 140 years off his maximum sentence.

Guilty or not, we've got snitch testimony—you know, his co-conspirator—that *makes* him guilty, and that's what counts in the end. What do you say? Are we all going to save ourselves a lot of time or . . .

Lawyer and Sanchez whisper.

Lawyer:

My client says, okay, but you know this isn't fair. You know he didn't do anything. The bum he rented to is just doing what he can to get out from under a sentence as high as Mount Everest. For all I know that guy's innocent too! And maybe Mr. Sanchez just pissed him off and this is his way of settling the score.

Prosecutor:

Settling scores, well that's pretty much what it comes down to. All that matters is what we can prove. So, we can settle this score by settling on a score – 20 years, flat – rather than having your client risk really big time. Poetic justice, huh?

Lawyer:

Bad poetry. Bad justice. Shit, just send me the paperwork at my office.

Shaking his head, the lawyer stands up and puts his papers in order, preparing to leave. The stenographer does the same. The Correctional officer turns Inmate Sanchez's chair to the audience, which reveals him to be a very old man strapped into a wheel chair with an array of medical equipment attached to him. Sanchez looks decrepit, like death warmed over. Everyone watches impassively as a nearly comatose Sanchez is wheeled off stage.

Characters exit the stage except for the Stenographer, who stops at Center Stage to face the audience as she prepares to leave. She appears to be deep in thought.

Stenographer:

Twenty years. All this fuss and that old man isn't going to last twenty minutes!

Nods her head pensively as she exits stage...

The End

Robert Johnson is a criminologist who writes poetry and fiction on the side, drawing attention to the inhumanity of US prisons and death houses. He is the author of *Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House, and the American Way of Justice* (Conservatory of American Letters, 2004). His latest poetry collection is *Burnt Offerings: Poems on Crime and Punishment* (BleakHouse Publishing, 2007).

Victor Hassine is a life-sentence inmate entering his twenty-sixth year of confinement in Pennsylvania prisons. He is the author of the widely used text, *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* (Oxford University Press, 2008), as well as several works of fiction, including *The Crying Wall* (WilloTrees & Infinity, 2005) which he co-edited and which contains several of his short stories.

Ania Dobrzanska is a corrections expert and practitioner with a long record of professional publications dealing with prison life and prison reform, most recently with a focus on the prevention of sexual violence in prisons and jails. Dobrzanska is a published writer of fiction. Her award-winning short story, "Dances with Dragons: Memories of the Hole," appears in *The Crying Wall*, a book she co-edited with Victor Hassine and Robert Johnson.

Eleanor Potter received a BA in Fine Art at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. Eleanor completed her art foundation course at the Wimbledon School of Art in London, U.K. She has had her work displayed at the Goethe Institute in Washington D.C. as well as at exhibitions in the London area. Her artwork is featured prominently in *Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House, and the American Way of Justice* and in several issues of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*, a publication of WilloTrees Press in partnership with Bleakhouse Publishing.