

# Tempered Steel:

The Minds, Memories, and Muscle Behind  
Hightower State's Most Notorious Residents



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## Introduction

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This is a *Spoon River Anthology*-inspired series of poems, each written by a distinct character in incarcerated in Hightower State Penitentiary, one of upstate New York's most daunting institutions. Regardless of background, everyone who comes in contact with Hightower has his or her own meaning of the word "strength." Each character, much like us, recollects his struggles – both past and present – and shares his personal memories to this anonymous audience. While some of these memories may appear mundane, each specific detail yields immeasurable influence over these men and women, the situations they face, and how they react. Moreover, each member of the community here – some unrepentant, some resigned, some devout, some opportunistic, some loved – made profound choices in their own distinct social contexts. Despite their differences, they all coincidentally co-exist, the cells of their bodies now inherently intertwined with the cells of the prison.

In the course of writing *Tempered Steel* two unexpected themes emerged. Empathy saturates each page, imploring readers to understand the incomprehensible, to imagine another's personal experiences as one's own, and to resist the impulse to condemn. Everyone, by virtue of existing, lifts life lessons high for the world to see. Yet, it is up to the reader to decipher their messages and decide for themselves what to glean. Only he who can summon enough courage to gaze into the eyes of the most

reprehensible without blinking can fully understand what drives human tragedy, why violence occurs, and ultimately, how (not) to live. Finally, every character's words are ultimately underscored by one of Man's most basic instincts: hope. Whether it is the hope for release, which many may never attain, or other more graspable goals such as spiritual fulfillment, social connections, a clear conscience, or realizing one's potential, all recognize that the arrow of time points perpetually forward. So long as this is true, there is always the possibility that the uncertainty of the future can give way to more favorable outcomes, especially given the right attitude.

Unswerving, unyielding, and uncompromising, these are their stories in their own words.

## Prologue

By the Faceless Prisoner

They say every poem's got a meter  
 And there's a period at the end of each sentence  
 But this sentence only ends with

*Ellipsis*

As my meter keeps running.

My poem, a Prisoner in its own right  
 Its words, fighting to transcend paper  
     Crumpled paper tossed in the dustbin  
 And even if some soul noticed it,  
 And even if some soul reached down to retrieve it,  
 Even if some soul uncrumpled it,  
 It's creases could not be flattened out  
     Like the scars on my back  
     And the backs of my ancestors.

\*\*\*

Welcome.

In a moment, you will enter the bowels of our society:  
 the much-esteemed Hightower State Maximum  
 Security Prison.

As soon as those gates lock behind you, they ain't  
 opening it again until your time here is served.

So be ready, life don't call no draws. Either you win  
 the battle or you don't, but she always wins the war.

Does it scare you, Man's insatiable ingenuity, his creativity in killing, the voraciousness of his violence?

Who do you trust? The eyes of the depraved or your wife? Perhaps they are one in the same.

What are you looking for *here*, the site of the basest, most indispensable stage, the very core of the human condition, the innermost recess of Man's heart? Or are you just a curious spectator wishing nothing more than to self-righteously ogle at the creatures of the Reptile House?

Take it from someone who found out the hard way, your preconception's are a contraband best left on the street for they have no value here. Flush 'em if you got 'em cuz I guarantee you they'll get ripped out.

There's a hand-painted sign hung up in the rec room that says "Choices, actions, consequences."  
The choice is yours.

Read these words not as the howl of a wolf, nor the whimper of a caged dog, but as *you*.

## The Depraved

AKA Gabriel Tompkins

I seen her up at Clinton  
I done more than seen her  
I felt her  
Her eyes, her smile, her club

She felt kinda good though  
I just had to laugh  
Got off on e'rybody watchin'  
Me be bottom bitch for a change

Maybe I like the blood-boiling shame  
The crowd flappin' they gums like they flashin they  
signs  
Make 'im think I'm the underdog  
Climb back, Cadillac, spotlight, New Jack

She pissed me off? real good though  
Twitchin' there on the ground  
Hollered to stand up and squat  
Well I don' wanna squat

Making me look like a damn fool  
I do that shit on my own terms  
For my own purposes  
My mistake was that I thought I had no choice

Well I squatted  
Lest she flatten my skull like a cardboard box  
How's a guy s'posed to get his rocks off  
If he ain'ts got none left?

So I'm squattin' there  
And she's glowin' and jabbin' at me  
And e'ryone's hootin' 'n' hollerin'  
An' I just couldn't hold back

Shit squirted down into my socks  
And I'm burnin' up real good  
I want that control  
But she won't give it to me

Now she sayin' to scrub, right?  
But she just bearin' down upon me  
Making me still squat there  
Letting me wallow in it

And the other guards, they don't give a shit  
One of 'em called me a nigger  
But that didn't stick to me  
So much as the excrement drying to my short 'n'  
curlies

I lost more respect than I wanted  
Forced to scrub up  
Some kinda power trip  
She got hers, now I'ma get mine

\*\*\*

Well they got me on lockdown one day  
Most days, anyway  
Sayin' I'm a trouble prisoner,  
I'm a no good stinkin' asshole

I'm poundin' on the door

And yellin at the top my lungs  
And cussin' for some companionship or somethin'  
And she come by and tell me to shut the fuck up

She must have just transferred here  
And that *really* got me going  
I stomped all the shit in my cell up  
Even the little spiders that I usually like to watch  
make they webs

She said any infraction won't look good for parole  
I don't give a fuck about parole!  
Killing a bitch and mopping the floor with her large  
intestine  
Don't look good for parole neither!

Up in Clinton, I been tainted  
Engrained in shame  
Couldn't even piss in peace  
Without some wisecracker callin' me a shit for brains

So I'm pacin'  
And I gets this idea  
I'ma gas her  
Like she gassed me

There I am savin' bottles and cans  
Anything I can, piss and phlegm  
Chunky and smooth, green eggs and jam  
Chocolate milk, thank ya ma'am

The day finally came  
She told me to turn around  
Stick my hands through the slot

Nah, I wicked bombed her ass

Chain reaction set  
 Too hazy to recollect  
 Forced to be extracted  
 To this chair, I'm now strapped in

It was my last chance for dignity  
 You understand me, don't you?

## **The Female Guard**

AKA Vanessa Williams

I feel at right at home when I'm at work

*Names*

*Insults*

I hope Ma tucked Steven in  
 He's been havin' bad dreams lately  
 Says some shadow's been stalkin' him  
 "Nothin' to worry 'bout, baby  
 Evil can't find us here"

*Slander*

*Abuse*

He's always been a troublemaker  
 Everybody warned me  
 Watch out, be careful  
 Shoulda listened earlier  
 To the "lock" in "wedlock"

*Slaps*  
*Kicks*

Took a job at the pen  
 It was my own idea  
 He was none to happy  
 Except for the extra income  
 I was glad to be in control

*Bruises*  
*Black Eyes*

That man killed his wife  
 76 stab wounds  
 Laughed at the judge  
 “I can do whatever I damn  
 well want with my property”

*Scream*  
*Stomp*

“Line up against the fucking wall!”  
 Motherfucker wouldn’t listen  
 Pulled my club on him  
 And he actually *enjoyed* it  
 Babbling in tongues

*Fuck You*  
*Slam*

“You’ll feel the humiliation I do  
 Every time you squish around in your shit-stained  
 socks,  
 Motherfucker,

You're state property now!  
How it feel now, bitch?"

## **The Jitterbug**

AKA Kareem Swayze

Tonight is the Hightower Grand Ball  
And its time for my grand entrance.  
Squinting as the spotlight shimmers,  
I casually find my seat at the table of Honor.  
An unseen tapestry, unfurled with makeshift stitches  
Announces to all:  
"The Kareem Swayze Frier's Club Roast."  
I've seen other guests of Honor,  
Donning the felon's finest,  
Columbian neckties, full metal jackets.  
Still in our salad days,  
I'm thinking of the main course.  
Will there be desert?  
A five course feast to come,  
Utensils forbidden  
But the clever and shrewd always find ways to eat  
Even if they must use their bare hands.  
It's not much class, I admit,  
But who's to critique our etiquette?  
An open bar serves up Molotov cocktails  
To wash down bread and butter brutality  
And choice cuts of beef on these stainless steel  
platters.  
A toast is proposed —  
But the words are inaudible  
Over a distant dog whistle.

Time to face the music on this Hobbesian dance floor.

And just like that,  
 We tiptoe to a malicious melody,  
 Tripping, twirling, whirling  
 Positively pirouetting,  
 Lindyhopping with flipped, limp partners.  
 I pant patiently as waiters with gnarled knuckles  
 – Love and Hate inked on each hand –  
 Dish out crème brulee and cherries jubilee.

## **The Entrapped Terrorist**

AKA Mohammed Elroy McKinney

I seen some subhuman shit in my time  
 Shorties givin' head to meth-heads  
 Under the rusting Beacon Bridge  
 And inside shuttered-up slum shacks.  
 Growin' up too quick.  
 Mothers crashin' they cars into the Hudson  
 Drownin' they kids cuz they can't cope.  
 Not growin' up at all.  
 Sistas sellin' themselves for 5 bucks a rock  
 Under silver-domed sodium streetlights  
 Somethin' ain't right.  
 Fathers – well what's left of 'em –  
 Givin' guns to teens  
 To settle scores  
 To make their daddy proud.  
 This kinda lovin' ain't right.  
 FBI commandos sharp sword sting takedowns.  
 Barbershop bullshitters passin' lists of  
 Captured comrades like brown-bagged blunts.

Cosmos Pizzeria got torched so  
 Some young Italian can get a notch in his belt.  
 Bodies washin' up like logs after a storm,  
 Green leaves strewn like brains  
 On a pus-bubbled, starchy wallpaper.  
 Youngins playin' ball  
 In the stench of secretion.  
 Blue Angels comin' to "save" us,  
 Our youth DARE'd to follow they dreams.  
 Dreams.  
 White kids an' they fathers' ridin' up,  
 Doors clanked shut,  
 Windows sealed tight,  
 Subtle warnings for misbehavior:  
 "Be grateful we don't live *here*."

Where else was there to go, poor Mama?  
 Middleburgh's a couple quarters too far from  
 Midtown.  
 Green scuzz-encrusted rusted coins don't get you far  
 On a glitz and glam Times Square tram.  
 One Day, *Inshallah*, I won't have to mop up shit  
 On this graveyard shift.  
 There's no Wally World in Paradise.

\*\*\*

Yeah, I done bids before  
 That's where I first found Allah's path.  
 Yeah, I was angry,  
 Pissed at Bush and them bloodspillers  
 Terrorizin' our kin around the world.  
 But I was also poor!  
 You think a man won't kill for

500 G's and a Beemer?  
 Look where I came from!  
 Now look at that hired hood-rat informant!  
 Even the Judge sees it:

“The essence of what occurred here is that a government, understandably zealous to protect its citizens from terrorism, came upon a man both bigoted and suggestible, one who was incapable of committing an act of terrorism on his own. It created acts of terrorism out of his fantasies of bravado and bigotry, and then made those fantasies come true." [...] The government did not have to infiltrate and foil some nefarious plot – there was no nefarious plot to foil. [The defendants were] "not political or religious martyrs, but thugs for hire, pure and simple."

But the doors of justice slam nevertheless.  
 Yeah, I done some subhuman things,  
 And yeah, I'm sorry for that,  
 But no one 'cept Hussain ever treated me  
 Like a human before.  
 May Allah continue to light the way.

## **The Day Laborer**

AKA Manuel Garcia Sanchez

My very personhood  
 Went up in smoke with Los Alamos Medical Center  
 I was now like *madre*:  
 Illegal.

\*

The day my life ended, they blindfolded me,  
 Threw me on that bus,  
 Said I'd plan an escape route.  
 Bad enough I couldn't see my sons,  
 Maria, or my sweet, mama,  
 Brown as the dirt she scrubbed  
 From the houses of *los gringos locos*

Weeping willows flourish in soil like hers.  
 Free trees grow beyond this razor wire  
 But I'll never see them.

\*

Thirty cent potato picker  
 Any 14 year old boy can get 20 times that flippin'  
 burgers  
 Not me though  
 No one ever believes your story  
 Social Security slip'n'slide  
 Medicaid free for all  
 Status: Undetermined  
 Ma too scared to go in  
 I talked to people through slots  
 Who told me to talk to other people through slots  
 Unsuccessful  
 We'd boomerang back with all the other day laborers

\*

Hazy mind saw through blue eyes  
 My brain ain't a worm soaking in tequila.

Though I missed,  
 My blade exuded an unmistakable glow.  
 Dignity, some called it.  
 Aggravated assault with a deadly weapon  
 Said others.

\*

You might know me as a number  
 EGZ-4286  
 AAH-1218  
 BCG-9927  
 #34892  
 But here's some other numbers for you:

18 –  
 Xavier's age when I get out  
 5 –  
 The grade Ramon will be in  
 13 –  
 The Amendment that supposedly ends slavery  
 6 –  
 Days a week  
 1 –  
 Hour of rec  
 30 –  
 My piss-poor wage, 2 minutes a penny  
 44 –  
 The cost of a stamp  
 1.467 –  
 The number of hours I gotta work to be able to send  
 somethin' home

\*

There's a commissar for those with connections

There's packages for those with pull  
 There's accounts for the aspiring.  
 Nothin' for me.

A hoarse holler:  
 "Ramirez! You got a letter from Home!"  
 Nothin' but gold.

## **The Confused Son**

AKA Ramon Garcia Sanchez

Hi Daddy,

I know you said not to send you anything because its too expensive, but my teacher said we have to make presents for Father's Day. I made you a clay bowl to keep things in. I also sent some school pictures that Mrs. Tompkins developed for us. Maybe one day we can go fishing together. I can't wait to see you again. You are the best daddy ever. Mommy says hi too. She helped me write this letter. She says to tell you never to change. We love you very much.

Love,  
 Ramon

## **The Grieving Mother**

AKA Sofia Maria Sanchez

"Not my baby!"  
 How can they take him away  
 When he was the victim?

“Not my baby!”  
 Who will stick up for us  
 When we’re under attack?

“Not my baby!”  
 How will we eat  
 When the price of tortillas has risen?

“Not my baby!”  
 Who will look after little Ramon  
 When my joints are too swollen to pick him up?

“Not my baby!”  
 Who will convince Xavier to go back to school  
 When we haven’t seen him in months?

“Not my baby!”  
 Will Maria ever get to rest  
 When her laugh lines fade and her hair grays?

“Not my baby!”  
 How can our little Manuel come home  
 When we won’t be around much longer?

## **The Babyface**

AKA Rickie Westley

On still mornings like this one, with yellow streaks of  
 light

    Playing peek-a-boo through these Northern  
 New York canopies,  
 Papa would pluck me out of my car seat

And walk me down to the water's edge to skip  
stones.

The Erie Canal, once magnificent,  
    Stood there as an ancient relic of an era long  
past,  
A fleeting memory.

Mom's gaze, as muddy as the waters,  
    Was fast-affixed to another pill bottle far away  
at home.

After he was done, Papa would help me  
    Put on my pants again, one leg at a time,  
And if I howled (Not that there would be anyone  
around to hear)  
    He would put out his Pall Mall on the nape of  
my neck.  
I learned not to howl.

One day – I was maybe seven –  
    I leapt into the water, unsure of what to hope  
for.

My leaden limbs paddled wildly  
    Fifty, maybe sixty yards down stream,  
But Papa's furious feet were quicker  
    And he plucked me out of the water,  
Soppin' wet, hoppin' mad,  
    His face was redder than ever.  
I don't remember much after that.

Well when I was eleven, I hid Papa's gun,  
    A stainless steel Beretta, in my front pants  
pocket.  
I took care of myself after that in those woods.

That is, until the State gave me the mandatory  
 minimum: life without parole.  
 In the eyes of myself and the eyes of the law,  
     I was suddenly an adult.  
 I beamed.

But looking back, why did they, a jury of my “peers”  
 some decades my senior,  
     Write me off as “demented and anti-social?”  
 Why was a guppy like me so callously cast  
     Into a shark tank more fearsome than that  
 home on Wallflower Lane?  
 How malleable are our children, when the same  
 scumbags  
     Who sneer and snicker at perverts and  
 pedophiles feast on fresh meat themselves?  
 What hope is there for restoration and what good  
 would it do  
     When there exists no more hellish  
 environment than this cage,  
     Our atmosphere of “hear-no-evil,” just  
 desserts, and haughty contempt?  
 Am I not also the product of a caustic climate, not  
 just poor genes?  
 And why did they say the scar on my neck is a  
 birthmark...

\*\*\*

That abandoned lock,  
 A symbol of Our sleepwalking spirit,  
 Mechanized more efficient means to ship cattle,  
 cargo, commerce

From now-extinct cities to backwards burghs  
 – and back again.  
 Business thrived and pedestrians stood tall,  
 Blessed to be on the Right Side of History.

That abandoned lock,  
 Where my tortured childhood tilted towards Fortitude  
 And away from Providence,  
 Now shows signs of strain under the weight of its  
 sins,  
 As even the gentlest of waters will weather the  
 sturdiest of gates.

That abandoned lock,  
 Which cleverly carried Our bitter barges upstream,  
 Will still stand tall long after we drift away.  
 I, however, take solace in the fact  
 That I taught myself how to swim there.

## **The Cave Dweller**

AKA Joseph Cacciatore

Targets can't keep their heads down  
 Can't choose to be good  
 Can't avoid trouble  
 Can't afford to close their eyes  
 Until no one's watching  
 Life in a glass capsule  
 Ad Seg, SHU, Supermax  
 The Hole  
 An oasis of security  
 For those like me  
 Unfit for gen pop

Tattered, torn, burned  
Like our old flag  
That once flew at half-mast  
Retired to an ash heap  
Or a pinewood box

23 hours a day  
7 years, 2565 days  
7 birthdays without candles  
Without being able to cut the cake  
That I'm not allowed to have  
Just pre-sliced grapefruit  
Cut into corners  
Time comes with trays

Rabid dog in an 8x10 cage  
Man's best friend  
Barking, barking  
Pacing, panting,  
Barking, barking, barking  
To himself  
What good is free speech  
If ears are shackled?

A slit for a window  
The slash of a wrist  
A sliver of sunlight  
But never sunkissed  
Suspended in syrup  
The first dew of spring  
Spotches of spotlights  
Shy stars, seven years  
Starlit silhouettes

–Irregular, waltzing  
 Disappearing–  
 (I'd kill for a Milkway)  
 White walls  
 Cave drawings  
 In blood  
 Keys jingling,  
 Back to Level One

With gashes longer than my stint here,  
 I linger in life –  
 The monotonous interlude  
 anticipating human recognition:  
 shackles through a slot,  
 an automated shower,  
 an artificial, glass-walled yard.  
 One hour to breathe, to feel alive.

Solidarity, eighty-thousand strong  
 We're forbidden to speak  
 Contact is a privilege  
 Made for good little boys,  
 Wholesome kernels of Christian compassion.  
 I haven't earned it yet.  
 Yet.  
 Tearing the seams of my boxers,  
 I fasten a rat-line  
 To rally Our Lady of Hallowed Hermits.  
 My message:  
 “Man wasn't made for this.”  
 Before I can loop it  
 Around my neck,  
 Riot police spray CS  
 Tears in my eyes,

They extract me,  
 Strap me to the  
 Chair of Civilization.  
 Their message:  
 “We wield the only levers of release.”

Manic depression, anxiety  
 Outbursts, behavior disorders  
 Infractions from robocops  
 The balance of power decided,  
 Reminded, reinforced  
 In a tug of war  
 Over a goddamned tray.

“A bid for attention”  
 is a derogatory term  
 I know they argue  
 Over whether I’m rational  
 Or not.  
 I know because  
 I make them up  
 When I bash my skull  
 On their steel door  
 “Knock, knock  
 who’s there?”  
 They run over, holler  
 Answer the door  
 “I am.”

The rabid dog swears  
 Snoozing in distant,  
 Blinding, vibrant,  
 Revolving nebulae  
 Behind the glow

Of ghoulish gazes,  
 Children screaming,  
 Crackling static,  
 Broken radio antennae  
 A far-flung melody  
 Trickles out  
 Warm waves awash  
 On this side of sunset  
 Violent dreams fade to ...

## The Warden

JoAnne Jenkins

My sweet mother was a belle, born and bred  
 And raised us with respect for all our peers  
 But when I found her bloodied up in bed  
 He only served but fifteen goddamn years  
 I toiled for her at Syracuse Law  
 Determined by my heart – this throbbing stone –  
 To accomplish thy will with resolute awe  
 And justice atop my principled throne  
 We all shall be judged, some harsher than most  
 To reconcile our purpose with our pain  
 And in solemn hell-fires should they all roast  
 These good walls God granted us shan't complain  
 Our trials lead to convictions unbroken  
 And temper us in the words left unspoken.

## The Pragmatic Skinhead

AKA Gary Powell

As a kid, I walked alone  
 From the schoolyard to my home  
 Hopping fences, huffing glue  
 Running from the Krosstik Krew  
 Caustic cursing, broken bones  
 Nursing wounds and badly bruised

Scrapes and scars from the attacks  
 The streets were theirs, we turned our backs

Boots and braces, fight to win  
 Standing strong with the Skins  
 Pubs 'n' brawls, bash the fash  
 Stuck with SHARP, no Nazi trash  
 Brothers need not just be kin  
 Proud and true, no longer dashed

No stars or bars or Union Jack  
 The streets were ours, we took them back

One dark night, it went too far  
 Fisticuffs in Mickey's bar  
 The band was good, the "Oi's" were loud  
 Drunken struggle in the crowd  
 O'er respect I got this scar  
 He slipped and slept while I stood proud

Tried, arraigned, and hung to dry  
 There were no streets, it was just I

Cell doors slammed, concrete walls

No more private shower stalls  
 First day in I got attacked  
 Turned around, it was the blacks  
 Falling down, could not crawl  
 But the Brothers had my back

(Round here, “punk’s” got more than one  
 meaning  
 But the speed still courses through my veins  
 Life’s unkind no matter where I reside  
 But I still have the will to thrive)

Protection or conviction? The odds were stacked  
 Betrayed beliefs, I turned my back  
 No more SHARP, just Skrewdriver  
 But I’ll always say, I’m a survivor

## **The Grateful Vagrant**

AKA Cedric Steckler

Snuggling with stray cats  
 Fleas and scabies  
 Downing dumpster-dived moonshine  
 Raccoons with rabies  
 Bathing in Grand Central sinks  
 Hoes with crack babies  
 Passerby ties with no time  
 Silence, no, maybe

Welcome to my living shell

Where my back watches itself  
 I got access to classes, healthcare,

3 piping hot meals per day  
 On time, all the time  
 A place where I can just close my eyes  
 And *breathe*.  
 And showers, fragrant, sweet, warm warbling water  
 To scrub out the dirt from my nails.  
 A guy can get used to this, huh?

## The Lyrical Lifer

AKA The Prophet

I'm a product of the Great Migration  
 A plot in a sharecropper's plantation  
 The legacy of slavery and trepidation  
 And the hand of the Klan in our mutilation  
 Great granny was a slave or so I've been told  
 Where her roots were planted, I'll neva know  
 One day she up 'n' left 'n' blew wit' da wind  
 Prayed her seeds would land wit' da rest o' her kin

My father was a foreman at Free State Steel  
 And my moms cleaned homes up on Federal Hill  
 They worked mad hard but money was tight  
 Went to church every Sunday but they fought  
 e'rynight  
 Birthdays neva came but still couldn't complain  
 Cuz a peep outta me woulda meant the cane  
 Couldn't lift much, no muscles in my arm  
 But I could wow crowds with a double entendre  
 You see, I grew up in the DMV  
 And I grew up with Run DMC  
 Then one day, the music got old  
 NWA helped my soul go cold

Round that time, I started catchin' rides  
 Cutting classes with the masses while pops work  
 overtime  
 A cat from New York said I could score drawers  
 If I went North of Baltimore  
 All my life was these rags, I needed much more  
 So I packed my bags and prepared for war  
 Burglar alarms weren't nothin' for ma charms  
 The cows neva came home cuz I took the whole farm

Growin' up, it always seemed to me  
 That MLK was neither a man or a dream  
 But a street in every city where you don' wanna be  
 Now tell me exactly how that came to be?  
 "Back in the days our parents used to take care of us  
 Look at 'em now, they even fuckin' scared of us"  
 Truer words have never been sung  
 But its me not the jury that appears to be hung

*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a –*  
*It's a –*  
*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a long time comin'*

This boondocks is ruder than Aaron McGruder's  
 The only trees I can see are all uprooted  
 From beyond the confines, an hour of yard time  
 Is just fine according to the Man Unkind  
 My sista neva visits and my parents both retired

I mean no more to ‘em now than when I was wild  
 Cuz home’s just the place where I lay my head  
 No care packages but I still gotta get my bread

Ya see, to me innocence is only a plea  
 We all hustlin’ but to different degrees  
 Somebody calls the shots whether its Little Shakeem  
 Or the people in the towers of Morgan Stanley  
 I see no difference between Young Campbell’s dream  
 And the Dow Jones-listed prison companies  
 We take pride in our numbers like UK’s Queen  
 But I lost count after my “Concrete Jubilee”

Huh, I’m invisible like Ellison  
 Especially to dem elephants  
 They don’ hear us, but they fear us  
 Cuz my sista went to Spellman  
 Now can you tell a man  
 Just exactly where you stand  
 Backpatted by the government  
 ‘n’ slapped wit’ da otha hand

Up in Attica it’s Battlestar Gallactica  
 Watch ya back at Rikers cuz they attackin’ ya  
 Death row ain’t a canoe on Niagara Falls  
 Its being locked up for life in between these walls  
 Calls are a minute long and monitored  
 Privacy’s a privilege and the turnkeys all be bombin’  
 ya  
 And don’t talk back lest they ransack  
 Ya cell like the museums of Iraq

*It’s a long time comin’*  
*It’s a long time comin’*

*It's a –*  
*It's a –*  
*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a long time comin'*

Now things is different, I'm on a mission  
 Make the best of this mess in this fatal condition  
 Hope is nothin' but growth than it is intuition,  
 Prohibition, or the white noise of politicians  
 It comes from deep inside of us  
 Like Malcolm taught himself to read in spite of this  
 How Rosa dared to sit in front of the bus  
 And Martin rallied us up to make a fuss  
 We're far from a basement at Stanford  
 but close to Trayvon's tragedy way there down in  
 Sanford  
 Cuz ya know its the Youth's what's important  
 Rather see some Hueys than a hundred Willie  
 Hortons

I try to be the leader that I never was  
 Because its neva too late for you ta set ya mind abuzz  
 Like the Young Gun, I tried so hard  
 There's more to life than bangin' on these bars  
 But he thinks he's forgiven for sinnin'  
 No good choices in the conditions we live in  
 Tried to take 'im in my wings, though I'm no Angel  
 To free my destiny unlike Abel

Luckily now I'm mentorin' Mohammed  
 Cuz the man is misread and been misled  
 Who hasn't stood there in his shoes?  
 Pots of cream for acts you don' wanna do  
 And who's to blame in this game – money or fame?

Trudgin' through mud, we all slump the same  
 Misconception we'll always be like this  
 The only exception in this abyss  
 Are those who can't change they brain  
 Hit or miss, confidence, unchained

Strike the match, light the fire  
 Replenish the earth and never retire  
 It's a long time comin'

*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a –*  
*It's a –*  
*It's a long time comin'*  
*It's a long time comin'*

*(Free verse fade out with chorus on a loop)*  
 I trust myself but my boys need to know someone  
 trust in them too  
 Someone believe in them  
 Ta know that they're not just sterile seeds  
 But they been planted in fallow fields  
 Waitin' for one day to finally come  
 These boys might never see they virility  
 They might neva see sunlight  
 Might not believe it  
 But if they can act like they believe it  
 If they can pretend to BE somebody  
 Then maybe those seemingly impregnable,  
 Neglected souls can impregnate this nation with  
 innovation  
 We NEED our OWN Proclamation  
 We NEED our OWN Emancipation

We need these seeds to blow with the wind  
 And sow some sources of agitation  
 It starts with One...

## **The Small Fry**

AKA Nicolas Cook

Poppies bloom  
 Cold creeps  
 Ghosts haunt  
 Star status sticks:  
 The Kandahar Killer

Cough syrup cooks  
 Smoke rises  
 Eyelids droop  
 Guilt trips follow:  
*Just* twenty months?

## **The Former Cop**

AKA Eric Price

Omerta meets the Blue Wall  
 Silence is the cushion  
 Grinding gears spray sparks  
 Violence is the friction  
 Beady eyes the same,  
 The costumes on our backs  
 Mutual respect  
 For our vices don't relax  
 Neither guard nor thug

What am I but both?  
 Betrayed by all  
 By law, by oath?

## The Cynical Doctor

AKA Grady Harte, M.D.

“I swear by Apollo, the healer, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath and agreement:”

*I still remember the voice of Hippocrates, our voices ringing in unison. Like the indefatigable Atlas, we would carry the world on our shoulders.*

“To consider dear to me, as my parents, him who taught me this art; to live in common with him and, if necessary, to share my goods with him; To look upon his children as my own brothers, to teach them this art; and that by my teaching, I will impart a knowledge of this art to my own sons, and to my teacher's sons, and to disciples bound by an indenture and oath according to the medical laws, and no others.”

*We, the lamps of life, yearn to preserve purity.*

“I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone.”

*Whereas the last vestiges of Hammurabi are content to  
let the wicked rot, we pledge to uphold the great 8<sup>th</sup>  
Amendment, to provide Cadillac care to murderers, rapists,  
and pedophiles.*

“I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked,  
nor suggest any such counsel; and similarly I will not  
give a woman a pessary to cause an abortion.”

*I will deny he who searches for an easy out, or who  
otherwise shirks his God-given responsibility in the eyes of  
the ultimate arbiter. Vengeance shall not be undone.*

“But I will preserve the purity of my life and my arts.”

*So long as human dignity gnaws its gnarled teeth upon  
my wooden soul, I will contemplate the purity of my life.*

“I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom  
the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to  
be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art.”

*I will leave others to discover that the inner mechanics  
of evil are the same in each of us, and despite our best efforts,  
we cannot sever all tumors nor cauterize all wounds.*

“In every house where I come I will enter only for the  
good of my patients, keeping myself far from all  
intentional ill-doing and all seduction and especially  
from the pleasures of love with women or men, be  
they free or slaves.”

*For he who deals with death, he who stares evil in the eye, he who perpetuates bloodshed by bandaging beasts, it is impossible not to maintain an unhealthy distance from all breathing beings.*

“All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal.”

*With the carriers of justice beyond the confines of this room, I am obligated to harbor dark secrets.*

“If I keep this oath faithfully, may I enjoy my life and practice my art, respected by all humanity and in all times; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my life.”

*Unshakable doubts reverberate like haunting churchbells: Who will respect me, the gentle sustainer of savages?*

## **The Truth Teller**

AKA Lex Lavon Johnson

I read *Live From Death Row*  
 In an afternoon  
 Each word whizzing past me  
 Like Bed-Stuy drivebys  
 Screaming like shrapnel  
 Biting into me like

Naughty kisses from  
Hollow-tipped misses

I closed my eyes  
I read each line  
On the cracks of each wall  
Ten stories tall.  
How did I get here,  
Underneath this jungle gym  
But clinging to the top?  
As children,  
This was my favorite spot  
Daredevil missions  
Summer hands were hot  
Where children play on battlegrounds  
And hum hymns of war  
Skippin' through deserts  
Unsure of what's in store

Division and lines  
Were all of our lives  
Streets like live wires  
Cascading down –Our Town –  
The sparks of our fires  
Cops as crooked as our caps  
Gooses as golden as our grillz  
When we dreamt that we could be so  
Fearless.  
Moms and cons checkmating with pawns  
Lawns abandoned by napalm dons  
Sharp-tongued shorties  
Slangin' silver bullet cure-alls  
Menthols, 8 balls, and  
Clover colored catcalls

Kids clawin' to be raw  
 And roarin' to be saw

Us vs. Them  
 Technicolor's too technical  
 For tragic pragmatics  
 Looking deeper, there was no Us  
 Not even Them  
 Only Me  
 Speaking truth to power starts with oneself.

Startled, I awoke  
 With the book balancing  
 On the bridge of my nose.  
*Did I just read my first book?*  
*Did I just write my first poem?*  
 Let it be known,  
 I'll take two to the dome  
 To sing the sins of my kin  
 And the masters in this place  
 We call home  
 Man up,  
 Forgiveness is my business  
 Selling sorries to myself  
 For what could have been,  
 Shouting back silence

Hold me under the Hudson  
 These words will bubble up  
 And wait in the wakes  
 Of giants and fakes  
 Confine me in solitude  
 I'll find solace in the soulless  
 Etch this poem into my tombstone

And make amends.

Truth telling –  
 Just because I now have something to really live for,  
 Just because I now have something to really die for,  
 Doesn't mean that I'm still not  
 Fearless.

## **The Native American**

AKA Raymond Heavyhand Chapman

Cayuga blood flows through my veins  
 From ancestral springs  
 Primordial passions –  
 Have we not been reduced to  
 Fire water or longhouse legacies?  
 To be steered by *Conotocarius* –  
 The president, Destroyer of Towns –  
 To reservation realities,  
 Oklahoman odysseys.  
 Far, too far, for family to visit.  
 Is that not the meaning of indignity?  
 Here, if it's not black or white,  
 Cayuga's just another upstate facility.  
 But O! Great Spirit,  
 Creator of All Things,  
 I still remember that Cayuga means  
 "People of the Great Swamp."  
 May you guide us from our vices,  
 From this mortal morass,  
 And return us to our natural lakes.

## The Obsolete Executioner

AKA Mark Jacobson

A seasoned sophomore  
 Standing in sinister shoes  
 Back then, I thought a lot  
 Can I take a life?  
 Do I have the guts?  
 The power?  
 The resolve?  
 Can I look into the eyes of the depraved,  
 The savage, the forgotten, the maniacal,  
 The predators, rapists, and cold-blooded killers?  
 Will they look into mine?  
 Will I see those eyes when mine are closed?  
 Will they meet Jesus?  
 Will I?

As bland as my daily grits  
 Dull as Monday morning banter  
 My wife and son  
 Distant  
 My job, these bars  
 Distant  
 Names and faces  
 Distant  
 My eyes, those eyes...

Father Shanahan's caught mine  
 Like two blue comets  
 On a crash course to a  
 Canyoning crater –  
 My soul

We walked to his makeshift parish  
 Metal folding chairs, file cabinets  
 One Bible, one table, one candle  
 He recited several Psalms:

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)*

*The God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. (Psalm 18:32-34)*

I averted my gaze,  
 Shivered with the fear of God,  
 And thanked him for his help.  
 For the next 18 months,  
 I endured continuous lightning bolts  
 Nightmares that jolted me deeper asleep

*Burning on the stake  
 Pray for redemption  
 Let the fury of the flames  
 Compel you to confess!  
 The sizzling flesh and  
 Lashes from God  
 Consoled those still standing.*

*I transcended bodies*

*First I worked the wheel  
 Breaking bones like  
 Jesus broke bread  
 Pray.*

*Then I went with water*  
*Dripping, coughing,*  
*Gagging, sagging*  
*Pray.*  
*I understood tongues,*  
*The restlessness, the righteousness*  
*The voice of Our Lord*  
*My Lord*  
*Strapped to the stake*  
*Shrieking*  
*Squirming*  
*Smoking*  
*Divinity*  
*Purity*  
*Oneness.*

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*Furman struck like a*  
*Fleeting clap of thunder.*  
*The skies parted*  
*The clouds cleared*  
*A balmy breeze blew*  
*I was spared.*

I spent the rest of my career at ease  
 Resolute in my faith  
 Unswayed in the struggle  
 To end the death penalty  
 We rallied Albany annually  
 And when we were successful,  
 My wife and I  
 Paid alms to Father Shanahan  
 And helped him buy new pews  
 For his hundred strong parish.

## The Stoic Priest

AKA Father Shanahan

Is anybody out there listening?  
 An ethereal numbness  
 Takes grip whenever I dare to ask.

Sunrise provides a brief respite  
 Before I march ramrod  
 Towards the gates of the abyss.

I am frisked with smiles  
 For the Good Book exudes hope  
 But I harbor secrets.

Smuggling suspicions,  
 My daily contraband,  
 To the newly furnished office near B Block.

I find joy in listening,  
 Hearing hopes and fears  
 Like staccato scratches in a neglected record.  
 My ears bring the most  
 Comfort to my flock  
 For they are a direct line to God.

I've helped many:  
 An 11 year old boy jailed for life after shooting  
     His predatory stepfather.  
 A gray-haired geezer who proved  
     Loyalty to his racketeering uncle.  
 A forlorn wife who lost her breadwinner  
     After 3 strikes

An unrepentant hustler with murders on  
     His chest but money on his mind  
 A stonehearted guard, abused by her husband  
 A tattooed tailspinner trying to land safely  
 An identity thief who longs for the bite  
     Of a big-mouth bass  
 A proselytizing searching for purpose in  
     Amongst nonsensical chaos.  
 A sex addict spurred into sin by lucid dreams  
 A son who watched his father blow his brains all over  
 the basement wall  
     (Many sons without fathers, actually)  
 Drifting dredgers at peace under warm blankets  
 Lost souls who simply crave contact.

Who's failing whom?  
 Can anybody but me still hear?

## **The Jail House Professor**

AKA Curtis Byrd

Split up into groups  
 like stanzas  
 We'll come back in the end  
 To make melodies:

"Write a poem on Plessy  
 A doggerel on Dred Scott  
 For our meter's messy  
 Gentle scholars we are not"

Let's fight this out  
 Like Foreman  
 Like a gunshot  
 Brains spilled on paper:

“Ain't nothin' mo' dangerous  
 than a man without  
 an ideology –  
 except a man with one”

Good, keep 'em closed  
 Keep writing  
 Rage, rage  
 Against the death of the light:

“I don' givvuh fuck 'bout this class  
 or your black ass?  
 How's that for a poem?”

Take this seriously, James  
 Book time's a privilege  
 I know you're frustrated  
 Don't give up:

“Peach fuzz right above her lips  
 The scent of a woman.  
 I sink into the fruit  
 And wake up alone”

Very powerful, Mo  
 Time's running out  
 Like the ink  
 in your pens:

“The hum of cicadas  
 In my homeland,  
 My people,  
 This prison”

Yall’s improvement is quick  
 I can breathe the  
 Sincerity  
 Of each word:

“Constant are the rugged ridges of each finger  
 Though my eyes were ghosts,  
 I left an imprint on each slug  
 And on the ones I turned to ghosts”

How dangerous writing can be!  
 Will you stash these slips of paper  
 In the sheets of your mattresses?  
 Tag each wall with each beckoning call?  
 Live in the library  
 ‘Til you bust the bindings of each book,  
 before each sentence once again  
 constricts you?  
 Can you weave a ladder of Leviticus  
 To free lady Liberty?  
 Live in fear of the turnkeys  
 Looting, defiling, ransacking  
 Each treasured page  
 Until all that’s left  
 Is a jumble of  
 Formless phrases?  
 Who will listen to the refrains of  
 Rehabilitation,  
 Rejoice,

Restoration,  
Renaissance?

Time's up for today.  
Truth, my friends, is a risky business.

## The Young Gun

AKA James "The Leviathan" Campbell

Dropped outta Booker T High  
For the School of Hard Knocks  
I nevu had a shit about no books  
No poetry, no words  
I think in numbers  
The strategies, tactics  
Of a down-n-dirty hustla

The Cat in the Hat?  
I busted him up.  
The Giving Tree?  
More taking for me.  
The Very Hungry Caterpillar?  
That nigga still hungry.  
Goodnight Moon?  
Time to prowl.  
Where the Wild Things Are?  
Here.

Who give a fuck if I get written up?  
Teachers say I won't amount to much?  
Locked up  
I got more connects than there are kids in class  
More paper than torn-up texts

More marks on my head than teachers got F's  
 More eyes on me than a pair of spex

Shorties look up to me  
 The King of this Domain  
 Smokin' weed in the bathrooms  
 To clean out my brain  
 Your conked-headed book clubs  
 Speak nothin' to my soul  
 But I'll write a couple couplets  
 To get out on parole.

## **The Chef**

AKA Colin Calhoun

Last meals are nothing special  
 Meatloaf lacking pomp  
 No-fanfare fish sticks  
 Forget filet mignon  
 Or ceremonial crawfish  
 Here's a heapin' helpin'  
 Of splendidly sloppy Spam.  
 My hands knead the dough of death  
 And stir the stews of solitude  
 For we are all connected.  
     To fade away into night  
     Which meal will it be?  
     Let me choose my own ten course feast.

## The Gay Outcast

AKA Clayton Glasser

My time's a-runnin' out  
And, truth be told,  
I'm scared what free life will bring.  
So many options,  
No routine to follow,  
I can be my own man.

A man of the mountains  
Was what I once was.  
Earnin' my keep  
On the scraggly nooks of Cragsmoor.  
Didn't think twice 'bout  
Seein' my breath arise  
All those times in the Ice Caves.  
Now I can only catch glimpses  
Of myself in black bus windows  
As we criss-cross the Catskills  
Like pock-marked pioneers  
Once in a blue moon.

Me and my baby-faced  
Blue Ox hang tight.  
Lookin' out for each other's needs.  
He's too scrawny to be out on his own.  
They'd eat him up.  
But he sure can cook.  
And even though a man  
Can live by his own two hands  
Sometimes he needs another set  
To help him through.

I ain't a faggot like they say  
 I got a wife 'n' I love her.  
 Prison's just another being entirely.  
 And I know how to get  
 What I want.  
 When I get home,  
 I hope not even one word gets out,  
 But I'll always wonder about  
 What could have been.

## **The Lonely Wife**

AKA Debby Glasser

I wrote so many Dear John letters,  
 Stuck the stamps with salty tears,  
 Sealed 'em with one last kiss,  
 And tore 'em up like sober confetti  
 The day after New Years'  
 Designed for no more useful of a function  
 Than to stream down slowly  
 From sad explosions  
 To the solitary gutter.  
 And after everyone goes home,  
 And the barricades are removed,  
 And the kitschy neon glow gives way to sunlight,  
 I'll lie here and remember last night.



**Bryan Yannantuono** is a senior at American University double majoring in Political Science and International Relations. His interest in prisons, inequality, criminal justice, and poetry go back to his high school days when he would read the works of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Malcolm X instead of paying attention in class. He is deeply dedicated to community service, founding Students Fighting Homelessness and Hunger, working with inner city youth as a DC Reads tutor, and serving as Deputy Director of AU's Community Service Coalition. As anyone who knows him can attest, he is also an aspiring China hand and will hopefully be conducting research on civil society and philanthropy in Beijing after graduation.



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