

FADING

A Senior Capstone
In the form of a collection of poems
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Preface

This collection, while put together throughout the course of my final semester, has been in the works over the course of my college career. It began with my first class with Robert Johnson, *Deprivation of Liberty*, and the collection of poems I wrote for my final. More and more poems joined them as I continued to see poetry as an interesting way to convey certain ideas and thoughts about the justice system.

So the collection that follows is created from old and new. Old poems from the past that have been edited and revived to be used for this project and new ones created specifically for this collection. None of the poems have titles. This is intentional. They each speak for themselves and so I sometimes feel that titling them robs them in a way of what they have to say. It's hard to pin down a consistent theme. Some poems attempt to address the loneliness and helplessness of people who spend their lives in prison environments. Some address what I see as incompetency or flaws in the justice system. Some try to convey the pain of the people left behind when a loved one is a victim or perpetrator of a crime.

The one thing that is consistent is that every poem tries to ensure that we see everyone as a person. We often fail to do this successfully when we think of criminals because society has branded them criminals. However, it is important to recognize that they are still human beings, with feelings, families, dreams, and goals despite the fact that they committed a crime. I find poetry to be an extremely useful vehicle to inspire the empathy necessary to recognize the humanity of people that our society has labeled the "other". I suppose if I were to state a goal for this project that it would be that you, the reader, walk away feeling empathy, if only slightly, for the plight of a human being who is locked away.

The title of the collection "Fading" is a title I used for a previous work of poetry. Some of those poems did find their way into this collection, although not in their original form. I chose to reuse the title because I think it helps to convey something about the experience I am trying to provide through my poems. For prisoners things fade: memories, the sense of self, and sometimes hope. For people who have lost loved ones either to crime or the prison system, their former life tends to fade as well. And as I said, my goal is for you to find a way to feel empathy for people you might not have found deserving before this. I hope that your initial impressions will be "Fading". So I found the title to once again be appropriate and fitting and so the collection is thus named.

Sound had changed his life...

Click of a gun
Gasp for air
Pop of a shot
Blood everywhere

Thud of his body
Beating of your heart
Rustling leaves
Worlds falling apart

Screaming sirens
Cuffs click closed
Doors slam
Bright orange clothes

Whispers in the room
Tears on the stand
Pound of the gavel
They hold his life in their hands

Clinking of metal
Bang of the bars
Snap off of the light
The silence of the dark

Sound had changed his life...

Here

You have no identity
You have a number

You're granted no respect
You have to fight

You serve no real purpose
You sit to pay

You are caged
You must make yourself free

Above all you are deprived
Of your liberty.

The books are falling apart
The classrooms are packed
Kids are dropping out
Teachers don't know what to do

The musicals are gone
The football and soccer teams too
The band hasn't been around for years now
There used to be a choir here?

Who knew?

Instead of investing in programs
To keep kids off the streets
We make it harder
For their teachers to teach

Our solution to a society
That's ridden with crime
Is to keep building walls
So they can serve hard time

Let's keep on building
Hiding problems in prisons we provide
Sure.
We can ignore how those kids got inside...

One

Two

Three

Strikes you're out at the new ball game!

Step up to the plate!

Let's play a game!

It's called "3strikes" and

Here's how you play...

If you miss the first ball

And the second one too

You have only one more shot

If you miss it you're through

But the difference is this

If you strike out here

You get no more at bats

Let's make that clear

So are you up for the challenge

Will you play our game?

Some don't volunteer

But we make them play anyway...

The stars burned brightly that night
Blazing flames lighting the charcoal sky
Staring down at the silent world
Paying no notice to the woman who rushed by

She ran down the street
Under the sweet serene sky
Her heart pounding rhythm
The last hour flashing through her mind

Her arm flapped limply at her side
No question it was broken
He'd hurt her again- pain beyond belief
Another betrayal that would go unspoken

Under that roof with no eyes to see
Without even the stars
To bear witness
To the abuse forcing her to flee

She returned the next day
After another long night
Yet another hospital stays
Everyone knowing but no one willing to say

It wasn't long after
In the star's evening light
He chased her out to her car
Attempting to obstruct her flight

This time she wouldn't back down
She refused to submit
He grabbed her, she fought back
And pulled the trigger in a fearful fit

This the stars witnessed
This act they saw
They heard her scream
They watched him fall

One black night
Later in time
She lay in her cell
Praying to die

A cold piece of metal
A coarse length of rope
A last gasp of breath
Without even the stars to bear witness

Eternity away
Life spent with no purpose
A child that just may
Have changed the world for us

But that's what we do
We lock up potential
Fear eats away at us
The game, it's all mental.

Vicious and angry
Dangerous. Threats to society
They don't deserve the chance
Rehabilitation- not our responsibility

We'd rather lock them up
And throw away the key
We never wonder what the
Consequences of our actions might be

We build a new world
A world behind bars
We hide them away
Ignore all their scars

It's a vicious game
Of "Hide and go seek"
We forcibly hide them
And never again take a peak

You're free to go
Your time is served
Go back to the community
Put to use what you've learned

What you learned on the inside
Will help you on the out
Get a job, be productive
That's what you should think about

But how is the violence
Blind obedience and submission
Supposed to help you in life
In this current mission?

They taught you to hide
How to fight, steal and cheat
Prison taught you authority
And the system can be beat

No skill sets acquired
No life enriching lessons learned
You re-enter the world
Like a fish out of water

The frustration you feel
Almost more than you can stand
Turning to your past life
Putting to use the things you learned there

To cheat, to lie
To run with the pack
To do what you must
And to never look back

Using this prison education of yours
You try to find a new beginning
All you accomplish
Is a free pass back to start. Back to the old life

One plus one No longer two
One plus one is made to be zero.

An eye for an eye
And a life for a life

Seems right.

But no debt is paid
One plus one equals two

No life is restored
No justice is found

We balance nothing
Burying another life in the ground

Faded pictures worn thin
Cling desperately to the wall
But soon no tack will be able
To hold them in place

They'll have to be taken down
Stored. Put away.
It's alright.
They're fading anyway.

They are the reminders
Of a world that I've lost
People
That no longer exist

Time has taken them
Reformed and reinvented them
But not me
I remain. Static.

I cease to live
And fight to exist
I cling to those memories
Tattered and faded they fall

I exist in a place
I wish to forget
Grey and alone
Day after day I sit

How to survive
When memories fade
When life grows weaker
Weaker with each passing day

No longer bringing sustenance

Bringing pain

I'll have to give them up
Put them away.
It's ok
They're fading anyway.

Clothes provided
Walls surrounding
Masses abounding

Clothes drown them
Walls dwarf them
Masses surround them

Clothes now tight
Walls so tall
Masses aged by years

All to allay fear

Masses swelling
Growing older
Time forgotten

Resentment smolders

Clothes that define them
Walls that divide them
Masses that hide them

Heart beating
Lungs screaming
Mind reeling
Sirens squealing

Lights flashing
Words catching
Hearing fails
Blank stares

A gun
A body lies near
Legs won't work
Ears can't hear

The officer's mouth moves
Producing no sound
Senses shut down
There's a body on the ground

Slide through a door
Take a short ride
The pound of a gavel
Locked up inside

Numbness subsides
A new one sets in
The rhythm of a prison
How each day ends and begins

The laws that govern
Just aren't the same
When you respond to a number
Instead of a name

Slamming bars
Calling guards
Frightening stares
You learn not to care

Listen to orders
Do what you're told
Sometimes you're forced to fight
Not to be ruled

A pack of cigarettes
A couple bags of chips
Could be a few bucks on the outside
Here the price can be your life.

Nothing is harmless
Accidents don't exist
Not here in this hell
Not in the world of convicts

Diamonds sparkling
Resting on a black velvet sky

Man smiling in the moon
Clearly seen by the eye

The light that beams
From the stars and moon
Cast shadows upon the earth

Tears streaming
A woman sobs
And curses the day of her birth

His vacant eyes stare
At dazzling night sky

Blood runs
Into the hands and lap
Of the woman who sits and cries

She gasps
Moving her hands
Trying to stem the crimson flow

Trees stand tall
Silent witnesses
To the scene played out below

Slamming doors
Angry words
A chase to a deserted park

A senseless shove
A staggering fall
A rapidly forming puddle of blood

It's over now
His blood runs cold
Lifeless in her arms he lies

And all the while
The diamonds sparkle
Resting on a black velvet sky

Wandering blind
Justice roams the world

Broken scales
Clang about her neck

The judge slams his gavel
Throwing sentences to the poor

While the wheels of the system
Turn grind and roar

The innocent man
Cries from within a cold iron cage

The beaten man
Gathers a great store of rage

Justice is blind
But she resigns her role

The system bearing her name
Takes its toll

Blinding dazzling light
Wakes me from fitful sleep

The cries of other in the night
Unwelcome. Invade my dreams

When morning comes emotion hides
Stowed away behind masks of stone

With the fall of evening fear returns
Bring torturous thoughts of home

Once trapped alone behind the walls
In dark with no escape

The feelings hidden all day long
Burst forth from behind the slate

Fervent calls to loved ones lost
In the din depart

Tears trapped behind stoic faces
Escape imprisoning bonds

After day of banishing them to shadow
Strength to hold them there is gone

When no light shines to expose the face
Abandoned in night in fear we lie awake

The coming of memory's sweetness
Touches and burns the soul

Pictures of the past and flashes
Remind us that we will never again be whole

More haunting than the sound of wind
Howling across open fields

Are the sounds of pain and loneliness
That only in darkness we can feel

Walking barefoot on the beach
Letting the salt water lap at my feet

Gazing across the vast open sea
To the place where ocean and sky come to meet

A single undefined line marks the horizon
The place where the sun sinks to bed

The colors of red orange and purple combine
Painting the sky preparing for the night ahead

The sun slowly sinks leaving a shadow of darkness
Splintered by twinkling stars and shining moon

Their fragile light falls across my face
Fighting through the opening into my room

The sweet smell of salt
The war grainy sand
The waves that caressed my feet

All that had been
No more than a dream
A phantom of my sleep...

With hues of red orange and red
The sun ushers in another day
It's beauty tainted by the bars
That hold me here at bay

Sometimes I wonder if this view
That I now see
Is meant to be a punishment
A glimpse of a world no longer belonging to me

I'm taunted by its beauty
By the wholesome nature that I see
I am jealous of the sunrise
It knows what it is to be free

Rising every morning
Shining down to earth
A day full of possibilities
Fresh. With no mistakes.

Not for me. Not for me.
I live my life outside its grace
I survive every day in a world
That exists to remind me of my mistakes

So the promise of the sunrise
Was stripped from me as well
On the day they took my dignity
Took my name in the existential hell

I will never see the sun
As my companion in hope again
But rather with each rising
I come closer to the coming of the end

I'll live the remainder of my days
Behind the walls of stone
Without the chance to start anew
Without a life to call my own

And so the coming of the sun
Stings by hardened soul
Reminding me of all I've lost
That I can never again be whole

The rising of the moon is better
Bringing the darkness of the night
I prefer that darkness
It casts shadows where I can hide

Gorgeous wings
Carefully crafted
By time and isolation

A quiet beauty
Possessed by fragile wings
Designed by nature

A creature that once
Crawled upon the ground
Now soars upon the breeze

After a long barren time
Cocooned in darkness
Loneliness and deprivation

The butterfly emerges
Reborn. Renewed.
With new beauty and purpose

She flutters softly
Just beyond my reach
Taunting me, tantalizing

Her beauty offers hope- a dream
It almost says
Maybe one day you too will be free

Running down the street
 She falls
And scrapes her knee

She should be deterred!
A bleeding knee should
Surely keep her from running so unsafely!

Sneaking out late at night
 He gets caught
And his parents ground him

He should be deterred!
A week alone should
Keep him from sneaking out again!

And you- You MUST learn from THEIR mistakes
If you do wrong
There are consequences

You have been warned
Be deterred

Intent
Motive
The difference
Between half a lifetime
And an entire life surrendered

What did he
MEAN
To do?

With a gun in his hand
Loaded and locked
What was his intent??

Did he mean to kill?
Was he even sure
Of what that act meant?

Motive intent
Small words
That open a chasm

What you meant makes a difference.
But how to know
How to tell?

Why should it matter?
The end is the same
Someone was killed
And someone is to blame!

Why does it matter?
What the motive was?
How can we be sure
That killing wasn't the goal?

We can't see in the mind
Of this man seated there
Can't know what he thought.
But it makes all the difference

Oh well, as they say
The road to hell
Is paved with good intentions...

I trust
In the balance of the weights

I rely
On the sightless eyes

I believe
In equality under the system

I believed.

Until her chains were severed
And discriminating sight renewed

Until my innocence
Was no longer assumed

Instead my guilt was believed
I had to prove it away

I was judged before I entered
The system I loved- failed

Broken chains
Heavy weights
Eyes reflecting sight

A blindfold removed
A burden changed
Attempts at doing right

A search for truth
Transforms within
To a race toward success

Wins and losses
Records count
In the adversarial system of justice

Not about
The common goal
Of finding truth and fact

About the headlines
You can achieve
By winning a case like that

The burden
Weights heavy
My breathing labors
Under the effort to dispel their certainty

Assigned guilt
Pressing in on all sides
Despite my innocence

That burden of proof lays heavy
Upon my shattered soul

Knowing my freedom my life
Depends on my ability
To convince them of my innocence

I cry out
 This is not
 How the system
 Was supposed to be...

A few steps have never been so hard
The struggle apparent
Teetering, tottering, on unsure feet
In a few short steps- a milestone achieved

Never have so few steps seemed so long
Grown up legs grow weak
Experienced hands shake
The last time he lays down, eyes closed, as if falling asleep

Straps there bind him to his bed
And drugs will bind him to his sleep
Bound by his crime
The drugs will flow and there he will lay dead- no milestone achieved

A pinpoint of light
Guiding my way
The scenery I'm passing
Blurring away

My eyes stay focused
On the goal ahead
I know the truth
Despite what's been said

The facts add up
They point to one place
The answer is there
Awaiting my embrace

I'll do what needs to be done
Say what needs to be said
I'll ask all the right questions
Put thoughts in their heads

Because I have the answer
I know the truth
He is the guilty one
I will come up with the proof

That pinpoint of light
Guiding my way
I'll build this case
No matter what he might say

The burden of proof
That is my task
I must build the case
Make him pay at last

The crime committed
No words can describe
Someone must pay
For us all to survive

Deep fear consumes
Rage eats away
A community divided
I must find a way

I know he is guilty

It becomes my light
I race through that tunnel
I win my fight

I am a man
Who makes shoes

I am a man
Who gardens

I am a man
Who swims

I am not
A shoemaker

I am not
A gardener

I am not
A swimmer

I am first
And foremost
A man

I am a man
Who broke the law

I am a man
Who killed

I am a man
In jail

I am not
A criminal

I am not
A killer

I am not
A number

I am a man.

Despite the snow and frost
all that has gone and changed

Along this old road of mine
The trees still stand evergreen

Many years have come and gone
Since the day I left this place

Life has washed in like the tide
Washing old away

The years I lost behind the walls
That solitary place

The man I was, broken down
Forgotten and disgraced

Those I loved and left behind
They moved on a new

Life granting them a second start
Something I wish I could do

I can't get them back now
Time took its toll

But as I walk this path
The trees stand tall. Evergreen.

Within the walls of prison
You slowly fade away
You're identity grows weaker
With each passing day

Upon release into the world
You stop and take a glance
Nothing is as you remember
But here's your second chance

Trying to get a job
That's the hardest part
No one wants to hire a con
Makes it hard to get that fresh start

Neighbors whisper in your wake
In the grocery store
They talk about your past
What you were in there for

No matter what you do
You never can escape
The identity cast upon you
It decides your fate

While your life is still intact
When you leave the prison gate
And you may pursue your happiness
Presumably be the master of your fate

Your liberty has faded
From the day you lost your name
Though they say it's been returned
Some things can never be the same

She's in her own little world
Standing before the mirror
Fascinated by how the "dickity" twirls
She's a big girl for real

Her face is caked with makeup
Bright red cheeks and lips
She wants to be like mommy
And mommy wears makeup like this

She's draped in a dress of mine
Drowning her small little frame
But mommy wears these grown up clothes
And she wants to do the same

I try to snap a picture
Without her knowing that I'm here
I want to preserve the moment
Of my little girl in there

She examines herself in the mirror
She looks satisfied with what she sees
She turns around towards the door
Excited to show me, mommy

I force myself to turn away
From that memory
As tears roll down my face
From my red eyes down onto my scarlet cheeks

Still so small standing there
Trying to hide her face
From all the people crowding her
Asking questions about the case

I sneak up behind her
Place my hand upon her arm
I want her to know I'm there
I'm going to teach her to be strong

She glances up at me ashamed
With eyes full of pain and tears
She doesn't even understand
Her sentence of indeterminable years

She'd never sat behind the wheel

She hadn't had her first kiss
She hadn't graduated high school
I think of all the things she'll miss

She'll never get her own apartment
Never go away to school
She'll never hold her baby to her chest
Never walk towards her groom

Instead she'll serve a lifetime
Of deep regret and pain
They'll call her by a number
They'll pretend she has no name

My baby girl, not yet fourteen
Panicked and tried to run
He wouldn't let her, he grabbed her arm
And so she grabbed the gun

Her world is changed
It's plain to see by the pallor of her face
That little girl who once stood
In her own little world, in her own little space

Hands so small, so tiny
A cry so strong and sure
He knows he's where he should be
Though he's not been here before

I stand behind a wall of glass
And peek in at his face
His little eyes closed gently
I can't wait to take him home from this place

I put my palm I once called small
Upon the window's pane
To mark the spot where my baby lies
With his coming everything has changed

Hands no longer tiny
A voice grown deep and pure
I know he shouldn't be here
He's never been here before

I stand behind a wall of glass
I stare in at his face
His eyes express the weight of regret
A desire to be freed from this place

I put my palm I must call small
Upon that window's pane
To show my baby on its other side
That his mother loves him and that won't change

She walked into the room
Uncertain of what she'd find

She hadn't been back since that terrible day
Its reality doesn't seem real

The stain on the floor stares back hauntingly
It glares up at her face

She starts to shake, she starts to cry
She collapses in that place

Her consciousness bears her away
To a happier world and time

One in which her daughter's broken form
Had not be on that floor as a chalk outline

She was swinging on the swings and catching
Lightening bugs in a field

She was young, she was innocent
The world was a place where she could make her dream real

That's what took her to New York
The spotlight and the stage

The awesome rush the loud applause
Another person she became brought to life off the page

Ah remembered how her first show
The performance her daughter gave

She knew then and there that she didn't belong
That she'd chase her dreams someday

So when she packed her bags to go
She did her best not to cry

She knew her daughter would make it there
She knew she had to let her try

And then came that dreadful day
When the NYPD called

Her daughter was killed in her apartment
Her killer's identity still unknown

That was six months ago today
She came back here to try to say goodbye

The doctor said with every day
The pain would slowly ease and subside

She was still waiting for that day
When the hole in her heart would heal

She came here to say goodbye
To try to find closure from the ordeal

The trial hadn't done it for her
The way she'd expected it to

They'd caught the man who'd killed her child
They'd locked him away and would kill him too

But her daughter stayed gone her pain stayed put
Despite the system's efforts

And now she was lying on the floor
Where her daughter took her last breaths

She cried her tears unchecked unstopped
And felt her loss completely

Her life had changed more than she could bear
Because her daughter had to leave

She gathered the strength and wiped her eyes
And drew herself from the ground

She turned her back and left that place
Thinking to herself

Why did it have to happen here?
Why not in the distant future?

Then she thought about her daughter
And all the things they'd done

She remember searching for apartments
And how much fun it had been

And she laughed.

