
“A PAIR OF RAGGED CLAWS”: POETRY AND PEDAGOGY IN PRISON

Alex Tretbar

Deer Ridge Correctional Institution

Steven Maack

Wichita High School East

Abstract

Alex Tretbar, a Wichitan and graduate of the University of Kansas, reflects on his incarceration in Oregon and the role of literature in helping him and others who live in prison make sense of their experience. During his imprisonment, Tretbar acquired a job as a GED tutor and eventually took on a role as leader of a poetry and fiction study group. He shares experiences common to teachers of poetry both in and out of prison and demonstrates the power of poetry to help people learn about language, connect with each other, and appreciate how poetry can teach us about ourselves. Moreover, poetry and pedagogy have their own unique relevance in prison. Tretbar forms several important connections with other imprisoned men through their poetry group and explores how the power of poetry can help teachers and students confront the personal, political, and artistic issues we all face. Eventually, Tretbar’s poetry group is shut down by a prison-wide COVID-19 lockdown just as its members were receiving instruction from visiting poets and educators. Steven Maack, one of Tretbar’s high school English teachers, introduces Tretbar’s reflection and provides an update in an afterword.

Keywords

poetry in prison, poetry study group; literary pedagogy; former student; Kansas-Oregon connection

Introduction

Most spring semesters for the last ten years, as my graduating seniors prepare to commence their new lives after high school, I (Steven) write a poem in their honor. I usually share it with them on social media so even those seniors I don’t have in class can see it, and I read it to my own students on their last day of class. But the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed all the traditional rites of passage for high school seniors in the spring of 2020. As schools were closed and my students and I were ostensibly in lockdown, I looked out through the window of my house and wrote a poem that I never got to read to my seniors in person, a sonnet I called “Sunny Windows”:

The rising sun behind a naked window
Burns a pane’s shape inside your vision.
Closed eyelids reveal a faint gold glow,

A remnant of inevitable collision
Between dreams outside, beyond the glass,
You know you want but can't quite access—
And an idle urge to watch the world pass
While newformed regrets fester without redress.
A world merely watched neither stops nor slows,
Nor waits for late passengers to jump on board.
Stay alert! Don't stare through sunny windows.
When the time is right, find territory unexplored,
Join others outside who help you keep pace,
Move out beyond windows and leave your trace.

In June 2020, a friend and fellow educator contacted me to tell me that she had shared my poem with her son, a student in my senior world literature class and graduate of 2008. She also shared with me that he is incarcerated in Oregon and would appreciate a letter from me. Thus, Alex Tretbar and I started our correspondence by mail and became reacquainted.

I'm now chagrined that my poem implies that one can easily overcome the figurative imprisonment of a pandemic lockdown by stepping out to explore the world when the lockdown is over. I cringe at how this might sound to a genuinely incarcerated person experiencing his own pandemic lockdown from within a prison cell. But I remain in awe of Alex's candor, and even sense of humor, regarding his incarceration. Alex noted the stilted tone of my first letter and informed me, outright, that there was no need to "beat around any bushes" over the fact of his living in prison: "Just know that I am far beyond (I really just bypassed it altogether) self-pity and embarrassment over my predicament... I like to think that I'm immune to the truth now." This directness reminded me of what I had appreciated about Alex in high school: his dry (or even wry) humor, his insights into language, particularly poetry, and his humble but consistent engagement in my world literature class. He was not often eager to discuss poems in class, but when he had something to say, he could show a perception that surpassed his most insightful classmates.

After we exchanged several letters and I learned that Alex was teaching and studying poetry with fellow imprisoned men, I knew Alex had a story to share. I suggested he write an account of work as an educator and student of literature in prison. He captures the experience of all educators who try to help students connect with the abstractions and beauty of poetry, but in prison, so much more is at stake than in most of our classrooms. The prison setting amplifies the importance of the human connection poetry provides and reminds us of how much is lost when we are cut off from teaching and learning poetry.

"A Pair of Ragged Claws": Poetry and Pedagogy in Prison

Instead of asking when you were arrested, people who live in prison sometimes say, "When did you fall?"

I fell in 2017. I fell in 2002. I fell in the early '80s.

There is poetry in these answers, all of which transmute the exile of imprisonment into the simple, physical act of falling down, as in a child's complaint to their mother: *I fell during recess and it hurt a lot.*

I (Alex) have always been moved by this gentle hedging—a sacrifice of specific detail for euphemism and sympathy—and I often use it to illustrate for my students¹ the ubiquity of poetry in plainspoken English. Metaphor is more than a device for bolstering works of art. It is a survival tactic unique to humans, one that allows us to dampen our terror, amplify beauty, or mine humor from sorrow. The person who lives in prison² readily understands this, for their language is already steeped in slang, misdirection, hyperbole, and understatement. This was the basis of my first attempt to teach poetry in prison.

I “fell” in early 2017 and pinballed through various jails and prisons before arriving at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution in September 2018. It’s a minimum-security prison just outside Madras, Oregon, a tiny remote town couched in the austere beauty of central Oregon’s steppe lands. Juniper, sagebrush, and ponderosa pine dot the nearby crags, and the formidable Mt. Jefferson sits crowned with snow to the west.

My first move upon arrival at Deer Ridge was to apply for a GED tutor position, if only to selfishly avoid conscription into the kitchen or scullery (also harrowingly known as “the dish pit”). I was nervous about the prospect of tutoring adults; it had been six years since graduating from the University of Kansas with a BS in journalism and a BA in English literature, and ten years since high school in Wichita. But the job was among the highest-paying in the state’s prison system—\$77.90 per month—and I would be around books and calculators instead of bleach, onions, and endless pots and pans.

The education department hired me, and I began working one-on-one with students immediately; the only training I received was from other imprisoned men. The state of Oregon mandates that “adults in custody” (AICs) without verifiable high school diplomas attend adult basic education (ABE) or GED courses while they are incarcerated, until they parole or earn their diplomas or degrees. Student skill levels vary dramatically. There are math savants who struggle with basic reading comprehension, readers of Dostoyevsky who cannot add or subtract, and men who dropped out of school as early as second grade and must start from scratch.

While there is no universal structure for prison education programs in Oregon, the model is essentially the same across the state: imprisoned tutors (the majority of whom are themselves graduates from prison GED programs) work with imprisoned students, and each prison’s program is facilitated by contracted instructors from a nearby community college (Central Oregon Community College, in the case of Deer Ridge). When a student and/or their tutor feel that they are ready to take on one of the official GED tests—there are four: math, social studies, science, and “reasoning through language arts” (RLA)—a facilitator schedules the test, the cost of which is covered by the state.

As with any school or college, classroom size and teacher-to-student ratio are the primary factors that determine the quality of education. At some prisons, one tutor will hold forth with up to thirty students, all of whom are at different points in the curriculum. We are fortunate enough at Deer Ridge to enjoy a 1:1 or 1:2 ratio, a luxury which makes possible granular attention to each student’s particular needs and idiosyncrasies.

¹ I am reluctant to call myself a “teacher” or to refer to peers as my “students” as I have no formal training in pedagogy, but I will adopt this terminology for this essay as those terms represent the clearest explanation of our relationship.

² I defer here to Ashley E. Lucas, associate professor of theatre and drama at the University of Michigan who uses “the terms imprisoned person, the incarcerated, and people who live in prisons... to remind readers both of the humanity of those who live in confinement and of the ever-present and domineering force of the institution itself on the lives of those inside it” (Lucas, 2020, p. 16).

What I found disheartening, though, is that poetry and fiction figure very little in the GED's RLA curriculum. Literature seemed an afterthought.

It didn't take long for me to realize that I loved teaching—everything from phonics to quadratic equations. I was still grateful not to be toiling in the kitchen or the dish pit, but I was even more grateful that my privileged college education was being put to good use.

One day during a break between students, I was experimenting with the Oulipian “s+7” writing method wherein each word of a text is replaced by the word seven words ahead of it in the dictionary— “son of Laertes in the line of Zeus” (Homer/Lombardo, n.d./2000, book X, l. 509) becomes “sonata da chiesa of Lafayette in the linear B of Zhengzhou.” A fellow tutor, Bill (not his real name), leaned over my shoulder and asked, “What are you working on there?” I showed him how the s+7 worked and invited him to try it out himself on a different line from Homer's *Odyssey*. Bill, a journeyman carpenter with a passion for architecture, was fascinated by this mathematical, mechanical approach to poetry, and we spent the rest of our break discussing the happy intersections of art, science, and math.

I learned that Bill, like many people who haven't read much poetry since adolescence, had a lukewarm disposition towards the art form. It was a classic case of what Ben Lerner describes in *The Hatred of Poetry*, “The fatal problem with poetry: poems” (2016, p. 23). For Bill, poetry was inscrutable, a tangle of knotty syntax and cloying rhyme. He hadn't read poems that spoke to him.

Before meeting with my next student, I fetched a copy of *Leaves of Grass* from our humble, single shelf of poetry in the education library and pointed Bill to Whitman's sprawling catalogs of everyday Americans and their ordinary goings-about. I told him that he might see himself in there.

In April 2018, about six months before I landed at Deer Ridge and began my work as a tutor, I was at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF) in Wilsonville, Oregon—the sole women's institution in the state, but also home to what amounts to a kind of Hogwartsian “sorting hat” for men on their way to prison. I had just been sentenced to 80 months (64 with good behavior) after sitting in a county jail for more than a year, and now I was to wait another 30 days at CCCF in a wing of the complex that every imprisoned male in Oregon must pass through after sentencing, while counselors and algorithms convened to determine which of the thirteen men's prisons I would be shipped to. At that time, I ended up in the desert, at the medium-security Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution. I was not allowed to bring to prison any of my books or writing from jail, so I was simply a man with a bedroll, toothbrush, and razor all over again.

A poem I wrote during the time illustrates the stasis, dread, and distance of the final waiting room before prison:

And I saw a flock of butterfly
knives cross the ocean
overhead, all the while
their steel humming with the brittle
tenor of shopworn song

That was a joy ago

Now my lips are inches below
the water's surface—
but they may as well be
sucking at sand for

all the oxygen
they get

I try to sing
something sideways

but my vocables just bubble
& rupture into the low sky

During one of the few times per day I was allowed out of my cell, I found a crusty old poetry anthology on the meager bookshelf in the day room and brought it with me back to my bunk. That night, by the only available light of an eerie blue bulb, I read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” for the first time since high school, and it knocked the wind out of me. Tears of affinity bubbled up. Here was a song of solitude and sadness with a significance that had bypassed my consciousness in youth. I felt consoled, heard, and I thought it funny that this time around, the song was doing the hearing.

I gently shook my head in wonder, as I do after every poem that fells me, and I looked at my hands. They resembled “a pair of ragged claws” in the bruised light.

Months later at Deer Ridge, Bill (who did not connect with Whitman as fully as I had hoped but did admit that it was unlike any poetry he had previously read) was the first person to suggest that I teach some sort of class on poetry.

I balked. Bachelor’s degrees in journalism and English hardly qualified me to “teach” anything, let alone poetry. I was terrified by the prospect of standing up and delivering the kinds of lectures I had slept through or skipped altogether in high school and college (I was, at best, a mediocre student). But Bill persisted, and after a handful of impromptu one-on-one practice lessons, he pointed out that what I was doing was, in fact, teaching.

Other tutors and friends learned about our sessions, and I would send them off with various writing prompts and specific poems that I thought they might enjoy. I was feeling better about teaching what little I knew and eventually decided to pin down a time each week when all interested parties would be free to meet: Fridays at 11:45am. I set about planning my first lesson.

The structure I settled on for our meetings was simply a close reading of one poem and one short story per week (the story being a lure for guys who were more drawn to fiction). I didn’t want to deliver confusing lectures on meter, critical theory, or any other areas of which I had only a dim understanding—at least not at first. Contrary to Hollywood portrayals, people who live in prisons do not sit around twiddling their thumbs, staring at the ceiling, or carving tally marks into the wall to count the days, so I felt fortunate to have five other men willing to spend their meager free time reading selections of my choosing and discussing them for an hour every Friday.

For our first meeting, I selected “Medusa” by Louise Bogan and “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” by Mark Twain. To be frank, I chose the latter primarily for its brevity and because it was included in an anthology we had a half-dozen copies of, the remnants of some long extinct and forgotten book club. Prison education programs are notoriously strapped for cash, so I did whatever I could to save on copying costs while preparing materials.

In the days leading up to our meeting, I began to fear the possibility that the men would show up unprepared, need new copies of the poem, make “dog ate my homework” type excuses, etc. And I understood then the English teacher’s never-ending fear that their students just wouldn’t do the damn reading.

So on a crisp Friday morning in mid-May 2019, armed only with what I could recall of Twain from high school and college, and some insights into Bogan’s “Medusa” borrowed from an Ellen Bryant Voight essay (1991), I walked the short distance from my cell to the education building, noting along the way, as usual, a lone Pandora pinemoth skewered on a barb of concertina wire.

Although our first meeting was awkward at times, freighted with hesitant silences, I was heartened by the members’ observations and their ability to make connections I hadn’t noticed on my own. Most important, though, was that *everyone had done the reading*.

Eventually, I decided to share “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” with the men at Deer Ridge. I wasn’t sure how it would play in the poetry group given the somewhat alienating erudition of the references and allusions, but I trusted my instincts and my own visceral reaction to the poem.

As had become customary, I started the meeting by reading the poem aloud, and I was struck all over again by Eliot’s musical treatment of desolation. So was the class, and as a result, we spent the beginning of that meeting discussing differences between poetry on the page and poetry in the air. Some of the members admitted that, at first blush, the poem hadn’t done much for them, but hearing it read aloud was more immersive. I also improvised an amateur mini-lecture on prosody, scansion, and iambic pentameter, using the infamous line of Eliot’s, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws” (1963). For weeks after our session, the line was tossed around, in and out of class, as a kind of wry admission of melancholy, a sigh with a smile.

The poetry group steadily grew to nearly a dozen members (mostly fellow tutors plus the odd GED student), aged from about 25 to 65. At 30, I was the group’s second-youngest member. Occasionally, in egregious and potentially disastrous disobedience of prison rules, I brought canteen-purchased candy and cookies to share with the men, both as a token of appreciation and as a bribe to encourage attendance and ensure that they would keep doing the damn reading.

Some assignments were bigger hits than others. Ron Padgett’s “Wonderful Things” was received with an especially colorful discussion, while Denise Levertov’s “Where is the Angel” and Ernest Hemingway’s “The Killers” occasioned my pulling students’ teeth to elicit conversation. But one poem in particular stands out in my memory as the most controversial and difficult to navigate as a group.

As I’m sure all teachers eventually discover, a class can slip away from you: the lesson is too dry, the students are bored or excited for the weekend, a discussion veers into unexpected or uncomfortable territory. I learned this first-hand when I assigned (perhaps against my better judgment) an untitled poem from Terrance Hayes’s *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018). The poem, by my general estimation, is a lyrical catalog of the “side effects” of modern life in America. The group members adroitly disentangled the poem but failed to notice what I perceived as numerous allusions to President Trump. I delicately pointed to the lines in question, and within minutes the discussion had crumbled and devolved into tension and division. Members sneered, scoffed, and shook their heads, and no one was able to hold the floor for more than a few seconds. I repeatedly invoked the tired “This is just a poem” cop-out until talk calmed down and turned more generally to the overlap between art and politics. In the end we managed to agree that no poem is ever “just a poem.”

In the end we managed to agree
that no poem is ever “just a poem.”

Eventually, I had the good fortune to work as a writing tutor in the Writing 65 class offered at Deer Ridge by Central Oregon Community College as part of its welding certification program. The instructor for the writing class was Mike Cooper, who also teaches at Oregon State University–Cascades and is the president of the Central Oregon Writer’s Guild, and through him I met the poets Irene Cooper (Mike’s wife) and Laura Winberry. All three hold MFA degrees from Oregon

State University and volunteered to collaborate with our group. Mike facilitated a fruitful fiction workshop, to which six members contributed original short stories, while Irene and Laura led close readings that surpassed what I had been able to manage with my limited training. I was elated that expertise from outside Deer Ridge might help support and sustain our organically formed fellowship of poetry readers and writers. Volunteers from outside a prison can form the backbone of continuity that drives arts and education programs inside.

The efforts of Mike, Irene, and Laura instilled newfound confidence in our poetry group, and in the weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic finally put a halt to “nonessential” programs at Deer Ridge, I devised a collaborative project to pitch to the men: a 100-verse *renga*, a collaborative form of poetry wherein successive stanzas are linked by multiple poets. I delivered a sketchy lecture on *haiku*, *tanka*, and *renga*, with readings of Bashō and of Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” and then laid out my idea. Everyone eagerly agreed to contribute between five and ten verses for the project, but I also proposed that we hold an informal contest for choosing the *hokku* (the opening *haiku* of a *renga*); each member would anonymously submit as many *hokku* attempts as they wanted, and then we would put it to a vote. Later that same day, I found six *hokku* in the file I had designated for the submissions. Here is one of them:

She died
I paid the coin for her passage
Mist trails its oar pressing

I still don’t know who wrote it. The prison could no longer ignore the pandemic, and nonessential programs were canceled the following week.

At the time of this writing, Deer Ridge is currently under full lockdown in response to a widespread internal outbreak of the novel coronavirus, and we are restricted to our cells for 23 hours a day. It will likely be months or even a year before what’s left of the poetry group can

Perhaps the existence of our poetry group was itself a kind of poetry: intense and vivid, yet fleeting, like a song from under the ocean, a pinemoth on razor wire, a pair of ragged claws.

formally meet again. I do still communicate, via standard snail mail, with one member who lives just two cell blocks away. Looking back, it seems to me a miracle that we were ever able to meet at all. A tangle of rules and regulations prevents most similarly minded groups from ever getting off the ground.

It’s important to note that, in the state of Oregon, people who live in prison are forbidden from personally leading or forming clubs or groups. Such gatherings are

dubbed “unauthorized organizations” if they meet without the physical presence of an approved volunteer or prison official. Notwithstanding the handful of meetings with the volunteers from OSU–Cascades, the poetry group was essentially hiding in plain sight, operating without the blessing of security staff. Corrections officers would occasionally poke their heads into the small computer lab where we held our meetings, shake their heads at the apparent glossolalia, and resume their rounds. Perhaps the existence of our poetry group was itself a kind of poetry: intense and vivid, yet fleeting, like a song from under the ocean, a pinemoth on razor wire, a pair of ragged claws.

The institutional memory of prisons is grievously short, despite the thousands of accumulated years served by its unwitting tenants. As such, few prison arts programs have the legs to last more than a couple years. The incarcerated, if they are lucky, parole. Guards and staff turn over or retire. And time unfolds again without poetry or the space to share it, until the next time a carpenter looks over a writer’s shoulder and asks, “What are you working on, there?”

Afterword

Steven Maack

Since Alex wrote this piece, the pandemic lockdown at Deer Ridge has been lifted. Oregon's generous and reasonable consideration of the danger COVID-19 presents in prisons has led to the vaccination of about 77% of Deer Ridge's population, and this keeps those who live in the prison, guards, and staff relatively safe from the novel coronavirus infection. Alex reports that all of Deer Ridge's programs and operations have returned to relative normality.

Alex has started working again, both as a tutor and as the sole librarian in the Deer Ridge education library. The lockdown prevented people from returning books that they're now returning in droves. The library has been neglected over the last year and Alex has a considerable job ahead of him to reorganize it. He approaches this task with the determination of a man with a mission (part of which is still to avoid the dish pit).

Alex can dream of a set of circumstances that might allow for the reformation of a similar poetry group, and he has not entirely lost hope. The volunteers from Oregon State would be more than willing to return, but the bureaucracy of the Oregon Department of Corrections must relent for their continued visits and help. Additionally, Alex no longer has a clear sense of who might want to be involved or how the group might reform.

I continue to be in touch with Alex, and I have already shared with my own students some of the poems and poets that Alex studied with his group, all of us, in our own way, trying to make sense of the disorientation and tragedy of this pandemic year.

References

- Eliot, T. S. (1963). The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>
- Hayes, Terrance. (2018). *American sonnets for my past and future assassin*. Penguin.
- Homer (n.d.). *Odyssey*: Translated by Stanley Lombardo. (2000) University of Kansas Press.
- Lerner, Ben (2016). *The hatred of poetry*. FSG Originals.
- Lucas, Ashley E. (2020). *Prison theatre and the global crisis of incarceration*. Methuen Drama.
- Voigt, Ellen Bryant (1991). Image. *New England Review (1990-)*, 13(3/4), 254-268.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40243421>

Appendix

Below is the syllabus for the Deer Ridge Correctional Institute poetry/fiction study group established and led by Alex Tretbar.

Week 1: "Medusa" by Louise Bogan; "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Mark Twain

Week 2: "Dream Song #14" by John Berryman; "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Week 3: Three poems by Hieu Minh Nguyen; "The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway

Week 4: "The Chorus" by Craig Morgan Teicher; "The Sculptor's Funeral" by Willa Cather

Week 5: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot

Week 6: "Directive" by Robert Frost

Week 7: "Wonderful Things" by Ron Padgett; "Bulldog" by Arthur Miller

Week 8: "The Magicians at Work" by Nicky Beer; "Along the Frontage Road" by Michael Chabon

Week 9: "Where is the Angel?" by Denise Levertov; "Zilkowski's Theorem" by Karl Iagnemma

- Week 10: “Oxyana, West Virginia” by William Brewer; “Not with a Bang” by Howard Fast
Week 11: “Chicks Dig War” by Drew Gardner; “Billy Goats” by Jill McCorkle
Week 12: “Howl” (excerpt) by Allen Ginsberg; “Is My Team Ploughing” by A. E. Housman
Week 13: “Travelling Through the Dark” by William Stafford
Week 14: “Wild Geese” and “Entering the Kingdom” by Mary Oliver
Week 15: “Dream On” by James Tate
Week 16: “You’ve Changed, Dr. Jekyll” by Jan Richman
Week 17: “Up-Hill” by Christina Rossetti
Week 18: “Time Reversal Invariance” by David A. Pickett; “All of Us, In Prison” by Jevon Jackson
(winners of the annual PEN America Prison Writing Contest)
Week 19: excerpt from *The Lichtenberg Figures* by Ben Lerner
Week 20: “Our Dust” by C. D. Wright; “It Was the Animals” by Natalie Diaz
Week 21: “The Korean Community Garden in Queens” by Sue Kwock Kim; “Daedalus, After
Icarus” by Saeed Jones
Week 22: “Ghazal” by Reginald Dwayne Betts
Week 23: “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop
Week 24: “Altered After Too Many Years Under the Mask” by CAConrad
Week 25: “Stone” by Charles Simic
Week 26: “Janus” by Ann Beattie
Week 27: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. LeGuin; “Happy Endings” by
Margaret Atwood
Week 28: “A Non-Christian on Sunday” by Amy Gerstler
Weeks 29-30: Creative Writing Workshops (Short Fiction)
Week 31: “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin
Week 32: “American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin” by Terrance Hayes; “The
Processional” by Joanna Klink
Week 33: *Haiku* by Bashō; “In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound

Author Biographies

Alex Tretbar is a librarian and GED tutor at Deer Ridge Correctional Institution in Madras, Oregon. He graduated from the University of Kansas with degrees in journalism and English and is currently at work on a book-length poem about tic-tac-toe. Alex can be reached at alex.james.tretbar@gmail.com.

Steven Maack is a National Board Certified Teacher and English department co-chair at Wichita High School East. He is a past president of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English and just completed his thirtieth year teaching in the Wichita Public Schools. He did manage to write a new poem for the senior class of 2021. Steve can be reached at steve.maack@gmail.com.