

BOOK REVIEWS

**Bone Orchard:
Reflections on Life Under Sentence of Death
by George T. Wilkerson and Robert Johnson (2022)
Washington (DC): Bleakhouse Publishing, 120 pp.
*Reviewed by Christopher Santiago***

“**W**hat makes serving time with a death sentence distinct from doing time with a release date?” That, claims award-winning writer in North Carolina death row prisoner George T. Wilkerson, is the question that his book *Bone Orchard: Reflections on Life under Sentence of Death* aims to answer. Co-authored with Robert Johnson, a professor of Justice, Law, and Criminology, who has written extensively about death row, the book is probably best placed on the literature bookshelf closest to the social science section. It collects 22 poems, 7 essays, and three letters by the authors, along with an additional poem by Sarah Bousquet, a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Social Policy and Practice.

“When I ask him about the differences / he says ‘well... the biggest thing is calendars’” (p. 93). These lines from the title’s eponymous poem answer part of Wilkerson’s question. In general population, most prisoners use calendars to mark the days until their release, whereas, on death row, calendars can seem like countdowns to execution. From a survey of the condemned, Wilkerson has compiled a thematic list of what he considers aspects of life on death row that make doing time there different. In addition to calendars, ‘the list’ includes: feelings of banishment, limbo, and grief; dead-already relationships with family and prison staff; and the harsh realities of segregation, socioeconomic disparities, and mental health struggles. These and other recurring themes weave together the volume’s collected writings. The problem with ‘the list’ is that many of its themes are not exclusive to death row. Idleness, for instance, exists in countless prisons where prisoners lack access to meaningful programming and activities. A prisoner locked in the death row cell is likely no more idle than the prisoners in my own building, who seem to have mastered the art of doing nothing.

Most of the collected pieces involved two or more listed themes. An excerpt from Johnson’s poem “Pod People”, for example, combines themes of mental health, grief, and monotony: “pain dissolved in medication, given/ daily to numb the soul/maintain control in this/ dark version of Groundhog Day” (pp. 44-45). Here, “Groundhog Day” refers to a movie in which the

same day repeats over and over again, like the sameness of days for those warehoused under sentence of death. The mental anguish of anticipating one's own execution is further illustrated in Wilkerson's account of a fellow prisoner's death by suicide and in mental rehearsals of his own demise: "Dying is the easy part. Waiting decades to be executed, with nobody to connect with – that's the scary part" (p. 4).

Johnson's prose ponders three dimensions of state-sponsored homicide. In "The Death House is No House", he calls death row cells "repositories for the living dead" (p. 29) and warns that anyone could end up like Troy Davis, who was executed by the state of Georgia in 2011 despite serious doubts about his guilt. In "Lightbearers", he writes of bringing hope to a capital prisoner only to see that same prisoner executed. His longest essay, "Lethal Rejection: Reveries and Ruminations on the Edge of Execution", imagines the final moments of life from the perspective of an imprisoned person strapped to a gurney in the death chamber.

Fortunately, the book is not all grief and gloom. Wilkerson's sense of humour surfaces in several places, with my favourite being "Snakes and Thunder", an entertaining story of a talent show organized by mental health staff at the prison. The highlight performance was an act that combined dancing, rapping and juggling. It called to mind similar events at my own prison where prisoners competed to humiliate themselves for prizes comprised of toothpaste and soap.

To me, *Bone Orchard* is less about showing how life on death row is different and more about showcasing the authors' poetry and essays, many of which have been previously published elsewhere. I am not criticizing the book for being something it was never intended to be. Rather, I am pointing out that it is more than it claims to be and that extra something makes it all the more readable. The real gifts are the first-person narrative windows into different moments of Wilkerson's roughly 16 years on death row. Beginning with his entry to the row in 2006, we witnessed him acclimating to his new environment, meeting his fellow death-sentenced prisoners, seeing through the convict code, and coming to terms with his fate – all while on display behind plexiglass for groups of people touring the prison. Meanwhile, through a series of emotionally moving letters, he re-establishes a loving relationship with his mother.

This is a work of genuine lived experience and detailed writing. From his faded red jumpsuits to a previous occupant's semen staining the door

of the cell, Wilkerson's prose drips with vivid, sometimes stomach-turning descriptions. As a prisoner sentenced to die behind bars, I recognized the authenticity in this collection. What you will not find here are human rights arguments or calls to abolish capital punishment. Instead, you will learn what it means to be dehumanized, to contemplate your own condemnation and to give meaning to a hopeless situation through creative expression. Recommended.

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