



Teacher Companion Guide

Felon

Poems by Reginald Dwayne Betts

A note about this guide

This guide is intended to assist teachers in facilitating analysis and conversation around selected poems from the book *Felon*, by Reginald Dwayne Betts. The poems have been annotated with possible interpretations, however there are many acceptable interpretations of poetic works, as each person brings a different perspective and experience to reading the words; encouraging students to understand this principle when reading poetry is important.

In addition to annotations, we have included suggested questions to help guide students' analysis. We have also offered extension activities for a number of the poems, as a way to dig deeper into the themes and subject matter of the poems.

A note about the poems

The poems in *Felon* examine the systemic obstacles of the criminal justice system and their impact on individuals. These are difficult and challenging poems. Not only does the language pose challenges, but the subject matter and themes of the poetry may also be difficult for students to process (topics like mass incarceration, parent abandonment, regret and remorse, suicide, powerlessness as a result of the criminal justice system). Please take care to read through the poems before presenting them to students and prepare for any potential difficulties you may anticipate.

Some poems include profane language in a meaningful and purposeful way.

A note to the author, Reginal Dwayne Betts:

Thank you for writing these poems; for creating something that allows us to think and reflect. And thank you, further, for sharing your poems with us and making them available to young students held in confinement around the country.

Christina Campbell and Roy Middleton
BreakFree Education

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Ghazal	
Pre-reading: Notes: A Ghazal is a poem that is made up like an odd numbered chain of couplets, where each couplet is an independent poem. Each couplet ends on the same word or phrase (the radif), and is preceded by the couplet's rhyming word (the qafia, which appears twice in the first couplet). The last couplet includes a proper name, often of the poet's. Many of this poem's couplets refer to Dwayne's Redaction Project. It may be a good idea to review the meaning of the word redaction and explore the purpose behind The Redaction Project before reading the poem with students. Suggested mode of group analysis: Teachers can work through each individual couplet with the students and analyze them one at a time. Alternatively, students could be grouped in pairs and assigned a couplet to analyze before returning to the larger group to share and discuss.	
Name a song that tells a man what to expect after prison; Explains Occam's razor: you're still a suspect after prison.	Takeaway: The fact that people view you as a suspect has not changed after you go to prison. No matter how many explanations of what to expect after prison, the simplest thing is that you are still a suspect. Occam's razor: the principle that, of two explanations that account for all the facts, the simpler one is more likely to be correct.
Titus Kaphar painted my portrait, then dipped it in black tar. He knows redaction is a dialect after prison.	Takeaway: redaction is to take away or censor. The criminal justice system and prison take away people's lives... therefore, redaction becomes part of one's language after having spent time in the system. The justice system takes away people's lives by locking them up for long times, but also by removing them or erasing them from the public's awareness/consciousness. * Betts further explores redaction in the poem <i>In Missouri</i>-- please see notes on that poem for more information and extension activities Titus Kaphar: the artist that created the portraits on the cover of this book. This would be a good opportunity for students to look at the cover and discuss it.
From inside a cell, the night sky isn't the measure-- that's why it's prison's vastness your eyes reflect after prison.	Takeaway: The speaker is comparing the vastness of the night sky with the vastness of prison-- both are giant and all-consuming. Even after prison, you don't see the night sky... you still see prison's vastness (it still consumes you)

My lover don't believe in my sadness. She says whiskey, not time, is what left me wrecked after prison.	Takeaway: The speaker discusses two potential causes to him being wrecked after prison: his sadness or whiskey. Is it possible they can both be true? Perhaps his drinking is a byproduct of his sadness, just like his sadness is to prison. They are one in the same.
Ruth, Papermaker, take these tattered gray sweats. Make paper of my bid: a past I won't reject after prison.	Takeaway: The speaker wants to make something of his time spent in prison. The tattered gray sweats represent his time in prison, but he is asking for Ruth to make paper out of his bid (time), to create something he won't reject after prison.
The state murdered Kalief with a single high bail. Always innocent. Did he fear time's effect after prison?	Takeaway: The speaker is referring to Kalief Browder, a young man who was held for three years without trial on Rikers island (two of which were in solitary) and then released. Two years after release, after struggling with mental health, Kalief committed suicide. The speaker is posing a question about Kalief to get the listener/reader to think... Why do you think Kalief killed himself? Or was it really the state of NY that murdered him? How?
Dear Warden, my time been served, let me go. Promise that some of this I won't recollect--after prison.	Takeaway: The seeker is making a statement to the Warden... telling him he deserves to go home now and promising the Warden that he is going to leave behind some of the things that have happened during his time in prison (he's choosing not to recollect them).
My mother has died. My father, a brother & two cousins. There is no G-d; no reason to genuflect, after prison.	Takeaway: The speaker shows how time in prison can steal away someone's faith. After you miss people's last days while you are in prison, there's no reason to believe in God or worship.
Jeremy and Forest rejected the template, said for it to be funky, the font must redact after prison.	Takeaway: Jeremy and Forest are the artists who designed a new font called "Redaction" in partnership with Dwayne Betts (see note below in additional activities). The font incorporates the idea that after prison, people's identities and lives have been redacted, or taken away, or erased from public consciousness. You can see an example of the font on the book's title page.
He came home saying righteous, coochie, & jive turkey All them lost years, his slang's architect after prison.	Takeaway: Prison even changes a person's language. After prison and the time spent there, prison becomes the architect, maker, of your language/slang.

The Printer silkscreens a world onto black paper. With ink, Erik reveals what we neglect after prison.	Takeaway: The Printer, Erik, is creating art that shows what is neglected after prison. After a person goes to prison, much of their world is lost due to 'redaction,' but here the Printer is making that world known. This couplet alludes to Bett's Redaction Project.
My homeboy say he's done with all that prison shit. His wife & baby girls gave him love to protect after prison.	Takeaway: This couplet contrasts that which you protect in prison ('shit': material objects, food, clothing, etc.) with that which you protect after prison (your family, loved ones). This poem also has a hopeful/positive poem about moving on after prison.
Them fools say you can become anything when it's over. Told 'em straight up, ain't nothing to resurrect after prison.	Takeaway: This couplet contrasts two opposing views: (1) that after prison you have your freedom back and therefore can do anything-- this is the viewpoint of "the fools" and (2) that after prison, there is nothing left of you (theme of redaction) and therefore there's nothing from which you can become anything (nothing to resurrect). The speaker calls people with the opposing view "fools." What do you think the fools would call the speaker? Who's the actual fool: the optimist or the pessimist?
You have come so far, Beloved, & for what, another song? Then sing. Shahid you're loved, not shipwrecked, after prison.	Takeaway: this couplet has a hopeful and uplifting tone. The speaker is telling "beloved" and Shahid that he has come 'far' after prison and reminding him that he is loved (Note: Shahid is the poet-- in Ghazals the poet names himself in the last line; Betts went by Shahid in prison). He isn't stranded/ 'shipwrecked', he can move on. Tying this into the theme of redaction, the poem ends on a note that despite all the redaction that occurs during/after prison, one can get a second chance, a new life ('another song').
Additional Activities: The Redaction Project: Betts and artist Titus Kaphar partnered for The Redaction Project, an exhibition and collection of art and poetry to examine the issue of money bail, the condition of the state and federal court system by which those arrested, but unable to afford bail, remain incarcerated even though they have been neither tried nor convicted. Included with this project was the creation of a new font (Redaction) created by Jeremy Mickel and Forest Young (mentioned in the 9th couplet of this poem). • Learn more about the project HERE and HERE • View and download the font HERE ◦ A potential creative project for students would be to create their own font typeface! • Access resources on Bett's poem In Missouri below to explore more about redaction poetry and further exploration about this topic Ghazal Poetry • Students may enjoy trying to write their own ghazal following the structure outlined HERE.	

Blood History	
<u>The things that abandon you get remembered different.</u> As precise as the English language can be, with words like <u>p</u>enultimate and <u>p</u>erseverate, <u>there is not a combination of sounds that describe only that leaving.</u> Once	What do you think the first line of the poem means? Different from what? - Perhaps the 'things' that abandon us get remembered differently than other 'things' (people). Maybe they mean more to us, or maybe they mean less to us. Why might there not be a word to describe this type of leaving? - Perhaps this feeling of abandonment cannot be summed up in one word-- it's too great of an experience. Why do you think the poet chose to use 'penultimate' and 'perseverate'? - The poet repeats the sharp 'p' sound with these words. If you read this line out loud, you can hear the sharpness and emphasis. - Perseverate means to repeat again and again... maybe this goes along with the experience of abandonment... you relive it over and over again, can't let it go Perseverate: repeat or prolong an action, thought, or utterance after the stimulus that prompted it has ceased Penultimate: second to last
drinking & smoking with buddies, a friend asked if I'd <u>longed</u> for a father. Had he said <u>wanted</u>, I would have <u>dismissed him in the way that youngins dismiss it all:</u> a shrug, sarcasm, a jab to his stomach, laughter. <u>But he said longing. & in a different place, I might have wept.</u> Said, once, my father lived with us & then he	What is the difference between <i>longing</i> and <i>wanting</i>? - Longing has a more emotional depth to it. A feeling of missing something or needing something. To long for something is a melancholic desire-- it implies that you are sad. To want is simply to wish for something. Why do you think the speaker would have dismissed his friend, had his friend asked if he 'wanted' a father? - The speaker says he would have shrugged, responded with sarcasm, etc. had the friend used the word <i>wanted</i>. He would have dismissed or brushed off that question... maybe because we don't always get what we want, so why think about the things we want but don't

	have. Or maybe he would have brushed it off because he does (literally) have a father-- everybody does-- his just isn't around. Why do you think the speaker might have wept in another place, but not here? • Maybe around his friends he doesn't feel comfortable enough to cry (why might this be?). • Or maybe with the word 'place' the speaker is referring to a mental headspace. In a different mindset, away from hanging with friends, he would have cried.
Didn't & <u>it fucked me up so much I never thought about his leaving until I held my own son in my arms & only now speak on it.</u> A man who drank Boone's Farm & Mad	How did his father's abandonment affect the speaker? How do you know? • His father's abandonment scarred/traumatized/affected him greatly. We know this because he didn't think or talk about it for a very long time. Perhaps he had to push it down in his mind (suppress) and ignore it because it was too upsetting. Why do you think holding his son made him think of this again? • Perhaps seeing his son in his hand made him realize that he, now, was a father. That he was in a position where he could do to his son what his father did to him-- but would choose not to. • Perhaps because seeing his son reminded him of his own youth and that his father did not hold him like he was holding his son.
Dog <u>like water</u> once told me & some friends that there is no word for father where he comes from, not like we know it. There, <u>the word father is the same as the word for listen.</u>	What do you think the speaker thinks about this man talking to him and his friends? • The speaker mentions that this man drinks alcohol like water, so he is likely an alcoholic. Perhaps the speaker and his friends wonder if this man is somebody who just talks nonsense, or if what he says may actually have a deeper meaning. How do you think the words <i>father</i> and <i>listen</i> relate? • We are told to listen to our fathers (this is also a component to many religions). Father's are supposed to give us advice

	in life, and in order to receive that advice we, as children, need to listen. Fathers should also be listening to their children, so they can take care of their children.
The blunts we passed around let us forget out Tongues. Not that much thought. But what if the old Head knew something? & if you have no father, you can't hear straight. Years later, another friend wondered why	What do you think the speaker means when he wonders 'if you have no father, you can't hear straight?' - Perhaps, without a father you haven't learned to listen. You haven't learned how to take in knowledge and advice (things a father should be offering you). Without the role model or teacher of a father, you've missed out on this important lesson: how to listen and learn things from others. Why do you think the author used the word 'hear' instead of 'listen' in this sentence. - The man had said that <i>father</i> and <i>listen</i> meant the same, but the speaker uses the word "hear" here. To listen to someone is to give them your attention. But to hear is less active, there is no attention given, it is an untrained action-- we can hear things without understanding them. Perhaps by using <i>hear</i> the speaker is further emphasizing that one is not able to properly <i>listen</i> or understand things without the presence of a father in one's life.
I named my son after my father. <i>You know, that's a thing turn your life to a prayer that</i> no dead man gonna answer.	Why do you think the speaker named his son after his father? - There are many possible interpretations here. Maybe he's replacing his father, maybe he's changing the narrative around his father's name by giving it to his son. Who is the dead man referred to here? How might he be dead? - The dead man refers to the speaker's father. He may be literally dead (deceased) or he may be figuratively dead (forgotten, rejected, far away) Why might this dead man not answer the prayer? - This ties in the concept of <i>father meaning listen</i> again... here, his father cannot answer the prayer if he is not

	listening. His father is not listening because he is gone (dead), having abandoned the speaker years before.
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For A Bail Denied <i>For A.S.</i> <u>I won't tell you how it ended, & his mother won't, either</u>, but beside me she stood & some things neither of us could know, & now, <u>all is lost</u>; lost is all in what came after-- <u>the kid, & we should call him kid, call him a</u>	Why do you think the speaker or the mother want to tell the reader how "it" ended? What is "it"? • "It" might be the court appearance, but it might also be the boy's life... what became of him after this bail hearing. What is the tone here? How can you tell? • There is a tone of hopelessness here when the speaker says that "all is lost." Why does the speaker think we should call him a child? What other terms do you think this boy is being called? • The speaker is implying that this boy is being called many other things (perhaps juvenile, criminal, menace, killer, etc.) but at his core, the boy is just a child. The speaker is calling us to see the boy for what he is and to not attach labels to him.
child, his face <u>smooth & without history</u> of a razor, he shuffled--ghostly--into court, & let's just call it a cauldron, & admit his nappy head made him <u>blacker</u> than whatever pistol he's held, whatever solitary awaited; the prosecutor's	What is the speaker trying to do by pointing out that the boy's face is "smooth & without history"? • Again, the speaker is showing how the boy is just a child. The speaker is forcing us to see his client as a child. Why do you think the speaker chose to use the word cauldron? How might a court be like a cauldron? • Cauldron: (1) a large metal pot with a lid and handle, used for cooking over an open fire. (2) a situation characterized by instability and strong emotions • Court can be a place of high emotions & instability for people because they don't know what is going to happen. There's also an allusion, perhaps, to the idea of being cooked over a fire-- the person's life is in the hands of others. Or the speaker could be alluding to the idea of witches (who use cauldrons) and court being similar to witch hunts of the past (persecution). Here the speaker uses the term "blacker" with a lowercase "b." What is the speaker saying in this stanza? • The speaker is calling out the boy's physical attributes that show he is Black, and using those to say that it is those attributes which made the boy black (not the act that he has held a gun). Here 'black' may be synonymous with bad, guilty, or evil. So what makes the boy guilty is not that he has held a weapon, it's that he is Black.

<u>bald head was black or brown</u> (but when has brown not been akin to Black here? To abyss?) <u>& does it matter,</u> <u>Black lives, when all he said of Black boys was that they kill?</u>– the child beside his mother & his mother beside me &	Why do you think the speaker is pointing out that the prosecutor is “black or brown?” - Perhaps to acknowledge the irony that Black and Brown prosecutors are putting they’re people behind bars. Why do you think the speaker asks this question about whether Black lives matter? - The speaker is pointing out that all the prosecutor is saying about Black boys is that they kill. If that’s the only thing worth mentioning about Black boys, maybe their lives don’t matter. But the speaker is telling us what the prosecutor says, right after telling us that we need to see this boy as a child, so see beyond the stereotypes and names that he is being called. The speaker is challenging the reader to understand why this Black boy’s life matters and why Black lives matter.
<u>I am not his father,</u> just a public defender, near starving, here, <u>where the state turns men, women, children into numbers,</u> seeking <u>something more useful than a guilty plea</u> & this boy beside me’s withering, on the brink of life &	Is it significant that the speaker is not the boy’s father? Where might his father be? - Maybe the speaker is reminding himself that he is not the boy’s father... reminding himself not to get too emotionally involved– this is his job and he has to do it everyday. If he gets too involved, he could experience second-hand trauma. - The speaker is making it apparent that the boy’s father is not present– it’s just the boy, his mother, and the speaker as his public defender. Perhaps, the boy’s father has been turned into a number by the state and is incarcerated? Or something else? What is meant by “the state turns men, women, and children into numbers?” - When a person is incarcerated they are given a state ID#. But also, these people become statistics once they enter the justice system. Essentially, the justice system dehumanizes people and turns them into numbers. What might be more useful than a guilty plea? What is the speaker trying to get for this kid? - It might be more useful for this boy to return to his community and family, then be sent behind bars. Statistically, when a young person is incarcerated they become more likely to have continued involvement in the justice system and less likely to graduate from high school. Perhaps the speaker is arguing that it would be better for this boy to not be incarcerated, and that is what he is seeking.

broken, & it's all possible, because the judge spoke & the kid says <i>-I did it I mean I did it I mean Jesus-</i> someone wailed & the boy's mother yells: <i>this ain't justice. You can't throw my son into that fucking ocean.</i> She meant jail.	Why do you think the speaker includes the boy's confession? • There's a large sense of being powerless throughout the poem, and here the boy's words show the only thing he has power to do... to confess. The power to admit guilt. But what type of power is this really? What is the tone here? • Sad, hopeless, powerless. As shown by the mother's words and also someone's wailing. Why do you think the mother uses the term 'ocean' when speaking of jail? • Because jail is like a rising tide that consumes people. Because her boy may drown in jail, may get lost.
& we were powerless to stop it. & too damn tired to be beautiful.	How might the speaker and others in the poem feel powerless? • They did not have power over the circumstances, the court proceeding, or the justice system as a whole. These things took away any power they had (except for the boy's power to admit guilt). • They are tired from fighting when they don't have any power to change things.
Additional Activities: Students may relate to the story told in this poem. It may be a good idea to facilitate a discussion around student's experiences related to court hearings and whether they felt powerless during those times. Encourage students to think about how they might be able to take back some of their power or find ways to cope with these difficult feelings.	

If Absence Was The Source Of Silence	
Some things my sons would never hear, not from my reluctance to speak, or the thief that has silenced his mother's tongue, his grandmother's tongue, turned the stare of the woman who, when it's far too early for the sun to be out, sees me turn a corner with a Newport, the sky & the ground as dark as the fear & yesterdays she swallows as she crosses into what might as well be oncoming traffic, remembering a man from her past-	Who might the "thief" the speaker mentions be? - Here the thief is likely a man or men in general. This may be a good question to return to after students have read the entire poem and understand the theme of men's violence against women. What emotion do you think the woman is having when she crosses the street after seeing the speaker? What does it mean when the speaker says she's remembering a man from her past? - The woman is afraid. She is reliving trauma and being reminded of a man who likely did her harm. - There is an interesting element here, also, in that we hear stories about White people that cross the street when approaching a Black person. What's interesting here is that the woman isn't crossing because of the speaker's race, but instead because of his sex. What does the speaker mean when he says she might as well have stepped into "oncoming traffic?" - Stepping into oncoming traffic might be an allusion to suicide. Here, the woman may be so traumatized by her experience with men that she could be led to contemplate ending her life to escape men.
stories my sons would not know, not because of a need to hide history, those bedrooms & boardrooms & work where trust became carnage; no, these things would be Pandora's box untouched. & yet, they will know-- because	What does the speaker mean when he says "bedrooms & boardrooms & work where trust became carnage?" This is an allusion to different spaces where men have historically taken advantage of women. Where men use their positions of power or trust to take advantage of women. Pandora's box: an idiom that has grown to mean "Any source of great and unexpected troubles"
& the because is what I tell my sons, about what their hands might do, in long conversations about what the hands of men do. Their hands, my own.	Why is the author having this conversation with his sons? - He wants to teach them about the history of men's violence against women, so that they can behave differently. So they can understand a woman's hesitancy or fear towards men; so they can be better and not repeat the past. What might the hands of men do? - While men may accomplish good with their hands, here the speaker is talking about the evils or harm than men can and have done to women.

When I was twelve, a friend told me of men offering her money for her slender & young body, she no older than me then, arms not strong enough to carry her own weight, let alone push her past the men who wanted to own what is hers. <u>Hers just the first of a story that would keep returning.</u>	What does the speaker mean when he says this girl's story is one that would keep returning? • This story of the speaker's friend is not the last that would be told of men abusing girls and women. The speaker is making a statement that these types of stories happen and are repeated often.
The numbered hurt. Rape, its aftermath & this account of trauma my boys would never know if the world differed, <u>if war did not mean soldiers demanding the body of a woman as land to plunder.</u> I keep trying to turn this into sense.	Does the speaker think that this treatment of women needs to continue? Does he think things could be different? • By offering the thought of his boys could know a different world where this trauma doesn't exist, the speaker is showing that he believes that world is possible. When the speaker tries to "turn this into sense" maybe he is trying to think of a way things could change. Why does the speaker comment about soldiers viewing women as land to plunder? • Plunder: steal goods from (a place or person), typically using force and in a time of war or civil disorder • The speaker is calling up history from all over the world where soldiers rape and abuse the women of the land they takeover.
<u>From me, my sons will hear a story about how hands like theirs, like mine, made something wretched of the memories of women we love or don't know at all.</u> This is true. & there is a map to take us to all that hurt. Some silence saying it all. But	What is the story the speaker's sons will hear? • This is the essence of the poem. The speaker is saying that he will tell his sons about the history of men's violence against women. That men have scarred women both physically and mentally (made wretched their memories). • It's also significant that the speaker points out that men have caused harm to both women they love as well as ones they don't know at all. The message is that we can harm people we love, we need to be cognizant of that.
let's say the world is ours. On that day all the silenced <u>tongues would have speak, without fear of being doubted,</u> of the cars & hellos that became dungeons, of friends who became darkness that drowns all until only rage & sadness remain. & maybe after, <u>we can build memory that does not demand silence;</u> all the things that happen now, <u>as if a part of being,</u> would not be-- & my sons' lives would be carved out of days in which <u>their hands & bodies do not suggest weapons.</u>	How does the speaker think the world would be different if women were no longer silenced? • Women would no longer remain silent for fear of not being believed or being doubted • Women would not be consumed by the bad memories that they have lived through (of cars and hellos where friends took advantage of them). • We could move forward in this new world and the memories men and women make together would not be ones that need to be pushed down or not spoken about.

	The speaker says “the things that happen now, as if a part of being,” what does he mean by that? - The “things that happen now” are the acts of hurt and violence men take. That they are just “a part of being” means that they are simply accepted as part of life... that our society doesn’t think twice about them and perhaps condones them, is complicit in the acts, or simply doesn’t care enough about women to do anything about it. How might the speaker’s sons’ hands and bodies suggest weapons? - Women may see in their hands and bodies the hands and bodies of other men who have caused the women harm
days where all their mothers & sisters can walk down any street in this world with the freedom that comes from knowing you will be safe, after dusk or during those moments just before dawn	What is the tone in this section? The speaker is almost hopeful. He is envisioning a new world, one better for women, and in doing so he is eager/enthusiastic to see that world one day.
unlike today, & yesterday, & now, when, the quiet & what might ruin it, is the threat that circles.	What tones does the speaker end the poem on? This is a somber note to end on. After taking us on a dream about another world, the speaker brings us right back to reality, to the reality where women are threatened.
Overall questions What does the title mean: When absence is the source of silence? - What does the speaker say is silencing women in today’s world? - They are silenced out of fear: fear of shame; fear of not being believed if they were to speak up. Women are silenced by their trauma, perhaps not wanting to relive it. Maybe women are silenced by the threat of men and what they might do if a woman were to speak up. - What would it mean for the cause of women’s silence to be absence? - It would mean that women would not speak because they don’t have anything to speak about. Violence against women would not exist (would be absent) and so women would not have these terrible stories to tell. The reason we wouldn’t hear about abuse towards women would be because it didn’t happen. Reflective prompt: What steps can you take to ensure that women and girls in your life are not silenced? What can you do to make sure women are treated better and we move towards the alternate world the speaker of the poem talks about?	

Essay On Reentry (p. 34)	
<u>At two a.m.</u>, without enough spirits spilling into my liver to know to keep my mouth shut, my youngest learned of <u>years I spent inside a box</u>: a spell, a kind of incantation I was under; not whiskey, but History: <u>I robbed a man</u>. This, months	Is it significant that it's 2 a.m.? - Significant because it is not a normal time for young boys to be awake and not a normal time for a father to be having conversations with his sons. What is the 'box' the speaker spent time in? Why was he in this box? Why might he refer to it as a box? - The box he's referring to is prison. He was in the box because he committed a robbery. Prison is like a box because it confines you and encloses you, traps you.
before he would drop bucket after bucket on opposing players, the entire bedraggled bunch five & six & <u>he leaping as if every lay-up erases something</u>. That's how I saw it, <u>my screaming-coaching-sweating presence recompense for the pen</u>. <u>My father has never seen me play ball is a part of this.</u>	What might the son's leaping and lay-ups erase? - Maybe his son's action and life may be pushing the speaker away from his time in prison, somewhat erasing or moving past that time of his life. How might the speaker's act of 'screaming-coaching-sweating' recompense for the pen? What is the 'pen'? - By being present in his sons' lives, he is making up for lost time, righting any wrongs he may have done in the past. The 'pen' is the penitentiary/prison. What does the speaker mean when he says his father never having seen him play ball is "part of this?" - Again, he is making up for something he missed out on with his own father. His father didn't see him play ball, but he's compensating for that by not only watching his son play ball, but coaching his son, screaming for his son, sweating in working so hard to be there for his son. Recompense: make amends to (someone) for loss or harm suffered; compensate.
<u>My oldest knew, told of my crimes by a stranger</u>. Tell me we aren't running towards failure is what I want to ask my sons, but it is two in the a.m. The oldest has gone off to dream in the comfort of his room, the youngest despite him seeming more lucid than me, <u>just reflects cartoons back from his eyes</u>.	How did his oldest son learn about his time in prison? Do you think this is significant? It's possible this is important because the stranger took that moment away from him. Instead of the speaker controlling the narrative and story about his incarceration, his son had to learn about it from a stranger. Now, the speaker is talking about it with his youngest son so that this doesn't happen

	again. What might it mean that his young son “reflects cartoons back from his eyes?” Despite his son looking awake and aware, he probably isn’t understanding what his father is telling him. When something is reflected back to us, we learn what that person is seeing or hearing from us. The fact that the boy is reflecting cartoons, likely means that he is either not listening and thinking of cartoons instead, or he is listening but doesn’t quite understand.
So when he tells me, Daddy it’s okay, I know <u>what’s happening is some straggling angel, lost from his pack finding a way to fulfill his duty, lending words to this kid</u> who crawls into my arms, wanting, more than stories of my prison, the sleep that he fought while	What does the speaker think is actually happening here? Because the boy is not really understanding what the speaker is saying, the speaker hears what the boy says to him (“Daddy it’s okay”) and takes those words to be words from an angel. He’s receiving a message from an angel telling him that ‘it’, that everything is okay.
I held court at a bar with men who knew that when the drinking was done, <u>the drinking wouldn’t make the stories we brought home any easier to tell.</u>	Why might the stories the men have still be difficult to tell even after drinking? Because their time in prison was difficult and traumatizing. Because telling those stories causes them to relive it. Because telling those stories to people may cause them concern about how people will view them or judge them.
Overall questions What are the different elements of the speaker’s life that come together in this poem? History (tie in prison, his experience with his father), friends, family/fatherhood, sports Reflective prompt: At its core, this poem is about the author having to tell his son something. What is it he has to tell his son? Has there ever been something you’ve had to tell someone that was difficult? What helped you get through that difficulty and actually tell the person?	

On Voting for Barack Obama in a Nat Turner T-Shirt

Pre-Reading Discussion

Who is Nat Turner?

Nat Turner was a slave who became a preacher and made history as the leader of one of the most well-known slave revolts in America on August 21, 1831. Following the insurrection, Turner hid for six weeks, but he was eventually caught and later hanged. The incident ended the emancipation movement in that region and led to even harsher laws against slaves. Turner later became an icon of the 1960s Black power movement.

The ballot ain't never been a measure of forgiveness.

In prison, people don't even talk about voting, about elections, not really not the dudes you remember, 'cause wasn't nobody Black running no way. But your freedom hit just

What does the speaker mean when he says "the ballot ain't never been a measure of forgiveness?"

- For most of our history as a country, when people are released from prison they are not given back their right to vote. America does not say 'your crimes are forgiven, now you can vote' to these people.
- The speaker may also be saying, just because you allowed me to vote, doesn't mean I forgive you for slavery.

Why don't people talk about voting in prison?

- They know they won't be able to vote when they get out; Nobody is running that represents them, so maybe they feel like their voice wouldn't be heard anyway

in time to see this brother high-stepping with the burden with the albatross, willing to confess that he knew people like you. & you are free, you are what they call out & off paperspappers & living in a state where you're not **disenfranchised**. In prison, you listened

Who is "this brother?"

- Barack Obama

What is the "burden" that the speaker mentions?

- The burden of being Black

Is it significant that the person running for office (Obama) is willing to "**confess** that he knew people like you?"

- There is something in common that the speaker has with the person in office. In contrast to what was said before about 'nobody Black running no way,' now there is somebody Black, who represents the speaker that is running for President
- Why is the word "confess" significant here? The speaker is noting that it's almost viewed as a bad thing to know people like 'you' (Black people, people who have been in prison). Also, in this moment, Obama (the president) is doing the same thing that people in prison have to do all the time (confess)– they have something in common.

	Disenfranchisement: being deprived of a right or privilege, especially the right to vote. Many states disenfranchise people who have felonies on their record. (noun)
to the ballot or the bullet & imagined that neither was for you, having failed with the pistol & <u>expecting the ballot to be Denied</u>. But nah, you found free & in line	Why is the speaker saying you didn't think the ballot wasn't for you? Because as a prisoner/felon, you don't imagine having the right to vote because so many states have disenfranchisement laws.
notice that this is not like the first time you & the woman you'd marry got naked & sweated & moaned & funkyed up a room not belonging to either of you. That lady is with you now & a kid is in your arms, & <u>you are wearing a Nat Turner T-shirt as if to make a statement at the family reunion. Everyone around you is Black</u>, which is a thing you notice. & you know your first ballot will be cast for a man who has the <u>swag that seems inherited</u>.	Now, the speaker is saying that 'you' found freedom... What kind of freedom? - Literal freedom (out of prison) but also symbolic freedom (the freedom to vote for whomever you choose) What type of statement would you be making if wearing a Nat Turner shirt to vote for Obama? - A statement about Black power; a statement about an uprising; a statement about our country's history-- that we are the same country that has Nat Turner and Barack Obama (slavery and a black president) The speaker comments about a 'family reunion' and then states that 'everyone around you is Black.' Why is this significant? - It's almost as if the voting place is a family reunion... everybody coming together to reunite and show support for their family member (Obama) - Also significant that everyone is Black because it shows the importance of this moment, for Black people to be voting for the first Black president. And Black voter turnout increased in 2008 and 2012 for Obama. Where does Obama get his swag? - It's 'inherited' from being Black, from his culture, from community
<u>It's early but there is no crust in your eyes.</u> You wanted this moment like freedom. You cast a ballot for a Black man in America while holding a Black Baby. <u>Name a dream more American than that</u>, especially with your three felonies serving as <u>beacons to alert anybody of your reckless ambition</u>. That woman	What's the significance of the line "It's early but there is no crust in your eyes?" - Despite it being early, you are wide awake, eager, excited about this moment/opportunity to exercise your right to vote and to vote for Obama Why is this an American dream? - This moment is about equality, opportunity, and

	representation. Voting is an assertion of rights in America. How might three felonies act as “beacons” of “reckless ambition”? There’s nothing, not even the felonies which would typically prohibit somebody from voting in other states, that can keep you from voting in this moment. You are empowered despite those obstacles (felonies) Beacon: a guiding or warning signal (noun) Reckless: without thinking or caring about the consequences of an action (adj) Ambition: a strong desire to do or to achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work (noun)
beside you is the kind of thing fools don’t even dream about in prison & she lets you hold your boy while voting, as if the voting makes you & him more free. Sometimes, it’s just luck. Just having moved to the right state after the cell doors stop clanking behind you. The son	Why is it significant to “hold your boy while voting?” Something to be said about fatherhood here, that you’re making this statement about exercising your right to vote and because you’re doing it while holding your son, you’re acting as an example for him
in the arms of the man was mine, & the arms of the man belonged to me, & I wore that Nat Turner T-shirt like a fucking flag, brown against my brown skin.	Here, the speaker switches from using the word ‘you’ to describe who is taking the action, and claims the son, and the arms, and the shirt to be his (i.e. ‘mine,’ ‘I wore’). Why do you think the speaker does this? He is proud. He wants to claim that moment as his own. Not only do the arms, the son, the T-shirt belong to him, but this whole experience does as well.
Additional Activity: Creative prompt for students: What T-shirt would you want to wear when voting in a presidential election? Design a shirt that embodies the attitude, beliefs, or purpose that you would apply to your voting. This T-shirt outline can be provided to students	

Ballad of the Groundhog

Ballad Of The Groundhog

Pre-reading

This poem relies heavily on the reader understanding the traditions of Groundhog Day, along with the common pop culture reference. It would be a good idea to review these items before reading with students.

Groundhog Day: A tradition celebrated on February 2nd each year, it derives from the Pennsylvania Dutch superstition that if a groundhog emerging from its burrow on this day sees its shadow due to clear weather, it will retreat to its den and winter will persist for six more weeks; but if it does not see its shadow because of cloudiness, spring will arrive early.

Pop culture reference: A 1993 movie with Bill Murray popularized Groundhog Day. In the movie, a TV weatherman finds himself reliving the same day over and over again when he goes on location to the town of Punxsutawney to film a report about Groundhog Day. His predicament drives him to distraction, until he sees a way of turning the situation to his advantage. "Groundhog day" is typically used to describe a feeling when people feel like they are reliving the same situation over and over.

-where cities get lost to time,
everyone knows the groundhog's story,
a wild animal caged, a climb cleaved,
the beast transformed into something gory,

a caution or flag or just inevitable.
They say he almost flew, catapulted
before the rest happened. Anviled
by the metal fence, cast as freedom's insult

How does the speaker describe the groundhog's story?

- A story of entrapment, of something wild that is being confined or caged. The groundhog is transformed into something 'gory' or bloody (perhaps this is an allusion to killing of the groundhog). The story is cautionary, it serves as a warning of bad things that can result.

in this county where states still turn
men into numbers. There's no city
where I can feel free. Time is fucking
inconsolable is what I mean, a starved sea

The speaker is comparing the groundhog with something? What is it?

- He's comparing the groundhog with a prisoner. How might they be similar?

& sometimes there is nothing-- just
days & their ruthless abundance.
By the time I heard the woodchuck's
tale, I'd be returning to prison as penance,

What connections is the speaker making to time and the groundhog's tale?

- Here, the speaker is drawing in the pop culture reference to Groundhogs Day as a symbol of something that is on repeat, reliving the same thing over and over. The speaker says time is 'inconsolable' as if one can't alleviate the suffering of time in prison.
- 'Days and their ruthless abundance': the number of days are unending, and a prisoner lives them over and over

circling black holes that turn the barren
lands dense: avenues & alleyways
buried inside sadness of castaways
lost to the clink. Who prays

What imagery does the poet use to describe what time is like in prison?

- Black holes: unending, all-consuming
- Turns the barren lands dense: prison may be barren because it's brick walls and concrete, which doesn't allow for things to grow. But it's still dense because it is compact, has a feeling of being heavy.

for the groundhog? The Cut
is a landscape of cells dug into red dirt--
who with a state number outruns

<u>the fate of red dirt</u>? The rodent's hurt?	How does the speaker further compare the groundhog and the prisoner? • The term groundhog is almost used synonymously with prison now. When the speaker asks who prays for the groundhog, maybe he is questioning whether anybody considers the plight of a prisoner (or the actual groundhog) and is alluding to the invisibility of the actual person or animal. Instead our focus is on the Groundhog Day celebration or the stereotypes of the prisoner • When the speaker asks who outruns the fate of the red dirt, maybe he is commenting on the impossibility of avoiding the harms and dangers of prison when locked up. The Cut: The Maryland House of Corrections was nicknamed The Cut, and was a maximum security prison known for harsh and dangerous conditions. The walls were made of red clay that prisoners had made during its construction.
<u>I owe my ears a debt for this burden.</u> <u>the groundhog believed in</u> <u>escaping</u> the steel bars around him. <u>Home was gleaming metal, the linchpin</u> <u>of shackles & handcuffs.</u> Who wants to awaken to that spring? When I ask my cousin, who knows more prison than cities, he's calling	How is the groundhog's home similar to the prisoners? • Both are made of metal (a cell and a cage), both involve chains and handcuffs, constraints. The speaker says 'the groundhog believed in escaping,' and says that he owed his ears a debt for having heard the story of the groundhog. Why might this be so-- why would he owe his ears a debt? • Perhaps because this story gave him hope. Like the groundhog, and after hearing the groundhog's story, the speaker believed he could escape, could have freedom. He had something hopeful to hold onto. The speaker is grateful for having heard this story.
the Cut a fucking deathtrap, as if he knew the beast. <u>The groundhog</u> <u>a legend & caution.</u> & <u>Janis Joplin</u> might <u>have been right,</u> but for the epilogue: the marmot, small-eared rodent, lost Everything; eclipsed, like all wild things aching for release. <u>The fence</u> <u>Tempted</u>; one afternoon it exiled	The speaker has already mentioned how the groundhog's story is a caution or a flag, but here he also calls it a legend. Has anything changed the way the speaker considers the groundhog? • The groundhog is still a cautionary tale because it tells you how terrible it is to be trapped. It's also a legend because it's so well known. • We know the story of the groundhog's cage, but now the speaker is transitioning into the epilogue, the rest of the story.

	What might the speaker mean when he says “the fence tempted?” - The fence (or boundary that is trapping the groundhog) is calling to the groundhog, daring it to try and escape to freedom. Janis Joplin: Janis Joplin’s song <i>Me and Bobby McGee</i> has a line that says “freedom is just another word for nothing to lose.” The speaker makes reference to that idea here. - When the speaker mentions Joplin, he is alluding to this quote. Saying she might have been right, except the epilogue of the groundhog’s story teaches us that she is wrong. We are getting a preview of what’s about to happen to the groundhog: he lost everything when he sought freedom.
the wobbling-near-leaping thing with <u>saw-teeth</u> sure to haunt. A groundhog, rabid animal, <u>any human entangled in razor wire, wants</u> <u>to be more. We all, when held that way, will struggle, twist the blades’ edges deeper</u> & so shanked on a spiraling cosmos, the serenade	What has saw teeth? - The razor wire on the fence that surrounds the prison/ or the fence that is calling on the groundhog to try and escape. What might the speaker mean when he says “any human entangled in razor wire, wants to be more?” - People imprisoned want to be more than just a prisoner. They want more than their surroundings. They want a future. They want freedom. What does the speaker say is the natural response to being held like a prisoner? - To struggle, to try and escape. There’s imagery here of the groundhog attempting his escape, getting caught in the razor wire, but still fighting, struggling to free himself even as the blades cut into his fur/skin. The groundhog is in essence ‘shanking’ himself; he is dying. What is the groundhog’s epilogue? What is the ending to its story? - The groundhog dies trying to escape; he dies seeking freedom. This ties back to the line about Joplin: freedom isn’t another name for something to lose... the groundhog lost everything (his life) becoming free.
of the grass rat became a story we all know. <u>When the fence’s tines grab hold, they will embrace like prison</u>	How might prison strangle anyone doing time? How is this like the fence and the groundhog? The fence wrapped it’s razors around the

strangles anyone doing time--

& this is true, whatever the
Groundhog's fate. Maybe men ain't
as wild as we think. & no one
came to cut the whistle-pig free.

groundhog, continuing to hold it hostage.
Prison does the same thing to prisoners, by
wrapping its arms so tightly around people
that it strangles, stifles them.

How do you think the poem ends?

- Maybe the speaker is pointing out that we shouldn't treat humans like wild beasts, like groundhogs
- Maybe the speaker is pointing out that nobody came to cut the groundhog free so as to say prisoners are left to rot in prison.

Overall Questions

The poet uses many different words for groundhog. What are the different terms he uses? Why do you think he used the different terms?

Essay on Reentry (for Fats, Juvie & Star)

Essay on Reentry

For Fats, Juvie, & Star

Fats ain't never killed nobody,
but has known more years in cells than cities,
than school, than lovers, than his favorite
cousin lived, more years than freedom.

Why do you think the speaker is comparing the number of years Fats has been incarcerated with the other items? (Probe: Is there something unfair about this?)

- Absurdity that somebody can spend more time incarcerated than the years another person lives, or than years in school getting an education.

Is it significant that Fats never killed anybody? If it is why?

- Maybe he's innocent; maybe he committed a crime where he shouldn't be locked up for as long as he has
- Maybe it shouldn't be significant... no matter if you're innocent or guilty, going to prison as a teenager for 20+, 30+ years isn't just.

We met before M- ran his time up
over a 5-inch black & white, before K- broke
somebody's jaw with the lock in the sock.
Back when everyone thought they'd go home;
before T- went home & was murdered; before
J- went home & came back. He gives me

How do all these people know each other?

- They were all incarcerated together; all incarcerated as young teens

What thread of commonality is there that ties all these people together? How might their stories be related?

- Cycle of incarceration; cycle of violence

How does the speaker feel about these people?

- They are his people, his friends. Their crimes or reasons for incarceration don't matter to him.

the math on men I did my bid with: *yesterday I sat at a table with Star, remember him? I was looking at his balding head and he was looking at the grays that cover my crown. I looked at Juvie at a near table both crown & beard stubble completely gray...*

Why are there italics here?

- Italics signify Fats speaking

As Fats describes Star, Juvie, and himself, what is being made apparent by their features?

- They are aging (maybe because of age, but also because of the toll of prison); they have been locked up for a long time

How does Fats feel about these people?

- He looks at them with a sense of kinship, he notices intricacies about them, about the way they've changed, and reflects on them as a friend would.

We first discovered jail cells decades ago,
as teenagers & just today, **a mirror reminded**

What does the speaker mean when he says "a mirror reminded me of my disappeared self?" How can

me of my disappeared self; androgenic alopecia: a word for our vanishing hair. Latin describing how time will cause everything to recede. No word exists for the years that we've lost	mirrors remind us of things? • He saw himself as an older man; his youth had disappeared. Mirrors can remind us of many things when we see our reflection (age; likeness to a family member, how tired we may be, etc.) Why do you think the speaker says that “no word exists for the years we’ve lost?” • Maybe you can’t sum it up in one word; they’ve lost too much Androgenic alopecia: a genetic condition characterized by a receding hairline and gradual disappearance of hair (noun)
to prison. & I thought, Fats, describing a moment he'd shared with men he's known for decades, was thinking about all that lost. But, he writes, looking at the landscape of gray that had become them, he realized it was far from over.	What does the speaker initially think Fats is saying by describing everybody having gray hair? • The speaker at first thought Fats was being reminded of all they have lost out on because of having spent so much time in prison and growing old in prison • Or the speaker was making the connection between Fats’ innocence to aging, to being in a desperate place, to feeling lost and hopeless. The speaker uses all that ‘lost’ instead of the proper word (grammatically), ‘loss.’ Do you think this was intentional? If so, why? • Maybe because there’s a lot of pressure to be correct and use proper grammar, but the speaker/writer wanted to go against this. Be different. What does the speaker realize Fats is truly trying to say? • The italicized portion are Fats’ words. He’s saying that all is not lost, that life is far from over (despite the fact that they are graying) Who is more hopeful in this moment? Fats or the speaker? Why? • Likely Fats because he is the one who’s taken away a message of hope, whereas the speaker was thinking the message was about loss.
Because, all these rounds later, prison ain’t still undefeated, & one of these days we might find us some free.	What does the speaker mean when he says “prison ain’t still undefeated?” • Maybe that prison has been defeated? These characters have defeated prison: the speaker has been released and is no longer

	incarcerated (broke free from prison); despite their age, Fats, Star, and Juvie have defeated prison because they have survived it (are surviving it– they’re alive). What is the tone here? • Hopeful • By ending with “one of these days we might find us som free,” the speaker has hope for the future, for finding freedom
Overall Questions: What is the story being told? • Two friends that know each other from being locked up are catching up with each other Do you think the speaker is currently locked up? How can you tell? • The speaker is likely a person that has been released from prison, who is going back to visit with his friend (Fats), or receiving a letter from his friend who is still incarcerated. The italics represent what Fats says to the speaker. (Note: ‘the math on med I did my bid with’ hints that the speaker is free because it is in past tense) What does the speaker learn from Fats? • The speaker learns about hope. This is significant, because the person who is still incarcerated (arguably in a worse-off, less hopeful position) is reminding the speaker who is a free man about holding onto hope.	
Additional Activities: The Real-Life Fats Fats in the poem, is a real-life person who the Poet met while incarcerated as a juvenile. Fats, Rojai Fentress, was charged with murder as an adult at the age of 16, and sentenced to 56 years. On July 1, 2020, he was pardoned and released, after another man confessed to the original murder. • Article from the Washington Post about Fats • Students can read the article and explore themes of innocence and overly punitive sentences in the criminal justice system. • Discussion questions: ○ After learning more about Fats, do you see this poem in a new light? Is it more surprising that Fats was the person teaching the speaker about hope? How do you think Fats might have been able to keep hope despite being incarcerated 24 years for a crime he did not commit?	

In Missouri

Overall Questions

1. What is this document?
 - This is a legal document. A court document filed by the Civil Rights Corps to challenge the incarceration of people because they could not afford to pay bail. The document has been redacted (a practice often used for legal documents to censor information or remove private information before releasing publicly) to make a poem with the words left. The redaction with the poems is used to reveal tragedy and injustice within the justice system.
2. What else do you know about the city of Ferguson?
 - Ferguson is where Michael Brown was killed. Students may be familiar with the city because of Michael Brown and the protests that happened after his death.
3. After reading this poem, how do you think the city of Ferguson treats its people? How do you know?
 - This poem shows that the city doesn't treat its people well. Especially people who are involved in the justice system. We know this because of the language being used to show how the people being held for bail *languish* in prison, are held in *overcrowded cells*, with no toothbrushes, the environment is dirty and smelly. There are tons of examples used to show how the people are treated poorly and unjustly.
 - The poem really focuses on those individuals who are stuck in jail because they cannot afford to pay their bail and their families cannot either. It calls into question whether this practice is fair. Teachers could lead a discussion around the idea of the modern age debtors prison.
4. What is the tone of this poem?
 - The poem is heavy and dark. The tone is one of anger, frustration, and sadness.

Languish: suffer from being forced to remain in an unpleasant place or situation

Impoverished: (of a person or area) made poor.

Grotesque: comically or repulsively ugly or distorted

Excrement: waste matter discharged from the bowels; feces

Refuse: matter thrown away or rejected as worthless; trash.

Taunt: provoke or challenge (someone) with insulting remarks.

Debtor's prison: the arrest and jailing of poor people for failure to pay legal debts they cannot pay

Extortion: the practice of obtaining something, especially money, through force or threats

Dickensian: of or reminiscent of the novels of Charles Dickens, especially in suggesting the poor social conditions or comically repulsive characters that they portray

Indigent: poor; needy

Arbitrarily: on the basis of random choice or personal whim, rather than any reason or system

Kafkaesque: characteristic or reminiscent of the oppressive or nightmarish qualities of Franz Kafka's fictional world

Additional Activity

Make your own redacted poem!

Betts uses official court documents that deal with money bail and redacts them into poems in order to reveal the way that bail impacts those living in poverty. Teachers can use this opportunity to talk about what it means to redact or erase and students can experiment doing their own redactions or erasure poems. This also gives students directly impacted by the system an opportunity to reclaim language that can be very othering and put the power of language back in their hands.

[Here](#) is a short video about Bett's Redaction project

This quote from Bett's [interview with The Paris Review](#) can be used to help students understand how and why he makes these poems.

"I'm trying to find ways to connect my identity as a lawyer with my identity as a poet. I'm on the board of the Civil Rights Corps, which deals with money bail. They are specifically trying to challenge the fact that many states incarcerate people and leave them incarcerated just because they can't pay their bail or because they owe fines for traffic tickets or things like that, citations.

But nobody can understand these court documents. I mean, you get sixty to seventy pages. It's like reading a novella, and you don't want to really read a novella that's talking about things like jurisdiction. But what I thought about was this poetry-ness, and if we can find the poetry. Instead of thinking that redaction is a tool to get rid of and hide what is most sensitive, what if we thought about it as a tool to remove the superfluous? What if I tried to find the rhythm, the poetry, the character, the story, the person? If I allowed the document to actually be a voice of the person writing it? That's what I attempted to do.

For me, this says a couple of things. It represents the attempt of the state to physically remove you, but then it also represents the attempt of people to reassert their existence. Those two things get to exist as one. In the same way that these two things are happening, there's this fight against erasure. I think that's what the poems end up mimicking. Even though the portraits on the cover represent that erasure, they also represent the existence of something underneath. It's pushing back against that."

Suggested documents for students to use to create a redaction poem:

- [Civil Rights Corps court filing in Houston, TX](#)
 - This is an actual court filing just like the ones Bett's uses, that deal with issues around money bail. Teachers can print this for students to create a redaction poem.
- [Dred Scott Case](#)
 - This is the court opinion in the Dred Scott case. The first page provides some background on the case to be used by teachers in explaining the case. The second page is the opinion, which can be printed and provided to students.

House Of Unending

Pre-reading:

There is an author's note at the end of the book (p. 95) that talks about some of the references made in this poem. It may be helpful to read this before leading students through the poem.

This poem is a series of seven sonnets. If you don't have enough time to review all seven sonnets at one time, you could break the entirety of the poem down and review sonnets individually.

The sinner's **bouquet, house of shredded & torn**

Dear John letters, upended grave of names, moon

Black kiss of a pistol's flat side, time blueborn
& threaded into a curse, Lazarus of hustlers, the

picayune

Spinning into beatdowns; breath of a thief stilled

By fluorescent lights, a system of 40 blocks,

Empty vials, a hand full of purple cranesbills;

Memories of crates suspended from stairs, tied in knots

Around street amps; the house of unending push-ups

Wheelbarrows & walking 20's; the daughters

Chasing their fathers' shadows, sons that upset

The wind with their secrets, the paraphrase of fractured,

scarred wings flying through smoke; each wild hour

Of lockdown, hunger time & the blackened flower.

Why might the poet be calling this 'house of shredded & torn..' the sinners *bouquet*?

- A bouquet is typically given to someone as a gift (to say congratulations, sorry, or thank you). Instead of receiving beautiful flowers, the sinner receives something that is shredded and torn, something ugly (graves, letters ending relationships, curses, etc.)

What is the tone of this sonnet?

- This sonnet has a dark tone. It is describing the oppressive, depressing environment of prison. The speaker is suffering.

Dear John letter: a letter written to a man by his wife or romantic partner to inform him their relationship is over because she has found another lover

Picayune: petty; worthless

Of lockdown, hunger time & the blackened flower--

Ain't nothing worth knowing. Prison becomes home;

The cell: a catacomb that cages and the **metronome**

Tracking the years that eclipse you. History authors

Your death, throws you into that din of lost hours.

Your mother blames it all on your X chromosome,

Blames it on something in the blood, a styrofoam

Cup filled with whiskey leading you to court disfavor,

To become drunk on count-time & chow-call logic.

There is no name for this things that you've become:

Convict, prisoner, inmate, lifer, yardbird, all fail.

If you can't be free, be a mystery. An amnesic.

Anything. But avoid succumbing to the humdrum:

Swallowing a bullet or even just choosing to inhale.

What might the speaker mean when he says "ain't nothing worth knowing?"

- Perhaps the speaker is saying that nothing in prison is worth knowing-- it's best to forget or to avoid
- The speaker could also be alluding to the quote by Oscar Wilde: "Nothing worth knowing can be taught." Wilde's quote is often considered a critique of education, pointing out that the most important things in life can't be taught in a classroom or even that the things taught in a classroom are not important. Here, the speaker could be saying that prison doesn't teach anything valuable.

What might the author mean when he says "If you can't be free, be a mystery?"

- This is an allusion to Rita Dove's poem "Canary." The author is pointing out a

	means of surviving prison/incarceration. If you can't be free, you can still <i>be something</i>, you can be a mystery. Even if you don't know who you are or other people don't know who you are, the speaker is saying that an incarcerated person can still <i>be</i>. You don't have to become invisible as a result of incarceration. 'Avoid succumbing to the humdrum' and continue to be something/someone. Metronome: a device used by musicians that marks time at a selected rate by giving a regular tick
Swallowing a bullet or even just choosing to inhale, Both mark you: pistol or the blunt to the head Escorting you through the night. <u>Your Yale</u>— An omen, the memories, the depression, the dead & how things keep getting in the way of things. When he asked you for the pistol, & you said no, The reluctance wasn't about what violence brings. His weeping in your ear made you regret what you owed. <u>On some days, the hard ones, you curse the phone,</u> <u>The people calling collect, reaching out, all buried,</u> <u>Surrounded by bricks.</u> On some days, you've known You wouldn't answer, the blinking numbers as varied As the names of the prison holding on to those lives, Holding on, ensuring that nothing survives.	What does the speaker mean when he says "your Yale?" - Yale is a top university. Perhaps the speaker is comparing prison to a house of education... however the education one receives from prison is very different from one you would receive at Yale. This may also be connected to the line in the previous sonnet about "ain't nothing worth knowing." - Note: The Poet, Dwayne Betts, after serving 8 years in prison, went on to earn his law degree from Yale university. This may be a good reminder to students of what can be achieved, despite involvement in the justice system. Why might someone in prison "curse the phone?" - Perhaps on days when it's difficult, when the burden of being incarcerated is weighing on you, it's hard to talk to people on the outside. People who want to ask you how you're doing, people who inevitably act as a reminder that you are locked up.
Holding on, ensuring that nothing survives, Not even regret. That's the thing that gets you, <u>Holding on to memories like they're your archives,</u> <u>Like they're there to tell you something true</u> <u>About what happened.</u> My past put a skew On how I held her. Unaccustomed to touch, I knew only dream & fantasy. Try to see through That mire & find intimacy. It was just so much. & then, <u>the yesterdays just become yesterday</u>	What is the speaker saying that memories do? What does the speaker do with his memories? The memories serve as a reminder of what happened during prison. As a reminder of who you are. But there is a tone of sarcasm here, as if the memories aren't really telling the truth. Maybe so as to say, though it seems like your experience and time in prison defines you, it actually doesn't.

A story that you tell yourself about not dying. Another thing, when it's mentioned, to downplay. That's what me & that woman did, trying To love each other. <u>What kind of fool am I.</u> <u>Lost in what's gone, reinventing myself with lies.</u>	After time, what becomes of those memories of prison? • They kind of fade away (yesterdays become yesterday) and you move on, move forward. Now, when you look at those memories, you are reminded that you survived. Why does the speaker call himself a fool? • Perhaps because he's been caught up in his past (his time in prison) and he has been using those <i>untrue</i> memories of prison to define who he is (to reinvent himself, but he's not actually reinventing himself... he's falling back into the definitions attached to him from prison) • Perhaps because he's been trying to move on, but he can't actually move on. Maybe you can never move on from prison, so when you try to reinvent yourself, it's all a lie.
Lost in what's gone, reinventing myself with lies: I walk these streets, <u>ruined by what I'd hide.</u> <u>Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine.</u> I barely see my daughters at all these days. Out here caught up, lost in an old cliché. But tell me, what won't these felonies betray. Did a stretch in prison <u>to be released to a cell.</u> Returned to a freedom penned by Orwell. <u>My noon temptation is now the Metro's third rail.</u> In my wallet, I carry around my daguerreotype, A mugshot, no smiles, my name a tithe. What must I pay for being this stereotype? The pistols I carried into the night, <u>my anchor</u>; The crimes that unraveled me, <u>my banner</u>.	What is the speaker burned or bothered by? • The speaker is burdened by his sins, his past that he tries to hide. While Jesus died for other people's sins, he says "not for mine." The speaker still carries his sins, he still suffers from them. How do the speaker's sins continue to burden him even after prison? • Even after release, the speaker still feels like he is in a cell, trapped. He still doesn't see his children. He's caught up in his past. He's so burdened he's tempted by the thought of suicide (by the electric rail-the metro's third rail). • His crime, carried out by holding a pistol, has become his anchor. It is holding him down, keeping him from moving, moving on • His crimes become his banner, something he carries and waves over himself, defining himself. Daguerreotype: a photograph taken by an early photographic process employing an iodine-sensitized silvered plate and mercury vapor.
The crimes that unraveled me, my banner. Only a fool confesses to owning that fact. <u>Honesty a sinkhole:</u> the truth doomed to subtract Everything but prayer, turn my breath into failure.	How might honesty be a sinkhole? • When we are honest with ourselves, we often reflect on who we are. This can be consuming, we can get lost in this

Whiskey after prison made me crave amber,
Brown washing my glass until I'm smacked.
The murder of crows on my arm an artifact
Of freedom: what outlasts even the jailor.
Alas, there is no baptism for me tonight.
No water to drown all these memories.

The rooms in my head keep secrets that indict
Me still; my chorus unspoken larcenies.
You carry that knowledge into your twilight,
& live without regret for your guilty pleas.

honesty/reflection, it could feel like we're being sucked under by all our past transgressions.

The speaker is comparing wrongs that have been made known to others with wrongs that have been kept a secret (and only he knows). What's the difference between them?

- This section is referring to the speaker's internal struggle with acknowledging and being honest with himself about his past sins.
- Maybe the wrongs that he keeps secret (either to himself, or from himself in that he doesn't want to admit to them himself) 'indict' him—they burden him and put a charge on him; as he acknowledges them, they sing a chorus in his mind that he can't silence.
- The wrongs he admitted to (guilty pleas—not literal, but figurative guilty please... wrongs that he has acknowledged and admitted to internally about himself) don't burden him as much because he's come to terms with them, he's suffered from them.
- Even a baptism can't wash away these sins ('drown' them). This ties back into the idea of honesty being a sinkhole, we can get lost in our honesty with ourselves and it can consume us.

Indict: formally accuse of or charge with a serious crime

& live without regret for your guilty please-Shit. Mornings I rise twice: once for a count
That will not come & later with the city's
Wild birds, who find freedom without counsel.
I left prison with debts no honest man could pay.
Walked out imagining I'd lapped my troubles,
But a girl once said no to my unlistening ears, dismayed
That I didn't pause. Remorse can't calm those evils.
I've lost myself in some kind of algebra
That turns my life into an equation that zeroes
Out, regardless of my efforts. Algophobia
Means to fear pain. I still fear who knows
All I've done. Why regret this thing I've worn?
The sinner's bouquet; house, shredded & torn.

What does the speaker mean when he says "remorse can't calm those evils?"

- Perhaps feeling sorry about his past transgressions isn't enough. Just feeling sorry won't overcome those evils.

How is the speaker feeling about his ability to overcome or move past his sins?

- Like it's not entirely possible. Like no matter what he does, he can't right his wrongs enough (to the point where the good things he's done will outweigh the bad). It's an equation that zeroes out (is even), regardless of his efforts to continue doing good. Even though the bad and good may zero out, he feels like he'll never tip the scales/equation towards good.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The sonnet and entire poem ends, again with a reminder from the first sonnet: that the sinner’s bouquet (gift) is shredded and torn... it’s more of a burden than a gift. |
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Overall questions

This poem is about internal regret where the speaker is talking about his personal struggles to cope with his past and move on from it (in contrast to external forces that may pressure one to feeling regret). How might a person move past their regret? What suggestions would you have for someone who is struggling to move forward after having done a ‘wrong’?