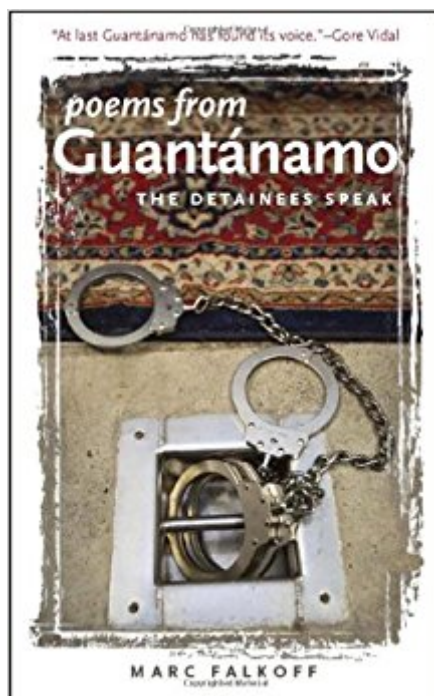


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Poems From Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak



Synopsis

Since 2002, at least 775 men have been held in the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. According to Department of Defense data, fewer than half of them are accused of committing any hostile act against the United States or its allies. In hundreds of cases, even the circumstances of their initial detainment are questionable. This collection gives voice to the men held at Guantanamo. Available only because of the tireless efforts of pro bono attorneys who submitted each line to Pentagon scrutiny, *Poems from Guantanamo* brings together twenty-two poems by seventeen detainees, most still at Guantanamo, in legal limbo. If, in the words of Audre Lorde, poetry "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, these verses—some originally written in toothpaste, others scratched onto foam drinking cups with pebbles and furtively handed to attorneys—are the most basic form of the art.

Death Poem by Jumah al Dossari
Take my blood.
Take my death shroud
and
The remnants of my body.
Take photographs of my corpse at the grave, lonely.
Send them to the world,
To the judges and
To the people of conscience,
Send them to the principled men and the fair-minded.
And let them bear the guilty burden before the world,
Of this innocent soul.
Let them bear the burden before their children and before history,
Of this wasted, sinless soul,
Of this soul which has suffered at the hands of the "protectors of peace."
Jumah al Dossari is a thirty-three-year old Bahraini who has been held at Guantanamo Bay for more than five years. He has been in solitary confinement since the end of 2003 and, according to the U.S. military, has tried to kill himself twelve times while in custody.

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Customer Reviews

"At last Guantanamo has found its voice."--Gore Vidal "Poetry, art of the human voice, helps turn us toward what we should or must not ignore. Speaking as they can across barriers actual and figurative, translated into our American tongue, these voices in confinement implicitly call us to our principles and to our humanity. They deserve, above all, not admiration or belief or sympathy-but attention. Attention to them is urgent for us."--Robert Pinsky "Poems from Guantanamo brings to light figures of concrete, individual humanity, against the fabric of cruelty woven by the 'war on terror.' The poems and poets' biographies reveal one dimension of this officially obscured narrative, from the perspective of the sufferers; the legal and literary essays provide the context which has produced--under atrocious circumstances--a poetics of human dignity."--Adrienne Rich Yochi J. Dreazen, *The Wall Street Journal*: "Inmates at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, used pebbles to scratch messages into the foam cups they got with their meals. When the guards weren't looking, they passed the cups from cell to cell. It was a crude but effective way of communicating. The prisoners weren't passing along escape plans or information about future terrorist attacks. They were sending one another poems." Kate Allen, director, Amnesty International UK: "The poems in this collection were written against enormous odds. The men detained in Guantanamo Bay are routinely held in solitary confinement, condemned without a fair trial, many of them tortured. Through it all, some have taken sanctuary in poetry, and through this small volume we hear voices and glimpse their innermost feelings. Their poems are a remarkable and moving testament to the power of the human spirit."

Marc Falkoff is an assistant professor at the Northern Illinois University College of Law and attorney for seventeen Guantanamo prisoners. Flagg Miller is a linguistic and cultural anthropologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ariel Dorfman is a Chilean American poet, novelist, playwright, and human rights activist who holds the Walter Hines Page Chair of Literature and Latin American Studies at Duke University.

While "Poems" isn't something I'd ordinarily pick up for light reading or outside of a classroom assignment, there was something oddly compelling and universal about the poems contained here. Granted, most people will not want to read this collection solely based on who created it, but that is

their loss. I expected to hear nothing but anti-American and anti-Western rants but instead came to see a familiarity with other prisoner created poetry. Most of the poems here are laments to loss of freedoms, which at times can be quite moving. There is certainly anger and animosity, some of it directed both specifically and vaguely. None of these are what I would call great works of poetry, but then again I'm neither a poet nor a literary critic, so I'll leave that to the professionals. They are more memorable for the emotions they evoke and what they have to say than for how they are said, which is the hallmark of poetry. If you believe the detainees represent a clear and present danger to Western Society, then there's little here that will change your mind. In fact it's doubtful you'd pick this up in the first place or if you did it would re-enforce your beliefs that they should be detained indefinitely. Thinking of the target market for "Poems" it is clearly for people of conscience who believe that anyone falsely imprisoned and detained their rights should be freed. For them "Poems" is a must have and a rallying cry for why these detainees should be released. In the push to strip these detainees of their humanity "Poems" seeks to return some of that to them. The poems are grouped by their author, along with a thumbnail sketch of who they are, where they were captured, and other details and facts about them, that certainly is done to reconstruct some degree of their identity and humanity. And that ultimately is the point of "Poems." Rather than becoming faceless nameless numbers warehoused at Guantanamo, they regain some semblance of their humanity here. Granted, some will criticize that these poems got out or complain that these detainees are somehow profiting off their terroristic acts or using "Poems" as propaganda. I can't speak to the veracity of any of that or to the artistic merit of the poetry. What I can say is that the poetry contained here showed universality with prisoners of many different places and ages, and that it helped to humanize the detainees. That said, there's little here that will affirm your faith in humanity or give you a warm fuzzy feeling.

This small selection of poems "Poems from Guantanamo" is a triumph of endurance and courage. These poets, Guantanamo Bay detainees, have been held for years without any trial and routinely tortured. All in a United States military detention centre. This profound poetry, written against all odds, is a testament to the indestructable power of the human spirit in the face of unspeakable cruelty on so many levels. "They deserve above all, not admiration or belief or sympathy - but attention. Attention to them is urgent...." (Robert Pinsky). This poetry is even more remarkable given that it is always difficult for translations to impart the power of poetry through different words in a different language.

Amazing read, heart breaking and thought provoking. I would recommend this to anyone who enjoys seeing things from alternate perspectives.

A necessary read for anyone who has anything to say about our policies toward an endless "war on terror." As a public, in the United States, we are often too removed from the consequences of policy. Learning to listen, being able to listen, to those most impacted by our policies might significantly improve who we are as a people.

Although this book is short, it's an incredible glimpse into the thoughts of these prisoners. They had to go through so much and to hear their words is a gift from them. I felt like they were nearly robbed of their voices, but broke through that barrier with their poems. I read from this book recently at an Open Mic Night, and I am so glad that I could use their words to create a greater awareness about what happened to them.

World War I yielded poetry by Wilfred Owen, a young poet who suffered and eventually died in that war. The power of his words "I am the enemy you killed my friend..." rang true for his time, just as Emad Abdullah Hassan's words "You have no comrade but Night to share in your sadness" speaks for those held at Guantanamo's prison of torture.

Another Angel Island without the angels.

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