

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | May 31, 2018

*The author of the following poem, William Blake, has spent 31 continuous years in solitary confinement in New York State prisons. Sentenced to 77 years to life for killing a sheriff's deputy in a failed escape attempt when he was 23 years old, Blake is being held in administrative segregation, meaning there is no clear end to his isolation. While in solitary, Blake has written over 200 poems as well as dozens of essays, including [A Sentence Worse Than Death](#), which went viral when originally published on Solitary Watch in 2013 and has been read by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. In his letters, essays, and poems, Blake describes the struggle to maintain sanity as his years alone in a cell stretched to decades. He has said that articulating his experiences, memories, ideas, and visions through writing has helped him survive the torturous conditions in the box.*

*Blake's most recent poem, Resurrection, was inspired by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), who won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923. In a letter, he describes [Renaissance](#), Millay's first poem to receive widespread recognition, as his new favorite poem, and says he could not have written Resurrection without the inspiration and technique he developed from studying Millay's work.*

*Like the famous English poet and painter whose name he shares, Blake also has an interest in Greek and Roman mythology. In Resurrection, he says, he drew on these myths to allegorically and metaphorically describe the box. He explains that he used the Furies, a trio of vengeful underworld goddesses, to illuminate what the DOCCS [Department of Corrections and Community Supervision] does to us in SHU [Security Housing Units], torments us and drives us insane, which is what the Furies did to the queen that [Roman goddess] Juno had a beef with. Other references to the underworld include Hades, its ruler; the River Styx, which divides it from the living world; Charon, the boatman who rows souls across the river; and Cerberus, the fiendish dog who guards the gates and prevents the dead from escaping. Toward the end of the poem, Blake turns away from the underworld and toward Uranus, Greek god of the sky.*

*The author welcomes letters at: William Blake #87-A-5771, Great Meadow Correctional Facility, 11739 State Route 22, PO Box 51, Comstock, New York 12821-0051.*

*Valerie Kieballa and Jean Casella*

.....

I know not how it got that way,  
But all about the gloom held sway.  
Is this a dream or is it real?  
I asked myself, and I could feel  
Chills run through me. A nightmare crept  
Right up on me while I still slept  
Or was awake, I could not tell.  
Alive or dead, I'm trapped in hell!  
I knew fast, I'm in a fix,  
Straight down the line, a concrete Styx.  
In this world Charon doesn't row,  
He walks his rounds, is called C.O.

Steel walls around a dirty floor,  
A cold barred gate, there was no door.  
My brow dripped sweat, my stomach tight,  
The cell was dark, beyond a light.  
Outside the mew through windows shine  
White rays like sun, a lighted line  
Drawn to my cage so I should know  
The steel stops all. I cannot go  
One step beyond Hades dark shore,

Till Cerberus allows no more.

I want to run, flee from the Fates;  
Its just eight feet, back wall to gate.  
I stretched my arms out to the side,  
Both walls I touch, cell six feet wide.  
Hands hold fast bars of frozen steel,  
Bare feet on stone, its cold I feel.  
An hour a day rec in the hole;  
Crap comes up when the gods dice roll.

I hear loud shouting on the gate,  
Unseen faces spit words of hate.  
I sense the heat as mouth wars rage,  
Shots get fired from an icy cage.  
Men throw waste, sunk into madness,  
Anger loosed from soul-deep sadness.  
Wrong turns right as the ill winds tow  
Stolen sense that got drawn too low.

Split by walls, rent humanity,  
Men hold tight to frail dignity  
That was worn away long years past  
Find a way or here breathe your last.  
All together yet still alone,  
Where pain burns deep, seared to the bone.  
Hate seeps into the idle mind  
That dreamed of love it could not find.  
Brains get bent as hope is cut loose,  
Bodies swing from a bed sheet noose.

One day I cried when no tears came,  
Reduced to numbers, lost my name.  
One day like countless days before  
Ill stand strong till I cant stand more.  
Ive lived to pay for my regrets,  
Marked by Justice that soon forgets  
The purpose was what is not now,  
Objectives set but gone somehow.  
Though just to pay for ones own sins,  
When a dead man walks, no one wins.

So I stand up because I dare,  
Looked into eyes that did not care.  
Cold one whose heart was wrecked by pain,  
Crushed a mind till it went insane.  
The lost souls walk a demon land,  
Broken bits in the devils hand.  
From human born to less inside,  
Blank within where the spirit died.  
While I would live and not grow cold,  
Run the gauntlet and never fold.

Then lo! I glimpsed the nightmares end,  
Theres one I know, unlikely friend.  
When Hypnos spoke, I slept no more;  
My spirit flew through Hades door,  
Back to the land where free men dwell  
Delivered from a living hell!  
For thirty years I took death blows,  
I walked a world of tortured souls,  
But listened when the gods would call,  
Rising up to survive the fall.

Freed from the depths of Tartarus,  
Looked to the face of Uranus,  
I raised my fist to his blue skies,  
Red-hot tears falling from my eyes.  
I heard Zeus call and thunder roar,  
A lightning strike through my soul tore.  
Power filled me, I knew at last  
My destiny had come to pass.

My moment now, I called to Earth:  
Hear my voice: What are our lives worth?  
When a mans done wrong, what are you  
Right in doing till youre wrong too?  
Dont think to hold yourself so high,  
Youll never look God eye to eye.  
Youve built it up, this manmade hell,  
Called it the box, filled every cell.  
Done it all as the devil bid,  
Engaged the Furies like Juno did.  
Twisted minds sent back to your town,  
Broken men calling chaos down.  
There inside you, what has been lost?  
Vengeance served, is it worth the cost?  
Better off or no better than  
The least of them, the lowest man  
To walk small circles in his pen?  
More animal than they are men  
Treated so till thats how they act;  
Once gone for good, they dont come back.  
All are losers in this foul game  
What you want back, give up the same.

*Banner art: The Hypocrites, illustration for Dantes Inferno, Canto 23, by William Blake (1757-1827).*

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

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September 6, 2022

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