Abused, desperate and isolated, Guantánamo prisoners have turned to writing poetry as a way to preserve their humanity. Despite the Pentagon’s vigorous efforts to suppress the poems, a dedicated band of pro bono lawyers for the detainees have published a collection.

I first met Adnan Farhan Abdul Latif soon after I filed a habeas corpus petition on his behalf in late 2004. We were sitting in an interview cell—really a retro-fitted storage container—at Camp Echo in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Across the table, Latif sat with his arms crossed and his head down. The guards had removed his handcuffs, but when he shifted his weight his leg irons clanged and echoed in the bare room. The irons were chained to an eyebolt on the floor. Guards were stationed outside the door, and a video camera was visible in the corner.

Latif, a small, thin Yemeni man with a scraggily beard, had been in the prison for nearly three years. Upon his arrival in Cuba, he said, he was chained hand and foot while still in the black-out goggles and ear muffs he had been forced to wear for the flight. Soldiers kicked him, hit him, and dislocated his shoulder. Early on, interrogators questioned him with a gun to his head. Latif spent his first weeks at Camp X-Ray in an open-air cage, exposed to the tropi-
They were broken down and psychologically tyrannized, kept in extreme isolation, threatened with rendition, interrogated at gunpoint and told that their families would be harmed if they refused to talk.

Where is the world to save us from torture? 
Where is the world to save us from the fire and sadness? 
Where is the world to save the hunger strikers?

The military won’t let you read the rest of Latif’s poetry.

_Poems from Guantánamo_, a collection of 22 poems written in the cages of Guantánamo, was published with great difficulty in August 2007. Six of the seventeen poets—all of whom, like the entire camp population, are Muslim—have been released to their home countries, but most, including Latif, are now in their sixth year of captivity in conditions harsher than “super maximum” security in U.S. prisons. They wrote their poems with little expectation of ever reaching an audience beyond a small circle of their fellow prisoners. My colleagues and I, all volunteer lawyers, first visited Guantánamo in November 2004 after receiving “secret”-level security clearances from the FBI. We knew little about our prospective clients, due to the Bush administration’s disinformation campaign that to this day includes the refrain that the prisoners “were picked up on battlefields fighting against our troops.” (The reality, according to the military’s own documents, is that only 8 percent of the prisoners are accused of being al-Qaeda, and only 5 percent were captured by U.S. forces on the battlefields of Afghanistan.)

What we learned from our clients on that trip was shocking. During the three years in which they had been held in total isolation, they had been subjected repeatedly to stress positions, sleep deprivation, blaring music, and extremes of heat and cold during endless interrogations. Female interrogators smeared simulated menstrual blood onto the chests of some detainees and sexually taunted them, fully aware of the insult they were meting out to devout Muslims. They were denied basic medical care. They were broken down and psychologically tyrannized, kept in extreme isolation, threatened with rendition, interrogated at gunpoint and told that their families would be harmed if they refused to talk. They were also frequently prevented from engaging in their daily prayers—one of the five pillars of Islam—and forced to witness U.S. soldiers intentionally mishandling the holy Koran.

“I’ve lost hope of being released,” Latif told me on one visit. Three days before, he explained, he’d been visited by an “Immediate Reaction Force” team. A half-dozen soldiers in body armor, carrying shields and batons, had forcibly extracted him from his cell. His offense: stepping over a line, painted on the floor of his cell, while his lunch was being passed through the food slot of his door.

Marc Falkoff is an assistant professor at the Northern Illinois University College of Law and attorney for 17 Guantánamo prisoners. Poems reprinted by permission from _Poems from Guantánamo_, published by University of Iowa Press.
“Suddenly the riot police came,” he recounted. “No one in the cellblock knew who for. They closed all the windows except mine. A female soldier came in with a big can of pepper spray. Eventually I figured out they were coming for me. She sprayed me. I couldn’t breathe. I fell down. I put a mattress over my head. I thought I was dying. They opened the door. I was lying on the bed but they were kicking and hitting me with the shields. They put my head in the toilet. They put me on a stretcher and carried me away.”

On my third trip to Guantánamo, Latif told me he had begun a hunger strike more than a month earlier. (The military calls it a “voluntary fast.”) Latif is currently in his sixth month of “fasting.”) Twice a day, the guards immobilize Latif’s head, strap his arms and legs to a special restraint chair, and force-feed him a liquid nutrient by inserting a tube up his nose and into his stomach—a clear violation of international standards. The feeding, Latif says, “is like having a dagger shoved down your throat.”

At first, there was little we could do with any of this information. Anything our clients told us, military officials explained, represented a potential national security threat and therefore could not be revealed to the public until cleared by a Pentagon “Privilege Review Team.” The review team initially used its power to suppress all evidence of abuse and mistreatment. Our notes, returned with a classified stamp, were deemed unsuitable for public release on the grounds that they revealed interrogation techniques that the military had a legitimate interest in keeping secret. Only threats of litigation forced the Pentagon to reconsider its classification decisions.

The Pentagon’s reaction to the publication of Poems from Guantánamo has been predictable. Last June, in an article in the Wall Street Journal, Defense Department spokesman Cdr. J. D. Gordon commented on the collection by saying, “While a few detainees at Guantánamo Bay have made efforts to author what they claim to be poetry, given the nature of their writings they have seemingly not done so for the sake of art. They have attempted to use this medium as merely another tool in their battle of ideas against Western democracies.” Gordon had not, at the time, read the poems.

Perhaps the Pentagon’s anxiety is justified, for the poems offer the world a glimpse of the profound psychic toll that Guantánamo has taken on the prisoners. They give voice to men whom the U.S. government has detained for more than five years without charge, trial, or even the most basic protections of the Geneva Conventions. The prisoners remain entirely cut off from the world; military censors excise all references to current events from the occasional letters allowed from family members, and lawyers may not tell prisoners any personal or general news unless it “directly relates” to their cases. Indeed, dozens of prisoners have attempted suicide by hanging, by hoarding medicine and then overdosing, or by slashing their wrists. The military, in typically Orwellian fashion, has described these suicide attempts as incidents of “manipulative self-injurious behavior.”

Many men at Guantánamo turned to writing poetry as a way to maintain their sanity, to memorialize their suffering and to preserve their humanity through acts of creation. The obstacles the prisoners have faced in composing their poems are profound. In the first year of their detention, they were not allowed regular use of pen and paper. Undeterred, some drafted short poems on Styrofoam cups retrieved from lunch and dinner trays. Lacking writing instruments, they inscribed their words with pebbles or traced out letters with small dabs of toothpaste, then passed the “cup poems” from cell to cell. The cups were inevitably collected with the day’s trash, the verses consigned to the bottom of a rubbish bin.

After about a year, the military granted the prisoners access to regular writing materials, and for the first time poems could be preserved. The first I saw was sent to me by Abdulsalam Ali Abdulrahman Al-Hela, a Yemeni businessman from Sana’a, who had written his verses in Arabic after extended periods in an isolation cell. The poem is a cry against the injustice of arbitrary
detention and at the same time a hymn to the comforts of religious faith. Soon after reading it, I learned of a poem by Latif called “The Shout of Death.” (Both of these poems remain classified.) After querying other lawyers, I realized that Guantánamo was filled with amateur poets.

Military officials at Guantánamo destroyed or confiscated many of the prisoners’ poems before the authors could share them with their lawyers. In addition, the Pentagon refuses to allow most of the existing poems to be made public, asserting that poetry “presents a special risk” to national security due to its “content and format.” The risk appears to be that the prisoners will try to smuggle coded messages out of the prison camp.

Still, the earliest of the poems we submitted for classification review were deemed unclassified, and it was only after the Pentagon learned that we were putting together a book of the poems that the hand of censorship came down. Hundreds of poems therefore remain suppressed by the military and will likely never be seen by the public. In addition, most of the poems that have been cleared are in English translation only, because the Pentagon believes that their original Arabic or Pashto versions represent an enhanced security risk. Because only linguists with secret-level security clearances are allowed to read our clients’ communications (which are kept by court order in a secure facility in the Washington, D.C., area), it was impossible to invite experts to translate the poems for us. The translations included in the collection, therefore, cannot do justice to the subtlety and cadence of the originals.

Despite these and many other hurdles, 22 poems have now been published, and the voices of the prisoners in Guantánamo may now be heard. As the courts move sluggishly toward granting the prisoners fair and open hearings, and as politicians bicker about whether to extend the protections of the Geneva Conventions to the detainees, the prisoners’ own words may now become part of the dialogue. Perhaps their poems will prick the conscience of a nation.

The America I Believe In

AUSA has been lobbying Congress in support of Senator Tom Harkin’s (O–IA) Guantánamo Bay Detention Facility Closure Act of 2007. The bill is an important step toward closing the U.S. facility, ending indefinite detentions and preventing the United States from returning prisoners to countries where they may be tortured. In addition, AUSA believes that every person detained as a terror suspect has the right to trial in federal court, or by court martial if appropriate, instead of by military commissions, which do not meet international fair trial standards.

For the latest actions, film screenings and updates on the work of Amnesty activists, visit www.TearItDown.org.

Is It True?

Osama Abu Kabir

Is it true that the grass grows again after rain?
Is it true that the flowers will rise up in the Spring?
Is it true that birds will migrate home again?
Is it true that the salmon swim back up their stream?

It is true. This is true. These are all miracles. But is it true that one day we’ll leave Guantánamo Bay?
Is it true that one day we’ll go back to our homes?
I said in my dreams, I am dreaming of home.

To be with my children, each one part of me;
To be with my wife and the ones that I love;
To be with my parents, my world’s tenderest hearts.
I dream to be home, to be free from this cage.

But do you hear me, oh Judge, do you hear me at all?
We are innocent, here,
We’ve committed no crime.

Set me free, set us free, if anywhere still Justice and compassion remain in this world!

Humiliated in the Shackles

Sami al Haj

When I heard pigeons cooing in the trees,
Hot tears covered my face.

When the lark chirped, my thoughts composed
A message for my son.

Sami, I am afflicted.
In my despair, I have no one but Allah for comfort.

The oppressors are playing with me,
As they move freely about the world.

They offer me money and land,
And freedom to go where I please.

But their gift is an evil snake,
Carrying hypocrisy in its mouth like venom.

They have monuments to liberty
And freedom of opinion, which is well and good.

But I explained to them that Architecture is not justice.

America, you ride on the backs of orphans,
And terrorize them daily.

Bush, beware.
The world recognizes an arrogant liar.

To Allah I direct my grievance and my tears.
I am homesick and oppressed.

Mohammad, do not forget me.
Support the cause of your father, a God-fearing man.

I was humiliated in the shackles.
How can I now compose verses?
How can I now write?
After the shackles and the nights and the suffering and the tears,
How can I write poetry?

My soul is like a rolling sea, stirred by anguish.
Violent with passion.

I am captive, but the crimes are my captors’. I am overwhelmed with apprehension.

Lord, unite me with my son Mohammad.
Lord, grant success to the righteous.