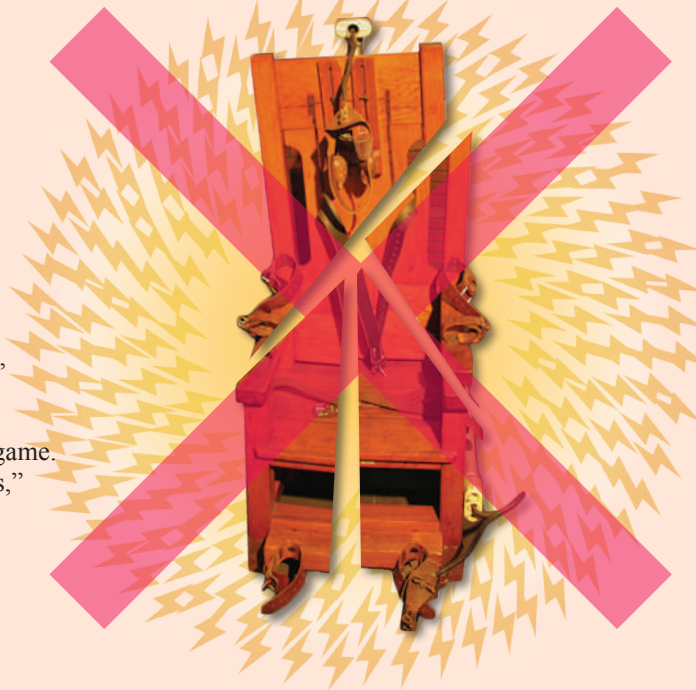


At the Texas Prison Museum

At the Texas Prison Museum,
 I see a fake guard tower
 with a dummy guard in the window.
 I see a replica of a prison cell,
 its bunk beds, chrome toilet,
 little metal desk and seat.
 I see a miniature model
 of the Huntsville Prison
 with its red brick walls,
 chapel with a steeple and cross,
 and adjacent Prison Rodeo
 that entertained fans
 until its condemnation in 1986
 and eventual demolition.
 I see old video of the rodeo
 on an ever-playing loop.
 I see prisoners' drawings,
 hand-tooled leather,
 intricate carvings of wood or soap,
 ingeniously crafted objects
 such as a skull pipe, string banjos,
 liquor stills, shanks, a Monopoly game.
 "If only they had used their talents,"
 says another museum patron,
 "instead of doing what they did."

I see the electric chair (Old Sparky),
 the re-created death chamber
 with its electric generator and lever,
 the actual sponge placed on heads
 of electrocuted prisoners.
 I see the actual syringes used
 for the first lethal injection in 1982.



The connectors of my brain,
 the cells of my body
 absorb these sights,
 weighing them,
 understanding them
 as someone's narrative.
 I do not shed tears,
 gasp with fake drama.
 Who in Texas can say,
 "We didn't know
 what was happening?"
 At the end of the tour,
 I buy several post cards
 with images of the prison,
 Old Sparky, the Rodeo.
 Back home in San Antonio,
 I see for the first time
 that the usual blank space
 for each card contains
 a lengthy printed caption
 in over-sized font.
 I had wanted to write
 to family, friends:
 "The prison is a sad place" or
 "We have to end the death penalty."
 Try as I might, I cannot write
 between the lines or get
 a word in edgewise.

—Rachel Jennings

A Child Imagines Her Execution

In old movies, guards
 drag the handcuffed man
 to the wooden chair
 that has leather straps,
 metal buckles,
 and wire coils.

The chair is named Old Sparky
 like the teacher's paddle
 is named The Sizzler.
 She smirks and laughs.

They strap the prisoner
 into the chair.

"May God have mercy on your
 soul,"
 the man in the suit and tie says.

In pretend games,
 I grunt and struggle
 as the guards drag me,
 but I never die.
 If they kill me,
 what is the point
 of the story?
 The game ends.

I twist and grimace,
 but I escape.

I slip free of the leather straps
 or break a buckle. Sometimes
 the lever does not work.
 A guard orders me back
 to my cell, where I climb
 out a window with rusty bars.

In the next episode,
 every gunman in the firing
 squad
 misses his mark. One gun
 is unloaded. I walk free.

Is it true a man who
 has been shot or hanged
 will mess his pants?
 That would be awful.
 As I stand on the gallows,
 the rotten rope breaks
 or the noose loosens,
 letting me wriggle free.

Walking the gang plank
 at sword point, I step
 into the sea, hands bound,
 but swim to safety
 where a lantern shines.

Gallows, garrote, guillotine,
 gas, gunfire, gurney,
 grill chair, gang plank.
 I survive them all.
 What is the point
 of dying?

The game goes on.
 Naughty little cheat.
 I sulk. I pout.
 I refuse being tagged
 Dead Man Out.

—Rachel Jennings

TEXAS COALITION TO ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY


TCADP 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE:

TRANSFORMING JUSTICE IN TEXAS


A virtual event hosted on Zoom

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The conference will feature a panel discussion with representatives of states that have abolished the death penalty in recent years. Our confirmed panelists are:



Rev. Dr. LaKeisha Cook



Representative Robert Renny Cushing



Denise Maes

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