

## Letters to a President

### **Commended Entry Y12 – student from St Paul’s Girl’s School**

Dear Mr President,

When I was a child I was scared of guilt - the pits in my stomach, the bitten lips, the frenetic worry. The demon lurking in the hinterland between sleep and waking. ‘How guilt refines the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime.’

Guilt, however, is a necessary evil. Without a conscience, nothing separates us from being mere beasts. Society’s communal conscience manifests in our systems of justice - the courts of law and penal policy. Scarier than childhood demons are the realities I’ve come to know as a young adult; one of them being the apparent insignificance of guilt in America’s courts.

There are a million wrongs every day, a problem of evil so swollen in magnitude that much of American society has turned away from religion. But I can’t think of a wrong more grievous than the perversion of justice with the name ‘cash bail’. Cash bail is a house of cards - the same ones people have stacked against them. Structural injustice, deprivation, and unadulterated bigotry. Prison concrete deafens the people’s questions. Can it deafen our adherence to justice too? On any given day, 3.3 million people are in there without trial - fed lies about being presumed innocent and then punished for their poverty.

America promises many things. I don’t mean the American Dream, I’m not so naïve. But a devotion to the constitution, to ‘innocent until proven guilty’, the tenets of justice so instinctive to us we can hardly believe they are learned: I still believe in these promises. I know you do too. And still, whole communities are being ravaged by bigoted police officers, whole lives destroyed by sexual assault and beatings in the first nights of detention. 50% of prison suicides occur in that first week.

Have you ever noticed the build in a child’s weeping? The first and terrible bite of fear, the sob lodged in the throat, and then the wail that curls upwards, taking a life of its own, culling every ounce of distress from the air around it until the sound could pare the bark from trees.

Daddy’s not coming back.

Who knew the word ‘why’ was stacked with so much pain?

Cash bail is an irreducible wrong, in its consequences and in the nature of the act itself. To put a price on freedom is to deface the constitution. To lock people up without genuine grounds for

arrest is to mutilate their faith in the government. To judge the rich and poor separately is to tarnish the American value system.

Might I remind you that without justice, we have nothing.

Yours sincerely,