

JAMIE KARL

## Executions fight for innocent

Last night has come and gone. A new morning has arrived. But some nights never end. For some, the morning never comes.

It was a June night in Nebraska. Jane McManus, a beautiful 26-year-old photography student, was getting back late to the Omaha house she rented with her sister.

Jane made the walk from her car to the house. Along with her classes, Jane was a waitress, and she had been waiting tables all of that evening. After she entered the house, Harold Lamont Otey neared the young woman.

Otey, who, at the time, worked as a horse walker at the Ak-Sar-Ben Racetrack, had broken into Miss McManus' home while she was at work. The acts Otey committed that night in the house at 67th and Pacific streets are beyond heinous, beyond human.

According to Otey's description, once he had physical control of McManus, he raped her. Then he stabbed her 15 times. Otey confessed that McManus, in pain and laying in her own blood, pleaded with him to kill her. Otey then went elsewhere in the house, leaving McManus to suffer.

Otey soon returned to the dying woman — nude, bloody and curled in a fetal position on the floor. He stood over McManus, raised his hand, and clutching a hammer, repeatedly beat her. Finally, Otey took the belt which he had been wearing, wrapped it around McManus' neck and strangled her. Jane McManus' night of terror was over.

Since June 21, 1978, Harold Otey had been awaiting execution in Nebraska's electric chair. His original execution date was set for September 25, 1978.

In the 16 years Otey was on death row, filing appeal after appeal, he had written and published three books of poetry; he had taken college courses



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in philosophy, logic and other subjects; he had come to embrace the Muslim religion. According to his supporters on the outside, Harold Otey was 100-percent rehabilitated.

Nonetheless, in the week where this man called "Walkin' Wili" would take his last steps on the way to the electric chair, roles were reversed. This time, it was Otey and his supporters who were doing the pleading.

Many of my media colleagues sympathized with Otey. The Lincoln Star, in the weeks before the execution, ran front page headlines like "Executions Cost Millions," and "Race Determines Who's On Death Row," reducing the town's morning paper into little more than propaganda.

I've heard the execution of Wili Otey compared to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

On Sunday, at a rally in the Nebraska Union, a Florida professor proclaimed Nebraska needed more public support to justify the execution. That same day, a former Parole Board member said, "Governor Nelson literally holds Harold Otey's life in his hands."

To say Governor Nelson was Otey's passport to life or death is shoddy, and gives hint of emotional instability. Nelson, pressed by Attorney General Don Stenberg, carried out the will of the people. Despite ramblings of some self-proclaimed expert from Florida, an

Omaha World-Herald poll taken last year showed 81 percent of Nebraskans favored the death penalty.

I was one of the 81 percent who believed Otey should have a seat in the chair of justice. Yet, advocating the death of any man, even a killer such as Otey or John Joubert, is not pleasant.

But there is a morality and necessity of the death penalty. Some crimes are so atrocious that only the death penalty is fit punishment and retribution.

If we outlaw the death penalty, we send a message of disrespect for innocent life — a message of moral confusion. Without the death penalty, we tell the murderer that no matter what he may do to innocent people, his most treasured possession — his life — is secure.

As Americans, we are always declaring some new war against crime, but the fatalities of these wars — thousands every year — are on one side: the side of the innocent. That is not a war; that is a slaughter. The death penalty is a chance at a fair fight.

So while the execution of Harold Otey does not bring back Jane McManus, it does bring an end to the night of hell the McManus family has endured for the last 17 years, along with the chance to get on with life.

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RAINBOW ROWELL

## Making sense out of Thursday

There was something about today, Thursday. It was one of those days, when everything shines and everything is good.

Something about campus, about walking and talking and feeling and just about me was really, really good.

I felt exhilarated, like my blood was carbonated.

Maybe it was the music. A South American band was giving a free concert by Broyhill fountain. You could hear the singing voices and the pan flutes as far as Love Library. And the area between the Nebraska Union and the new green space was filled with students and staff and passersby.

And I felt good. Lucky. Alive.

Most days I walk around like everyone else, just living, being, surviving. Too busy getting by to think about the hows and whys and oh yeses of my existence.

But sometimes a window opens — I don't know where, I wish I knew why — and life floods in. The sun is brighter. I feel taller, deeper and bigger.

And the trees were so green, the colors were so bright, my heart hurt. My heart hurt.

And everything was so good.

It wasn't a 'What a great day' good. It wasn't a 'How are you?' 'Fine' good. It wasn't a Hallmark card or a 'Thank heaven I remembered to have a V-8' good.

Sometimes I think God lets us see, lets us feel, just for a moment or an hour — or if we're lucky or madly in love, maybe a few timeless days — our full potential.

Here you are, and here's what you can be, and here, here, here is how huge you are. You're deep. You're full. You brim.

Here is how good and here is how bad. How much you can love and hurt. And here is all the ecstasy and misery and immensity of life.

And you're big enough to hold it inside, but just barely. You feel it pressing in your chest and stinging



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your eyes. But you're stronger than you ever imagined.

It isn't just a good feeling. You're as aware of the bad as you are the good. And it's all as keen. As sharp.

Because sometimes it seems we're capable of as much horror as we are beauty.

I'm in the newsroom now, waiting for the state to execute Harold Lamont Otey. It's a big news day. A big news week.

The Daily Nebraskan and every other branch of the media have been preparing all week. I have heard the story over and over again.

Jane McManus' tragic death. Her stolen life. Her bloody pillow. Otey's sickening confession. Pictures of the chair, the straps, wires.

And now we're here trying to do our jobs, to inform the public, namely the campus. To catch every angle, however gruesome.

What Otey did was sick. What the state is doing is sick. McManus' death was inhumane and brutal. Otey's death was planned and sanctioned. Both deaths seem so wrong.

What I can't reconcile is that tonight is still today. How can I justify that Jane McManus may have been killed on a day like today? On a day when life felt so good and the future seemed so amazing.

How can the wonderful come with the horrible. Is it all random? Wrong place, wrong time. For nothing, no reason.

No. It can't be. I won't believe it.

I need there to be more. I need to believe that sometime someone will make sense out of this night, and that someday someone will explain to me why Jane McManus died the way she did.

Because when I feel like I did today, so rich and full, I can't believe we're random. I can't believe that we're just shooting through life like anthropomorphic pinballs, banging and hurting and helping each other for no rhyme or reason.

I think that's why our state is killing Harold Otey. We can't accept what happened to Jane McManus. No matter how we twist and try and cry about it, it doesn't make sense.

But we can't accept defeat. So we try to solve it like a human algebra problem. Life for life. Now we're even.

If Harold Otey killed Jane McManus, nothing we could do could ever punish him enough. And nothing we could do could ever make it right.

Now it's dark and cooler and the air is sharp and potent. Something's coming and you can feel it, breathe it in. Like Halloween.

I feel heavy. And hard. And fiercely alive.

Rowell is a senior news-editorial, advertising and English major and a Daily Nebraskan associate news editor.

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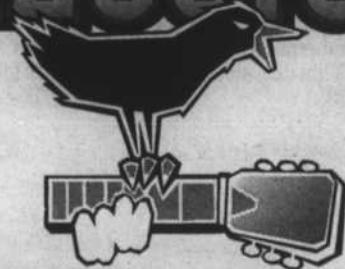
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