**One of Those Happy-Sad Ones**

Alexa Brockamp Hoggatt

The first time I see the children in their prison jumpsuits,

they are so young.

The jumpsuits are deep blue, and at Christmas the kids

who wear them draw penguins on crepe paper to hang on their doors.

They call their pod “Christmas Land” and draw a paper

tree to tape to the wall and pretend it’s a home.

Metal doors lock behind me when I walk into night air.

I close the door to my car and cry.

I return, books in hand, and this face is 14

and staring from a cell door, yelling through the window,

Can I get him a book?

This one likes Percy Jackson, and this one Malcolm X.

They ask me,

“Can you get me love stories,

mysteries,

one of those happy-sad ones?"

They run back to their cells and return holding

notebooks and crinkled papers.

They read their poems out loud with hungry voices.

They say,

“That book was sick, bro.”

They say,

“Can you get us more of those books

that are told from two sides?”

They say, “Are there any books about

kids like me?”

They say, “I don't want to read another book

about a black kid who gets shot.”

After the meeting, a kid hides his cookies in the pocket

of his blue jumpsuit and says he didn't get any.

He says he swears,

he says he's hungry,

"Come on, have you seen what they feed us?"

He says, no one ever told him he matters

before.

He's holding a red and green wrapped rectangle.

He says,

“I've never had my own Christmas gift before.”

Inside cold concrete walls there are children

who don't need somber faces,

there are children who need

someone to know that

they are children;

so I tell them,

“You are not what you did.”

I tell them,

“You could be what you do after this.”

I tell them,

“You will do so many other things, and that’s what you will be.”

I ask them,

“What did you think of the book?”

and they talk for hours.

The day he leaves, the other kids write nice things about him

on pieces of paper and

take turns reading them out loud.

They arrived with wary faces but now they say,

"Can we play heads up 7 up?" But they call it "heads up homie,"

and there are ten teenagers in this detention center classroom

giggling in blue jumpsuits with their heads on the table.

Their faces are soft and when they read their notes, he hides his eyes,

listening

then

leaves the room.

Says,

He's never had friends who speak to him like this.

The day of his sentencing I tell my boss I want to go up the hill

to the courthouse to see a kid get sent to prison because

no child should be alone when their life is handed to guards,

and it feels like a confessional because

what kind of person would want to do that?

I say,

“He's such a kind kid,” and

she says, “Okay.”

So I leave early that day and don't

tell anyone else why because

people make the strangest faces when they're asked to see

the headlines from the newspapers as human children.

He doesn't look at us when he gets his sentence.

I tell myself that he knows.

That he saw us through the glass and

even if he doesn't know it, he isn't alone.

His grandma and his sister and us watch him

get 12 years and then escorted out.

Two years later we get a letter from inside

the walls of the prison he lives in now.

He says he's sorry it took him so long to write, and

there is not a day he doesn't reminisce

about the time he spent talking about books and eating cookies

in a small circle with us.

I send him back “Invictus.”

I want him to know that, like Hensley,

he has an unconquerable soul.

I want him to know that

He is not what he did.

I want to give him a gentler world.

I want to slip it in between the pages of the letter

so it will fall out and open up on the floor and

he can step into the new place I’ve created

where he never had to protect himself from anything.