

*Robert Dana*

CLOSER

In the rose garden  
of the old Idaho  
State Penitentiary  
in Boise, the sun's  
ferocious; the air  
itself, thirsty;  
the gravel paths  
leached to desert.  
Between 1901 and '27,  
six men were hanged  
on this square  
of well watered  
grass, their faces  
turned black,  
eyes bulging—  
flanked by these  
perfect Jackson-  
Perkins blooms  
and a view of the  
merciless foothills.  
If I tell you  
that, as I bent  
to read the roses'  
names, I found  
at the yellow center  
of one—I forget—  
—was it Blue Girl,  
or White Wings,  
or Paradise?—  
a small spider,  
you might think  
that's poetry.

But everything  
here's savage:  
the steel cells,  
six by eight,  
where four men  
shared a stinking  
bucket. Solitary.  
"Siberia." Three  
by seven concrete  
closets—one hole  
for excrement;  
and overhead,  
a smaller one  
for light. Here,  
men suffocated  
or froze or went  
mad counting  
their 27,000 hours.  
Or scribbling, "We  
are all a lost race."  
In Maximum Security,  
I can't breathe.  
On second floor,  
a grey, steel box,  
where a gallows,  
used only once  
to execute a black  
man, occupies  
all of silence.  
A trap door  
in the steel floor,  
its spring operated  
by dripping water,  
the self-guiding  
tourist folder  
tells us. Come  
closer. Closer.  
Can you hear it?