Maryland, to teach English to mostly poor, mostly nonwhite tenth-graders. “It’s one of the most important things that’s ever happened to me,” he says.

When he came to Cambridge, Smith returned to teaching, this time at a state prison in Massachusetts, where he traveled every other week to discuss great literature with men serving life sentences. “I wanted to find something that would keep me grounded while I was in grad school,” he says, “something that would remind me why I came.” Before long, it became the reason why.

Initially planning to study how young people cultivate a civic and social identity, Smith kept thinking instead about education and incarceration. The prisoners had formed a longstanding and deeply rooted literary community, reading and writing together for years. Smith says: “It was the teachers who cycled in and out.” The men were thoughtful and brilliant in a way he was not prepared for. Smith began to wonder whether recidivism and after-release employment were really the best metric for assessing the overall value of prisoner education. For the almost 200,000 people serving life sentences in the United States, that measure makes no sense. “It’s almost a human-rights question,” Smith says: “Just because society will never utilize these men’s vocational skills one day out in the world, does that mean we shouldn’t be investing in them as people?” He continues, “Part of what literature does, or history, or any education that’s not geared toward specific vocational training, is that it makes you a fuller person, a more empathic person, more compassionate; you’re more likely to recognize common threads of humanity in all of us. And I think that’s the case whether you’re teaching high-schoolers or men who are serving life sentences in prison.”

In “How Malcolm Learned to Read,” Smith puts it this way: “Malcolm, could you ever have imagined / what this diction— / you ever have imagined / what this diction— / you ever have imagined / what this diction— / you ever have imagined / what this diction—

Legal Affairs I. A new president and Congress may engage with matters penal and otherwise. 23/7, by Keramet Reiter ’03 (Yale, $32.50), an in-depth examination of the rise of solitary confinement by a young scholar at the University of California, Irvine, offers evidence for coming debates over sentencing and imprisonment. In Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison (The New Press, $26.95), Ellen Condilffe Lagemann, former dean of Harvard Graduate School of Education, presents examples of, and makes the broader argument for, educating the incarcerated.

Legal Affairs II. Stand Your Ground, by Caroline E. Light, lecturer on studies of women, gender, and sexuality (Beacon Press, $25.95). The author, a southern Virginian from a skeet-shooting family, examines the origins and risks of a “do-it-yourself security citizenship,” one of the gun-related issues likely to be legislated and litigated soon. In Praise of Litigation, by Alexandra Lahav, J.D. ’98, of the University of Connecticut School of Law (Oxford, $29.95), vigorously restates the case for lawsuits as “critical to American democracy” on matters large and small. The ultimate litigation, of course, ends up in the Supreme Court; contributing editor Lincoln Caplan ’72, J.D. ’76 (see also page 69), succinctly reports in American Justice 2016 (University of Pennsylvania, $24.95) on what he subtitles “The Political Supreme Court”—not the familiar process of confirmation proceedings, but the operation of the institution as currently constituted.
Betty Shamieh ‘96, RI ‘06, isn’t in the house tonight, but she is on stage. The small Off Broadway theater staging Fit for a Queen, her latest play, is sparsely lit. The glitz of the set’s palace—flashing lights, booming music, scantily draped slaves bearing platters of fruit and flowers—has receded. Queen Hatshepsut, till now languid on her throne, jumps up, her cool cracking: “You know I hate it when you make it sound like you don’t love me.”

The figure at whom Hatshepsut lashes out is Senenmut, her favorite slave, who is prostrate on the floor. In the language of the play, “favorite” is code for consort-by-coercion, but with that role comes an expectation that the coercion remain unspoken. Senenmut becomes “sweet Senenmut”; Hatshepsut is “Happy,” and open to affectionate ribbing. But now, Senenmut invokes her servility, cutting Happy to the bone. If she can goad the queen into offing her dying husband, the pharaoh, and claiming the throne, then...