

## **Imagining the Radical Beauty of Freedom**

*No change for the good ever happens without it being imagined first, even if that change seems hopeless or impossible in the present.*

—*Martín Espada*

Artists incarcerated in prisons have frequently told me that making art was like encountering an unlocked door—art provided a momentary way out from the confines of state control. During long days, where tedious rules organize life and boredom is punishing, artists were able to scratch out a line or mix a color that could breathe a little air into the small cells that lock up so many people across this nation at shameful rates. Making art doesn't necessarily change the material conditions of prison, but it can change psychic ones. Art gives the artist another language, another tool to fight for freedom. For the first time in fifteen years of working with artists in Illinois prisons, I have started to hear a different story, one of despair and fatigue. With COVID-19 raging in congregate living spaces, of which prisons are prime hot spots, artists, poets, and, indeed, all people locked behind fences and walls are on the edge. In many prisons, people have been on constant lockdown for more than six months, stuck in a six-by-eight-foot cell with another person for twenty-three to twenty-four hours a day. Those filing petitions for clemency and writing to state governors aim for an urgent priority—the hope of escaping premature death. The stress of living in a box can only ever exceed its tight boundaries.

As COVID-19 exposes the genocidal mix of permanent confinement coupled with lack of decent healthcare, people (some of them formerly incarcerated) who marched in the streets over the last year are rightfully enraged by the deaths of so many Black and Brown people at the hands of police. This moment has been primed for decades by activists, artists, poets, educators, attorneys, currently and formerly incarcerated people, and so many others, who intimately know the crisis of incarceration and have centered an abolitionist vision—a practice of freedom. As the activist, curator, and critic Mariame Kaba tells us:

All of the most important and impactful social transformations happened because people fought and struggled for things they had never seen. Prison industrial complex abolition demands imaginative work and is rooted in building another world.

The writing and art in this issue meets that demand by looking back at the historical frameworks that make prisons possible, and dreaming forward to imagine a world in which we all thrive.

When Joshua Bennett, Tara Betts, and I started on this issue in 2017, both a global health pandemic and ideas of abolition were not yet featured prominently in the news or discussed at dinner tables. While artists, poets, musicians, and other cultural workers have, for decades, been educating us to witness and organize against the expansive net of the carceral system, we were cautioned that our ideas of abolition might be too political for *Poetry* and its readers. Questions about the *risk* of publishing the poetry of people locked up, no matter their crime, weighed down the conversations. We insisted that the poetry and art by people who are convicted of a crime, but are also criminalized for being poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, women, survivors of abuse and sexual violence, survivors of gun violence, under educated and/or from America's most divested neighborhoods, is a necessary power of culture that we need. Now, US cultural institutions are being called on (once again) to rethink and evaluate their role in supporting (*or not*) the poetry that calls out white supremacist violence, the song that sings a melody of radical restructuring and the images that give shape to a more beautiful future. In that work is an emphatic critique of policies that shape the lives of poor people and communities of color in the US; testimony to loss of family and friends to state violence; resistance to degrading conditions of prisons and a radical insistence for human dignity. In that work the reverberations of change are felt in the body and on the streets. Of the thousands of poems submitted to this issue of *Poetry*, common words written over and over again tell the realities of a legal system that maintains racial and class segregation. *Pain, longing, new slaves, New Jim Crow, midnight hours, brother, sister, mother, and enough* are words that repeated across the pages. And yet because they were written we can imagine that they also echo that change, saying *we are still here, we are alive, we are surviving*.

The visual work in this issue reflects and expands those ideas with deft craft and content. The images here give shape and texture to the poetry throughout this issue. In the way that poetry, Audre Lorde says, gives “name to the nameless so it can be thought,” the art makes visible people and sentiments who were meant to be disappeared. Each featured artist has intimate relationships with what Beth Richie terms the “prison nation” (meaning both the existence of carceral spaces such as detention centers, prisons, secured half-way houses, and the ideological frameworks that produce criminalization, segregation, and confinement), they are either educators in prison classrooms, family or friends of people locked up, or artists who are themselves incarcerated.

One artist and poet, Margaret Burroughs (1915–2010), spent decades visiting people and teaching in Pontiac and Stateville prisons in Illinois. She told people in prison to treat their cells as their studios. When William Jones, then incarcerated on death row in Illinois, met her, he remembered that she said,

My son, do you know you are a descendant of great Kings; you are someone and I love you. Now get to your work station and write me a poem. I will be back the third Sunday of next month and you have to have something for me.

Her time with people—crossing the physical boundaries of walls and resisting the ideological narratives of throw-away populations—left a deep mark on the lives of people in those two prisons. In his own way, artist Devon Daniels, who is currently incarcerated at Stateville prison, pays homage to Burroughs through an immaculate pencil drawing. Self-taught while incarcerated, Daniels often creates portraits of his creative heroes, like Burroughs and artist Kerry James Marshall, people he looks to for inspiration from inside a prison cell. The economy of his pencil is on full display, as Daniels ekes out a fierce beauty and clarity with one of the simple tools allowed to artists inside. Without artists and poets like Burroughs, who spend their time negotiating art supplies with prison staff or convincing guards that artistic marks are not gang symbols, artists in prison would surely still make art. But, as in all creative practices, having a community to challenge and deepen aesthetic practices makes the work that much more visible and urgent.

Everyday life in prison is captured in the work of Lawrence Dantzler-Bey in *Arrested Development*. A chess game and stack of books—a Bible, a novel, and an investing book—are some things that take up time in a space where no Internet and few programs exist. While the scene might express an everyday, anywhere-ness to it, the orange striped pants, chained picnic table, and barbed wire in the distance remind us that prison *really does arrest*—perpetual punishment tightly organizes time and controls space. Manuel Antonio Gonzalez III's and Flynnard (Fly-1) Miller's depictions of prison cells reconfirm this fact. Both artists render their cells as skewed and distorted. How can the artist even observe a space that is too up close to see, a place designed to distort and distress the perceptive senses? One answer is emblazoned on the wall in Miller's work: "Buried."

A similar kind of up-closeness is found in the work of Frank Perfetti's *Machine* series. With some thirty black and white abstractions developed over sixteen years, the artist creates meticulously drawn, nonsensical machines using templates and a T-square alongside freehand drawing. The intricate shapes and lines suggest the machine has a purpose, but like the criminal legal system, small details create a dense, complex puzzle that few find their way out of without expensive legal assistance.

The trappings of violence and incarceration ripple through other images in this section. Amber Wilson's *The Cheater* centers a large eye hung over a series of cartoon-like land- and cityscapes. This all-seeing eye traps: barbed lashes enclose a detailed iris where abstracted figures float around a maze. The maze surrounds a spinning table saw blade that frames a black pupil. Inside the pupil, a figure is now in small parts: a ghostly head, arm and hand,

brain and heart. Cryptic details throughout Wilson's work are delivered with soft pastels, suggesting lightness to what is most certainly a heavy weight. A similar color scheme is deployed in Carole Alden's *Hollow where my soul lives*. Alden was a sculpture/installation artist before being incarcerated for defending herself from an abusive partner. While in prison, her work as an artist continued, albeit with different materials and little space. In this work, the clean flesh of an arm is pulled back to reveal cold rods, as a cold-blooded animal, the snake, weaves through the rods, fingers, and wrist of the limb. Here the prison is the body; the poison of entrapment is made corporal.

Other works in this issue picture life outside of prison, a reminder of the radical beauty of freedom. In SH Hendley's *Father's Responsibility*, we are dropped into a household scene. A couple embraces as a child holds one shoe up to her parents. The father points up, eyes closed as if in a state of prayer, perhaps just thankful to be with those who care about him. In Christopher M. Campos's work, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, we are one step removed as we encounter a scene through a torn photograph. Two young men look back at us: they are on the go, perhaps on a road trip, with an itinerary posted nearby. Their mobility is a quintessential metaphor for American freedom, even if it is drawn from the confines of a cell.

By contrast, figures are firmly rooted in *Three Feet High and Rising* by Flying Spaghetti. Their movement is in the twists and turns of braiding hair, an art form and connection of care that is passed down intergenerationally. These women look directly at us. Their gaze locks with ours in a kind of mutuality, similar to that of *LaTrice* by Armand. Latrice wears the ribbon for cancer survivors. In the script above her head, the artist reminds her that a greater power will hold her together. The hope that someone/something will hold her in a time of need is palpable because the artist, locked away in America's prisons, cannot.

A series of other images are featured in this issue. For C.A. McAllister, poetry and image work together in *Meanwhile, Under Colorado...* The incommensurability of two selves that the artist experiences, one free and one unfree, hangs in the full moon and pitch-black sky. Damon Locks uses pen and ink panels to narrate a poetic story, asking us to both listen and look more carefully. In one scene, handcuffs circle the words "too persistent to ignore" and "disbelief is unbelievable," suggesting the scale and repetition of the carceral system, one that takes the lives of so many young Black and Brown people to a grave or a cell. The work shows embraced figures with a question, "what should be happening in this world," ending with a final, emphatic "Not this!" Sable Elyse Smith's *Coloring Book Series* vividly marks up a coloring book designed to introduce children to the court system. Smith's markings offer sarcasm, exposing the fiction that such a system could deliver anything close to fair and equal justice. The marks conjure a vibrant anger held by the many mothers, brothers, and lovers, who "do time" with their loved ones in prison—as families of incarcerated people are

also exposed to poor treatment in prison visiting rooms, exploited by steep fees for phone calls, or are shamed for having a family member inside. One page features a letter “to the white lady in Santa Fe” where Smith rightfully deploys that vibrant anger in a direct “fuck you” implicating white women as both central to and the alibi for the criminalization of Black people. This work materializes the affective ways in which the legacy of slavery lingers in the policies that sweep up one in one hundred US residents and citizens into the carceral net.

The richness of this work confronts the operations of criminalization that create the specter of an always derelict, already disposable population of people. Instead, what we see in these pages and read throughout the poetry is the full-range humanness, articulated in images of care, sorrow, anger, critique, everyday life, and joy that resist the normalization of people in prison as a homogenous group, only ever capable of crime. The life that courses throughout this work says, again and again, we are still here. And, dear reader, so are we. Now is the time to lock eyes and arms and begin the practice of freedom.