



Proceedings of the 2023
Rebellious Lawyering Conference
Notes on Law & Liberation

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POEMS

Selected Poems by Incarcerated Youth of the Free Minds Book Club

The Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop is a Washington, D.C.-based creative writing organization for incarcerated youth. These selected poems from Free Minds members are followed by commentary from Emma Perez '23, Kailyn Gaines '23, and Liz Jacob '23.

I Was / I Am / I Will Be
By Dazmine

I was lost in the world
Didn't know where to go or what to do
I am finding my way
And figuring myself out as the days go by
I will be there
Where ever I'm supposed to be

From *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us): Voices on Youth Incarceration*

Resilient

By Antoine

Resilient is a strong word like *education*
A young man from Southeast
That's resilient in the making
Don't judge me on my past or my future situation
Judge me on my character
And not the hard times that I'm facing
I'm strong
I'm wise
I'm independent
I'm smart
My future is bright
My past looks dark
I read
I write
Go to class and succeed
My body is incarcerated
But my mind is totally freed!

I Forgive Me

By Mark

Can't keep thinking of my past
I need to forgive myself
I need to move forward
I'm giving up the darkness
I want the sun
So finally...
I forgive me

From *They Called Me 299-359: Poetry by the Incarcerated Youth of Free Minds*

Amor y Pasión Por Luís Soy enamorado del amor Por eso es que en mis poemas amor es el tema principal Escribir del amor es mi pasión Creo en el amor y en que estoy enamorado Escribiendo es como demuestro mi amor Y aunque el amor es como una palabra que para el mundo no existe Porque la gente frecuente solo sufre desilusiones Incluso hay gente que prefiere que no menciones lo que es amor Soy un amante del amor y trato de averiguar lo que en verdad es amar Estudio las diferentes formas de amor Y sé que no en todos se puede confiar Todavía, nunca pretendo no enamorarme Vivo enamorado De los recuerdos que en mi mente están presentes No hay edades para dejar o comenzar a enamorarse Un gran deseo que tengo es que la gente No deje de creer en el amor Y que se olviden del rencor Yo alimento bastante a mi corazón con mucho amor Amor es la palabra que en mi mente Sustituye dolor y rencor Y en el nombre del amor Siempre escribiré	Love and Passion By Luís I am in love with love That's why in my poems, love is the principal theme To write about love is my passion I believe in love and I am in love Writing is how I show my love And although love is a word that doesn't exist in the world Because people often suffer only disappointments There are even those who prefer that you don't mention what love is I am a lover of love and I try to find out what it really means to love I study the different forms of love And I know that you can't trust all of them Still, I never pretend not to fall in love I live in love With those memories that are present in my mind There aren't ages to stop or start falling in love I have a great desire that people Do not stop believing in love And that they forget resentment I feed my heart with love Love is the word that in my mind Replaces pain and anger And in the name of love I will always write
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Wrong Sight of a Young Black Man
By Juan

If you could really see me
You would not be afraid of me
If you would just open your eyes and see
You would not misjudge me
Yeah, I'm young, black, brave and bold
But that still don't give you the right
To misjudge my soul
I think that when you see me, you are scared
Scared that I'll be something great or powerful
I can smell your fear
But don't be afraid of me
Encourage me
Encourage me to be a better person
If you will really see me
You will see the hunger
I want to be better for me and my family
All that you see is what this environment gave me
But one day you'll see the best man
That I am striving hard to be

College
By PJ

Most young poets talk about the ghetto
But I'll talk about college
That's where I wanna be to obtain some knowledge
I wanna be out from behind bars
In a college class getting ready for the future
And learning from the past
People think prison makes you change your ways
But in reality it only makes you worse
'Cause there are inmates all around you with a criminal thirst
We wanna steal, rob and kill
Because we think there's nothing to look forward to
In college I can study black history
But behind bars my people are a mystery
I am locked up for a robbery
My father died in one
I don't know what made
My dumb ass pick up a gun
Now when I get released
I wanna go to college
Because there's no point in living
If we don't have knowledge!

The Best Dream**By Andrew**

The C.O.* came to my cell and said, "Pack your bags!" I was in shock. I was asking myself, how was I going to get home? The C.O. took me down to the front gate. I looked and I saw my mother and the rest of my family. I was dressed in an orange jumper. I ran through the gates and gave my mother a big fat hug and kissed her. I mean, I sat right there and hugged my mother for about five or six minutes! In the car my family started asking about how it was behind the wall, but I didn't want to talk about it.

I was hungry, but it was like they already knew. My mother said, "We are going to the all-you-can-eat buffet in Virginia." I was glad and blessed because I hadn't eaten food from the streets in a long time. When we arrived at the buffet, man, I ate good! I ate like I hadn't eaten in about two or three months. After coming back from the buffet we went to our new home. It was out in Maryland. Man! The house was big and pretty. We went in and it was laid out. I had my own room. Everything I needed was already there. I lay on my big soft bed and started to go to sleep. I hadn't slept in a bed in a long time. I closed my eyes and...boom! The dream was over.

My cell door opened. It was time for breakfast. I thought to myself, what a great dream I just had. I promised myself that day is going to come, and I am going to do everything I can never to come back to a place like this.

Becoming Clean**By Tune**

Every night I dream
Dream of leaving the past and becoming clean
I despise the days of misfortune
Every night I dream
I dream of a different upbringing
But harsh reality sets in
And with my life I continue to bet
To lose instead of win...
Every night I dream
Of becoming
A legal citizen
A loyal friend
A good son
To the father that never did wrong
Every night I dream
That I stopped sinning
That I became a brother
That rejoices in being a father
But my steps still seem to be errors
My steps that are on thin feathers
Feathers snap and now my steps are disasters
Every night I dream
Hoping one day I will feel free

* Correctional Officer

In Memory
By Chris

On June 10, 2007
My life was over
That was the day
My mother died
And that whole day
I was broken-hearted
My family told me
That it was God's work
But at the time
I thought it was my fault
Because I got locked up
But everything will be all right
Because the last thing I told her
Was I love you

My Free Mind
By William

My mind is now freed
On this pad I let my thoughts bleed
I don't have a one-track mind
I think of everything
My brain is racin' at lightning speed
I cried tears cuz I once was in need
I'm still physically locked up
But now my mind is freed
So at 10:45 when the door shuts
I pack my bags, and my mind takes me overseas
Then I'm somewhere on an island
Under them palm trees
I got a gift that we all need
A pencil, lined paper and eraser
So free ya' mind
You'll be surprised where it take ya'
I'm in my cell
But my mind 'bout to take me on a trip
I guess I'll see you later
When I'm back on the rip

Commentary by Emma Perez '23, Kailyn Gaines '23, and Liz Jacob '23

On any day, approximately 25,000 children are incarcerated in the United States.¹ As if this number were not heart-wrenching enough, in 2019, kids were incarcerated more than 240,000 times.² Youth incarceration is part of the explicitly racist machinations of the criminal system; Black children are more than four times as likely to be detained as their white peers.³ Forty-one percent of youth in confinement are Black, despite the fact that they make up 15% of the youth population across the United States.⁴ In 2015, girls accounted for 15% of the incarcerated youth population, finding themselves in detention for less serious offenses, known as status offenses, more often than boys.⁵ But, boys make up the majority of incarcerated youth because police and officials in the juvenile system “misjudge [their] soul[s],” as Juan puts it. LGBTQ+ kids make up 20% of all children in detention centers and 39.4% of girls in detention centers. LGBTQ+ youth of color are especially vulnerable to incarceration; 85% of incarcerated LGBTQ+ kids are youth of color.⁶

Despite these dismaying statistics, many youth in prison, including those whose work is included in this piece, tap into deep wells of resilience grounded in their life experiences before being incarcerated and experiencing the trauma of being locked up. For many, the pen helps them make sense of their place in a world that devalues the voices of children, especially children of color. William and Antoine reveal how writing has helped liberate them emotionally as they put pen to paper and let the words flow, provoking us to think of freedom not as something that is given, as we typically conceive it, but as something that you can feel stirring deep within you. William evocatively puts words to this premise: “I’m still physically locked up / But now my mind is freed / So at 10:45 when the door shuts / I pack my bags, and my mind takes me overseas / Then I’m somewhere on an island / Under them palm trees / I got a gift that we all need / A pencil, lined paper and eraser.”

Imbued in many of these poems is an ethic of love. Luis’ work leads with this: “Yo alimento bastante a mi corazón con mucho amor / Amor es la palabra que en mi mente / Sustituye dolor y rencor / Y en el nombre del amor / Siempre escribiré.” Luis’ words are reminiscent of bell hooks’ yearning to “end the lovelessness that is so pervasive in our society.”⁷ In a place where love is not fostered, he uses the love he carries in him as kindling to carry him through this moment and beyond. Juan speaks of love, too, in his yearning to be seen, to be truly known. Knowledge of our fellow earth-dwellers is what repels the lovelessness of our world, as it fosters a connection that reminds us of our collective humanity. Chris and Tune vulnerably share about their love for their mother and father, respectively, unsettling the image that people may have of incarcerated youth as

¹ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Highlights From the 2020 Juvenile Residential Facility Census* https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/snapshots/DataSnapshot_JRFC2020.pdf

² Richard Mendel, *Why Youth Incarceration Fails: An Updated Review of the Evidence*, SENTENCING PROJECT 10 (Dec. 2022), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2023/02/Why-Youth-Incarceration-Fails.pdf> (citing Joshua Rovner, *Too Many Locked Doors: The Scope of Youth Confinement is Vastly Understated*, SENTENCING PROJECT 2 (Mar. 2022), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/too-many-locked-doors.pdf>).

³ Joshua Rover, *Black Disparities in Youth Incarceration*, SENTENCING PROJECT 1 (July 2021), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/Black-Disparities-in-Youth-Incarceration.pdf>.

⁴ *Id.* (citing *Easy Access to Juvenile Populations: 1990-2019 (EZAPOP)*, NAT’L CTR. FOR JUV. JUST., <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezapop>).

⁵ Samantha Ehrmann, Nina Hyland & Charles Puzanchera, *Girls in the Juvenile Justice System*, U.S. DEP’T OF JUST. (Apr. 2019), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/251486.pdf>.

⁶ Ctr. for Am. Progress, Movement Advancement Project & Youth First, *Unjust: LGBTQ Youth Incarcerated in the Juvenile Justice System* 3 (Jun. 2017), <https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/lgbtq-incarcerated-youth.pdf>.

⁷ BELL HOOKS, *ALL ABOUT LOVE: NEW VISIONS* xxix (1999).

“pathological.” Far from it; they bravely announce their love and how it lives in their bodies, illuminating instead how our society is pathological for how it treats children.

Boldly, these poems are also an invitation—to simply be, to grow, to dream of the future. During periods of such turbulence, these poems show us that dreaming of a better tomorrow is a defiant act of resistance. This future is neither close nor far, as Dazmine points out. “I will be there / Where ever I’m supposed to be.” To arrive there—wherever there may be—we must look inward. Mark and Andrew reveal how the forgiveness and promises that we extend and make to ourselves are foundational to forward motion. For Andrew, his promise of a better day will not be limited or abridged by the walls of the prison: “I thought to myself, what a great dream I just had. I promised myself that day is going to come, and I am going to do everything I can never to come back to a place like this.” Listening to and centering voices of incarcerated youth is a call to dream bigger, hope boldly, love resiliently, and fight in solidarity for a brighter tomorrow.

In law school, “youth law” is painfully under-discussed. And in the few law school spaces in which we talk about kids, we often limit their identity and experiences to the classroom or the school yard. We rarely allow children the space to be full and complicated human beings with their own lived experiences, opinions, and aspirations for the world. Even more rarely do we actually engage with young people and listen intentionally to them about how they experience the world under white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal rule. And law schools are not alone in marginalizing children’s voices; it is typical for adults to brush aside the concerns of children. The way capitalistic white supremacist power is held and wielded—to extract, exploit, and oppress—depends on the erasure and marginalization of children. By ignoring children, we write and complete a self-fulfilling prophecy of harm. Children who are ignored, especially children of color and queer youth, are put in violent conditions of policing and incarceration. When we ignore children, we are complicit in this harm, and we allow the ripples of harm to extend even further into our families and our futures. So we must strive to elevate the voices of those whose eyes are unjailed by the ways of the world, those who can see past our reality and imagine something new, those who are most in touch with their sense of wonder and hope. That is what is needed for this moment, as we engage in the collective process of envisioning a new world. We need kids.