

Haiku From Prison
Abolition Poems and
Essays From Inside

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May we soon look back on prison
with the same views most have on chattel slavery.

May we reflect on the moral constructs that were used to justify
our nation's shameful past and see how vile and misled
we will seem to our inheritors.

May we understand today how baffled they will be that we
allowed such atrocities to be perpetrated, much the same
way we consider historical wrongs with righteous
indignation.

~1~

Let us, once again,
redefine the mission of
abolitionists

preface

I started writing haiku as a resilience building exercise. Prison is the loudest place I have ever been for a sustained period of time. Imagine a Chuck E. Cheese's inside a casino inside a BTS concert - that's what prison sounds like. The point I am making my way toward is that it is hard to think clearly in prison. Every single surface reverberates sound. There is nothing soft in prison. There are no couches or throw rugs or curtains or quilts to absorb sound. If it's not hard and relatively indestructible, it doesn't exist. The resulting cacophony is overstimulating. My neuropathways were fried after the first few months. I went from writing letters to loved ones daily to taking six weeks at a time to complete a single correspondence. But haiku are bite sized. They embody all of the nuance and complexity I want to convey in three lines and 17 syllables. They can be beautiful and formidable in their brevity.

I started writing haiku because my exhausted brain could complete the task. At moments of particular overwhelm, I took out my pen. When I had written 50 that I liked in the light of day I thought, "I should share these with my loved ones since they don't get letters from me anymore.

Maybe this will help them understand.” Then I thought, “some context might be helpful. I’ll add notes here and there.” It has been scary to put so much on paper. I am constantly terrified that staff will get curious about what I’m writing and decide to “randomly” search my cell. I’m not doing anything wrong, but they may take umbrage with my perspectives.

It’s been... hmm, what’s the euphemism I want to use here... character building... illuminating...an immersive experience...deeply humbling to embark on this project without the luxuries of a keyboard, spell check, artistic talents in the absence of graphic design software, google, access to a pencil sharpener outside the hours of 7pm-9pm, a reference library, the ability to consistently write the letter “e” with that doughnut-hole space in the upper half that makes an e an e and not a c, or anyone who can safely proofread to let me know if my prison-addled brain is still capable of producing coherent thoughts. While I am easing (or plunging) into disclaimer territory, I want to be explicit that I don’t believe anything I am sharing covers new ground. Quite the contrary. These are stories we have lived and heard about American prisons over and over again. Despite the

repetition, mass incarceration continues and every primary source is a tool as we strive to dismantle the PIC. Also, there are times when I outline familiar topics as a means of getting to a larger point or laying a foundation for my emotional reflection.

I try to be funny in a few places for the sake of levity, but I have no way of knowing whether or not I succeed. If you find yourself blinking rapidly in an attempt to digest something that hasn't landed right, I'm trusting you to turn the page before my mishap is committed to long-term memory.

I have done my best to check spelling, but the dictionary available for purchase on commissary is woefully lacking. When I asked if there were any dictionaries in the prison library, I was blatantly laughed at as if I had told the most hilarious joke the staff had heard in weeks. There is an Oxford English Dictionary app in the paid section of the tablets, but I would rather ask for your grace than give any more money to prison profiteers than I have to. I appreciate your understanding.

There are a lot of awesome things about haiku, but distilling language can have its pitfalls. In several poems I have used the abbreviation CO as a stand in for Correctional Officer. This is partly

because seven syllables is more than I am willing to spare and also I abhor the title in the first place. It is insulting, undeservingly glorifying, and inaccurate in the extreme. I generally refer to anyone who is paid to work in the prison as staff. At a dog kennel, the folks who make sure the cages are locked, the animals are fed, and everyone gets a turn out in the yard are called staff. Along these lines, I prefer to call those of us who live inside the prison residents, because that is the word the English language uses to reference where people live. People can be residents of college dormitories, gated communities, apartment complexes, nursing homes, states, cities, and prisons. I recently listened to an NPR story on the rhetorical tension between the use of terms like inmates, convicts, people who are incarcerated, people on the inside, prisoners, etc. and I don't intend to diminish their regional, political, and cultural significance. For me, resident speaks to the incredible arbitrary nature of how one might end up in an American prison. It is a language choice that says nothing about who people think I am. It just tells you where I sleep at night.

For my own safety, I am calling the facility where I currently reside American County Prison or ACP. At the time of this writing, I have been held captive here without bail for over a year.



Glimpse

~2~

“Smack That” sung off-key
with demonstrative dance moves
eyes closed, she’s alone

~3~

concrete and iron
create unintentional
ASMR caves

~4~

each time neighbors flush
their waste comes up on my side
ACP plumbing

My toilet isn't unique. Every toilet in the prison does the same thing and it has been that way for as long as anyone can remember. As a result, every normal flush is followed by a brief but imperative flush-war back and forth until things make their way down the pipes. It's the most intimate thing that happens in this place and a great way to learn about the digestive health of your neighbors.

~5~

the last time I saw
windows this thick, I was ten
staring at Shamu

~6~

living room, kitchen
bathroom, bedroom, and study
five cinder blocks wide

~7~

my kingdom for some
q-tips, kombucha, contact
not in that order

~8~

my kingdom for a
Float on the lake, the cove
Or among the kelp

~9~

communal clippers?
a serious conundrum
talon toes for now

~10~

there are no good smells
with one weird exception
CO's clean laundry

One of the most profound things about this experience has been how challenging it is to engage in any kind of care for self or others. On top of the plumbing issues in this place, basic hygiene practices are undermined at every turn and it can make the olfactory atmosphere unpleasant. There are layers of thick black mold in the shower, but we aren't allowed to have bleach to properly clean it and it hasn't been professionally cleaned a single time in the year that I've been here. The prison provides each person with two sets of oranges (1 jumpsuit and 1 two-piece which we are required to wear in all public spaces including the dayroom), two t-shirts, two pairs of socks and four sets of undergarments.

After each mold infused shower, the next logical progression would be to put on a clean set of these various items. The catch is that oranges and personals are only collected to be laundered twice a week and you have to be wearing one set while the rest are out. The math isn't pretty. It gets even more unfortunate if you get inspired to exercise and go for a bold midday shower after you work up a sweat.

~11~

bunk beds and sleep meds
are a terrible combo
concrete floors are hard

~12~

a Kimye divorce?!
months ago, apparently
NPR news gap

~13~

penciled R.I.P.s
from twenty-fourteen tell me
nothing has been cleaned

~14~

rock hard, freezing bed
like camping, without nature
I envision trees

~15~

unlike new inmates

new books are a COVID threat

no more donations

~16~

cell door graffiti

says “FUCK DA POLICE,” all caps

Signed by Artist - BOLD!

~17~

the amount of waste
is unimaginable
unconscionable

I grew up in the desert and learned early on to never waste water. Leftover food from dinner was turned into lunch the next day. Anything that could be recycled was cleaned and sorted religiously. This is all to say that I have never in my life encountered anything close to the amount of waste that I have witnessed at ACP.

To get hot water out of the sink (which you might use to wash your face or make a cup of coffee or hand wash laundry or rehydrate food that you or your loved ones have purchased on commissary to supplement your abysmal diet) you have to push the hot water button and let the spout run its course around 5-15 times, depending on your cell and a multitude of other factors that could keep us here all day. A 12 oz. cup of coffee or tea from my sink easily requires a gallon of waste. Of course, water is just the tip of the quickly melting iceberg.

By design, the number of residents in a prison is in constant flux. New people are arrested and booked around the clock, some bail out, some complete their time, others are transferred to rehabs or up-state, many are deported. In lieu of keeping track of all these comings and goings, the ACP

kitchen likes to optimistically plan for a full house when sending trays up. Awesome, right? Seconds and thirds for anyone who could really go for another fruit cup or 8 oz milk carton. Ha! Just kidding. Not gonna happen. Instead, we're going to make you sit there and watch tray after untouched tray get emptied into the garbage. We are talking about countless loaves worth of bread, thousands of pounds of animal by-products that somewhere back down a very long line belonged to thousands of actual animals, enough gallons of canned peas to fill an olympic swimming pool... you get the drift. It's horrific.

If this is the scene with food and water, I am sure you can discern that the ACP recycling program is not stellar. To be specific, it doesn't exist. This prison can house about 2,500 people at a time. That's 5,000 plastic fruit or apple sauce cups a day and 7,500 plastic spoons. Not to put too fine a point on it, but these numbers don't even include staff, whose meals are included and served in styrofoam containers. Of course, I can't even begin to address the waste of human potential...

~18~

COs condescend
like I don't see where they work
I'd rather be me

~19~

some people make jokes
that they're gonna hang it up
and then they do it



Grille

~20~

she sings opera
high soprano kyrie
regretting her plea

One thing that can be said for living in a space where every surface is concrete, metal, or plexiglass is that the acoustics are unparalleled. The woman referenced in the preceding haiku is classically trained in opera and would often serenade us on request. I got to know her while helping her study for college before she was seated and transferred up-state.

~21~

we'll wipe your slate clean
if you take a guilty plea
gotchya! 5-to-10

People arrested on felony drug charges in American County are told that they can be released and their felonies will be dropped down to misdemeanors if they plead guilty and fully complete a required program. Of course, the program is notoriously difficult to complete. Participants are subject to rigorous and frequent drug testing at their own expense, required to attend appointments at myriad times and locations throughout the week regardless of an individual's access to transportation (making legal employment and prompt payment of court-related fees and fines next to impossible), required to be home for unannounced drop-in inspections (again, making legal employment a challenge), and additional contradictory demands too numerous to list. Failure on any level results in re-arrest and likely expulsion from the program. Conveniently, program rejects have already pled guilty as a condition of their initial admission, so they can be sentenced by a judge without any hope of negotiating a lighter term or ever seeing a jury.

~22~

involuntary
presence plus profit equals
slavery, you see

As an abolitionist, one of the hardest things about being locked up is how much money is being spent on and made by my forced presence. It feels excruciating to actively feed a thing I am so dedicated to dismantling, but there is no way around it. The orange jumpsuit I am wearing and the plastic shoes on my feet were made in Indonesia and China, respectively, but the taxpayer dollars went to Bob Barker Company Inc. in North Carolina. The prison issued toothpaste and shampoo are both shipped in from Asia under the clever brand name “Maximum Security,” but closer inspection reveals that Bob Barker rakes in the cash for these items, too.

It might seem like good old Bobby has the market cornered, but we’ve just begun. That bottle of shampoo is 4 fl.oz. Residents can submit a written request for one travel-size bottle per month. If you need to wash your hair any more than that because you don’t happen to be Homer Simpson or The Rock, you have to buy it off commissary - where the real money is made. Fun fact, it is universally agreed that Mr. Barker’s Maximum Security deodorant somehow manages to make its unsuspecting wearers smell worse. Bottom line, if you don’t want B.O. buy real deodorant off

commissary. It's time for bed and you can't sleep in the buff because a stranger is sleeping 18 inches away and the staff shine flashlights on your bed every 15 minutes to make sure you aren't having sex or hanging yourself. If you don't want to wear the oranges you've had on all day, you know the ones that are only laundered once a week, you'll have you buy some sweats or thermals off commissary. Same goes if you ever want to exercise. It is impossible to exist at ACP without spending money to buy essentials. Even people who have absolutely no access to funds barter with people who have more than enough. The paper I am writing on and the pencil I am writing with were purchased on commissary. By the time you read this, I will have slipped these pages into an envelope purchased on commissary and mailed that envelope out with stamps purchased on commissary. We could be here all day, so I'll move on.

For as long as this nation has existed, people being held captive have expanded the fortunes of the already wealthy. Following the civil war, chattel slavery was quickly transformed into convict leasing. Black men were arrested in droves and their labor was sold to private companies. Before

convict leasing went out of style, people being held captive in penitentiaries were already churning out commercially sold goods as a means of demonstrating their “correction.” ACP’s methods of financial exploitation may seem less reprehensible than its predecessors’, but the amount of money being made is greater than ever. The number of people who are financially invested in my captivity and the captivity of millions of others like me is staggering. How much justice could there ever possibly be when there is so much money to be made in keeping people locked up? Not much. Not any, to be precise.

~23~

I'm kept company
by Iron and Chromium
held captive here too

The background of the image consists of several concentric circles in a light gray color, centered on the page. These circles create a ripple effect, with the word 'VOCATION' positioned in the middle of the pattern.

VOCATION

~24~

shooting on the news

CO blames stimulus checks

logic beyond me

~25~

Protestant warrior
mocks Catholics and Muslims
ACP chaplain

~26~

he cuffed her hands tight
behind her back while she seized
said her arms had “flailed”

~27~

they always walk for
medical emergencies
and run for back-up

~28~

this married CO
“jokes” about turning inmates
into sister wives

~29~

“If you don’t like it,”
He projects his reprimand,
“don’t come to prison.”



BARRAGE

~30~

going out for rec?
you must be frisked beforehand
the price for fresh air

At ACP, we are supposed to be offered outside rec every day for one hour. Rec is considered to be a privilege and is therefore subject to the whims of whomever is on staff. When it is offered, I jump at the chance. The yard is no Eden. We are talking about a bucolic 1,200 square feet of blacktop with some grass on either side, two sets of high chain-link fence topped with razor wire, and a guard in a repurposed telephone booth with a huge rifle at hand to make sure no one has any escape fantasies. There are also more rifle carrying guards on the roof, security cameras, and a family of gophers with a concerning case of mange. Let me not forget a million dollar view of the staff parking lot and a fast food establishment that seems to sell fried chicken, based on the ever present aroma that wafts over from it. This is all to say that enduring the assault of a “pat down” feels like an excessive and unnecessary price to pay for some vitamin D, given the circumstances. .

What could we possibly be sneaking out to the yard when we have already been strip-searched, metal detected, and deprived of any worldly possessions on our way into the prison in the first place? What could possibly justify staff being paid to run their hands under my breasts, along the

inside of my waistband, up my inner thighs until they slam into my vagina, squeeze my braids or the bun on top of my head and so on? When I posed this question, albeit in a slightly less colorful way, I was told by staff that people have been known to sneak out notes and candy. Their faces were straight, their tones were earnest bordering on bored, and there seemed to be no sense of shame whatsoever in the ludicrous disproportionality of their task.

I'll say this. What ACP lacks in critical thought it more than makes up for in unnecessary groping.

~31~

haven't been naked
out of the shower, unless
you count strip searches

It is a very weird experience to be within view of other humans with whom I have no connection or intimacy 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I haven't changed clothes this discreetly since high school gym class - and even then the lengths I went to were more about self consciousness than propriety. It feels very owning-class Victorian to be so constantly clothed without reprieve. After wearing so many layers non-stop around the clock, surprise strip-searches are jarring, to say the least. While peeling off my various layers, lifting, being, squatting, coughing, shaking out my hair, saying "ah" and other indignities - I vacillate between feeling assaulted and feeling overwhelmingly grateful. While I may be incarcerated, I rest assured that I have never been nor will I ever be paid to watch someone involuntarily disrobe while I closely inspect their dirty socks and freshly discarded underwear.

~32~

male CO on shift
sees straight into the shower
and gets paid for it

~33~

migrane? hemorrhoids?

toothache? stomach cramps? chest pain?

just drink more water

~34~

rec in the courtyard
means men taunting through windows
while they masturbate

~35~

man with a rifle
“escorts” me down the hallway
is he embarrassed?

~36~

“If you do not stop,”
She called out, “I will spray you.”
Mace drifts through the air

~37~

Steel doors slams KaBLAM!
300 times each day, min.
pre-dawn to post-dusk

The tremendous volume of this slamming door cannot be overstated and 300 is a conservatively calculated estimate, not hyperbole. It marks the gateway between our housing unit and the hallway. Traffic in and out of the unit is constant. Residents are called out for court, medical consultations, attorney-client meetings, video visits, mental health checks, COVID tests, etc. We might also go into the hall to use the pencil sharpener, clip our nails, go outside to read, turn in forms, and so on. Staff also enter the unit to do rounds, pass out mail, yell at people for not wearing their masks properly, distribute items that have been requested (such as toothpaste/shampoo/combs), conduct count, perform cell searches, the list goes on. For every single one of these instances that take place between the hours of 6am and 11pm, the door is slid open electronically from a control booth and slammed shut. The vibration is bone jarring. There is no way to brace for it. It is like living at the epicenter of a fireworks display while a wrecking ball is caving in the walls around you.

~38~

cheap plastic wristband
scanned thrice daily for count
cuts my face at night

~39~

all week long plays a
Law and Order marathon
sadists run this place

~40~

evening TV news
shows who will be coming soon
my face was there too

~41~

staff in a bad mood?
now you're trapped in a closet
ACP lockdown

~42~

ACP Lockdown
cells shut 24/7
showers tues., thurs., sat.

~43~

ACP Lockdown
learning to take a shit
with an audience

~44~

ACP Lockdown

15 minutes to undress,
shower, dry, get dressed.

~45~

ACP Lockdown

no phone...rec... commissary
book cart... no warning.

Lockdown at ACPO is an administrative tool applied to entire housing units as a method for punishment, intimidation, or achieving greater overall control. Lockdowns are also used in times of staffing shortages and COVID outbreaks. In my experience, it is extremely difficult to predict that conditions that will or will not precipitate a lockdown.

NOURISHMENT

~46~

surreptitious trades
for fruits and vegetables
keep me regular

ACP does its best to maintain prison food's notorious reputation. In the past year, I have not received a single meal that failed to contain a significant ratio of mold. Bone chips are another frequent ingredient, the one and only indication that actual meat played a part in the unrecognizable array of patties we are fed. Needless to say, a fair amount of ingenuity is required for anyone interested in maintaining even the most basic level of nutrition.

~47~

salad once a month
mostly iceberg and not much
counting down the days

To celebrate the glory of salad days, I believe they employ a small child whose tiny digits are used to measure out the one minuscule handful per tray.

~48~

spicy hot peanuts,
peach fruit cup, raisins, and rice
ACP pilaf

~49~

plastic spoons only?

I make big pens my chopsticks
crisis averted

~50~

strange for lunch again
I didn't make that name up
it's on the menu

Strange is a smooth, oblong slab of rubbery, heavily processed, unrecognizable meat and/or soy and/or wheat gluten. It is medium brown and air -brushed with darker brown “grill” marks. I’m told that, once upon a time, strange used to be listed on the menu as “beaver tail,” presumable due to its color, shape, texture, and markings. I’m not sure why the ACP menu name changed, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it had to do with the original name containing euphemisms for two separate erogenous zones. “Tongue” is on the menu five times a month and the same puns play out week after week.

~About the Font ~

This book was [originally] set in middle aged written hand. It was designed by Endjah Sunlei between the late 20th century and the early 21st century. Heavily influenced by years of exclusive keyboard use and the deeply grooved surface of a graffitied cast iron desk, it is distinguished by its characteristic alternation between cursive and classical print lettering.

~About the Author ~

Enjoy Sunlei is a prison abolitionist and educator