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# No Beauty in Cell Bars Talking with Spoon Jackson

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“PRISONS ARE CREATED internally / and are found everywhere.” My conversations with Spoon Jackson keep returning to this point, a line from one of his poems. Prisons are both real and imaginary. All people experience some kind of prison, some to a greater degree than others. Those degrees are not coincidental. Jackson, a 63-year-old Black man, has been serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for 42 years and has lived in a series of prisons. He discovered poetry one day, about 30 years ago, sitting in his cell, looking over the bay at San Quentin. At least that’s how he tells it.

Since then, he has won four PEN America Prison Writing Awards for his poetry. In 1988, Jackson played Pozzo in a historic production of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin. In 2010, he co-authored *By Heart*, a joint memoir he wrote with his poetry teacher, Judith Tannenbaum. Jackson’s poetry and life have inspired more than one full-length [documentary](#). I had known of him and his poetry since 2016, when I spent a New York spring doing editorial work for [Die Jim Crow](#), now the first nonprofit record label for currently and formerly incarcerated musicians. Jackson had been working on *Uncuffed*, a podcast for KALW radio out of San Francisco, up until the coronavirus derailed all programming at the prison indefinitely. Earlier this month, [The Prison Music Project](#) released *Long Time Gone*, an album made up of music and lyrics written by incarcerated musicians at New Folsom, produced by Ani DiFranco. The album features a musicalized version of one of Jackson’s poems, “Nowhere but Barstow and Prison,” a haunting folk-blues track, performed by DiFranco.

I reached out to Jackson to talk with him about his experience of the pandemic. Our conversation began in medias res. I asked him what the scene was like where he was sitting at the moment. “Oh, you know, there are some fools watching *Maury*, a guy making tacos who cooks pretty well.” He could have been describing the break room in the emergency room where I used to work. I think out loud about the similarity between hospitals and prisons. We talk about other people’s cooking, something we’ve both been missing. Jackson is upfront with me about being happy to talk about anything except for the crime that landed him with a life sentence. While Jackson takes full responsibility for that crime, he also recognizes how much he has changed

since he was 20 years old. “It’s my first time in jail,” he tells me, “it’s just been a long time.” Time comes up often in Jackson’s poetry, the comparison of prison life with memory, imagination, and nature. In “Heart of the High Desert,” sounds heard from a prison cell — the ocean, the wind, a bird — alchemize into a memory of home, and the loss of it, which brings him back to the present: “Lying here on this bunk / my mind drifts and dreams / within itself / searching for a poem.” When Jackson and I first talked, I told him that I’d moved to the desert a year ago and, having grown up in New York, was still getting used to it. “Make sure you do all your business before the sun gets too hot,” he lectured me, “or late at night. The day is for taking it easy.” By the cool authority of his voice, I wouldn’t have guessed that the last time he was in the Mojave was 1978.

In Jackson’s first poem, “No Beauty in Cell Bars” — the one he wrote while watching the seagulls and the windsurfers on the bay outside San Quentin — the speaker is searching for a more tangible world: “A lifer / A dreamer” in a landscape of harsh noises and human lives sapped of vitality. It’s a poem about wanting to connect to a non-built world — a world quiet enough to hear a raindrop. It is also a poem about time, where the past is elevated to supersede the present: “The memories / the dreams / are now.” A few years later, he wrote “Beauty in Cell Bars” — a litany of the many ways in which people lock themselves up: “We allow unnatural and unreal thoughts / to be our walls, our limits.” The poems, despite the opposition their titles suggest, are complementary. There is no beauty in the prison-industrial complex, but there is beauty in understanding the walls we build around ourselves. If we have built them, we can take them down, the poem seems to suggest.

I asked Jackson if he thinks that people on the outside will become more sensitized to the problem of prison, if he thinks that we will see more people fighting for the rights of prisoners, more support for prison abolition movements. This past spring when the virus reached shocking peaks in cities around the world, there was also a surge of campaigns to get PPE to prisoners, as well as protests and petitions to release them entirely. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and Governor Gavin Newsom have respectively made claims to transition nonviolent offenders to parole, reduce arrests, and halt intakes at several state prisons.

According to Jackson, there are different types of prison, and [in quarantine] you’re getting a taste of the prison that we feel because you can’t do what you usually do that makes you human. Sure, there’s the coming together of families. If you’re [lucky enough] to be quarantined with your family, you’re able to catch up. You’re able to read the books you want to read.

For Jackson, isolation means being stuck with people he doesn’t want to spend time with, and not being able to experience the culminations of his projects, to celebrate with his collaborators. While Jackson’s art is a labor of love, it is nonetheless labor that he is not compensated for: I feel isolated when I’ve created something. I can’t go and speak to kids or students [about my work]. I feel isolated when I can’t share realness and love like I want to. But then again, I travel — my imagination keeps me non-isolated, so to speak.

Right now, none of us can do everything we want to do. I learn from Jackson that we all have to reassess our understanding of freedom — a task that has revealed the destructive nature of a

deeply rooted White American ideal of freedom and reawakened a global conversation about how institutionalized racism impinges on the most basic freedoms of Black people.

Jackson and I first talked about a month before the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer. Now, the limits of reform and the inherent link between abolishing the police and abolishing prisons are glaringly clear. If Governor Newsom commutes nonviolent offenders, it would still leave a huge amount of California prisoners behind bars. The dichotomy between violent and nonviolent offenders implies that some people deserve to be released while others do not. The former category includes Jackson, whose life will not be changed by Newsom's reforms.

"Right now," Jackson tells me, "we're stuck in this building all the time. The dorm I'm in has 10 bunk beds and each bunk bed has two people in it. So, you've got someone above or below you, and you've got someone right across from you — it's impossible to stay six feet away." Visitors aren't permitted during quarantine lockdown, and time in the yard has been vastly cut down. "It's totally different." Normally, Jackson has a space in the education building where he can sit and work. He records *Uncuffed* for KALW, works for the prison newspaper, and spends as much time outside as possible. "I love nature," he tells me. "I like being out there just watching the sky. The pigeons, the hawks, the crows and ravens and other little blackbirds. I can look at the hills." That was before the pandemic. "Now we've just been sitting around, exercising sometimes. I volunteered to work in the kitchen, just because."

Jackson has a grim form of hope that the terrible living conditions of prisons during the pandemic might be shocking enough to catalyze change: "I hate to say it, but the more cases we have in here, the better for us." I told him I read an article recently about inmates trying to contract the virus from one another, by sharing out of the same cups. Jackson laughs for a long time. "I didn't hear about that. But it makes sense!" I told him that the corrections officers interviewed for the article condemn the prisoners as public health hazards. Jackson points out the irony that, since prison transfers have been put on hold and visitors barred, corrections officers or other staff members are likely the ones responsible for the spread of the virus.

"Well," he sighs, "I think it's a defining moment for the prison-industrial complex. [There's] a chance now to restructure things. We have a chance to work together, instead of apart." In light of George Floyd's murder and the resulting global uprisings, it's evident to many people who did not understand before that massive-scale structural change is necessary and that, as journalist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor reiterated, quoting Martin Luther King Jr., "The black revolution [...] is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws — racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism."

"Nothing positive," Jackson tells me, "nothing real, nothing loving, can come from this." I imagine the day room. Maybe it's Jerry Springer on now, maybe the news. If prisons are internal and found everywhere, it does not follow that prisons are normal, or should exist. Rather, the strength of the imagination to create prisons, internally and externally, confirms that it is possible — that it is necessary — to imagine new realities that have not been created, enforced, and reinforced by oppression.

The prerecorded white woman's voice of Global Tel Link reminds us that our surveilled call will be disconnected in five minutes. "If you want to call this a 'corrections' facility," Jackson tells me, "if you really want to engage in rehabilitation — there are some countries that really do have programs that help get people back into society ... America is not that place."

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