

published in *Offender Programs Report: Social and Behavioral Rehabilitation in Prisons, Jails and the Community* Vol. 5 No. 3 September/October 2001

## AN OASIS IN THE DESERT: A San Quentin Teacher Talks about Prisoner Writing

by Judith Tannenbaum

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I've been asked to speak to you this evening about prison writing because I taught poetry at San Quentin for four years in the late 1980s and because, in the years since then, I continue to be involved with my former prisoner-students, with prison art programs nationally and with artists who teach through these programs and who join together not only to share the work we do but also to address prison issues.

I want to note two excellent compendium of prisoner writing – **Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**, edited by Bruce Franklin (Penguin Books, 1998), and **Doing Time**, edited by Bell Chevigny (Arcade Publishing, 1999). Primarily, though, I'm here to talk to you in a fairly personal way about my students as writers.

### **Prisoner writing is human writing**

It is important to begin with an understanding that there have always been people in prison, as there are people everywhere, who make art. Bruce Franklin's *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (Oxford University Press, 1978) has a bibliography of over thirty pages listing American men and women writing, at least in part, from their experience in prison. A shorter international list includes writers as various as: Jack Henry

Abbott, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Daniel Berrigan, Malcolm Braly, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, Cervantes, Caryl Chessman, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Eugene Debs, Dostoevsky, Marcus Garvey, Genet, Emma Goldman, Vaclav Havel, Chester Himes, George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Martin Luther King Jr., Etheridge Knight, Jack London, Robert Lowell, O’Henry, Patricia McConnel, Malcolm X, Leonard Peltier, Miguel Piñero, Irina Ratuskinskaya, Iceberg Slim, Agnes Smedley, Piri Thomas, Thoreau, Jacobo Timerman, and Oscar Wilde.

And, of course, beyond this list of published, often famous, writers, there are men and women writing in cells and prison classes – just as there are men and women writing in garrets and college workshops – who have not been published, whose names no one but loved ones have heard, but for whom writing is important, sometimes essential.

A second important understanding to begin with is that prisoners, like writers everywhere, write from a wide range of interests and in a variety of voices and styles. Some prison writers are primarily journalists or social critics. Some prison writers write fast-paced novels based on their adventures. Jarvis Master writes as a Buddhist from Death Row; Bob Kaufman’s poems contain rich, almost surreal, image. Argentinean poet Alicia Partnoy writes a poem to her daughter; American poet Kathy Boudin writes to her mother; poet Judith Clark writes to Vladimir Mayakovsky. Michael Hogan writes about spring; Patrick Nolan writes about an old con on the yard. Many prison poets write prayers; many write love poems. In other words, prisoner writing is human writing.

### **Prisoner writers from San Quentin**

In 1987, we made a tape on which San Quentin poets spoke of what writing poems meant to them. Here are the statements of a few of these men.

Elmo Chattman is a journalist and was editor of *The San Quentin News*. Parenthetically, Elmo earned his BA at San Quentin through an at-a-distance program established by Antioch. So Elmo is, as I imagine many of you are or will be, a graduate of Antioch College. Elmo said, “I mostly write about being in prison. Long term incarceration is a unique and painful experience and there’s no way anyone who hasn’t lived through it can ever understand it. Yet they try. So, in my writing I try to create images which create that experience in terms of my own feelings and

perceptions. But in a way which, hopefully, will succeed in giving an accurate and universal picture of what such an experience is all about.

Coties Perry is the father of two children and is concerned about the next generation. “I write poetry because it’s a way of getting my feelings and thoughts out. I really respect my poems because they exemplify the realness in me, that part that no one else seems to know.”

Spoon Jackson reads “Beauty in Cell Bars,” a poem written a few months after he wrote “No Beauty in Cell Bars.” For our class broadside series, Spoon designed a poster on which he put both these poems. Spoon played Pozzo in a major production we did of “Waiting for Godot,” and he wrote in the playbill: “As human beings, we all have one foot in light and one foot in darkness.” This paradoxical vision is Spoon’s. Spoon said, “My name is Spoon Jackson, from the heart of the high desert, and I write just to write, no reason. Writing for me is like an oasis in the desert; it quenches my thirst.”

Another student, Gabriel, said: “I write because it’s better than staring at the blank wall. Thus far, I’ve found that something exists within me that isn’t me, and from there I’ve learned that poetry brings a voice to that part of me which needs to be heard. Prison has provided me an atmosphere steeped in silence, emotion-packed moments under a scrutiny of myself, thus a voice echoes out from there...”

And James said: “Writing poetry, for me, is a form of therapy. A way of preserving and purging my mind, so to speak. The mind, an implement of decay and self-destruction, or the key to growth and survival. It all depends on how we use it. Here, in prison, where cyclone fences, concrete walls and steel bars shut out most forms of physical, emotional and psychological gratification, the power and importance of the mind is evident. Here, most of what we experience that is pleasant must take place in the mind. The feel of a woman’s touch, the fragrance of jasmine on a summer day, the sound of the ocean, the taste of hot pizza and cold beer, watching children play on grass in a tree-filled park--these experiences must take place within the mind because such things are not allowed in the walls of San Quentin. Some people think this process of experiencing pleasures through mental images is no more than fantasy or a symptom of psychosis. But, for me, the poet as well as the prisoner, what I see and experience in my mind is another realm of reality that sustains me in the midst of the bleak reality of prison. And both are equally real.”

## **Listening to prisoner writers**

So, as I've been saying, people in prison write. What is less assured, is whether we on the outside are interested in listening. In recent decades, the greatest interest in prisoner writing was in the late 1960s and the 1970s, that era of Malcolm X and George Jackson. During that time there was a great deal of prisoner writing being published – both in books and journals.

The media blitz surrounding Jack Henry Abbot's *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison* occurred in 1981, but within a few years the pendulum was in mid-swing. Under Reagan, the NEA cut funding for small magazines, and soon all magazines publishing prisoner work had disappeared. The last major publication of prison writing in this era was Joe Bruchac's Greenfield Review Press's *The Light from Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons*, which appeared in 1984.

As the pendulum swings toward a fairly horrific extreme in prison matters, some people on the outside have wanted again to hear from people inside. In the past few years there have been many books published that give voice to prisoner writers. Cedar Hills Publications – begun by prisoner poet Christopher Presfield – has published a list of writers from both inside and outside. *Correction(s)* – a new magazine whose first issue will appear this August – is actively soliciting work by men and women behind bars. (Cedar Hill Publications, 3722 Hwy 8 West, Mena Arkansas 71953; *Correction(s)*, Box 1234, New York New York 10276)

## **Keeping the soul alive**

Most prisoners say that they started writing by writing letters. I'm told that having a means to communicate with friends and loved ones, and seeing the impact of this communication, allows prisoners to realize they still have some ability to express themselves deeply and to be heard. Many men and women begin writing poems during a long lockdown, for writing gives a way to keep soul alive. It's this "keeping the soul alive" I myself am very interested in and which I want to speak about.

In fact, this is what first drew me to teaching in prison. In the mid-1980s I was giving many poetry performances that included my own poems and also work by a variety of other

poets. A friend teaching at the prison in Tehachapi, California, asked me to share this performance with his students. What I found was that these men responded to poems as I did – as bread, as sustenance, as what might keep the soul alive.

In “Some Advice to Those Who Will Serve Time in Prison” (*Selected Poetry*, Persea Books, 1986), Nazim Hikmet writes that a human being can serve even a great deal of time, “as long as the jewel/on the left side of your chest doesn't lose its luster!” If I had to sum up my intention in teaching poetry at San Quentin, it would be this: to provide a space in which people could polish the jewel on the left side of the chest.

The question I’m asked most consistently about my work at San Quentin is “How did your students change?” I understand what the questioners mean, but the question troubles me. I did not think my job was to change anyone. What I felt, and continue to feel, is that almost everything about prison is designed to be, as Elmo once described, “that hatred like hands in the way it touched me at times;” my job was to provide something different.

For a moment, think of the worst thing you’ve ever done. Imagine that this act is all you’re known for. Imagine that everything in your world now is designed to treat you as a person who’s committed that act. Any other fact of your life is irrelevant: you are only a person who has done this worst thing.

My job was to provide a space in which other aspects of my prisoner students had room to live and grow. So, to me, these San Quentin poets didn’t “change” so much as exhibit the effects of conditions more positive than their normal prison conditions.

“Normal prison conditions” are the consequences of economic, social, and political values and decisions. At the core, is the human tendency to divide the world into us-and-them and then to treat *them* as less than human, as different from *us*.

### **Those we lock up are human beings**

As I said, I was at San Quentin for four years -- the first on a once-a-week basis, the following three on a grant that allowed me to be at the prison basically full-time. San Quentin was a maximum security male prison during those years, with many men serving some kind of

life sentence. I worked with a core group of students over the years I was there, which means I got to know my students pretty well and they got to know me. We knew each other – as much as prison rules and realities allowed – as people. What I have to say to fellow citizens intent on locking ‘em up is that those we lock up are human beings. What we choose to do we do in light of this simple fact.

I’m going to introduce you to a few of the men who I came to know at San Quentin. Here we all are on the first night of class:

*“Hi,” I greeted Gabriel.*

*“Not tonight; wish I was.”*

*By the time I caught the pun, three other men had sauntered into the basement classroom and slid their denim clad bodies against seat backs. For two hundred weeks, we would meet on Mondays in this buried room. At 6:30 that first week, and each week thereafter, I welcomed my students.*

*Elmo – tall, black, and well-muscled – loved the poems of Pablo Neruda and was himself a master of metaphor. Though younger than I by ten years, Elmo recognized what he called my “child of the sixties” sensibilities. He himself had grown up in a beach town north of Los Angeles and had wanted to attend art school in New York City. Elmo watched me walk into San Quentin as though I were a traveler in some foreign land, and he generously shared information he knew I wouldn’t find on any of the maps given out by the official tourist office.*

*The “underground guidebook” Elmo opened for me included stories of his own experience and how this experience shaped the man he’d become. Within my first few weeks at the prison, Elmo told me: “My father always used to say, ‘Better to be dead than mistreated.’ I didn’t know where he was coming from. I was a kid in California and he was from Louisiana. I’d pull the tab on a beer and shake my head thinking, nothing’s worse than being dead. But now I understand.”*

*Quick and wiry Angel sat next to Elmo that first night of class. Angel was Latino, but refused to think of himself as a category. Over the months, he would repeatedly warn us about*

*manipulation and an elite based on “material, power and possession”--the refrain that ran through all of Angel’s jeremiads. He demanded, “Who decides what a poem is?” letting us know “I am a poem/The world is a poem/The butterfly is a poem.../This poem is a poem/Speaking in tongues is a poem/A rock is a poem/Shit is a poem/And the corn in it too/is a poem...”*

*Coties – young and sweet natured – grew up in Pacoima, the San Fernando Valley town where I had attended CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) meetings when I was in high school. Coties worried. He worried about his own two children and he worried about all children and he worried about his people, black people. How, Coties worried, had the community’s traditional looking-out-for-everybody attitude? How, Coties worried in the years I would know him, had drugs become more important than Black Pride and unity? Coties addressed his worries to “You people/who stand and watch your next door neighbor/Suffer from hunger...” and “You people/Who preach every Sunday and take your people’s/Money to the bank of America on Monday...”*

*In the years to come, Coties would always be the one to inform me of anyone mentioned on the news doing good work in poor black neighborhoods. “You heard of the Omega Boys Club, Judith? Write and find out. Send them our poems. See if that Joe Marshall will come talk to us.”*

*On that cool August evening, Ali entered the classroom, along with Hakim. Manny walked in. Gabriel waved me toward the empty seat next to his own.*

*Of these eight men who showed up that first August evening, many would form the core of our class over the following years. That night and thereafter, I found every way that I could to teach these men about themselves as writers of poems. But I was equally student. For I learned from each man’s particular qualities and unique ways of surviving in prison more than I could ever have imagined about what it is to be human.*

*My book tells the stories of what these men and I shared. Some of these stories are big and long-in-the-telling – such as a major production we hosted of “Waiting for Godot” for which Samuel Beckett himself sent a director. Other stories are moments that reverberate – such as the time I brought poet Frank Bidart in to work with Elmo and the two men stood reading their poems to each other – Elmo from inside his cell, Bidart on the tier on the other side of the bars – the sounds of a baseball game blaring from every TV in the unit.*

One of Elmo's poems – the title of which, "Disguised as a Poem," he let me use as the title of my book – speaks of such stories and moments.

#### DISGUISED AS A POEM

In Birkenstocks and hand-crafted earrings  
still living a life from the sixties  
you enter this place  
this dungeon  
this dust bowl on the edge of the bay  
where 3,000 men wait  
for the sweet rain called freedom.

You walk a path from the front gate  
across the garden plaza  
Your pale feet step softly  
upon the spots where angry men have died  
Don't let the pink and yellow roses fool you  
This is not a pretty place.

Two flights down  
you wait for us to come  
bearing the fruits and scars of our embattled lives  
disguised as poems  
scrawled on bits of paper  
last week  
in a cell  
when sleep was hard to find.

For three hours in that basement room  
we are cut off  
A million miles away  
from your daughter and your cat  
A hundred yards from death row.

For three hours  
we joust  
we orbit around each other wrestling with words  
we make love with words  
we grow close  
We meet in a place called poetry  
one woman  
and a few captured men  
We speak of poems  
and grasp at them like straws  
until it is time to go.

Two flights up  
the cool night air greets us

There are always those few tight minutes  
waiting for count to clear  
and the inevitable parting of ways  
We could go have coffee and speak of poems all night  
but your daughter will miss you  
and I must be back in my cell before ten.

It is always the same  
For three hours  
you or Phavia or Sharon or Scoop  
manage to get close to me  
only to be peeled away  
like the bark from a young tree  
leaving behind a little spot  
bare and vulnerable  
that does not want to see you go  
but will die of exposure  
long before you return.

Elmo's poem speaks of the connection between those of us coming in from the outside – myself and guest artists – and the imprisoned men. One of the first guest artists to visit was Nobel Prize winner, Czeslaw Milosz. I loved Milosz's work:

*But when I brought in a few of his poems to class, Elmo had arguments to pick with Milosz. Elmo read from "Bobo's Metamorphosis": "But metaphor seemed to him something indecent," and asked, "Why is this man afraid of the power of language?"*

*Elmo referred to Carolyn Forché's, "The Colonel," pointing out, "When Forché had to describe that bag full of severed human ears the Salvadorian colonel shook in her face, she wrote: 'They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this.' Metaphor was the most accurate description she could find."*

*"But, Elmo," I argued. "Your own beloved Neruda once wrote: 'The blood of the children ran in the street/like the blood of children.' Even Neruda, metaphor-maker extraordinaire, saw a horror so profound, the only way he could convey it was to let the fact stand for itself. He knew comparing the spilled blood of children to anything else would cheapen the truth."*

*Elmo acknowledged my point, but let me know that his preference was for a poetry of passionate language. Milosz's poetry seemed distanced to Elmo.*

*“There is distance, but there’s passion, too. That’s what I love about Milosz. Look at what follows the line you quoted: ‘By looking he wanted to draw the name from the very thing.’ Does that sound like a dispassionate wish to you?”*

*Elmo certainly understood what I was saying, but he wasn’t drawn in by what seemed to him a mental passion. Instead he wanted to be overwhelmed and seduced by the energy of a poem’s language. I was attracted to, and distrustful of, both passion and distance, and so treasured Milosz’s paradoxical vision.*

*Milosz agreed to visit my class, but the evening he came court had cleared late. While we waited, Officer Weichel offered to take us to North Block, so show Milosz a cell block.*

*As we moved toward North Block the overripe smells of dinner and sweat filled the space. A man on third tier yelled out his next move in checkers to his opponent two tiers below. A man on the second tier stood handcuffed, wearing only his shorts, while two guards searched his cell. Some men were singing, some were hooting at me, some were debating the news with others three cells over. Across from the tiers of cells, gunwalks jutted into the blocks. Officers sat there or walked, patrolling, looking across into the cells for possible trouble.*

*The reverberating noise, false light, and moist, dungeon-y odors nearly made me faint. This is where we lock up human beings? Public money is being used to create this? We expect men spending time in a place like this to be capable of being responsible citizens-in-the-world in the future? In the following days I told friends, “We give animals in zoos more space and respect.” Milosz’s stunned response was, “What does a man do here if he wants to study?”*

*Milosz described European prisons which had no bars, but solid doors. The primary rule in those prisons, he told us, was silence. What does someone do here if he wants to read, Milosz asked, if he wants to write? Weichel said every man was given earplugs when he entered San Quentin. Milosz and I nodded, as though this were a solution.*

*We walked back to Four Post, subdued, hardly talking. Once there, the officer told us that the men in my class were just being released and we could go to the classroom to meet them.*

*What with late chow and no Elmo, only five men showed up. In the hour granted us by the Captain, Milosz talked about good and evil.*

*Leo protested, "There's no such thing; good and evil are subjective."*

*"You say that because you're an American," Milosz nodded. "But to any twentieth century European, evil is not subjective."*

*Leo stuck to his position and Milosz shrugged: he understood this view. Milosz told us about a philosopher friend. When she was little, she asked her father, "Is that tree real or am I only imagining it?" He told her it was real because he saw it and her mother saw it, too. But, the little girl said, maybe they were all imagining the same tree. Her father took her then to a hot stove and said, "If you put your finger in there, it will be real heat." Milosz said, still, she was never completely convinced.*

*...Milosz's broad face, his Eastern European-accented English, his language of formal discourse, were all strange to the men in this room. They were honored by Milosz's visit and shook his hand with enormous respect. Still, they left confused.*

*I walked Milosz out through the Plaza, through Count Gate and Scope Gate and down the long path to East Gate. Above the bay's soft play over rocks, that Mediterranean sound, Milosz asked, "Who is the most intelligent man in the class?" The question caught me surprised, as earlier in the evening his first question to me--"At what university did you study?"--caught me surprised.*

*Elmo was the one I assumed Milosz would consider the most intelligent, but Elmo had not been in class. I stuttered. Milosz said, "I think that young black man by the doorway." Milosz meant Spoon; he saw the intelligence in Spoon's silent face, even behind shades.*

Spoon had joined our class shortly after it began. He spent the first year sitting within a circle of chairs, saying nothing, sharing very few poems. I began my second year at the prison on a grant from the California Arts Council which allowed me to put a whole poetry program together. One addition I planned was individual consultations so I could spend one-on-one time with each student going over his poems. I arranged my first individual consultation with Spoon.

*We waited for the officer on duty to check Spoon's name against the movement sheet, then we walked down the two flights of stairs. "I grew up in the Mohave," Spoon told me as soon as we moved away from the guard, "in a small town. The heart of the high desert. It was the only place I'd been till they brought me here."*

*I had told Spoon to bring his poems for us to go over but, truthfully, I assumed he had none but the two or three I'd already seen. I was prepared with model poems and information on image and line. I thought I'd have to do all the talking but, in fact, Spoon had plenty to say.*

*"I'd stand on the main street and look at the mountains that surrounded the town. I thought what those mountains held was the whole world."*

*We entered the same basement room where our class had gathered for so many Mondays. We'd just walked past the same faded mural, past the same tin cans filled with sand and cigarette butts. The air that we breathed was the same dank dungeon-y wet, but instead of the mute man I was used to at the edge of the classroom, here was Spoon right beside me with his sunglasses folded on the table before us.*

*"I was nineteen when I got busted. That same day I'd signed up with the Marines. Wanted to see more of the world."*

*For months, Spoon to me had meant silence, the shyness we shared. The Spoon who sat next to me now, though, didn't stop talking and I happily listened.*

*He took out dozens of sheets of paper from the folder he carried and spread these out on the wooden table--its surface bumpy with carved initials, blemished by cigarette burns. I read lines about wildflowers and sparrows, about deserts and an oasis, about midnight skies and stars that "have no voice yet they're heard..." For almost a year Spoon had sat quiet; now, in story after story he told me, in poem after poem that I read, I was given the gift of Spoon's voice. I loved the language of his long ramble--its rolling rhythms and precision of image; even more, I was grateful finally to learn something about this man and his life.*

*When afternoon count cleared, we climbed the stairs once again. I'd always been drawn to Spoon's silent sensibility, but now I was pulled to his speech. In these poems he'd just shown me, I saw Spoon paid attention to everything we talked about in our Monday night class. Spoon hadn't talked, but he'd gone on steadily writing.*

*Spoon headed towards chow as I walked across the Plaza and out of the prison. The early evening soft breeze felt like a gift after sweating through the day's uncharacteristic heat.*

*At home I wrote down all I remembered of what Spoon had just told me. The next day I handed him these sheets which I'd titled "Spoon's Words." The following Monday, Spoon handed me "The Heart Of The High Desert," the poem he'd created from my transcription. It began:*

*Ocean winds  
gentle breezes  
find their way through the bars  
Through the bars  
a sparrow sings  
and its mellifluous melody  
is all about love...*

As my residency grew toward an end, San Quentin was in the process of changing to a medium security prison. Many of the new young men coming in shocked the San Quentin old-timers. There had always been violence in the neighborhoods where most of my students had grown up, but now crack and easy access to guns had ripped these communities close to ruin.

Coties said. "We gotta *do* something, Judith" and so we began our last class project, an anthology for kids beginning to get into trouble. Thus did the San Quentin poets come full circle: now it was their poems serving as the model for the next generation.

### **Writing programs in prison**

The program I worked with in California is Arts in Corrections. I'll say more about this program in a moment, but what I want to say now is Dostoevsky didn't need Arts in Corrections. For some people, however, programs like Arts in Corrections are crucial, giving as they do a space and opportunity to polish the jewel on the left side of the chest.

For those of you MFA students who want to teach, please know that you can choose to share the tools of writing in places in addition to college classrooms. Of course, there are no real jobs in this field, no full-time positions with employment security, health care benefits, and retirement plans. Because there aren't jobs sharing poetry in prison in quite the same way there are jobs for doctors and car salesmen, the structure for providing art classes in prisons varies from state to state. In California, Arts in Corrections has provided arts programming at all state prisons for over twenty years. Artists are hired for civil servant positions with a mandate to put together a complete arts program and those of us teaching through this program are funded in a number of ways.

Buzz Alexander and students at the University of Michigan have formed the Prison Creative Arts Project through which they offer arts programming in Michigan prisons as well as an annual visual art show. Other states' prisons contract with an outside firm to hire art teachers and buy materials. Some provide art classes through their prisons' education departments. Elsewhere, teachers from local colleges give arts instruction inside prisons and jails.

## **Conclusion**

Say how ya doing  
Outside world?  
Do you remember me?  
I'm that intricate part  
Missing from the whole  
The one y'all decided to forget...

*Coties Perry*

I began this talk by saying that there are always people in prison who write. Those of us doing this work know our prisoner students have a great deal to say. The question is, are those outside the walls ready to listen?