

If I Was Them *Francesco Bonami*

When you serve time, you lose track of time, and even forget why you are there, particularly when you go in as a boy and you come out as an old man. And if you misbehave, it's likely you will spend time in lockdown, which means that you are by yourself in a small box for twenty-three hours a day. So my suggestion is: if you want to get out, forget why you are in, or, even better, what you are in. I found that thinking about the outside too much is what made me crazy, so I started focusing on the inside. I began to study where I was, who was there, what I meant to the outside world — not as me but as some kind of abstract entity forgotten as a normal person and resurrected into that professional track that is being an “inmate.” I forgot about the “outmate” — it doesn't exist as a word and he doesn't exist as a person. When you are in, be sure to keep your mind inside, too.

Today's prisons, as buildings with walls and barbed wires and electric fences, are obsolete. Technology works pretty well for us: wearing one of these bracelets with satellite devices, you could be anywhere in the world and still be serving time, constantly followed by the eye of the law. I don't see why one day they will not implant in us one of these cells and make us reachable, findable, punishable anywhere on this planet. They don't do it because the prison in itself is an industrial complex — it means better figures for the unemployment rate of our government. We are not considered

unemployed. Two million people behind bars are forced employees of the United States government, and that makes a difference. We help the economy. I look into these kinds of figures because they make me understand better how things work here where I am. Outside I would be simply angry, free, dangerous, and unemployed. When I stepped inside I barely knew how to read, which was normal since so many inmates in the U.S. are illiterate. Now I know the system better and I read and write quite a lot. People here don't like me more, but since I was able to know more, I spent less and less time locked down. A guy that was in my same cell did not know where France, Great Britain, Germany, or Japan were, in fact he did not know what Singapore and the Netherlands were — I mean, he did not know they were countries. I explained a little bit of geography to him and also told him that the U.S. holds in its prisons more inmates than all these countries together do and about half a million more people than Communist China does. We were just two of them. The information did not impress him much, but he was quite interested in those places and he told me that once out he would like to visit them. He maybe forgot that he was serving life and that he was, like some of my colleagues, HIV positive.

We are also ideal customers for phone companies. Our only connection with the outside world is through phone calls, and phone companies add surcharges for each call that comes out of a state penitentiary.

I think there was even an ad by a phone company promoting prison telephone service, which was like this: "How he got in is your business. How he gets out is ours." When I think about all of this I feel kind of optimistic, like my life is not wasted inside this dungeon. We don't want to be rehabilitated and they don't intend that when they put a hood on your head, once they throw you in isolation. People were scandalized by the images of prisoners in Iraq brutalized by American soldiers. They should have a look at video from some correctional facilities in Texas; it looks as if the soldiers staged a remake of those tapes. To be in charge of punishment seems to give people an extraordinary power. To punish you need to be convinced you will never be punished and when you cross that threshold, you can be transformed into a very nasty person. To lock anybody into a space slightly bigger than a coffin, as it is in lockdown, you need to fear that the roles will never be reversed, because if the idea of yourself inside that hole crossed your mind, you would think twice before you even consider it a possibility for another human being. Someone told me that in maximum security prisons you can spend your time in a tiny metal cell for years on end. Whoever emerges from this situation is not a person, and whatever they have become, you don't want to meet them either inside or outside. Why we do this to ourselves, as a civilized country, God only knows, yet we do it and eventually we will face the consequences of this strange experiment in breeding global massive rage.

In the past there was an idea that if you remained long enough with your soul, you would make it better; if your soul was rotten you need to confront it much longer. Whoever had this theory never realized that if the only example you have in isolation is the demons of your mind, then it is very

likely that your soul will not heal at all but will turn into pure, ruthless evil. It is a fact that the majority of inmates that go in with lesser crimes and are subject to isolation turn out as murderers. I read a very interesting article about this by Sasha Abramsky in an old issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* I found in the prison library. The title was "When They Get Out." It presented an apocalyptic vision of all these inmates who turn into murderers that will be released, hundreds of thousands in the next ten years. You know some of us arrive at the prisons disturbed and some come out crazy. Because you lose any sense of time, and you forget the nature of your crimes and even your individual nature, killing does not seem to be such a bad option. Life is a time-based matter, and if you don't have a concept of time, life in itself, your own and that of others, seems irrelevant. You can say that my view of the correctional system in the U.S. is not objective and that my reflections are maimed by a latent conflict of interest. Yet, as I said at the beginning, I believe that focusing on internal time, that particular kind of time we experience inside, allowed me to become a better person and to see my punishment as an opportunity for improvement rather than decay.

Not everything I learned here about prisons is totally grim. I had the chance to study the early architecture of prisons, beginning with an experiment by Jeremy Bentham, a lawyer, who conceived the idea of the "panopticon" in 1791. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the first panopticon prison was built in Philadelphia. In this kind of prison inmates could be isolated and still observed by the guards around the clock. The interaction between freedom and captivity was reduced to a minimum.

The guards could control the prisoners without almost ever coming into contact with them. To be able to see without being seen enhances one's sense of freedom. Security cameras do that today, but in the panopticon the guards' presence, without the contact, inside the same architecture that gave guards a new feeling of power, while the prisoners began to feel like a herd. Today's architects seem to be uninterested in prison architecture. They design stores, museums, libraries, private homes, Olympic Stadiums, and swimming pools, but not prisons. A prison is something good architects seem to ignore, and yet they talk about flows, synergies, and systems and theorize ugliness as a necessity to be faced by architecture — all issues that belong very much to the nature and the life of a prison. Why aren't they interested in structures that, in the U.S., host almost two million people and produce a substantial economy? I guess that as a social subject we remain marginal, residues of a culture that worships visibility rather than invisibility and invisible we truly are.

A young Dutch artist has traveled to the U.S. to film us. I don't know exactly what she will have in mind, but I appreciate the idea that someone thinks we are worth seeing, to be taken out of our forced but productive invisibility. They asked me if I would like to be filmed by her and I passed on the offer. Not that I was against the idea, but I don't need to be thinking about the outside, I need to concentrate on here. She will film three hundred people, and that's enough to show that we are not simply transformed into numbers. The gaze of my colleagues in her camera and eventually into the eyes of the beholder will be a way to convey a new kind of freedom, a symbolic freedom that is nevertheless very important. To be in front of a camera

is also to be in a certain way in front of the real world, a chance to grasp our own pride again, a pride that has been crushed but not destroyed. There is nothing exploitative in trying to understand, through the simple process of filming, the nature of someone else's state of mind, his or her reality, the nature of their despair. The Dutch knew how to paint very beautiful still lives, and in a certain way the idea of filming people in prisons is another way to create a still life. The people in the camera do not seem to have a real life; like fruits in bowls they are there simply to represent a moment in time that has been extended endlessly. When you serve time, your life stands still as long as you are inside. The life we live here is not real life, it's organized, like those objects and fruits in seventeenth-century canvases, very carefully, if not so beautifully. It is not life and yet we are still living in an abnormal state of suspension. We belong to society, we are its property. Society needs us to remember why freedom exists. In filming any of us the director remembers her freedom but at the same time she reminds us that freedom still exists, if only in the short space between our gaze and the lenses, in that fragment of time when the camera is running, allowing our soul to take the only chance to escape, leaving behind just a body with a number and a mind wishing to be born into another life.