

The Art of Not Bowing: Writing by Women in Prison

Carol Muske

*Who the hell am I anyway
Not to bow?*

(Assata Shakur/Joanne Chesimard)

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In July 1973 I wrote an article for *The Village Voice* about a hunger strike then taking place at the Women's House of Detention (New York City Correctional Institution for Women, housing around 400 detention and sentenced women) on Riker's Island. I used a pseudonym for the article because I was working at the time at the prison as a mental health worker as well as teaching a poetry class, and I wanted to keep both occupations. Many of the women in my class were involved in the strike and were emphatic about the significance of their stand, although traditionally women at Riker's were notoriously apolitical, even downright reactionary. Strikes had taken place before, but on issues such as cosmetics (the women had wanted an Avon lady), more dances and recreation time or flashier products in commissary.

This strike was different. The women were demanding, among other things, a legal library, an end to massive and lax prescription of "diagnostic" medication, decent food, and limitation of solitary confinement to three days. At the Women's House, where an old adage ran "all riots end at mealtime," this was pretty heady stuff.

The article in *The Village Voice* (July 26, 1973) was supposed to get the world (or at least Manhattan) listening and to familiarize people with a woman's situation in prison:

...incarceration for women is a somewhat different experience than it is for men. Male prisoners are expected to be political in one form or another, they are far better legally informed, and an atmosphere of "bonding" is prevalent. (They are also considered more "trainable"—more vocational rehab programs exist for men on Riker's Island.)

The administration broke the back of the strike in its sixth day by separating the ringleaders, transferring them to different housing areas, or locking them in the "bing" (solitary). But it was too late. The article appeared and provoked a reaction from the community: pressure was put on the warden. A few of the women's demands were met: a legal library was established, kitchen conditions were improved, and other steps were taken. Someone from the class hand-printed a sign and put it up in the classroom: WORDS CAN TURN THEM AROUND.

This was a milestone. I had been teaching the class for about a year and felt that although the women's response had been overwhelmingly enthusiastic, I was getting nowhere in the actual teaching of writing. It wasn't that the women were intimidated by the act of writing. Far from it. They wrote to keep mentally alive, to keep sane. When I first suggested the idea of a writing workshop to the warden, she scoffed at it. "These women don't write," she said. "They don't read. The overall educational level is poor. Reading, writing, comprehension... all very low." At the first class, I learned that all the women "wrote"—they came to class lugging diaries, journals, manuscripts full of long poems, ballads, stories. Everyone had a poem to "tell"; poetry was a tradition; poems were written, read, copied by hand, and passed around—a publishing network. No one owned a poem. All the poems rhymed, and all were either sentimental love/religious verse or political rhetoric. My failure had been the inability to let them see alternatives: a poem was not always an escape, a fantasy, or a slogan, but a way into yourself, an illumination. Somehow the article, which was about them, about their very real lives in clear, simple language, did it. Someone said that a poem could be like reporting on your life, telling the story of your life—journalism of the soul.

They tried out this approach. Millie Moss, who sat all day in front of the television watching commercials about getting away from it all and listening to the planes (one every three minutes) take off from La Guardia a few hundred yards across the water from the prison, wrote the first. (Millie had been a "hearts and flowers" verse writer: her poems were filled with "giggly sunsets"):

Fly Me, I'm Mildred

*Finger my earring as I lean low
over your bomber cocktail
I've been known
to put you on a throne
send you off alone (not united)
through the tomb-boom roar
you get what you're asking for
when you fly me, honey,*

I'm Mildred.

Personally

*So you spoke to me in silence
in the ice man's choir
and I dangled all the while*

*You said (in silence)
live each day
spittin' on Fifth Avenue
fox-trottin' in hell...*

*So we ain't home—
we're together*

*Smile:
I take it personally*

They were on fire. I told them about Mandelstam, Dostoyevsky, the long tradition of writers in prison. I read them poems. Another woman, Elizabeth Powell, came to class with a poem about homosexuality which was explicit, honest, and skillfully done. The class praised it—Elizabeth left the class that night, made a sheaf of copies by hand, and passed it “on the vine.”

The next time I arrived at the prison, I was called into the warden’s office. A member of my class, the warden said, had written a poem about her “unique perversion” and had implied, she said, that there were also correction officers who were homosexual, one in particular. She spoke of libel, telling me that I should have confiscated the poem immediately, or at least made sure that it didn’t go beyond the class. (Though homosexuality was indeed common—the “only game” in the prison, the warden steadfastly refused to admit that she had any more than a few “deviants” on her hands, whom she described as hard-core—in other words, gay even on the outside. Actually, as is the case in most women’s prisons, homosexual relationships were standard even for straights, for the simple reason that human beings need physical intimacy and affection when they are confined to correctional institutions and cut off from relationships available to them outside the walls.

Definitions of personal sexuality tend to change behind bars. Upon release, some women remain “changed,” while the majority of former prisoners return to heterosexual lifestyles. The warden deeply feared homosexuality; any manifestation of “butch” conduct was enough to tag an inmate a troublemaker and “male attire” was expressly forbidden in the rules guide. Correction officers were warned not to wear pants to work, and thus their uniform remained skirted. (Although many C.O.’s were, in fact, gay, the atmosphere reflected the warden’s artificial notion of femininity.)

After this incident, I was informed that the poem had been confiscated and that Elizabeth Powell had been placed in solitary confinement

pending a hearing by the disciplinary board. I was told that I would be allowed to continue the poetry class for the time being, but that if another incident like this took place, I would be asked to leave the prison. The warden sincerely hoped that I had “learned a lesson.”

I had. It was just as I had told them: a dramatic testimony to the power of words—and, I thought, one of the stupidest things I have ever done. It was easy for me to drop in and talk about “getting it down right” and being honest in writing—I went home every night. For me, there was no danger of being thrown in solitary, having my personal papers raided, or worse. It occurred to me that even when I had written my ever-so-honest article, I had used a pseudonym to protect myself. There were obviously bigger risks than job loss at stake for women or men who chose to write while incarcerated; risks I had clearly not understood. Words could indeed turn around the authorities, but could also turn them into the oppressors they actually were.

Elizabeth Powell was in the bing for three weeks. When she came back to class, she was ready to go another round (she had written 25 poems, all dealing with homosexuality, while in lock), but I had made a decision. I explained how I felt as an outsider, with no right to tell them how to write in this volatile situation, but I asked that they make a distinction between public and private poems to protect themselves from exactly this kind of censorship/punishment. Private poems were, obviously, ones you could get thrown in the bing for; public poems could be “published.” At this point, I also went back to the warden and told her she should not be surprised at some “emotional” poems; I described the class as “therapy” and she agreed that that was a good way of viewing it.

The class flourished. The women began to express *themselves*, to find words underneath and in the midst of the gloss of everyday language. Some discovered (recovered?) a subterranean language like subway graffiti: the poem became a Kilroy, a zap: “I was here.”

I had quit my mental health worker job and was concentrating on expanding FREE SPACE, as the class had come to be called. The NEA had given us some funding, as did Poets & Writers and some local banks. Linda Stewart of The Book-of-the-Month Club mailed boxes of overstocked paperback books; we amassed our own library and Ted Slate of Newsweek donated supplies and equipment.

Tom Weatherly taught a second poetry class, Gail Rosenblum taught fiction, and Fannie James, an ex-inmate, ex-student of the Space whom the warden actually allowed to come back to work with us, taught poetry and library skills. Each teacher learned to cope in his or her own way with the trials of trying to run a writing class in a prison. Each class was like a hypothetical leap: it would take place 1) IF the officer in

the housing area remembered to announce it; 2) IF the women were there and not a) in court b) in solitary c) in another part of the prison d) watching television e) sleeping and/or drugged f) transferred to another floor g) transferred to another prison h) out on bail (good news); 3) IF the officer on hall duty okayed the passes; 4) IF the warden had not scheduled something else in your classroom (usually a course in etiquette); 5) IF there was no "contraband," i.e., spiral notebooks (the wire is a potential weapon), chewing gum (jams locks), tweezers, or snap-top pens (another weapon—only ball points or pencils allowed).

Somehow, the class took place and thrived. Visitors came to read and comment on student work: poets Mae Jackson, Daniela Gioseffi, Daniel Halpern, Audre Lorde. For a long time, everyone learned. Information was taken in, absorbed—classes were spent writing and re-writing, letting off steam.

Almost four years later, most of the women from the old class had been transferred or freed (detention women often spend two years waiting for trial), but emphasis was still placed on "getting along." We all stressed writing as craft. Classes were run as any *outside* workshop would be, except no one ever published anything.

The poetry class at this time was full of women who were considered potential security threats—in other words, intelligent, outspoken, and funny. Some were "controversial" cases: Juanita Reedy, about to have her first child behind bars; Carole Ramer, who had been busted with Abbie Hoffman and who had a lot to say about everything; Gloria Jensen, whose imagination was like a vaudeville show; Assata Shakur/Joanne Chesimard—alleged leader of the Black Liberation Army, brilliant and talented, with a *Cool-Hand Luke* aura of insouciance, compassion, and tenacity. (Assata was considered so dangerous that the prison required her to have a continual guard-escort.) These women were all good writers. They had learned craft and practiced it—and wanted more. They wanted to go further than "therapeutic" writing or workshop poems. They were writing dynamite.

After four years, there was a huge pile of handwritten poems, Fannie's log with the names of every woman who had come to class, some incredible memories, and that was all. We went to the prison week after week and no one ever saw or heard what the women wrote: the voices were never heard outside, and on the inside, only in class. I began to feel that something had to give—no matter what risks were involved for the women (if they should decide to publish)—and for FREE SPACE as a writing program. It was Catch 22—we were losing either way. At this stage, the women were denied the natural fulfillment of self-expression, which is publication. If we published their writing, however, we stood

to lose the writing program itself. I began to fantasize about getting the word out: if people could only hear some of this stuff, I thought, no one would ever ask me again about either the quality of prisoners' writing or the reasons for running workshops in prisons. We would have evidence in writing. Best of all, the women would have the audience they deserved. I began to draft a rough script, a framework for some of the poems.

What happened to Juanita Reedy made up everybody's mind about publication. Juanita went to Elmhurst Hospital to have her child and was treated so inhumanely that she refused to let prison doctors touch her upon her return. She wrote a poem about her experience, which she developed into a longer "Birth Journal." She published it in *Majority Report*, the feminist journal. In the same issue there was an article about FREE SPACE and a poem by Carole Ramer. The issue began to circulate in the prison.

Assata, inspired by Juanita, wrote her own "Birth Journal" and sent it to a major magazine. One night in class she read this poem:

Butch

*You should have told me
About your dick
Stashed inside your bureau drawer
I woulda believed you*

*Ya say ya wanna be my daddy
Ya say ya wanna be my daddy
Ya say ya wanna be my daddy*

*Yeah! Run it! I'm ready!
My mamma warned me about you
She taught me about you
She beat me about you*

But I thought you were a man . . .

*And I lower my eyes
And I lower my back
And I swivel my hips
And I lighten my voice
And I powder my nose
And I blue up my eyes
And I redden my cheeks
And I jump when you call
And I cook and I knit*

*And I clean and I sew
And it is all so cozy
You lying in my arms
(If I am not being too forward,
too unladylike)*

*But who will know, anyway,
That you were in my arms
Not me in yours*

And if it comes to it
To save face
You can lie
I'll back you up
I've gotten very good at it lately

You should have told me
About your status—
I would have bowed to you
What's one more bow, anyway?

I bow to the dollar
I bow to the scholar
I bow to the white house
I bow to the church mouse
I bow to tradition
I bow to contrition
I bow to the butcher
I bow to the baker
I bow to the goddamn
lightbulb maker—

Who the hell am I anyway
Not to bow?

What else do I know how to do?

But you should have told me baby
You should have hipped me momma
I didn't know you would pull it out
And strap it on

Fucking me mercilessly
Long stroking me
So that even my shadow is moaning

But damn baby
I didn't know
You coulda saved me the trip—

I thought I was on my way
To a garden
Where fruit ain't forbidden
Where snakes do not crawl to seduce
I thought for a second
That earth was a good thing
That acting had played out
And cotillions were outlawed
That bingo was over
And ladies had drowned in their tea

But now that I'm hip momma
Come, fuck me.

(©Assata Shakur/Joanne Chesimard)

Some of Assata's poems were accepted for publication in a literary magazine. Poets & Writers gave us a grant to do an anthology of students' writing which Gail and I compiled. We published it through the Print Center in Brooklyn and called it *Songs from a Free Space: Writ-*

ings by Women in Prison. The anthology was sold in New York bookstores and distributed to the women in the classes. It contained some of the best work done in the classes.

By now I had handed over a rough script to the poetry class and an idea about doing some kind of theater piece. The women put together a revue of loosely scripted poems, songs, and vignettes called *Next Time*. They memorized lines and improvised costumes. Karen Sander-son, a friend and videotape expert, arrived at the prison one Sunday with a crew of women (after endless haggling for permission; we told the Corrections Department that we needed the videotape as a rehearsal tool for a play) and taped for nine hours straight. Finally, after months of editing, a half-hour tape emerged which documents the poems, songs, love, and exasperation of some of these incredible women. (This tape is available to anyone interested.)

In September 1975, FREE SPACE merged with ART WITHOUT WALLS, another arts project for women in prison. Now we were able to offer graphic arts and dance, in addition to having a larger staff. The publishing idea had fulfilled itself, a renaissance. Juanita had begun a book about her experiences; another woman, Isabelle Newton, was collecting her poems in manuscript. Then Assata, who had been held in solitary for one year in New Jersey, whose cell was raided by guards every day in search of contraband, and who had been beaten by the prison goon squad on numerous occasions, completed her book of poems and wrote two chapters of a book, an account of her arrest and life in prison. The warden stopped me in the hall one day and told me that she knew we were collaborating on a book with Assata and Juanita. She told me she hadn't forgotten the Elizabeth Powell case.

On November 26, 1975, Gail was preparing to leave home to go to her fiction class (filled with new students) when the phone rang. It was Deputy Freeman, the WHD Program Director, who advised her not to come to class: the program had been cancelled. We were not allowed to do anything after that except to pick up our books and any program belongings; we couldn't say good-bye to anyone or discuss plans for any of their work.

Naturally, we are contesting this decision, but there isn't much hope in appealing a warden's whim. It is, after all, her turf. Official reasons for the cancellation were said to be duplication of services (they stated that the public school provided the same type of classes) and irregularity of classes. The warden refused, however, to put these reasons in writing for us.

It is clear that the writing classes were taken seriously only when the women wrote seriously about their lives and *published* those writings. Poetry is safe, women are safe until they begin to make sense and communicate. Still, ART

recognizes the possibilities of self-expression, perhaps the walls crack a little. *Perhaps.* Words can, indeed, turn them around, but sometimes having all the right words is small change.

"Before despairing, speak of it," said a woman one day in class. Even when writing of despair, there's the fact—named and held to the light for a moment—maybe even understood.

WITHOUT WALLS/FREE SPACE is continuing to work at a children's center, a drug clinic, and another women's prison. It's important to maintain the lifelines between people on the outside and those inside.

But what happened at the Women's House of Detention can easily happen again. Especially if publishing is, as it should be, part of the writing project. Prison writers have a right to be heard as does any writer. Their voices are too important to be missed. Publishing is part of the art of not bowing. Each time a man or woman in a cell

Next Time
(group poem from the videotape
of the same name)

*You don't hear me
You don't see me*

*I'm the one just a step behind
you
a split second before the light changes on the
corner.
The face that breaks the glass without a sound
The hands that take your money on a
screaming train uptown.*

*Ladies. I had nowhere to take myself tonight
Except to myself
To my own face
Reflected in yours
And my own voice
telling me
THERE IS NO NEXT TIME FOR ANY OF US*

*Just the husbands and families waiting
Just the habits and fast money waiting*

*The kids in the street
The kids in strangers' homes
The kids in our bellies
The kids we are inside*

*And the lies we tell ourselves
To go on living*

LISTEN

*No one got over on you tonight
No one lied here tonight*

*We told the truth
And the truth is what you see before
your eyes
Ladies
Before you forget, ladies,
Till the "next time"....
My best.*

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