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Carolyn Benson

Moon

The 46-line poem "Moon" grew out of my work at the Hampden County Correctional Facility in Ludlow, Massachusetts where I have been facilitating writing workshops with incarcerated women for the past five years. We employ the Amherst Writers & Artists method for writing with underserved populations.

The moon is a sliver
tonight, a slit in the dark sky.

On workshop nights, with one eye squinted
– like the moon—I pass through
metal doors, give up my ID,
hold out my hand for stamping, cross the guarded yard
behind razor-wire fences and circling patrol cars,
past the drug dog pulling on his leash.
I interrupt lines of green- and orange-uniformed men
trained not to meet my eye,
ride the elevator that has no buttons,
get the guard CO to unlock the door of our room,
and sit down to build an oven for poetry.

In our workshop,
we re-invent the hidden sky,
resurrect what has become forbidden.
Imagining sunlight, imagining stars, imagining the moon,
we see backwards and forwards in time.

Today in daylight
I saw Ellie, from my writing group,
standing alone behind her slotted door,
in "segregation" for keeping art class glue.

She caught my eye and waved,
began reading brand new words
through the crack in the locked metal door.
Beams of pleasure lit thick glass between us.

Can Ellie see the moon tonight
through the slit window of her cell?
The meager glint
catches her metal sink,
steel toilet without a seat,
rumpled bed, pillow, blanket,
pad of blue-lined paper, bitten pencil.

We fashion beauty in our little room,
we redeem hurt lives with love.
But sometimes when I walk back out alone
the whole dark circle of sky
fits down like a lid made of night
and I feel the moon's watching eye close
like an iron door sliding shut.

Carolyn Benson, a writer living in Western Massachusetts, is co-director of "Voices from Inside," a series of writing workshops for incarcerated women and a founding board member of JusticeWorks Community, a grassroots not-for-profit organization that works towards more just and humane sentencing laws for women.