

# A poetic travelogue of post-incarceration



## *Felon: Poems*

by REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS (NORTON, 2019)

Reviewed by TRIVIUS GERARD CALDWELL

READING *FELON* FEELS LIKE WITNESSING A FOUNTAIN PEN BLEED — ITS INK SPREADING INDISCRIMINATELY, LEAVING INDELIBLE MARKS WHEREVER IT TOUCHES, YET THERE'S A HAUNTING BEAUTY IN ITS UNCONTROLLED FLOW. Reginald Dwayne Betts pens his 2019 poetry collection in much the same way, only his ink is a permanent reminder of the legacy of incarceration.

*Felon* is a travelogue of post-incarceration, and its power lies in its diverse poetic forms, compelling readers to confront the multifaceted realities of life after prison. Betts foreshadows his reparative work through Titus Kaphar's revisions of mugshot photos on the book's cover. Taken from *The Jerome Project*, the images of four Black men are depicted only partially, their faces submerged in tar and framed by gold leaf. The tar, dense and unyielding, symbolizes the inescapable weight of incarceration, while the gold leaf elevates the figures into a sacred tribute to their inherent worth and resilience as people. This juxtaposition is a poignant and powerful critique of the criminal justice system. *Felon* represents the many lives bound in obscurity; it drives readers to confront the systemic forces sustaining cycles of injustice.

This is Betts' third collection of poetry and perhaps his most powerful because it masterfully demonstrates how art can transform pain into protest, loss into resilience, and silence into a resonant call for accountability. Betts takes readers into the depths of incarceration and beyond, forcing a confrontation with a range of emotions and implications — homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, fatherhood, grace, and hope. Given the cyclical nature of Betts' work, readers must travel through the cell blocks and into those spaces where citizens slowly morph into one of several labels: inmate, a number, convict, or prisoner. Betts is our guide, and he requires our attention.

In 1996, at age 16, Betts and a friend, armed with a gun, committed a carjacking. Although a minor, Betts was tried as an adult and sentenced to nine years in prison, of which he served more than eight. During his incarceration, Betts spent 14 months in solitary confinement

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due to minor infractions against prison guards and regulations. In the isolation and darkness of that time, Betts found poetry as a means of transcendence. He began meticulously copying anthologized works by poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Gwendolyn Brooks, discovering a kind of “second sight” through their words. During this transformative period, while in prison, he adopted the name Shahid, Arabic for “witness,” to inspire a greater consciousness to perceive his circumstance and moments of transcendence therein, setting his sights on a future defined by freedom and purpose.

Since that time, Betts has established himself as a notable writer. He is both a poet and a lawyer, holding a JD from Yale Law School and a Master of Fine Arts from Warren Wilson College. In 2020, *Felon* received the American Book Award and an NAACP Image Award. In 2021, Betts was honored with the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the “genius” grant. He currently leads Freedom Reads, an initiative that aims to provide books to more than 1,000 prisons and juvenile detention centers across the United States. To date, 419 libraries in 44 adult and youth prisons participate in this program. These accolades reflect *Felon*’s attention to the gripping exploration of the afterlives of incarcerated individuals and its incisive critique of the prison-industrial complex, which perpetuates the kind of erasure symbolized by Kaphar’s artwork on the *Felon* cover. Betts recalls how this

improbable narrative is propelled by poetry as an intimate and aesthetic form of introspection. He explains, “When you’re trapped in a cell, words are your only lifeline.”

*Felon* opens with a table of contents signaling its poetry as several pitstops along a journey within the bowels of bondage. “Ghazel” is Betts’ opening declaration, a form of Arabic poetry taught to him by another friend named Shahid — “Name a song that tells a man what to expect after prison.” Betts begins by acclimating readers to the blinding light of a felon’s after-prison life: “From inside a cell, the night sky isn’t the measure— / that’s why it’s prison’s vastness your eyes reflect after prison.” Fourteen couplets establish “Ghazel” as a renovation of lost time, depicted by artifacts of bondage: “tattered grey sweats,” “single high bail,” “slang’s architect,” and redacted font. Betts employs his couplets like cells on a prison block wherein each individual-in-custody gets exactly two lines to communicate their poem.

*Felon* closes with a collection of sonnets in “House of Unending.” The title implies that the end is the beginning, both in its suggestion of infinity and in Betts’ 2023 release of a poetry-infused jazz album of the same name with

Blues artist Reed Turchi. The sonnets in “House of Unending” are metaphors of contradiction, describing the “convict, prisoner, inmate, lifer, [or] yardbird” as people whose lives are redacted and must be reinvented. Betts draws attention to a collision of ironies inside prison, a morphological process of reinvention such that redemption and regret bear no restorative quality. He writes, “The sinner’s bouquet, house of shredded & torn ... / Of lockdown, hunger time & the blackened flower— / Ain’t nothing worth knowing. Prison becomes home. . . .” The lyrical force of Betts’ poetry is focused on the injury and interiority of the prison experience. The paradox of bondage lies in the boundless freedom the imagination fosters, and Betts demonstrates this through his bleeding pen.

Between “Ghazel” and “House of Unending” are thematic poems addressing the fragility of young Black men whose vulnerability enables the kind of storytelling Betts employs to facilitate empathy. One cannot read this collection and return to business as usual. The fear of systemic oppression and the violence of its wrath are weights carried by Betts and the many friends he writes to and about in *Felon*. The fourth line of “Ghazel” foreshadows his method: “. . . redaction is a dialect after prison.” Several poems take this form. In an explanatory note, Betts observes that the poetic redactions exhibit “the tragedy, drama, and injustice of a system that makes people simply a reflection of their bank accounts.” Restoration, reform, redac- ►

tion, revision, and repair are functions of Betts' poetry — that is, his writing is an act of reclamation and healing. Through his emphasis on re-ness, *Felon* offers a reparative strategy, demonstrating the power of revisiting trauma to transcend it. Additionally, the graphic redactions function akin to Kaphar's portrait of prisoners in gold leaf and tar, the horizontally smeared ink invoking prison bars to redact otherwise cryptic legal verbiage.

The redated poems constitute several pitstops on a journey to the "House of Unending" — their titles, "In Alabama," "In Houston," "In California," and "In Missouri." In these poems, Betts rewrites court documents, subverting the role of the censor by uncovering the markings of injustice and obscuring the convoluted language of the law. Like the tarred faces on the book's cover, Betts uses ink to redact court documents, revealing only those signifiers whose nouns and verbs represent the victims of symbolic violence in specific states. By redacting the court document, Betts obscures the dense legal language that functions to cloak injustice. What readers are left with is injurious: "City officials / employees / built a / scheme designed to brutalize to punish / to profit. The architect / the City of Ferguson . . . / the rest of the Saint Louis . . . The treatment / reveals systemic illegality / The City has / a / Dickensian system that / violates the / most vulnerable." For Betts, in Missouri, Alabama, Houston, and California, the system is the culprit of unconstitutional bail; the system

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is an instrument of oppression. "In Alabama," the system is the city, and "It is the policy / of the City / to jail people . . . to hold prisoners . . . The City's policy / violates / Constitution" [each / represents Betts' redaction of legal language]. To use public documents in contemporary American poetry is to implicate the rule of law in the possible perpetuation of harm. By engaging directly with these legal texts, Betts challenges the authority of the law itself, transforming it from a symbol of order into one of disorder, exposing its inherent contradictions and abuses. His act of redaction turns the legal document — once a tool of power —

into a site of resistance. The obscured words mirror the silences imposed on marginalized communities, while the exposed fragments act as a clarion call for justice, demanding that readers see the hidden realities beneath the surface of legal and institutional rhetoric.

Employing other reparative strategies, Betts reclaims the narratives of the incarcerated to restore the dignity and humanity of those who are routinely dehumanized. The stereotypes and criminalizing language often associated with Black men stifle any other conception of their ability to be good friends and fathers and to exhibit vulnerability and love, which are two qualities often repressed in the depths of Black men. Two poems with similar names offer a glimpse into Black male grief as an unspoken and lost sentiment. "Essay on Reentry" and "Essay on Reentry: for Fats, Juvie & Star" are intimate and chart the way a prison sentence is kept alive through speculation and memory. Like the redacted poems, Betts remixes form, calling his prose poems "Essays."

The first poem in the sequence, "Essay on Reentry," figures alcohol as a tranquilizing spirit, supposedly causing Betts to haphazardly tell the story of his crime to the youngest of his two sons at 2 a.m. Betts writes, "My oldest knew, told of my crimes by / a stranger." This poem is about disclosure and love but also about the temporary numbness of alcohol — a recurring theme throughout *Felon* suggesting self-destruction and the lack of rehabilitative support. In this

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way, the conversations between Betts and his sons are overdetermined by a prison sentence. And the grace of a son toward a loving father is the hope that Betts articulates as he regrets drinking with buddies at 2 a.m. to numb the memory of prison: “So when he tells me, Daddy it’s okay, I know / what’s happening is some straggling angel, / lost from his pack finding a way to fulfill his / duty. ...” In a swift turn, the last stanza of “Essay on Reentry” signals everything about what we think alcohol offers: “the drinking wouldn’t make the stories / we brought home any easier to tell.”

The fourth poem of the same name pays tribute to Betts’ prison comrades. “Essay on Reentry: for Fats, Juvie & Star” offers insight into other individuals-in-custody who have “known more years in cells than cities, / than school, than lovers . . . / more years than freedom.” Betts reflects on the many years lost to captivity, a circumscribed existence wherein hope exists in watching friends come and go. Fats, Juvie & Star represent men whose hope exists in the freedom of their comrades. Each is bound to each other through the crime or their time. Betts uses the symbol of a mirror to reflect and reconnect with his own identity. He writes, “We first discovered jail cells decades ago, / as teenagers & just today, a mirror reminded / me of my disappeared self.” Time also features in Betts’ poetry like an hourglass; that is, time is portrayed as a finite and continuously diminishing resource. The confinement of the sand in an hourglass for a prisoner

is finite, unless, of course, the hand of the system inverts the sand clock. Betts is incisive in his critique of the implications of the penal system; his improbable narrative relies on readers to understand the systemic inequities that perpetuate cycles of incarceration, the humanity of those impacted, and the capacity for redemption amid dehumanizing conditions.

In many cases, Black men suffer juridically from the history of their skin. Surely, Betts understands this as he recreates scene after scene of young Black men, some minors, as literary companions who suffer their consequences with the totality of their Black body. The poem “For a Bail Denied: for A.S.” depicts such an epidermal schema. Betts recreates a courtroom in ten tercets and a couplet. Taken together, the poem is one statement, ending with “This ain’t justice.” Perhaps the most provocative aspect of the young man Betts represents is the image of the young man’s Black or Brown bald head, “(but / when has brown not been akin to Black / here? to abyss?) & does it matter, / Black lives, when all he said of Black / boys was that they kill?” The chasm of blackness also describes Betts’ hole in solitary confinement; additionally, the

abyss features in the vast literary canon Betts contributes to — the abyss holds Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Bigger Thomas, and James Baldwin’s nephew. And when the young boy’s mother screams in Betts’ poetic sentencing, “*You can’t throw my son / into that fucking ocean.*” She meant jail.” She also meant bondage. Because so much of what Betts writes about has to do with recapitulation, a revision of narratives rendering Black bodies invisible yet hypervisible, caught between the erasure of their humanity and the perpetual spotlight of criminalization, as if bound to replay the same cycles of oppression, repeatedly. This is *Felon* — as the book jacket expresses: “a powerful work of lyric art.”



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