

Note on Process

It felt important to work with notions of ecology, environment, landscape, and absence as poetic form.

A poem is made up of two things: text and white space.

Text is not as truthful as we think: language is shaped by history, which is shaped by power. Maps too are shaped by power, and every revision is an erasure of what came before. I was struck by the maps in the exhibit, by the small moments of story and language, and how the information fit into my field of study, which is ecocriticism.

Here in my poem, the whiteness is all-encompassing; it is in power, not unlike the system responsible for mass incarceration.

It also implies silence: a lack of story. The text we have tells one story, but that does not make it inherently true. The empty space (I hope) implies the existence of other stories, stories that were silenced, truths suppressed and even erased.

Poetry is a powerful vessel for such retellings—reconsiderings—because of the tension between text and non-text; the open-ness of a page and yet it is bound on all four sides. Like a map, it can only depict a portion of the truth, flattened to two dimensions and squared off.

It is restricted, like a cell.

I mean, it's all very troubling, to say the least. It feels as useless as it does impactful to theorize about the aesthetic of documentation and depiction of mass incarceration while people are locked away, away from the world, from love, from their lives. Someone's garden is now overrun with weeds. Someone's beloved dog was surrendered to a shelter. Someone's kid has no one to help them with their math homework, because these people are now imprisoned.

Incarceration is also a form of absence, not only of empathy, of care but of a person from their own life.

Imagine the void left behind in the world if each of us was now locked here, in this room, for a day or a week or a decade. Imagine that ripple effect, imagine the spiral of that absence.

The absence takes everything else away, too.
The white space is a black hole.

The system is systematic in its production of absence.

Invisibility: An Anti-Ode

Incarceration is the legacy of enslavement

the laborers who built these levees
are saints unnamed.

Correct.

Did you know the term “corrective” comes
from the plantation? The word
is a lash, as is most white
lace.

The more space

we build, said Larry Smith,

the more space we fill.

He was describing his penitentiary, not the levees
or forests or the water.

This legacy is like water.

The human body is 60% water.

Louisiana too is water,

all this erosion

this sinking.

Even a single tree is a weapon

and when the storm hits,
not everyone has a chance
to get out.

This legacy more insidious than the seeds
of the rain trees, than Spanish moss

the more trees we cut down
the more dangerous the flood

the levees built by those
imprisoned to keep out
water—for us—
and lock up so much
within.

History doesn't always float
and maps don't show their own
footprints and we all stand
here without shovels and
we don't even know their names.