

Some Friends of Mine

Barbara Ruth

I'd like you to meet some friends of mine

lesbians

women I write to

women in prison.

Last year I decided corresponding with them was a good way to continue my political work being too disabled to go to meetings or to demonstrations.

Valerie was the first

a Cherokee-Chicana femme doing long time in Nevada prison.

An artist without art supplies,

she sends me cross-hatch portraits of her sister inmates

rendered with ballpoint on lined paper so thin it tears.

She has cystic fibrosis

at 26 she's getting old

for someone with CF.

She tries not to think about what that means.

After all, she says,

no one at the jail thinks she's disabled.

Her job includes scrubbing the bathrooms with bleach

three times a week.

I try to figure a way

to smuggle in a charcoal mask.

When I tell my friends who haven't been locked up about my friends who are

they first want to know

what they are in for.

Ruby Jean waits in Florida for a release date.

She's been in jail for nineteen years, locked down for two.

If you found out her crime was horrible enough

would it justify her treatment?

Brenda's another friend in lockdown.
She's 22, used to be a songwriter.
She's a Black bisexual woman with AIDS.
The prison medicates her with Thorazine and Haldol
— typical jailhouse medicine.
Now Brenda struggles
tries to recall the tunes she wrote.
(Valerie says no matter
how sick she gets
she never goes to the infirmary.
"Bitches die in there.")

Two white prisoners in lockdown with Brenda
complain they don't want to take showers after her.
Brenda searches for some compassion for them
alongside her rage.

Ana Lucia's a Cubana in Texas.
Denied visitation of her kids, she went to see them anyway.
I'm not sure what all went down, but now she's doing life.
At the trial the judge referred to her as "it."
No one in the queer community has spoken up for her.
Most prisoners don't get defense committees no matter how political their cases.

Reignbeaux is a Paxantent Two-Spirit
disabled so many different ways it's hard to list them all.
She joined the Navy and ended up a POW in Southeast Asia.
She writes me that the cell she's in now is smaller and worse
then the one she escaped from in Hanoi.
I'm not sure that I believe everything she writes me
but I admire how well she tells the tales.

What are they in for?

Seems like most of the Native dykes in prison got locked
up for despair
and truly, I could make a case that any queer woman in jail
is a Prisoner of War.

But not many have a story like Judith's
a Jewish revolutionary locked up for conspiracy to bomb a KKK headquarters.
Most of the reasons my friends sit in jail are more mundane, combinations of bad luck and bad judgment.

Most have been on the treadmill of institutionalization
since they were kids
group homes, juvie halls, psych wards,
county, state, federal jails
minimum, maximum security.
Control units.
Prisoners of one sort or another
all their lives.

I write to 25 lesbians in prison.
It doesn't feel like work.
Or rather
it feels like unalienated labor
it feels like sisterhood again
after all this time
and all these disappointments.
That's a lot.

We hold each other through these words on paper we send
our cards and stickers,
drawings and articles clipped from newspapers
from Washington to Florida
and here to me in Oakland.
These women I love
these friends of mine.

Barbara Ruth writes at the convergence of magic and grit, Potowatomee and Jewish, fat and yogi, disabled and neurodivergent. She has performed her original work with Mother Tongue and Wry Crips Disabled Women's Readers' Theaters in the Bay Area, taught in California Poets In the Schools In San Diego, co-conspired with DYKETACTICS! In Philadelphia and blogged at NeuroQueer.

She writes biomythography in poetry and prose, and has been working on a novel since before writing was invented.

She is 70 and lives in San Jose, Calif. and is also a published photographer. She has been an anarchist for 50 years.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/397-winter-2017/some-friends-of-mine>
Fifth Estate #397, Winter, 2017

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