

Bastards
of the
Reagan Era

Reginald Dwayne Betts



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Introduction

THE POET RAYMOND PATTERSON once asked “but who can conceive / of cities lost in a blackman.” These poems contemplate tragedy: what it means to be nearly broken by something you love. *Bastards of the Reagan Era* challenges the dominant narrative while confronting the realities that frame an America often made invisible. Within these poems, we see the city as lover and nemesis, we hear “the sound that comes from all / the hurt & want that leads a man to turn his back to the world.”

PRAISE FOR *BASTARDS OF THE REAGAN ERA*

“Poet and memoirist Betts presents elegy after elegy in a devastatingly beautiful collection that calls out to young black men lost to the pitfalls of urban America. ‘In the streets that grieve our silence, children die, / they fall to bullets & asthma, they fall / into each other’s arms as mothers watch on,’ he writes. Betts keeps his forms as tight as his turns of phrase. In ‘Elegy with a City in It,’ he flips the same handful of words and their homonyms over and over to meticulously depict the violence—systematic and individual—experienced by black people in Washington, D.C., during the 1980s. These poems are aimed at readers willing to be moved and to be schooled, who appreciate poetry’s ability to cull beauty and hope from despair and desolation: ‘They have known cells like rivers and brown and / Black men returning to prison as if it’s / The heaven God ejected them from.’ If the raw material of these poems seems depressingly familiar in 2015, their molding is not. Yet Betts cares for more than aesthetics—he cares to return names and spaces to the dead and incarcerated: ‘For Shawn, & Malik, Quan, & Moe— / their names all echo.’”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review, August 2015

“Reginald Dwayne Betts paid a heavy price for the wisdom coursing through his fierce, unstoppable book of poems, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. The redemption he has found in wrestling, fearlessly, with the destructive decisions—and decade—of his generation’s trials is mesmerizing and beautiful in the language and rhythms of his pen. Betts’s journey back—from prison all the way to Yale Law School—is as inspiring as it is rare, and should give us pause in condemning any man to social death. From rebirth comes justice—and power.”

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University

Release Date: October 2015

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Introduction

PRAISE FOR *BASTARDS OF THE REAGAN ERA*

“Fierce, lyrical and unsparing, the poems in Reginald Dwayne Betts’s new book, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, bear witness to the author’s difficult journey from prison to law school, and the experiences of the men he got to know in prison. . . .”

—**Michiko Kakutani**, *The New York Times*, October 2015

“Betts, whose memoir, *A Question of Freedom* (2009), won the NAACP Image Award, begins his second poetry collection, a poetic evisceration of societal race norms, with a powerfully stirring love poem for his sons, Miles and Micah. His children’s presence is on display early to foreshadow a world that takes shape according to ‘the business of human tragedy’ and the need for us to become more fully human. The timing for this demanding, candid, resounding, and hopeful volume is perfect, as Betts takes the media to task for its failings, exposes manipulative politics, and turns criminal law upside down. With his own children always at the forefront of his critique, protest, and call for truth and justice, Betts uses heightened language and concentrated rhythms to look back over his own road from prison to writing, activism, and Yale Law School. An inspiring collection: ‘Talk about them dudes on the roof / talking about the Library of Congress. / Talk about never owning a damn thing, / & then talk about us.’”

—**Mark Eleveld**, *Booklist*, October 2015

“Patriarchal sentiment is not the reason Reginald Betts begins *Bastards of the Reagan Era* with a heart-wrenching praise song to his sons, Miles and Micah. He is celebrating the singular occasion of their continued breath. In this bitter, unflinching and triumphant work, Betts mercilessly probes the soul of the soulless machine charged with the disappearing and dismantling of black men’s lives. This crisp assemblage of perseverance and loss relentlessly pummels the status quo, poems building each upon the other until the desolate inevitability of the narrative both enervates and empowers the reader. The poet himself warns, ‘when I sing this awful tale, there is more than a dead black man in the center.’”

—**Patricia Smith**

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About Reginald Dwayne Betts

Reginald Dwayne Betts is a husband and father of two sons. He began his writing life at the age of sixteen, after pleading guilty to carjacking and being sentenced to nine years in prison. Dwayne imagined that words would bring hope and solace—qualities he could not find within the walls of a prison. This drive led first to poetry and later to memoir and essay. His first book, *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison* (Penguin 2009), recounted his time spent in prison—and was awarded an NAACP Image Award. His first collection of poems, *Shahid Reads His Own Palm* (Alice James Books 2010), won the Beatrice Hawley Award. Dwayne’s writing has led to a Radcliffe Fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, a Steve Orlen Fellowship from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Workshop, a Peter Taylor Fellowship from the *Kenyon Review*, and a Soros Justice Fellowship from the Open Society Institute. He has also been awarded two Pushcart Prizes and the Frederick Bock Prize from *Poetry* magazine, amongst other honors.

Over the past decade, Dwayne has advocated for the reform of the criminal justice system. As the National Spokesperson for the Campaign for Youth Justice, he has worked on state and national legislative reform issues. In 2012, President Barack Obama appointed Dwayne to serve as a Practitioner Member of the Coordinating Council of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Since his release from prison, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The New Yorker*, *The Huffington Post*, CNN and NPR have all profiled Dwayne. In addition to his social justice work, Dwayne has given readings, speeches and lectures at universities across the country, including Oklahoma State University, Yale Law School, Maryland University, and Rutgers University. He is a graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, the University of Maryland, and Prince George’s Community College. Dwayne is currently a second year law student at the Yale Law School.

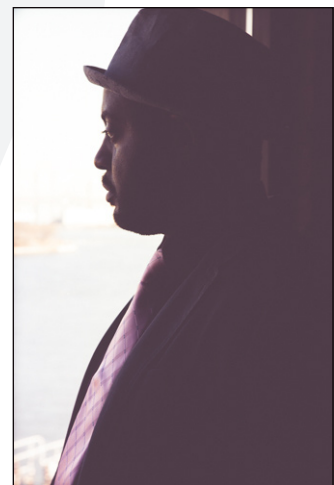


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Select Praise

PRAISE FOR A QUESTION OF FREEDOM

“This book is a lesson on living. How does one become a man after being in a cell? *A Question of Freedom* is not a book of answers. Instead, this memoir is a reminder that a black boy can turn his world around. Betts shows us that words are key. This book will unlock your compassion.”

—E. Ethelbert Miller,
Director of the African American Resource Center, Howard University

“Dwayne Betts was incarcerated for 10 years in an unforgiving place—a place in which he also discovered the incredible power of books and reading. He’s written his own life-changing book, which may well prevent other young men from making that detour to prison. A searing and ultimately uplifting story.”

—Hill Harper, *Letters to a Young Brother*

“I’m so happy to have been introduced to the miracle that is R. Dwayne Betts’ *A Question of Freedom*. It tells so many important stories: of senseless violence that plagues our streets, the devastating effect our prison system is having on so many young African-American males and the struggles we must all experience before we can find redemption. But perhaps most importantly, it’s a story about the power of consciousness. A reminder that no matter how confining our surroundings might seem or how bleak our future might look, as long as we are in touch with our higher selves, we can always tap into both the compassion and the toughness that is in all of our hearts. Betts is a major new voice in hip-hop and I look forward to being inspired by him for years to come.”

—Russell Simmons

“At last, a clear defining voice to express the feelings and hardships of so many young black boys trapped in America’s prisons. A survivor among the countless lost souls, Dwayne loudly demands to be heard—in a soft and honest tone. A magnificent journey!”

—Louise Ferrante, *Unlocked: The Life and Crimes of a Mafia Insider*

Select Praise

PRAISE FOR *SHAHID READS HIS OWN PALM*

“Betts doesn’t just have a powerful story to tell. He is a true poet who can write a ghazal that sings, howls, rhymes, and resonates in memory years after it was first read.”

—**Jericho Brown**, *On the Seawall*

“American prisons are the new slave ships for Betts. The image of a black man in chains and cuffs is an image that for many is much to contemplate. Here in this disturbing book of poetry, *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*, Reginald Dwayne Betts takes us back into the whole Afro-American Diaspora. A latter day Paul D, in ‘yesterdays yoked’—the lid is rusted solid on the tragedy that is the Black man and women’s experience in the new world.”

—*Stride Magazine*

“ . . . restrained though fierce talent . . . surprising and emotionally resonant . . . ”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“ . . . Betts allows his readers to become engulfed in the minds and experiences of different men that have been imprisoned and their perceptions of judgments imposed upon them from the outside world. The poems, in often graphic detail, explain the chilling truths of prison lives weighed by lost dreams and regret.”

—*AFRO*

“Inside silence there is a sliver of light that is the seed of the music of these poems, the origin of a melodic range we seldom see in a poet’s first collection. These melodies move in a harmonic range affirming human struggle with an extraordinary elegance. This collection of song is definite evidence of the gift.”

—**Afaa Michael Weaver**

“Dwayne Betts’ poems—from the first moment I encountered them—read like revelation. This poet has entered the fire and walked out with actual light inside him. These poems—clear, muscular, musical—are what the light says. I’ve waited for this book for years!”

—**Marie Howe**

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Official Book Trailer for *Bastards of the Reagan Era*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWJuOa3W2oA>

Feature on PBS NewsHour:

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poetry-helps-youth-at-a-juvenile-detention-center-find-peace/>

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/stuck-behind-bars-a-writer-found-a-way-to-connect-to-the-world/>

Interview on NPR's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross:

<http://www.npr.org/2015/12/08/458901392/in-bastards-of-the-reagan-era-a-poet-says-his-generation-was-just-lost>

Library Journal's 15 Best Books 2015: Poetry:

<http://reviews.libraryjournal.com/2015/11/best-of/best-books-2015-poetry/>

NPR's *On Point* with Tom Ashbrook:

<http://onpoint.wbur.org/2015/10/29/prison-poetry-incarceration-reform>

Profile in *The Huffington Post*:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/yes-one-book-can-change-your-life-even-in-prison_55e630dbe4b0aec9f3551027

Soros Justice Talk, Telling the Untold Stories:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdtYPJ4w5Vg>

Interview on The Tavis Smiley Show:

<http://video.pbs.org/video/1267363371/>

NPR, Weekend Edition:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112134942>

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NPR, The Kojo Nnamdi Show:

<http://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2009-08-13/coming-age-prison>

The Washington Post:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/01/AR2006100101160.html>

The New Yorker:

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-r-dwayne-betts-on-prison-poetry-and-justice>

The National Conference for State Legislatures:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GRrZtL3I10>

The National Youth Leadership Council:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN51TrywbdQ>

What We Know Of Horses

Reginald Dwayne Betts

1.

& when my brother says Swann Rd.
is the world, he ignores boarded
vacants, broken windows—this place’s
shattered glass? He tells me
“believe the world is tenement house,
a pocket full of stones, a world
of ghosts, & what’s left of ash &
smoke after each inhale.” I visit now
that a prison cell holds his world.
Dead men circle every block
we know, thread this world
with quotes from psalms, “the sorrows
of death embrace me,” “some trust
in chariots and some in horses.”
They embrace metaphor, disbelieve
gravity, breathe in a haunted world.
& what of my brother? Running
these streets, he was a horse—
graceful, destined to be
broken. Why admire horses?

2.

Why compare everything fast
& beautiful to horses?
My daddy’s generation had a saying
for men lost in the world,
it was true of my uncle, my cousin—
men strung out on horse,
chasing the dragon, shivering
with the memory of that stallion
gone postal in their veins—
called them lost in place,
with cities buried inside them—horses

inside them stampeding.
My brother put his faith in horse,
& there is no map to find him now.
He tells me he inhales
the funk of men doing life
& knows he is in hell,
that he has dug his grave
amongst bricks that embrace him.

He—exile, with only rusted iron
& bricks bracing his two hundred pounds.

3.

Who admits this cage embraces
him? “History is written
on the back of the horse” broken
by the world. We all in prison now.
I stare at this man, my kin
ruined by embracing
night. Call this place a horsecollar,
& watch how it cuts into skin,
how the leather embraces
all of our necks. Even as a visitor
behind plate glass I brace
myself for cuffs. This not Swann
Rd., this burden placed on me,
these memories of courtrooms
and the places where bodies were found.
& still, I want to stop and embrace
my brother, to hold him close
& pause to inhale the scent of prison,
to tell him what I smell, what I inhale,
is still the body of a man.

What We Know Of Horses

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4.

How can a man inhale
so much violence and not change?
I light my Newport, inhale.
Think on how his voice has changed.
My man, now a feral horse
wearing kick chains: unable to sleep,
always on guard, inhaling
the air for prey, as if he is still
the predator, as if he can inhale
death & keep on living. Death
the elephant in this world.
I imagine the other men here, all
in a world filled with a casket's aftermath.
How much grief can you inhale?
My brother tells me he prays
at night, he wants to leave this place.
But we know all his wild hours placed
him in this mural of blood.
His hunger placed him in C-block,
cell 21. It suffocates
& nothing replaces time.

5.

"You okay in here," I ask.
But he's in a place
only he knows. When he walks
away he embraces
the kind of rage I fear. A man
was killed near him, placed
on a gurney and rushed
down a sidewalk. Dead

in a place where no one gives
a fuck if you're breathing.
To be a horse galloping away
is what I want for him,
he wants horse trundling through
his scarred veins. Prison
has taken the place of
freedom, even in his dreams.

6.

& I know, this is not a "world
where none is lonely." & I know,
he is lost to the world,
& I know he believes this:
"I shut my eyes and all the world
is dead," & I know that there is
still a strip, a place
that he believes is the world:
Swann Rd., where he can inhale
& be free. Sometimes his cuffs
are on my wrists & I embrace
the way they cut, as if I am the one
domesticated, a broken horse.