

One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana

The Reappearance of Those Who Have Gone

Introduction to *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (Twin Palms Publishing, 2003)

In the 1950s and 60s, my grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Pyeatt Gunter, consistently and inadvertently produced a series of photographs, "the diagonal family." Each frame in this series from our family ark—full of cats, dogs, horses, and blood kin—appeared to list approximately ten degrees, as if taking on water. Later, my mother, Jean Alyn Gunter Tovrea, documented our annual Christmas trees, the evolution of our fashion sensibilities, and seemingly, our family's every mood and move. These, along with photographs taken long before my birth, were kept secure in several albums or haphazardly in an orange wooden box. In Arkansas, where I grew up, these photographs served as touchstones for the countless tellings of our family story. They described the history of our land, and our family's colorful characters and steady loss of fortune. The orange box was my favorite object for it contained hundreds of photographs, loose for the touching. For countless hours I would arrange and read the hypnotic language of the bodies and faces of my kin. Time and death dissolved when my great-grandfather and I stood side by side as slips of paper. I was in the here and now. I was in the there and then. I was neither here nor there. I was making contact. I was converging.

Perhaps I was channeling my ancestors in the years following the deaths of my mother and grandmother. Perhaps it was their spirits that moved me to pick up a camera—for in our family, the camera was manned by women. It was my turn. Or perhaps I picked up the camera out of desperation. I did need a tool. I was buried under the loss of my family members. The world was a sinister one. I was awake and numb and frightened. How could I sleep under the same stars as my mother's murderer? I used the camera to dig out. I found that I was still capable of making contact.

Nine years later, I stood in a courtroom following the conviction of the man hired to murder my mother. I looked around the room. Here sat the remnants of my family. There, across the aisle, sat the family of the convicted. So many lives destroyed or damaged by this greedy, stupid act. I wondered if there remained a single soul untouched by violence. Violence in the name of hatred and in the name of love; violence in the name of righteousness and the almighty buck. No contact.

In the fall of 1998 the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities funded a group of photographers sent out to document the state's northeast parishes. I was one of those photographers driving around on Delta roads looking for inspiration. I was rounding a long curve and wondering where all the people were when I saw a small prison. Maybe this is where the people live, I thought. I parked the truck, got out, and knocked on the gate. Large birds circled high overhead. Warden Ray Dixon walked out of his office. "Fine with me," said the warden. I photographed at the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm. I developed and printed the portraits.

Convergence.

Louisiana incarcerates more of its population than any other state in the Union. The United States incarcerates more of its population than any other country in the free world. For three and a half years I photographed at three Louisiana prisons.

East Carroll Parish Prison Farm at Transylvania was built in 1935. It is located a few miles from the Mississippi River in northeast Louisiana. It is a minimum-security parish facility housing approximately two hundred men. The majority of these men are state prisoners serving terms of under five years for drug possession or parole violation. No man at East Carroll is down for more than ten years. Seventy percent of the population is African American. Most of the men have completed less than nine years of formal education. A gymnasium, volleyball court, and iron pile are provided for physical recreation. A small chapel sits on the corner of the compound, where many of the men attend religious services on Sundays and weddings on Saturday mornings. There is a pond near the gate with ducks, fish, turtles, and snakes where the current warden and ordained minister, Edward Knight, conducts baptisms.

The Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel is a minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security facility housing approximately one thousand women. The prison is located a few miles from the Mississippi River in south Louisiana. The St. Gabriel facility more closely resembles a campus than a prison. The grounds are immaculate, and elaborate handmade decorations are rotated throughout the year to acknowledge the changing season's celebrations. The majority of inmates at St. Gabriel are serving sentences directly or indirectly related to drugs. Approximately 10 percent are serving life sentences, and there is one woman on Death Row. Over 39 percent of the women who entered St. Gabriel between 1995 and 2000 tested below the sixth-grade level. Approximately 65 percent of the prison population is African American. The guards at St. Gabriel, almost exclusively women, are not armed, and no gun is kept on the premises.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is a maximum-security facility housing over five thousand men on eighteen thousand acres of Delta farmland. Angola once served as a slave-breeding farm and is surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River. The topsoil here is purported to be twelve feet deep. Inmates work the fields (at a wage of between 4 and 8 cents per hour) that produce food for Angola and other correctional facilities around the state—four million pounds of vegetables per year. Cotton and feed crops are also grown. Fifteen hundred head of cattle and over two hundred horses are raised on this working plantation. Eighty-seven percent of Angola's inmates are violent offenders. Forty percent are first offenders. Seventy-eight percent of inmates are African American. The average inmate reads at the third-grade level. Angola's oldest inmate is ninety-one years old, and the youngest is seventeen. There are ninety men on Death Row. Eighty-eight percent of the men who are incarcerated at Angola will die there. Following the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11th, Angola's inmate population donated \$13,000 to aid victims of the disaster.

I cannot explain the need I felt to produce these portraits, because I do not fully understand it myself. I only know that it has something to do with the formal quality of loss and the way we cannot speak directly to those who have gone—how to touch the disappeared. I cannot explain my need to produce these portraits in such numbers except to say that I needed an aesthetic equivalent to the endless and indirect formality of loss. I also needed rules to support my intentions and to keep from being trapped by them.

Dorothea Lange said, "The best way to go into an unknown territory is to go in ignorant, as ignorant as possible, with your mind wide open, as wide open as possible not having to meet anyone else's requirements but your own." Before I started photographing inmates, I chose not to read accounts of prison life or study the numbing statistics. I wanted the portraits to be as direct a telling as possible—to hold up a mirror for the viewer as well as the subject. My hypostatic concerns required me to become a more disciplined, patient, hardworking, and contemplative photographer, and in some ways a less imaginative one.

We are all creatures of chance and choice. I chose to photograph each person as they presented their very own selves before my camera on the chance that I might be fortunate enough to contact, as poet Jack Gilbert writes, "their hearts in their marvelous cases." I took my chances. I wanted this to be as collaborative an enterprise as possible.

Each person photographed received an average of ten to fifteen wallet-sized prints. I have returned over twenty-five thousand prints to inmates. For the inmates and their families these photographs can be magic things in ways that a letter or a visit cannot be. One woman, whose nineteen children had not written or visited her in the fifteen years of her incarceration, wanted to send photos home to "soften the hearts" of her children. A few months later, four of her children came to St. Gabriel for a reunion with their mother, down for ninety-nine years. An Angola inmate sent his photos to his sister in Florida. She had not seen him in over thirty years. Contact.

An inmate Angola called out to me on the walk, "You been to St. Gabriel, Haven't you?" "How did you know that?" I answered. I had only just visited St. Gabriel for the first time a week or two before. He replied, "'Cause I sent my girlfriend that picture you took of me and she sent me back one just like it." The act of photographing and returning prints to these incarcerated persons and their eventual distribution of the portraits to friends and family are as important to this project, and compelling to me, as any formal exhibition or publication of the images.

The final portraits, like my family's photographs, are small enough to be held in the hand—five by four inches. They are printed on prepared black aluminum. Information supplied by the inmates is etched on the back of each plate and these plates are housed, loose, in a large black steel cabinet. To find the plates the viewer

must pull open the heavy steel drawers that hold them. The plates may then be held and read or arranged on the cabinet top.

These photographs belong to the eyes of the free world viewer—citizen, voter, gallery goer, broker of social policy. They are intended to serve as a reminder of the thin blue line traced by societal and telluric forces that contribute so often to our personal fortunes. They belong equally to the eyes of the photographed in their own universe of family and friends, intended as evidence of life, presented here, as Andre Breton has written, not only as faces to be examined but also "as oracles to be questioned."

Artists, I believe, are often drawn by spirits into strange places. I found myself walking through prison gates. I felt the leaden hours of the forsaken and forgotten. I felt the certain slowing of time and thickening of space—neither here nor there. In this place I found it easy to believe that the earth came from a great swirl of gases and that someday it would end. I have come to understand that, while it was the fear and anger generated by my mother's murder that in great measure ignited this work, it is the loss and hope I feel—that we each feel, one and all—that has fueled it.

—Deborah Luster