

# **BETWEEN THE BARS**

**BY LYNN CLAY BYRNE**

**A DPS ACTING EDITION PUBLISHED BY**

**BROADWAY**

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The world premiere of BETWEEN THE BARS was produced by HERE Arts Center (Kristin Marting, Founding Artistic Director; Lesley Hunter, Managing Director), New York City, on September 30, 2021. It was directed by Benjamin Viertel, the scenic design was by Bryce Cutler, the lighting design was by Mary Ellen Stebbins, the costume design was by Devario Simmons, the sound design was by Adrian Bridges, the COVID compliance officer was Tyler DeLeo, the assistant stage manager was Felipe Cuesta, and the production stage manager was Juliana Crawford. The cast was as follows:

McGEE/ZEKE ..... Juan Arturo  
ATTIS/MASSUD ..... Chad Carstarphen  
BJ/MOHAWK/OTHERS ..... Akeil Davis  
EVE/SORRELL ..... Katie Mack  
CHAD/OTHERS ..... Christopher Mowod  
TISAH/KALEY ..... Nowani Rattray  
ARLENE/OTHERS ..... Carol Todd

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Between the Bars* is based on my experience visiting my son in the Visit Room of a county jail and includes several actual events that happened to him or other inmates at county jails, as well as reports from their guards. The focus of this play is the painful reality of our prison system: the woeful lack of rehabilitative support. Meanwhile, the similarities between those who are incarcerated and those of us who are free are striking; their lot may be fraught with illegal behavior, but their hearts, their sensitivity and their desires are no different. And the line between who should be inside and who remains out here feels surprisingly illusive. Because our system of criminal justice is so morally flawed, the public awareness and sympathy this play may engender is hoped to make an active and valuable contribution toward reform, as well as a more promising future for our culture.

—Lynn Clay Byrne

## CHARACTERS

CHAD—Inmate. White, early 20s. Typical bully, blames everyone else for his problems, but is also emotionally vulnerable and a victim of child abuse. *Crime: Assault on a disabled/elderly person, 2 years.*

McGEE—Inmate. White or white Hispanic, late 20s. Well-educated with an inflated ego. Sarcasm and rudeness are his weapons and he covers vulnerability with aloofness and condescension. *Crime: Sale of drugs to a minor, 2 years.*

ATTIS—Inmate. Black or Black Hispanic, 20s. A genuinely nice guy who has a younger brother mentality. Sincere and loyal to a fault, he's trusting and guileless. *Crime: Class A misdemeanor assault, first offense, 1 year.*

ZEKE—Inmate. White Hispanic, 20s. Poorly educated and a repeat offender. Has an extremely short fuse, though alternately trying to be a good guy. *Crime: Use and possession or delivery of drug paraphernalia near school to nonstudent, 1 year.*

MASSUD—Inmate. Black, late 20s. He never thought he would ever be incarcerated, somewhat self-deluding. Desperate to be above the fray, he is the most determined to get this behind him. *Crime: DUI after 2nd or 3rd offense, 18 months.*

ARLENE—Chad's mother. White, 40s. "White-trash" type, dresses younger than her age, is a flirt and a strong personality who uses bravado to intimidate and seem confident.

SORRELL—McGee's visitor. White or white Hispanic, early 20s. Hairdresser, not too classy or overly well-educated but contemplative and smart. She desperately wants a boyfriend.

EVE—Zeke's visitor. White Hispanic, 20s. Cute and sweet, not well-educated, nonthreatening, she's never known anything different from Zeke or the other men in her life, so tries to accept and adapt.

TISAH—Attis's visitor. Black or Black Hispanic, 20s. Smart and well-spoken, a social worker. She's kind yet strong.

KALEY—Massud’s visitor. Black, mid-20s. Well-educated, introspective, she’s insecure, has been hurt too many times and so is self-protective and suspicious, almost setting herself up to be let down, as that feels inevitable to her.

BJ—Attis’s brother. Black or Black Hispanic, 30s. Cunning. He’s loyal to his brother but he’s a punk and in the end, just wants to save his own skin.

### **OTHER ROLES**

OFFICER TABOR

OFFICER MARONI

PRISONER

KID WITH THE MOHAWK

MOHAWK’S VISITOR

### **DOUBLING**

The play can be performed with as few as 4 men, 3 women and as many as 10 men, 6 women. Recommendations for doubling: Chad/Officer Tabor, McGee/Zeke, Sorrell/Eve, Attis/Massud, Tisah/Kaley, BJ/Officer Maroni/Mohawk, Arlene/Mohawk’s Visitor.

### **PLACE**

The play is set in the Visit Room of a county jail, Upstate New York. (County jails vary in what is allowed during visitor visits and what can be brought in by visitors.)

## NOTES

\*\*\* represents a change of characters in conversation, not necessarily a change of time.

*Between the Bars* is an actor-driven event where the space can be transformed as the play progresses to help tell the story. The set is stark and simple, yet dynamic, allowing for freedom of the use of space to reflect the emotionally charged Visit Room. Emotions crisscross in the inmate's journeys toward redemption and self-forgiveness. The set should be fluid and interpretive. The poetry can be woven into the fabric of the play or separated out of the action as the director sees fit.

### FROM THE DIRECTOR

The poems for me were an opportunity to “escape” the confines of the prison visitation room, emotionally and physically, creating a physical and auditory contrast to the given circumstances of the prison visitation room scenes. The poems were a way to enter into the minds and hearts of the characters and to create abstraction and distance from the individual stories or their day-to-day. My method at the time of our 2021 production at HERE ARTS, was to create a soundscape, where the poems’ words could be prioritized over the visual. We created evocative tableaus while recordings of the actors speaking the poems played throughout the theater. The gestures the actors produced with their bodies were developed in tandem with the company and reflected the emotions and heart-breaking imagery that encircled us all in 2020 and 2021, as well as gestures of control, defiance, love, and resilience of those incarcerated in the United States.





# BETWEEN THE BARS

## Scene 1

\*\*\*1

*Inmates onstage arranged facing along the wall, hands up against the wall. At an offstage command, they all turn and go sit in a chair. Lights flicker, only Chad notices. Lights flicker again, only Chad reacts. Lights out. When they go back on, Officer Maroni is approaching Chad, who screams and tries to get away, Maroni in pursuit. An occasional chair gets thrown in the chase. Lights out. When lights go up, it is Arlene there instead of Maroni, trying to comfort him. Lights out. Lights up, only Chad and McGee are left onstage.*

### McGEE'S POEM.

Wherever can one go to breathe? I search my memories bare.  
Perhaps I've misplaced an element which, combined  
would create air.

I was here at the beginning, ran the gamut of men's crimes.  
I'm the universal vessel of mistakes and fears and lies.

I am every human born and every human yet to be. Every  
man who sits in judgement, every heart that can't be free.

I am the deadlife brought by sin, yet I'm the soaring soul's  
delight! All the earthly traits are mine—perhaps we share  
that sacred right.

There are seven heavenly virtues as such and seven deadly  
sins. What God or man is fit to judge? A heart bursts  
from within.

*Arlene and Sorrell are being wanded by Officer before entering the Visit Room.*

**ARLENE.** *(To Sorrell.)* Oh yeah, I know all them guys who show

up in the Visit Room. Some real losers in there with my boy, believe you me. But, you know, a lot of them just got bad breaks, like my boy, Chad. Who ain't screwed up at some point? Take Chad's roomie, McGee. Like I says. Sold weed to a kid who looked thirty—coulda happened to anybody. Except he got caught. There but for the grace of God, like my mama always said.

**SORRELL.** This feels kinda fucked up, I'm not gonna lie.

*Arlene looks at her like, What, are you going to back down now??*

But like my daddy always said, "here goes nothin'"

*Arlene approaches Chad, Sorrell follows her. Sorrell and McGee awkwardly shake hands. Everyone sits except Arlene.*

**ARLENE.** Where's my big hug, Baby?

*Chad stands up a little resentfully. They hug.*

I came through for you, McGee. As a special favor to my boy here. But I ain't no dating service you know, so act proper. You're damn lucky my friend Sorrell here happened to be free to drive down here today and keep you company.

**McGEE.** I don't remember asking.

*Arlene swishes her hair, smiles proudly, shows off.*

**ARLENE.** Notice anything different about me, Boy? (*To McGee.*) Sorrell here is my professional hairdresser, ain't she somethin', McGee? (*To Chad.*) That guard was thinkin' I was your girlfriend when we come in! Whaddaya think, Chaddy?

**CHAD.** Don't call me that, Ma. I told ya. How come all these other dudes got their shorties visiting them and all I got is you? You promised me a babe, Ma. You know you did. Ba-sic.

\*\*\*2

**SORRELL.** Look at Arlene, so pissed. Could be her boy wants a girlfriend more than a mom, eh?

*Chad and Sorrell look at each other, Arlene notices.*

**McGEE.** I think that's what Chad just said, so yeah.

**SORRELL.** So—McGee. That's an interesting name.

*McGee is silent.*

You like cookies? I hear visitors around here bring cookies. I like baking—cookies aren't my speci-ality but I make these butter-scotch squares—

**McGEE.** I'm allergic.

**SORRELL.** Whaddaya up to with that drawin' pad there? You like drawin'? I heard you write poetry, too.

**McGEE.** I'm not drawing. I'm doodling. I need something to do.

**SORRELL.** You'd a thought there was plenty of chances to doodle before and after visitin' hours. C'mon, McGee, give it a rest.

*McGee stops mid-doodle, looks at her. Places the pad and pencil down.*

**McGEE.** There were.

**SORRELL.** What. There were what?

**McGEE.** Plenty of chances. You said, "there was plenty of chances." It's "there were."

\*\*\*3

*McGee notices Sorrell and Chad exchange interested glances.*

*(To Chad.)* Hey Man, you tell your mama yet about them nightmares you keep having?

**ARLENE.** Again? What the hell you still havin' nightmares for, you're a grown man. Jesus, Chad... All right. I know where those nightmares are comin' from. I was there, too, ya know. But it's over now. Them days are over. We survived, Chad, us, not him! It's past history! You need to let it go; let all that shit go, Son.

*Chad starts to protest, as that is not the reason and she knows it, then lets it go, deflates.*

**CHAD.** I can't, Ma. It's too hard. I can't even hardly sleep. I need help, Ma. I need pills. Sleepin' in this place is worse than livin' in it.

**ARLENE.** Aaaaah, that sad little boy pout ain't gonna work on me no more, Chad-daddy. I think we been looking at this whole thing wrong! Maybe being in jail is like one of them gift horses, you know, like "don't look a gift horse in the mouth"? The mouth part, that's the jail! The gift horse, that's gotta be somethin' good that comes outta—the horse's mouth! Right? This here is your chance to

dry out, son! So, Baby, my supporting you here is my way of helping you get yourself cleaned up! Right? You getting me?

**CHAD.** I was just asking you to help me out wit' some sleepin' pills, Ma. I'm askin' you for a favor, that's what you can do to support me. Come on. You want me to feel better? Trust me. We'll both seem a lot better when I'm gettin' some sleep.

**ARLENE.** How come you're always changing the subject on me? All kids have bad dreams—but then they grow out of them, Chad! Aren't you startin' to find this embarrassing? (*Whispers loudly.*) You're twenty-fucking-five years old, Chad!

*She notices him and Sorrell look at each other, bristles, makes sure Sorrell hears her.*

Don't go makin' a fool of yourself again, Boy!

**McGEE.** Oh, Mom, you're traumatizing your kid again.

**ARLENE.** I am not traumatizing nobody. I would never do that to my son and don't you pull your badass attitude on me, McGee.

**McGEE.** Jeez, Arlene, I'm traumatized by you and you're not even allowed near me.

*Chad is still looking at Sorrell, Arlene speaks loudly for Sorrell to hear.*

**ARLENE.** And why are you so fixated on the babe I brought in for McGee? You're not her type, Son! No woman wants to be with a man who wakes her up at night because he's having nightmares!

*Chad reacts with vulnerability that he manages, finally, to hide. To cover, he turns to McGee.*

**CHAD.** Mac—that chick of yours dresses kinda slutty, don't ya think?

\*\*\*4

**OFFICER MARONI.** (*To Tisah, arriving for a visit.*) Mmm. What do we got here today?

**TISAH.** My famous snickerdoodles. Remember, those are for Attis over there!

**OFFICER MARONI.** (*Meaningfully.*) Ha, at least they still warm, hunh?

*Officer Maroni winks. He takes them and walks upstage behind a partition.*

**ATTIS.** You feelin' better, Tisah? You still got that sickly, tired-ass look on you.

**TISAH.** Hey you. Want me to find you somebody a little more lively to come on up here and hang with you instead? For real, I could go look! —...Naw, I'm good. A heavy caseload, too many late visits with overworked parents, nothing new really.

*Attis ducks his head, chuckles.*

**ATTIS.** Oh damn, Girl, you straight-up fine with them baggy circles under your eyes. Even them nose freckles lookin' mad beautiful to me right now, Baby.

**TISAH.** Yeah? Don't even try to sweet talk me right now, I know your game.

**ATTIS.** That is facts—you got me. Hard-core.

**TISAH.** Good thing I know better, Attis. Yo, this place is fucked up...like some morbid kind of deadlife, even the air in here smells like it's been recycled from a funeral home. Just one time I want to see you some place where I can breathe.

**ATTIS.** Oh yeah I been prayin', I mean *prayin'* for that, too. That and for a chance to make up for all this...to my family and you... and you know, to God. That helps, a little. Six more months, Baby, six more. Anybody could wait that long. Hell, you could wait that long can't you? Like you promised! You know you did!

**TISAH.** I saw your brother, he said HEY.

**ATTIS.** He look okay?

**TISAH.** I don't know, about the same. Doesn't hang at home much. He's always gotta jangle the keys in his pocket, shake his leg, look everywhere but AT a person. You and BJ are so different. You'd think you were the big brother.

**ATTIS.** No way, you just don't know him like I do. He skittish but he cool. He ain't been a bad brother, neither. You know he always be lookin' out for the little ones? Checkin' in on 'em, makin' sure they pops be keeping food in the house and shit. Tellin' 'em, do they homework, yo.

**TISAH.** You might be surprised. Those two giggle bunnies are way more upstanding than you two big-ear losers.

**ATTIS.** You ain't still goin' over there as a case worker? Damn, I'd ha' thought they graduated from that bullshit by now.

**TISAH.** Oh no, no graduating. I'm still assigned to see them twice a month. Be honest with you, sometimes I'm up over there once or twice a week. My car just shows up in your driveway. I love those kids, Attis, they amazing.

**ATTIS.** They axe about me?

**TISAH.** ...Yeah... They ask what you sent them. You're always sendin' comics or gum or a pair of mittens or...nothing big, just like treats to remember you by. I tell them you're gonna be home pretty soon. You know.

**ATTIS.** I didn't know that, actually. You—from me? How could I, I should of...thanks, Ma. So how about next time, you bring 'em a nice PS-5 from me?!

## Scene 2

\*\*\*5

*Eve goes through security, hands a plate of iced sugar cookies to the guard and points to Zeke as recipient.*

**EVE.** Je. Sus. what's up now, Baby?

**ZEKE.** What? Nothin', B.

*Eve reaches up to touch his face, he flinches.*

**OFFICER TABOR.** Sit, Inmate. One hug upon greeting, no further contact. You know the rules.

**EVE.** You had another throwdown, Zeke.

**ZEKE.** Stop messin' through my business, Girl, ain't nobody tell yo' nosey ass nuttin' about nuttin'.

**EVE.** I know you lose your temper like three times a day. And then at least four times a day you promise you ain't never gonna let nobody get you heated again.

**ZEKE.** Like I said. You got no idea. I ain't start nuttin'. That clown—he was disrespectin' me. Know this—that shit don't work up in here.

**EVE.** What was he doing that was so wrong??

*Beat.*

**ZEKE.** Yo, chica, dude put his eye on my avocado toast!

\*\*\*6

*She is always hyperaware of what goes on around her here, yet curious, too.*

**KALEY.** Oh Massud, I still get the shivers coming in here! I've always been afraid of jails. Did I ever mention how my Granny used to tell us stories of “men folk” down where she grew up who were hauled off to jail and never came back? I've been haunted by that ever since. I guess that fear doesn't even make sense at this point.

**MASSUD.** Well, it makes enough sense when you're sitting on this side of the table. But it'll be OK, I'm serving this shithole sentence and getting the hell away from here as far as possible the second it's over and you won't ever have to ever come back.

**KALEY.** Is your cousin's boy in here with you, too? Have you seen him? I can't bear for a kid like him to be locked up. He should never have been thrown in here with grown men like this.

**MASSUD.** Mohawk. The least I can do while I'm here is look after him. Just be glad he's not on his own. It's tough for him, no lie, but he's a pretty resilient kid, really. Don't worry. Now! Tell me—you get that interview?

**KALEY.** I did. I went. I'm not qualified for that job, Massud! I told you that.

**MASSUD.** That's negative talk, Girl. I don't wanna hear that. You're a natural with kids with autism. Anybody would have to be a fool not to hire you. You wait and see.

**KALEY.** It's been a week and I haven't heard anything. I don't want to talk about it anymore, I came here to see you and forget about my state of unemployment and all my other debts to society!

**MASSUD.** You will be the best teacher in the state of New York. I know you will. Now go call them soon as you get out the door.

**KALEY.** You think it's OK to call them?

**MASSUD.** At the end of the day, I'm gonna need somebody to support me after I get outta this place, so yeah, make that call. Tell them you got mouths to feed!

**KALEY.** If I call them I'm probably not going to mention anything about your mouth—or where it's residing at these days.

**MASSUD.** (*Laughs.*) Hey, you!

**KALEY.** I practically never wanted anything as much as I want that job. I guess I'm dead terrified to find out I didn't get it.

**MASSUD.** There's practically "nothing" you ever wanted so much as that job?

*Beat.*

**KALEY.** Nothing I'd be willing to admit to—until—or—. No, not yet.

**MASSUD.** Damn, Girl, you like hanging me out to dry, don't you? Someday you're going to have to take that leap and risk your worst fears for a shot at controlling your own destiny. Mark my words: Someday, when it means enough to you.

\*\*\*7

**EVE.** OK Zeke. Now you're goin' to spill? What is up with your face?

**ZEKE.** (*Relents. Mumbles.*) Nothin'—jus' the everyday shit in this place.

**EVE.** What?

**ZEKE.** Everyday shit! Dude can't get down with doin' nothin' dirty, he ain't gon' eat in here. You like a target till everybody know you deadass that you fo' sure gon' be a survivor. Or should I say until you done earned you the right to survive; till you got yo' ass some serious clout.

**EVE.** Wait. What? You have to fight for your food? You never mentioned that before.

**ZEKE.** Ya, real talk. First they all be like takin' your food from you. Then you gotta fight just to hold onto that shit. And sometimes you gotta prove yo' self over and over. I'm fresh bait now that I'm back inside again. New circumstances. New posse in town.



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