

# *An Evening of Poetry*

# Reginald Dwayne Betts

Monday, February 26  
Luth Concert Hall  
Prior Presents 2023–24

**PRIOR**  
Performing Arts Center

# Welcome

Dear friends,

The 2023-2024 Prior Presents series features a number of artists working at the intersection of art and activism. Our latest artist-in-residence, Reginald Dwayne Betts, holds the unusual position of being a prolific writer who is also a lawyer. As a poet, memoirist, essayist, and dramatist, he draws on first-hand experience with the horrors of incarceration to render the systemic ills of the criminal justice system in viscerally human terms. As a lawyer, he draws on the same first-hand experience to advocate for clients who face extended sentences and to propose specific avenues for criminal justice reform. Together with the Office of Justice, Equity, Belonging, and Identity, and supported by the Department of English and the program in Peace and Conflict Studies, The Prior is honored to bring Betts to Holy Cross.

The bidirectionality of Betts' writerly gaze is signaled by the opening of *Felon*, the author's acclaimed 2019 collection. Written in one of Betts' signature forms, a *ghazal*, the poem is comprised of couplets that each include a rhyme and a standard refrain. At once distilled and expansive, the poem serves as a window into Betts' broader oeuvre as rhyming words like "suspect," "wrecked," "reject," "protect," and "resurrect" accumulate across stanzas to offer prismatic perspectives on the refrain "after prison." As Betts suggests, *after* prison is a temporality that continues to require thinking *on* prison. It is a hard poem to forget once you've read it. Indeed, his fellow poet Jericho Brown anticipates how many in this evening's audience may feel in the wake of Betts' talk when he writes that "[Betts' work] sings, howls, rhymes, and resonates in memory many years after it was first read."

Throughout his career, Betts has emphasized how radically his life was changed by the literature he encountered in prison. Aiming to impact other individuals in a similar way, he recently created the program Freedom Reads, which places and activates libraries in prisons around the country. "I do not believe that a book alone will grant a person wings," Betts has written, "but the hope of it all is not a fantasy." A similar spirit inspires his aim to connect throughout his travels with people in prison. While at Holy Cross he will bring his story and his interest in others' stories to incarcerated individuals within our own community at the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction.

Betts closes his powerful *New York Times Magazine* essay "Getting Out" with his reflection on what it means to give his young sons an image of their father as "both a convict and an attorney!" In the courtroom and classroom, on the page and in the public square, Betts offers the powerful reminder that *everyone* is more than one thing—and encourages us to question and confront the iniquities of any system that dares suggest otherwise.

Kyle Frisina  
Interim Director  
Prior Performing Arts Center

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# Biography

In October 2018, *The New York Times Magazine* published Reginald Dwayne Betts' long essay "Getting Out." Several months later, the piece was awarded a National Magazine Award. The publication was another example of this poet, author, and lawyer entering into a new genre and bringing his characteristic depth and rich self-reflection to the central problem of this generation: incarceration and its effects on families and communities.

Betts' work reflects his journey from a sixteen-year-old sentenced as an adult to nine years in prison to a critically acclaimed writer and graduate of Yale Law School. He has written four collections of poetry, the critically acclaimed *Redaction*, *Felon*, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, and *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*. When he was awarded the PEN New England Award for poetry for his collection, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, judge Mark Doty said: "Betts has written an indelible lament for a generation, a necessary book for this American moment." His memoir, *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*, is the story of a young man confined in the worst prisons in the state of Virginia, where solitary confinement, horrific conditions, and the constant violence threatened to break his humanity. Instead, Betts used the time to turn himself into a poet, a scholar, and an advocate for the reform of the criminal justice system. Betts' third collection of poetry, *Felon*, interrogates and challenges our notions of justice. *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani has called his work both "haunting and harrowing." His most recent collection, *Redaction*, follows from a collaborative installation created with visual artist Titus Kaphar, originally displayed as an exhibition of prints at MoMA PS1. Drawing inspiration and source material from lawsuits filed by the Civil Rights Corps on behalf of people incarcerated because of an inability to pay court fines and fees, *Redaction* features poetry by Betts in combination with Kaphar's etched portraits of incarcerated individuals. Together, Betts' poems and Kaphar's printed portraits blend the voices of poet and artist with those of the plaintiffs and prosecutors, reclaiming these lost narratives and drawing attention to some of the many individuals whose lives have been impacted by mass incarceration.

A widely requested speaker and a vocal advocate for criminal justice reform, Betts is the founder and director of Freedom Reads, an initiative which creates libraries and literary experiences within prisons across the U.S. Between his work in public defense, his years of advocacy, and his own experiences as a teenager in maximum security prisons, Betts is uniquely positioned to reflect on the failures of the current criminal justice system and present encouraging ideas for change. As a result of that work, President Barack Obama appointed Betts to the Coordinating Council of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. More recently, Governor Ned Lamont of Connecticut appointed him to the Criminal Justice Commission, the state body responsible for hiring prosecutors in Connecticut.

Named a 2018 Guggenheim Fellow and a 2018 NEA Fellow, Betts has also garnered a Soros Justice Fellowship, a Radcliffe Fellowship, a Ruth Lily Fellowship, an NAACP Image Award, and a New America Fellowship. He has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Post*, as well as being interviewed on NPR's *Fresh Air*, *The Travis Smiley Show* and other national shows. He holds a B.A. from the University of Maryland; an M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College, where he was a Holden Fellow; and a J.D. from Yale Law School, where he was awarded the Israel H. Perez Prize for best student note or comment appearing in the Yale Law Journal. He is a Ph.D. in Law candidate at Yale and, as a Liman Fellow, he spent a year representing clients in the New Haven Public Defender's Office. Betts was also one of 25 selected for the 2021 MacArthur Fellowship.

# Prior Performing Arts Center

A catalyst for creativity and learning, the Prior Performing Arts Center amplifies the arts at Holy Cross and provides the College, the greater Worcester community, and visiting creative thinkers with an inspiring environment to pursue diverse questions of the human experience.

For more information, visit [www.priorperformingartscenter.org](http://www.priorperformingartscenter.org).

## Prior Presents

Reginald Dwayne Betts's talk is the fifth event of this year's **Prior Presents** series, The Prior's signature visiting artist program, which complements the innovation and creativity of work produced throughout the year by Holy Cross students, faculty, and staff. Building on the foundation laid by Arts Transcending Borders (2014-2023), Prior Presents is the keystone of The Prior Performing Arts Center's public-facing programming, merging thrilling live events by visiting artists with robust educational and outreach activities. Defined by exceptional artistic quality, interdisciplinary impulses, and the potential to spark both wonder and reflection, this annual series celebrates artistic risk-taking and the exchange of ideas and perspectives from around the globe. Short- and long-term visiting artist residencies include performances, artist talks, installations, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities for Holy Cross students and the greater Worcester community. Creative residencies, which provide artists with time and space to develop new work, make an essential contribution to the broader arts ecosystem and provide on- and off-campus community members with a window into intimate aspects of the creative process.

Upcoming Prior Presents events include:

### Gonzalo Grau and La Clave Secreta

February 29 | 8:00pm | Beehive

Multi-hyphenate artist Gonzalo Grau returns to Holy Cross with his Grammy-nominated salsa fusion group La Clave Secreta. With Latin music as its foundation, La Clave Secreta incorporates elements of jazz, funk, rock, classical, R&B, neo-soul, and the cultural backgrounds of its performers.

### Cultural Exchange Rate

Tania El Khoury

March 11-16, 2024 | Boroughs Theatre

In this interactive multimedia experience by Lebanese live artist Tania El Khoury, audiences are invited to engage with an astonishing collection of sensory artifacts that collectively trace more than a century of border crossings.

### Rhiannon Giddens

March 14, 2024 | 7:30 pm | Luth Concert Hall

The iconic folk artist Rhiannon Giddens, who has stretched her inimitable brand of folk music into nearly every field imaginable, performs from her first album of entirely original songs, "You're the One."

### Boston Lyric Opera

The Wanderer's Tethering

April 6, 2024 | 3:00 pm | Luth Concert Hall

With poetry by Boston Poet Laureate Porsha Olayiwola and music by composer Mason Bynes, "The Wanderer's Tethering" follows the story of Tobi, a descendant of an Igbo community whose members were stolen from what is today Nigeria and who led a revolt against their enslavers on the shores of Georgia in 1803. The program will also include stirring selections of chamber music by Castle of Our Skins.

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