

## THE SYSTEM

BRIAN PACE<sup>∞</sup>

*In this longform poem, Brian Pace shares his views about the criminal punishment system. He examines how Black and brown people become caught up in the system, how they are treated within it, and how it is next to impossible to be freed from the system once caught in its web.*

Some say that the justice system is broken,  
while others say it's doing exactly what it's designed to do.

**So, the question is: What is it designed to do?**

Because all I see is Black and brown people getting lost in the system,  
trapped inside a maze with no outlet, searching for an exit that doesn't exist.

Because even after you've served your time and paid your debt to society, you're  
still labeled a convict or felon and subjected to probation or parole and sent back to  
prison for any technical or minor violation.

So, to me, the justice system can be considered a trap,  
easy to get into, but oh-so-hard to get out.

And once the system bites you, it won't let go until it injects its venom into your  
veins, which to some can be deadly, but others become immune and the bite  
doesn't sting anymore,

so they just accept it and lock themselves into a modern-day grave to be neglected.

**Another question I would like to add is:**

**How can a system of justice be truly just when it convicts innocent men and  
women on a daily basis?**

And where is the justice when you take a father away from his children for a  
nonviolent offense, only for those same children to be raised by the streets,  
perpetuating a vicious cycle?

I often hear a question that bothers me. A question that is profound.

And that question is:

**“Where have all the Black men gone?”**

They're locked away in a prison cell,  
caught in the net of systemic racism,  
tangled in the sticky webs of oppression,  
fighting for their freedom,

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<sup>∞</sup> Brian Pace is from Indianapolis, Indiana. Prior to his incarceration, he ran a successful home improvement business. He now strives to turn his life around, be the best man he can be, and show the youth in his community how to make a transformation from negative to positive.

awaiting their release from captivity to be home free, home with family and friends once again.

**“Where have all the Black men gone?”**

They’re out of sight, out of mind,  
confined in a cage or, better said,  
a modern-day grave because he’s dead to the world but still alive at the same time,  
looking for a way out of the maze  
that he’s been trapped in for the past four decades.

**“Where have all the Black men gone?”**

They’re doing 10–30 for a nonviolent drug conviction,  
in the name of the “War on Drugs,”  
so now he resides on the new plantation, hauled off into mass incarceration,  
the new slavery, and labeled a convict,  
so now he’s subject to legal discrimination.

Now this question is asked:

**“Momma, where is my daddy at?”**

He’s gonna be gone for a while, but  
hopefully he’ll be back before your graduate or before you walk down the aisle.

**“Momma, where is my daddy at?”**

Baby, he’s locked in the pen, for a crime he didn’t commit,  
paying for another man’s sin.

**“Momma, where is my daddy at?”**

He’s stuck inside a box, on 23-hour lockdown,  
waiting for his captors to unlock the lock.

**So, where have all the Black men gone?**

They’re being warehoused inside a penitentiary away from their families,  
ostracized from society and branded a felon, which upon release makes it easy to  
be looked at as the scum of the earth and not worthy of redemption.  
But that couldn’t be farther from the truth. In fact, they are worthy of redemption  
and deserve a second or even a third chance until they get it right.

See, we have to uplift and build with each other, because we all make mistakes and  
fall short.

But the beauty in falling short, making mistakes, even failure, is the lessons that  
come with each shortcoming.

Because each failed attempt drops little seeds of success that, if recognized, can be planted and cultivated into a springboard that can launch us to succeed in whatever we so choose to endeavor.

So, let's lift each other up and create an atmosphere in which we can build one another up despite our past failures, and get out and stay out of the "system."