

A VOICE FROM INSIDE:

Juvenile Life without Parole

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Contents

Abstract:	2
I. Introduction	3
II. Stamped and Molded	4
The Early Years	5
III. Creatures of this Place	12
Beginning a Life Behind Bars.....	13
IV. The Man in the Mirror	21
Fish to Lifer.....	22
V. Dreaming Once Again	28
Finding Hope on the Inside.....	29
Waking Up	34
Works Consulted.....	35

Abstract:

The purpose of this work is to serve as a social narrative on the use of Juvenile Life without Parole (JLWOP) by the modern American justice system. As a creative short story written in four parts, it follows the journey of 15 year old Jamal, from his first brushes with gang life to his interminable fight for survival in San Quentin. Written in first person, this story incorporates anecdotes, poetry, and self reflection, united by an underlying question of justice. Jamal's struggle with everyday life, first on the streets and then as an inmate, is paralleled by his struggle to not lose himself in the fear and loneliness that is prison life. Written in response to the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Graham v. Florida*, this work aims only to shed some light on the lives of the over 2500 American children who have been sentenced to death by incarceration.

I. Introduction

When you have nothing left but yourself, and you don't even really own that anymore, there are so many things to miss that sometimes it's hard to focus on any one. But most guys can tell you those few things they would give anything to get back. For me it wasn't the physical things: my mom's cooking, my Nintendo, a soft warm bed; and it wasn't even the intangible things that get to a lot of guys: freedom, quiet, control; for me it was the ability to dream that I missed the most. Not sleeping dreams about flying hamburgers or talking toilets or whatever else my subconscious serves up after lights out, but dreams for the future. Plans, hopes, dreams--hell the concept of a future at all. At 15 I didn't really have a plan, nothing longer term than trying to impress my bros and dodge my mom's nagging, but I guess it's like they say, "you don't know what you've got till it's gone."

Well, the Supreme Court of the United States of America just ruled that my being here in this cell is 'cruel and unusual punishment.' And damn if I ain't glad for the few classes they still offer us or I wouldn't understand the importance of that decision, much less be able to spell importance. But when all that is left to do in a man's life is to wait for it to end, any distraction, even school, helps the time pass faster towards the end.

I am in prison on the charge of first degree attempted murder of a police officer with sentence enhancements for the aggravating factors of gang affiliation, use of a firearm, and narcotics trafficking. I was 15 years old when California locked me up and threw away the key. For the first time in a decade, I have hope that I may not die in the cell I am writing this from. My name is Jamal Lewis. I was sentenced to life without parole as a juvenile, and this is my story.

II. Stamped and Molded

There was a time, a while ago
When I did not sleep to a grown man's screams
but rather
to my mother's lies
“There is a God and He loves you”
She said.
And I believed her
As the young and the innocent are
So easily fooled.
But now I know
God only loves the worthy souls
those who keep their future for themselves
And I am not one.
In fact, I am no one.
There was a time when I could have been someone,
I think
But I was stamped and molded wrong.
From something was created
Nothing

The Early Years

I'm not a big believer in fate. To believe in fate would be to believe that I belong in a cell, that I was only ever destined to have 15 years of freedom. But, looking back on how I got here, I sometimes have to remind myself that it wasn't fate, because it sure seems like the odds were against me. I'm not trying to blame my mistakes on some Higher Power, but let me tell you the events that led to my life in San Quentin, and let you decide. There is no one moment in time I could pinpoint as the beginning of my story, but a good place to start is back in 9th grade.

It had been just me and my mom for as long as I could remember. My dad had never been around, he left Ma when she was pregnant with me, and just never came back. It wasn't that big a deal though because where I lived most kids either didn't have dads or wished they didn't. When I was 9 years old, my best friend, James Jr. (everyone called him Lil' J), slept at my house for a week 'cause his old man went on a bender and was swinging his fists at anything that moved. Before that, I had been one of those little boys who dreamed about his Dad one day coming home and apologizing for thinking he ever could have been happy without his family. When I saw the bruises on Lil' J's mom's face when she came to pick him up, I decided right then and there that I was better off living with my Ma than I ever would have been if my dad had stuck around. If he didn't want us, then we didn't need him.

That's not to say that Ma and I had it easy, but we got along alright. There were good times and bad times, but they were pretty predictable, and that helped. When she was drunk, she would get real sad and cry about all kinds of things—my dad leaving, or our constant lack of money, or sometimes over nothing at all. We got along best when she was high. Now my Ma

never hit the pipe or anything like that, but she would have smoked pot day in and day out if she could have afforded it.

I was one of the few guys on the block that didn't mind school so much. I was awful at math, but everything else came easy enough to me. I got pretty good grades up until I started cutting a lot of classes to hang out with my boys. We lived right in the middle of the NBT zone, between the Rollin' 60s and the Hoovers. If you lived in South Bureau long enough you would eventually get some pressure to set up. Nowadays it's more than pressure, a lot of guys in here joined up to get protection for their families. But, back then the Crips sets around my area were still on the rise and hadn't fully built their presence on the streets. There were still a lot of guys who weren't joined up, but people looked up to those who had with a mix of fear and respect. I wanted to be looked at like that too, and soon enough I was offered exactly that.

In the fall of '99, when I was just starting my freshman year of high school, Ma got picked up for smoking on the street. That had been a good week for us moneywise; Ma had cleaned some houses after her shift at the diner and picked up some extra cash. Normally, this would've been a good thing, but she spent her extra cash getting a couple of ounces of weed. The cops found it on her, and because of the quantity she got slapped with a year of felony probation. I wouldn't have known anything about all this, but few months later recruiters started to get serious about me and Lil' J.

Some of the NBT's had started cruising past my house and walked home from school with me and Lil' J. I wasn't used to getting noticed by guys who were older, bigger, and more respected than me. I craved the attention, listening to their stories about protecting the neighborhood and keeping our families safe when even the cops were afraid to answer calls out here after dark. I had heard from my Ma that gangs were put on earth to corrupt the youth and

would lead nowhere but to violence and prison. But the homies that would come and talk to us weren't trying to start trouble; they were trying to keep us safe. They had a meaning, a purpose to their actions, which was a lot more than I felt I had at the time. I wanted so badly to be a part of their group, not just to be respected by them, but to be a part their family. Because that's what a set is, the other members are your brothers and sisters who you would do anything for, and they'd do anything for you, and together you are closer than blood.

The older boys hanging around her son did not go unnoticed by Ma. She absolutely in no way wanted me to join up, and she was ready to do whatever it took to stop me. So she did the only thing that might have worked to keep me out of NBT, she up and decided to move us to my aunt's place in Texas. I yelled and screamed and begged and pleaded, but she wasn't having any of it. Ma has always been stronger than she lets on to most people, and I think she would have moved mountains to get me away from the temptation of gang life.

But the one thing stronger than my mom was her parole officer. She came home one day swearing like I had never heard before, cursing her P.O. out with every swear in the book and then some. Not only had he reminded her that she had to stay in the state, but that her parole was dependent on steady employment, so even moving to a different city was out of the question unless she had a job lined up. Her work at the diner was what kept us from going hungry week to week, and she didn't have money saved up to pay for rent while looking for a new job. Texas was the only option because we could have stayed for free until we got settled, but Ma still had months on her parole, and her P.O. flat-out refused to grant her a transfer.

Within a month I had been initiated into NTB, wearing the bruises and cuts with pride. I think the guys went light on me when I got beat in, maybe because everyone knew I was recruited for my ability to paint, not fight. Soon the fear and shock of having one of my friends,

my homies, throw a punch at me out of the blue before getting joined by his boys, was replaced with pride when I was officially a member of NTB. There was already a Jamal in the set, so I went by Myszchief, my original tagging name. Being part of the set was everything I imagined it would be, and the importance of protecting and rep'ing my homies in the 'hood quickly surpassed everything else in my life.

It's almost funny how the worst moments of your life, those moments you would give anything to take back or just have wiped from your mind, are the ones that are most etched into memory. And you never know one of those moments is coming until you are right in the middle of it. After all, the day that landed me in this cell started out normally enough.

It was the first day of school break in the summer of '92. I woke up to Lil' J pounding on my window, yelling at me to get my ass outta bed and to the shed. So I got up and threw on my gear which back then was a black hoodie and tee, jeans, and my Nike Airs. Lil' J and I biked over to the shed together; we used to do almost everything together back then. Walking into the shed always felt like going home, at this point I was probably spending more time in that dingy room then I spent at my own apartment. My mom hated when I would go out and hang with my homeboys, but there was nothing she could say to make me stay home, not after I got jumped in and became official. I had gotten NBT inked on both forearms with Lil' J a few weeks before, a reminder that we were in this for life and proud of it. My boys were my family now, not that I would have ever abandoned Ma, but she just didn't understand.

That morning we were meeting up to plan out where to hit next. For almost a year, the set had been in a tagging war with the '40s. They had been hitting walls in our territory, and we weren't gonna stand for that. Being newer and younger than a lot of the other NBTs, I didn't have a real say in the planning. That was mostly Big Tee; Tyrone had been in the set longer than

any of the other homies and his word was close to law. Big Tee made the call that Lil' J and I would bike down to Leirmert Park, packing 4 canisters each and all the filled pens we could stash. He and some of the older homeboys were gonna drive down and meet us with more paint and watch our backs while we worked. I didn't know at the time, but they were also heading down to do a deal with the Hoovers we'd clicked up with who hung around Leirmert.

When Lil' J and I got to the park we went straight to it, working our piece over the 40s tags. I had been tagging with him for years, since way before NBT became our lives. Lil' J would mostly work outline after I laid out the rough shape. While he filled in, and we worked the black, I would do shading and coloring, tossing each other cans when they ran low. It was always my designs that we used, Lil' J wasn't the artistic type, but he has a good steady hand and having him fill the outline cut the time it took to finish a tag in half. When hitting a wall, the battle between speed and quality is constantly raging. On the one side, the tags represented the whole set, so I really didn't want to show NTB as anything other than impressive; on the other hand, tagging is illegal and the longer you've got a paint can in your hand, the higher the chances are of getting caught. Sometimes though, it doesn't matter how fast you work.

The homies dealing with the Hoovers heard the sirens first. I could get into a kind of a trance when I was tagging, focused entirely on the work. The lines and shades were all I saw, the feel of cold metal in my hand, the smell paint in the air pulling all my senses into the piece. I heard my name being yelled before I registered the sound of sirens. Lil' J and I flew into action, grabbing canisters and throwing them into bags, before we realized there was no time. Krazy yelled for me from the car, and I pushed Lil' J toward his bike. Because he had only been working the black paint, and like me was covered with a black hoodie, his role in the tag was

nowhere near as obvious as mine. I was covered in neon streaks of paint, made all the more obvious by my black clothing.

Lil' J biked off as fast as he could in the opposite direction of the sirens while I ran for the car. The boys threw open the back door as the Hoover's car screeched away around the corner. We started driving with the cops in the rearview, lights flashing, speeding after us. In the front seat Ronny yelled "Fuck" over and over while turning every corner as fast as he could to try and lose the Cops. Bones was grabbing baggies of crack and a few that looked like heroin off the dash and throwing them in the glove as fast as he could. The glove fell open to reveal more drugs than I had seen in my entire life, which at this point had been largely limited to seeing a few baggies of crack and some weed at the shed.

I began to understand why Ronny was trying so hard to avoid the cops, and why he, Bones, and Krazy looked terrified. Getting rolled up for tagging would have been bad, mostly cause I hadn't been recorded by the cops yet as a member of the NBTs, but it would be absolutely nothing compared to getting pulled in for dealing crack. The other guys in the car were all over 18 and would be tried as adults. Krazy and Ronny had records, and put on top of that, they would get real time if the cops managed to stop us.

Ronny swung into an alley that was blocked halfway through by a green city dumpster. There was another chorus of "Fucks" shouted off in the car as he slammed the brakes on and we fishtailed to a halt, with the car stopped diagonally across the alleyway. Two cop cars pulled in, trapping us between them and the dumpster. Bones whipped a handgun out from under his seat and fired off a few shots at the cop cars as we piled out of the other side of the car. Ronny had smacked his head on the steering wheel when we stopped, and was just sitting there, staring

straight ahead, until Krazy and I hauled him out of the car to the pavement. Ronny hit the ground, with Bones getting out nearly on top of him, when all hell broke loose.

I had heard before that in moments of extreme panic or stress time seems to slow down. Well, this was the complete opposite. The sound of shots was suddenly coming at me from seemingly all sides, bouncing off the walls of the small alley. The officers were yelling to one another while Bones threw Krazy a handgun and tossed me the spent gun he had started the shootout with. Ronny was sitting against the car while I gripped the gun, the warmth from its barrel slightly surprising me, before I dropped it on the ground. Bones had probably used all the rounds before handing it to me, knowing that I had never shot a gun before, but dropping a possibly loaded gun could be added to the seemingly endless list of mistakes I made that day, starting with getting out of bed.

Bones got hit with a round in the shoulder and fell. Krazy, by that point, was out of bullets, and we waited till it was silent on both sides. The cops yelled for us to stand with our hands up and come around the car, slowly. I followed Bones and Krazy, doing what they asked, and listened to Krazy try and explain that Ronny was still behind the car but unarmed. We laid on ground spread eagle as they cuffed and Mirandized us. My cheek was pressed against the warm rough pavement, and I felt completely numb. I had no idea how my afternoon had gone from working a wall, one of my favorite activities, to laying in this alley, listening to Bones whimper as his torn up shoulder was pulled back into cuffs. My last moments in free air, and I was barely even there.

III. Creatures of this Place

They leer
at me through their Cell doors.
Animals in cages, hackles raised high
Creatures of this place.
Faces marred,
scarred with ink, old wounds and hate.
It was not, however,
the faces that scared me most.
It was the eyes.
not reflecting light but absorbing it.
Could a person's eyes change color
From brown or blue or green
to black?
If eyes are windows to the soul
Is what I'm seeing
the abyss within?
And in time, will my own eyes turn
to black as well?

Beginning a Life Behind Bars

When I think about my first few weeks here, they come to me in uneven chunks of time-- flashes of memory surrounded by a blur of sounds and faces. That time was little more than a barrage of tests and medical exams, shouted commands and endless interviews. With no time to adjust, I was on constant sensory and emotional overload. My mind recorded the events as though I was in a dream, a nightmare my mind could not fully process or wake from. A few moments emerge from the haze, crystal clear and burned into my memory forever, beginning with my first minutes inside.

Stepping through the barred doors of San Quentin, the first thing that struck me was the air. It was thick in my mouth, wetly filling my lungs as I pulled a deeper breath hoping for a dry relief that wouldn't come. Growing up in Los Angeles I knew what it was like to live in a haze of hot smog-filled air. This was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The air was not just heavy with humidity, but weighed down with the stench of thousands of sweaty men. It had a stale quality, which I now recognize as the result stacking men like animals in buildings with closed doors and windows that open less than 4 inches, if at all. The stench was so strong that not only could I smell San Quentin, I could taste it. However, most disorienting of all was the sound. Clanging, yelling, stomping—echoing endlessly off the concrete, metal and stone, assaulting my ears.

The noise was deafening. The guards on either side of me were ushering the group I had traveled with since we left County this morning down the hallway. There was no time to adjust to the new surroundings, not that I had been given time to really adjust to any of the events that had occurred over the past month. The guy walking next to me, covered in tattoos from his neck

to his fingertips, was staring directly ahead, walking unflinchingly forward. He looked disinterested in everything going on around him, concerned only with putting one foot in front of the other. It was immediately apparent that he had been through this process before, and seemed unsurprised to be going through it again.

Some of the younger guys and one soft looking white guy were glancing around like me, trying to get a hold on this cinderblock zoo that was now our home. I reacted just like any first timer, or “fish,” does—with unrepressed shock and fear. My head swiveled back and forth, but the images my eyes were taking in seemed to get lost somewhere on the way to my brain. Then my gaze locked on the faces staring out at me from inside the cells.

There were men of every shape, size and color in those cells; but the more I looked the more they all looked the same. As I walked, their faces blended into one face, all bearing a single expression that I saw reflected back from each cell we passed --a face with an angry sneer, daring me to come closer, to try something, to ever think that I would be safe here. Beneath the anger was a dead look that scared me even more, if that was possible. These men had hardened from their time in here, trapped and soured like the air. From the scared faces around me, to the impassive guards, to the inmates in their cells, there was not one welcoming face to be found. It became apparent that as much as I didn't want to be in San Quentin, San Quentin didn't want me.

There aren't good days and bad days in here. There are bad days and worse days and days when breathing just doesn't seem worth the trouble anymore. My first one of those days, those very worst days, was the first time my mom came to see me in San Quentin. The visiting rooms here are different than they were at County. In jail it's like what I used to see in the movies, glass dividing the visitors from the inmates, plastic chairs set up in rows on either

side of two-way speakers—they call it ‘non-contact visitation’. For most of us in prison, we get contact visits: in a big white room with chairs and tables attached to the floor and a vending machine filled with cheap junk food. We have to wait until we are in General Population to use the visiting room instead of the non-contact set up. Ma can’t get up here very often, so she waited to take the time off until we could have a contact visit. It’s almost funny because I remember expecting that day to be a good one, finally a day worth getting out of bed for...

I woke up this morning excited for the first time since I got here. For once, when the wake up bell startled me awake at 6am, the nerves playing in my stomach were excitement instead of fear. Last week when I called my mom, she told me that she had finally gotten enough time off work to make the 6 hour drive up to San Quentin. While I hated the idea of her seeing me in my SQ blues, they weren’t really all that much worse than the orange County threads, and those were all she’d seen me in for months.

Visiting hours started at 7:30 in the morning and only went till 2:30 in the afternoon. To make it here as early as possible, Ma planned to drive up yesterday evening and spend the night at a cheap motel somewhere nearby. I could hardly believe it; *I’d be seeing Ma in less than two hours!* Even the sheets of rain lashing against my cell’s window couldn’t get me down today. A friendly face, a reminder of the outside world, the only family I had ever known would soon be literally within my reach. I grinned my way through my morning activities, getting dressed, brushing my teeth, making my bed, even morning count. It was a good thing that I am not prone to breaking into song or dance, because my heart felt light enough to do either. However, just smiling can be dangerous in prison, and a musical dance routine a death wish. Or, at the least, an invitation for some decidedly unpleasant attention.

The guards came and got me at my cell, and we went through the search routine that was beginning to feel almost normal. Visitors' security is similar to airport security; they only have to go through metal detectors and maybe a pat down before entering the visiting room. I am infinitely glad that the war on drugs in prisons, which everyone—guards and inmates alike—knows gets inside through visitations more than any other way, has not yet extended to strip searching visitors. If I thought for one moment that my mom, or in a lot of guy's cases wife and kids, had to "bend over and grab 'em" like we do, I would never want her to visit. While my dignity has been nearly entirely stripped, the system has at least left our loved ones alone, so far anyways.

After the search I was lead down the block with the other guys who were lucky enough to have visitors, and we were each taken to a table in the visiting room. My arms were taken out of the cuffs once the guards got me secured in my chair, which was a relief, I didn't want Mom to see me in chains. The guards backed off a few feet then, and left me to stare at the door and fucking will it to open. If eyes could burn through steel, I think the combined looks of every guy in the room would have melted the door in seconds. When it swung open, creaking like some clichéd scene of an old horror movie, I think I stopped breathing.

First to walk in was a round older woman whose paper white skin, grey hair and glasses made me think of Mrs. Claus. She was followed by a younger Mexican woman, with a baby on her hip and a little girl holding her free hand. The baby couldn't have been more than 6 months old, though to be fair I have no idea about these things, but it was just so small. I watched as the little girl clutching her Mom's hand looked around the room before spotting the guy directly to my left. He was a big guy, also Mexican, with full sleeves inked on both of his arms, and a nose that had been broken one too many times. He had clearly seen his fair share of fights because in

addition to the bent nose, he wore a scar across his chin and another sliced through his eyebrow. If I had seen him on the yard, I would have steered clear or looked around for my boys, but the moment he saw his little girl his face lit up, and the effect was startling. The little girl yelled “Daddy!” and practically pulled her mom’s arm off trying to run to him. When he pulled her into his arms, he looked like Christmas had just come early, and I guess in a way it had.

I glanced back at the door just in time to see my mom walk in. And in that moment she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She caught my eyes and smiled. It didn’t reach her eyes, but then it never does anymore, not since she first saw me in County orange. It took me a minute to notice that her hair and jacket were dripping water onto the tile floor. I asked her what had happened, and she told me that they could only bring clear umbrellas into the prison, and she hadn’t had a chance to buy one before she drove up. She handed me twenty damp one dollar bills, and from the pocket of her pants produced a picture of the two of us from when I was around 8 or 9.

She had sent me a few pictures last month, but this one was a personal favorite of mine. We are both laughing and Ma’s hand is holding my head against her side. It reminds me of the best moments between us, when there were no drunken tears or drugs or gangs, just us. She asked me a few questions about how I was doing in here, and I told her only the good bits, like how I was assigned to laundry duty which was away from the heat and sun that the yardmen faced every day. I had already hurt her enough for a lifetime without adding to it with the dark reality of life inside San Quentin.

When told her that I had been placed with a cellmate named Slouchy she laughed out loud at his name. I explained that his influence was keeping me safe in here. I didn’t tell her that his influences, and protection, were a result of our allied sets, and I certainly didn’t tell her

the fate of most young, small inmates. No mother should have to know how close her son came to being owned by another man, a fate worse than death in my opinion. Slouchy alone probably would not have been able to keep me safe, but I had a few other things going for me as well. The Hoovers and by extension NBTs were well situated in the power structure of San Quentin's gangs and though I was not a long-standing member, the tats on my arms clearly showed my allegiance. I also quickly began to make allies inside through my ability to ink.

Slouchy had asked me the day I moved into his cell what a scrawny little kid like me was doing rolling with NBTs, but when I told him I was Mischief the tagger, he had actually known some of my work. Slouchy got excited telling me that their best inker had transferred out of SQ a few months ago and no one had yet been able to fill his role. I wasn't too sure that I could draw as well on skin as I did on paper and walls, but once Slouchy got an idea, he saw it through to the end. That was how, a week later, I ended up with a prison ink gun in one hand, and one of Slouchy's homies in the other. The gun was really just a needle in the barrel of a Bic pen, attached to a walkman's motor, and powered by an AC adapter. I started out small, just outlining the barbed wire I was going to be putting all the way around his arm. The vibrating threw me off at first, but I found a rhythm and it was easy from there.

I told Ma that I'd found out I had real skill with inking, and that it would help me make money and friends inside. She wasn't all that surprised, but made me promise to keep drawing on paper as well as skin, to keep a notebook like I did before. Then her face got really serious, and for a moment I was sure she was going to tell me that one of my boys from home was in trouble, but I couldn't have been more off base. She took my hand in both of hers and said "Jamal, now I know they have you take your GED in here, and you may not see any point to working at school now, but it would do your mother proud if you take your time in here to

learn.” She looked me right in the eye as she asked me to do this one thing for her, and there was no way I could say no to her, not after all I had but her through. “I swear Ma, I will do my very best for you,” I promised.

The rest of the time we had together was spent talking about happier times, eating terrible food from the vending machine, and holding hands, taking advantage of this brief contact we could share. My mom’s request in that first visit that I try to take education seriously even though I would never be free to use it in the outside world, shaped the next decade of my life. After passing the GED, I was able to join the Prison University Program when it came to San Quentin. It offers inmates a chance to take college prep courses as well as actual college classes. I only did it for my mom, but now I realize that those classes help me survive in here, hanging on to a part of myself from before prison, before trials, even before gang life. It would become tradition when Ma visited to wait until right before she had to leave to talk about the new things I’d learned, a happy note to close on until I could see her again.

At the end of the first visit we had no routine to fall back on, no way to help ease the pain of the end of our time together. Not knowing when she would be able to come again made me that much more reluctant to let her go. In the last months in here I had built a wall around myself. I had trapped my emotions inside of it and other’s emotions outside, living safely in the middle. After a few early bouts of depression it became almost easy to accept that this would be my life. After all, all I saw were other guys serving their time; living in cages becomes a new kind of normal surprisingly quickly when it is all you see. But seeing my mom knocked down all of my carefully constructed barriers, and reminded me of just how much I was deprived of. How much I would always be deprived of.

To my horror I almost began to cry when Ma leaned in to hug me goodbye, her scent bringing with it memories of a home that I would never see or step foot in again. We broke apart looking away from each other, quickly schooling our faces back into masks of composure. I wasn't sure who was being strong for who at the moment, but neither of us was willing to give in to the emotions threatening to emerge. I watched her leave the room with the other visitors, many of them glancing back tearfully at their loved ones. Mom looked back once, and held my gaze for just a moment before her chin began to quake and she looked quickly away as she walked around a corner and out of site.

I felt as though a spear had been thrust through my chest, knocking the air out of my lungs and leaving nothing but pain in its wake. I don't remember the leaving the visiting room, the subsequent search or the march back to my cell. Days passed before I could even find the will to eat and even then it was only at the urging of Slouchy.

IV. The Man in the Mirror

The mirrors here
They reflect faces of the unloved
Their surfaces as broken and cracked
as the men in them
I became a man in this mirror.
A face
I did not recognize staring back,
lathered in soap
Blood trickling down a jaw, a throat
Victim
to a cheap razor
running over virgin skin
never having needed it before.
Learning through furtive glances,
hopeful tries
ending in painful mistakes.
Learning through pain, just as
I have always done
Before.

Fish to Lifer

There is a rhythm to the yard. There are the guys who run, the guys who lift, the dealers and their customers with matching expressions of carefully constructed casualness, all moving, occupying this single cement square. The rhythm of the yard is not perceptible at first, but after enough months have passed, the chaos begins to form a pattern of sorts. I have often thought that since arriving at San Quentin I have gained skills I never would have on the outside. Not job skills or people skills, but the skills needed to stay alive inside. Most of these develop out of need, as a form of defense, and none is more important than observation. Keeping my eyes open and my guard up is the only reason I have as few scars as I do.

One of the pieces of advice my first cellmate in General Pop, Slouchy, passed on was “always, always keep your eyes open Lil Chief, but be careful what you seeing.” For my first year or so in I figured Slouchy was telling me to be careful what shit I saw because there are some things just witnessing can put your life in danger.

I remember a time about 3 years back when a new kid, he couldn't have been in longer than a couple of months at that point, got beat unconscious in the mess. He had been real clean since he got in, keeping to himself, just trying to do his time and get out. The story circulated without hours of the beat down, which for prison gossip, is actually pretty slow. Turns out that a few days earlier he had been walking in the corner of the yard behind the weights, an area that serves as the office for a kind of black market of commissary goods run by the Mexicans.

Now the kid probably had no idea what was going on back there, or maybe he really was spying like the Mexicans were saying, but every version of the story has him back there when a particularly intense exchange went down between the Mexicans and a group of Neighborhood

Crips. Those groups would normally never interact without some blood getting spilled, but this trade was apparently for a large amount of Oxycontin, which is in high demand around here, and the promise of a good price for good drugs will create a temporary peace between almost any groups. Even with a hot deal creating a temporary truce, both groups brought extra muscle to the exchange, and not just low level guys either. After all, better safe than dead.

Well, three days later a handful of guys from both groups were thrown in the hole, all guys who had been there for the exchange. They got some of the powerful guys, but not everyone who'd been there. The guys that remained in the General Pop decided that the new kid must have snitched to the guards, and they went for blood. Although I was among those who doubted that the kid had anything to do with the guys put in solitary, the beat down is the expected response in the case of a snitch. In this particular situation, I'd bet that there was no snitch at all.

When two rival groups interact in the yard it disrupts the rhythm, and anything that changes the flow of the yard gets noticed. After all, it's not just the inmates who have perfected their skills of observation. The guards might not have caught on in this case had the Mexicans and Neighborhood Crips brought fewer guys to the deal. As it was, the guards had more than enough incentive to shake down the boys, snitch or no. Sometimes it's easier in here to assume that someone is snitching on you and your crew than give the guards any credit. Smart guards are a lot more of a threat than stupid bigoted guards. We do what we have to do to maintain any semblance of safety, even if it is only in our minds. So the unspoken rule has formed that whenever you get punished for something, always find an inmate to blame.

After a decade inside, I've passed on Slouchy's advice to more fish than I can count. I know that eventually they will understand, just like I did, that there is more to it than they first

hear. There's a difference between being aware of your surroundings and really seeing them. And while it can physically protect you to "always, always keep your eyes open, but be careful what you seeing," once the advice sinks in, it can also keep you sane. There is so much despair here, so much pain and hopelessness, so many kinds of abuse. If anyone looked, really looked, around himself, and took the things he saw in year after year, he would go insane. Caring, looking, seeing...these are weaknesses in this place, and any weakness here must be overcome.

I used to hear the screams at night. Screams and pleading that faded quickly to whimpers and then, just days later, to the silence of a broken man. Slouchy would say it was God that saved me from that fate. While I still thank God nearly every day that I never got turned out, I would say it was Slouchy. Well, a combination of luck, Slouchy, NBT allies and an ability to make images come to life with just a needle, ball point pen, and walkman. There are other screams in the night, caused by monsters in men's heads instead of their bunks. Reliving the pain of the past each time they fall asleep. From time to time, we all fall victim to the demons that lurk in our subconscious, waiting to prey when we are at our weakest.

I used to see the scars on guys' arms. A few slashing deeply across veins, reminders of failed attempts at freedom. Others shaped like cigarettes or cigars, just like the ones Lil' J wore from the times he really pissed off his old man. I'd see the haunted look of the dying. Men wasting away from some disease or another, given just enough meds to keep them alive but not to truly ease the suffering, or the fear. I used to see it all, take it in and let it mark me as well, but everyone has a breaking point and I eventually learned to shut it out and just look away.

If I sound callous or cruel, it's because that is what this place has made me. I have seen guys get out, given a second chance at life that I would never have, and end up right back inside. There is a part of me that blames the guys for wasting the opportunity I want more than anything,

but most of the time I blame the system. The more time that passes, the more guys I watch come and go until their strikes and freedom are spent, the more I find fault with the system and not with the men. They push men out the door with \$200 dollars (less if they needed clothes or were in for less than a year) and a list of rules and requirements.

Well, a lot of those requirements, like securing a job and housing, are not possible with just \$200 dollars and a felony on your record. Keeping your P.O. happy is made even harder by the restrictions placed on spending time with known ‘associates.’ Yeah, that makes sense if we are talking a bank robber or something, but mostly parolees are guys like me whose homies are all they know, or the guys in here for drug charges whose whole world outside is made up of other junkies. They tell guys who get their first taste of freedom for years or even decades to stay away from everyone they knew, to choose to remain in the state of constant loneliness that we are forced into here, and then are surprised when they fail. So I don’t blame the guys anymore, but to be honest these logical failures in the system weren’t what got me to stop hating every guy who wasted his freedom. I finally got it, really got how hard the system works to get guys back in just as soon as they get gated out, when Jimmy got his parole yanked after three weeks out.

Jimmy had lived one floor up from me, on the 5th tier of C-block, and was one of the boys I played chess with from time to time. He had been in for just over 7 years when he got paroled. In the week or so between hearing he was getting out and his day of release, Jimmy wouldn’t shut up about how he was gonna do right by his family, be a real dad to his little boy, be home in time for his kid’s 10th birthday. Maybe it wasn’t fair, but I was living through him in some ways, he was going to be able to walk out of these walls a free man, to a family of his own, things I would never have. When I heard through the rumor mill that he was back in County for

violating parole, I could have killed him. It was a damn good thing he wasn't back at SQ or I would have shown him just how pissed I was.

A couple of weeks later I was playing chess with a bunch of other lifers. We get together about once a week to play chess or cards to just talk. Sometimes it helps to be around other guys who know what it's like to know you'll die in here. I guess at one point it reminded someone enough of group therapy that they started calling the meetings 'group' and it just stuck. Well, during group this particular week, we started talking about Jimmy. One of the guys had gotten a note, or a 'kite,' from a homie in County that knew Jimmy, and had asked him what his P.O. got him for. Turns out Jimmy had a pocket knife on him that had a two inch blade. Now somehow the P.O. saw it and took it out to measure the blade because knives longer than two inches are considered weapons. While the knife *was* two inches sharp, the metal went another quarter inch below that before the handle. Well the P.O. measured the blade as handle to tip, and just like that Jimmy is back in, probably for another year.

It was during that group that I first clearly saw what I had been denying for so long—the system really was out to get us. I spent a long time thinking that my case had been a fluke, that the jury and judge somehow thought they were protecting society or something like that. But when it comes down to it, innocent until proven guilty only applies to Americans who can afford a decent lawyer. What happened to Jimmy wouldn't happen to an upper-class white man, but what's worse is that eventually we just accept that this is how it works. We accept the food that is barely fit for animals, the cramped quarters and the violence that fills them. In the end we even accept the fear, though for me that was one of the final realities I acknowledged.

The fear is still there, in every breath, every step, every thought. But it's different now. When I first got here, the fear was so extreme that it was almost debilitating. Terror is an

interesting thing, because while at first it puts all your senses on high alert, after a while it becomes a fog you have to fight through to do even the simplest things. That kind of sheer terror simply cannot be sustained; it fades subtly into a different brand of fear. Sometimes I am jealous of the fish, with their darting eyes and rapid breaths. That fear is on the surface, a way of handling the environment you have been thrown into. Once you are around here long enough it becomes easier to accept it into your bones. To fear everything and everyone becomes a way of life, and the ideas of comfort and trust are almost laughable.

It's not so bad though, to be afraid or angry all the time—it's better than being lonely. In a place that is never quiet, never still, it is amazingly easy to feel alone. But even loneliness can be adjusted to, given enough time. I honestly think that man can change to handle anything, if he must to survive.

V. Dreaming Once Again

Dreaming

was once a freedom

from an imperfect life

of foodstamps and cramped apartments and shame.

I'd dream of fame and riches

The dreams of a fool.

What would I give now

To dream

of what I awoke to then

of laughter and family and warmth

of freedom.

Now I dream of cages built of darkness

Invisible Walls

pressing in on me until I cannot move

Cannot breathe

No up, no down... no escape

Nothing but me and the blackness.

I wake up

and face the cold metal bars of reality

Until tomorrow when

the darkness will claim me

Once again.

Finding Hope on the Inside

I've spent the most of last decade living in haze. Not because I am overmedicated like some of the guys here or straight up crazy like some of the others, but because I just couldn't bring myself to care. Every move I made, every lap in the yard, every folded set of blues, every chess game, it was all done because it had to be done to survive. After 5 years inside, I had reached a point where I knew who my friends and enemies were, I'd found out most of the tricks to surviving in here, and the gravity of my sentence had finally sunk in.

When I first came to prison I went through the same series of emotions every fish does: shock, anger, and depression. According to some of the older lifers in here who I meet up with once a week, the last stage is acceptance, but that one seems to have passed me by...twice. The first time I went through this progression was upon my arrival in San Quentin. The shock didn't wear off fully until I was placed in General Pop and each day went from a battery of different activities to a rigid routine.

At that point it was a damn good thing that my cellmate, Slouchy, was a homie because otherwise he would've been in his rights to beat me down when I started having fits of anger. The littlest thing would set me off, once it was just the sound of the sink dripping, and I would be screaming and cussing, punching the walls (or in that one case, the sink) and kicking my bunk. Slouchy would let me tire myself out, or if I got really out of control, push me up against the wall until I chilled out. I must have done something right in a past life, cause having Slouchy as my first cellmate truly was a godsend and a lifesaver.

It took less than a month to burn out on the anger, and then the depression hit like a fucking brick. There is probably a more elegant way to say that, but not a more accurate one. I

had finally grasped that I would die in this cinderblock hell, and nothing short of God himself could save me from that fate. It hit me straight in the gut and knocked the wind out of me. The ache didn't subside, and I spent the next 3 months trying to catch my breath. Whenever I would start to forget about where I was and how long I would be there something would remind me, and the feeling of being punched in the gut would return with a vengeance.

Unlike the shock and anger, I can't pinpoint when the ache in my stomach subsided, or exactly when I began to breathe again. The depression did not fade into acceptance, but into numbness. I learned to use this numbness as a shield against both the things I saw and heard around me and the things I had to do each day. I threatened men that owed me for tats I had completed, threatened them with who I knew, who I could get them reassigned to live with. I could lock them in a cell with a man who wanted their blood or their body. I had the pull to do it and they knew. But it was as if I was watching someone else say and do these things, someone harder and crueler than I ever thought I could be.

Almost a year ago, the world I had built around myself came crumbling down. The Supreme Court handed down their decision in *Graham v Florida*, and they had sided with a guy just like me who was serving out his time in Florida. What had previously been a world of grey desolation, of walls and chains, was pierced by a ray of sunshine I never thought I would feel again: hope.

One of the many ironies of the prison system is that those of us who are inside (some never to rejoin society, not even able to vote) are more informed than most of the people outside these walls. It's not necessarily a case of "you don't know what you've got till it's gone," but a matter of time. We have so much time, nothing but time in some cases, and limited methods of filling it.

One of the privileges that those of us in General Pop are allowed is owning a radio or small TV. The TVs cost over \$200, so they are generally owned by inmates who have been around long enough to have some cash saved up, or who have friends or family on the outside with enough money. The radios are dirt cheap, not even half a week's wages, so anyone can get one. There aren't a lot of stations or channels available, so at some point during the day almost everyone listens to the news for a while. I know so much more about the day to day happenings of the state and country than I did when I was free to live in that world.

Whenever a case is at the state or national Supreme Court that could affect the guys in San Quentin, guys who understand what it could mean spread the word around the joint. There are times when I hate the way news, stories, any kind of gossip really, spreads from tier to tier and block to block in what seems like minutes, but this is one of the few ways I appreciate the rumor mill in here. While we hear about the big developments on the news, the smaller cases that don't get covered are heard about from family members, friends, or even lawyers. I knew the Sullivan and Graham cases were going to be decided soon and had even talked about what they might mean for me in group. None of the other lifers here would be affected, but I got on well with most of them and they were hoping for my miracle, but like me—expecting nothing.

One lifer in my group didn't saying anything, which wasn't too surprising coming from Sam, but he sent me a kite later that week, which shocked me for a few reasons. Sam and I had never gotten really close, not that I have gotten 'close' with anyone in here, but aside from a few times in group, I had never talked to him before. Sam had been in for around 20 years, so far as I could tell, and though he is only 40 or 50, he looks ancient. 20 years in here has marred his face with deep lines, occasionally crossed by old scars, a mask of hardship.

I wasn't just surprised that he had contacted me because we weren't 'friends,' but because, if I'd had to bet before I got that kite, I would have said he couldn't read, much less write. Sometimes guys who can't write their own notes will get their buddies to write them out for them, maybe trade a cig for the work. But Sammy was the kind of old timer who didn't trade with other guys, didn't ask for nothing and wasn't asked for nothing in return. He had crossed out words, and misspelled others, but I could read the message.

“the courts fucked All of us good i aint saying i'm gunna stop prayin for you lil Chief, but i dont see no reason they would do differant this time. the white man who make these desisions are not looking out for you or me or noone in hear. i've seen too many man break in hear when they get and loose hope. stay strong lil brother”

I could read the message, but I couldn't follow his advice.

Sammy's advice was more than just good, it was right, he was right. I did my best to stay realistic, to force down the hope blossoming in my chest, until the court came down in favor of Graham, of all juveniles just like me. Though I still don't know what exactly will happen at my appeal, if I will ever actually get out on parole, I can't help but dream.

I don't know if I can put into words the way that this small ray of hope has affected me. It's as though I have been asleep for a decade, doing only what was expected of me to survive and occasionally to make my Mom happy. I had taken classes because she wanted me to, and it helped pass the time, but now I had a reason to want to learn. I have been two classes short of graduating with an Associates Arts degree, but have been putting off finishing those classes because the idea of sitting in my cell with a degree was somehow even worse than sitting in my cell with nothing to offer the world at all. But now, I might one day be able to actually do something with it.

My passion for painting, not inking or tagging, but actual paint on paper has returned for the first time since before I got in deep with NTB. I sent my mom the first work I completed, and the letter she wrote back was filled with a happiness I hadn't heard from here in a decade. San Quentin even has its own inmate run paper, the San Quentin News, that is published every couple of months. After I finish writing this, I am going to try my hand at my first cartoon on prison life and send to the paper's staff.

There is a part of me, whether it is a result of my many years in SQ or just natural survival instincts that knows this new outlook brings equal parts hope and danger for my future. The barricades I spent years constructing around what's left of my heart have been torn down, ripped open to allow this light in. My future is no longer certain, and it is this uncertainty that I have craved during the nights where I had to convince myself it was worth it to keep plotting towards my eventual death inside these walls. I don't think anyone but a fellow lifer could understand the freedom one feels not knowing where their last minutes will be spent. However there is also danger in hope. There is always a chance that the California courts could rule that *Graham v. Florida* should not be retroactive, should not free those of us already behind bars, only stop more children from sharing out fate. Or that, if granted a possibility of parole, it will be denied to me time and time again. Once again knowing with certainty that my last breath, whenever I take it, will taste of San Quentin... it would be too much. I have given myself over to the hope too fully and cannot, will not return to the haze I must live in to survive here – better no life than that half-life.

But for now I will push those thoughts away. After all, I promised Ma a painting before her next visit, and I have just decided what I to for paint her: a mustang on the plains, the wind whipping his mane against the leather of a broken harness.

Waking Up

Once I only dreamed of cages

built of darkness

Invisible Walls of no escape

Now I wake up

From dreams of wind in my face

and a pen in my hand

the cold metal bars of reality

Admit the faintest light

Once again.

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