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ALREADY THERE

by Judith Tannenbaum

Say, how ya' doing
Outside world?
Do you remember me?
I'm that intricate part
Missing from the whole
The one y'all decided to forget.

Coties Perry began with these lines a poem he wrote from San Quentin in the 1980's. I was there, teaching poetry in prison classrooms and cell blocks. *I'm a human being, and I'm here, too*, the San Quentin poets wrote over and over, in a variety of voices.

Elmo Chattman also addressed those beyond the prison's walls:

A ball and chain
strapped to my cerebellum
A barbed wire noose
around my brittle neck
Concrete sarcophagus gilded in steel
Good morning world
Please count me among the living.

San Quentin was a maximum security male prison during the four years I taught there. Coties, Elmo, and most of my students were serving some kind of life sentence. Most had come to prison in their early twenties and had been down about ten years when I met them. Now, twenty years later, these San Quentin poets – unlike Florestan in *Fidelio* – are still behind bars.

Spoon Jackson described what his senses encountered:

Restless, unable to sleep
Keys, bars, guns being racked
Year after year
Endless echoes
of steel kissing steel.

Elmo summoned the feel of prison this way: “that hatred like hands in the way it touched me at times.”

For a moment, think of the worst thing you've ever done. Whatever it is, remember it well. Now imagine that this act is all you're known for. Imagine that everything in your world is designed to treat you as a person defined by that act. Any other fact of your life – any act of love, kindness, compassion, intelligence, creativity, joy, humor – is irrelevant. You are only a person who has done this worst thing. That's it, that's you, from now till forever.

This is the reality of a person in prison. Whether you actually did that worst thing, or you didn't; whether it was one uncharacteristic act or part of a sad series of missteps; whether you are still the person who committed that wrong or someone whose spirit has grown – you've been convicted and you're thrown into a world where all you are is bad and ready to do bad.

In *Fidelio* Rocco, the prison's warden, tells the disguised Leonora:

The heart grows hard
If you can face
The horrors of this world.

Rocco speaks to give Fidelio courage, but the San Quentin poets worried about the costs of such hardness. Elmo Chattman again:

The part of me that matters most
hides like a rabbit inside my wolf body
My flesh is the sentinel that wards off
all intruders
All except
this thing
This thing which has taken root
so near my sacred garden
This hungry weed
whose roots are entangled in mine
tempts me
evokes my anger
makes me more like the animal
I try not to be.

“A rainbow on my path still shines,” Leonora says in the face of grief and despair. “Oh hope, do give me strength,” she prays, calling out:

Come hope, let not the last bright star
In my anguish be obscured!
Light up my goal, however far,
through love I shall still reach it.

Leonora hopes that she will find Florestan in the bowels of the prison, hopes he'll still be alive, hopes she will be able to bring him *sweet comfort*, and hopes her husband will be freed. She summons hope, too, in *the voice of mankind*. She begs Rocco to allow prisoners out into the fortress garden, where she knows hope will warm them. *What joy, the men sing, in the open air. Hope whispers softly in my ears! We shall be free, we shall find peace.*

The weather is beautiful during these moments the prisoners in Seville are let out to the garden. Instead, it's one week before Christmas when prisoners are out on the yard in Elmo Chattman's poem, "December Rain." The day is wet and cold, and the men – who normally keep great distance between them – huddle in one corner of the Max A yard "to escape the frigid assault/from the angry fists of winter." In that December storm, the San Quentin prisoners sing their own version of the *Oh Heaven! Salvation! Happiness! Oh Freedom! Will you be given us?* chorus sung by the men in Seville. Elmo ends his poem:

But today, much of that distance was forgotten
Their wet captive bodies touched
became a living, breathing mass of close proximity
united in common battle
against the wet swords of the wind
trying to keep warm
trying to humor each other
trying to reclaim what has been taken from them:
a memory of what it means to live free.

Every prisoner I've known has told me he can't survive without hope – hope that one day he'll be free, hope that his years behind bars won't have destroyed him, hope that those of us on the outside will recognize people in prison as our brothers and sisters. Coties Perry wrote:

But in my despair
Looms a light
A small hope

It is the glow
of the "Real"
That your eyes will see
A piece of me in you.

In *Fidelio*, when Leonora says “Love will be able/To suffer greatest pain,” she isn’t summoning an abstract love for all human kind. Leonora means the specific, embodied, love she feels for her actual husband, Florestan, whom she is compelled to find and to save. At the moment his beloved flesh is in most dire peril, Leonora inserts herself between her husband and Pizarro’s dagger. “This heart you must pierce first!” she cries.

And then – *Blessed the day, blessed the hour* – the longed-for miracle arrives. “A brother’s come to seek his brethren/And can he help, he gladly helps.” Minister of State Don Fernando recognizes the noble Florestan, and orders his chains removed.

Oh unspeakable happiness.

Just, oh Lord, your judgement is.

“Love alone my efforts guided,” the wife, Leonora, asserts, “Real love is not afraid.”

Real love. San Quentin poet, Spoon Jackson, reminds us that real love erases the distance between us – between the Lord and those who suffer, between husband and wife, and between prisoner-poet and free person in his or her opera seat.

Where there’s love
There is no distance
Between two points
For you are already there.

Judith Tannenbaum has taught poetry in a variety of settings from primary classrooms to maximum security prisons. Her books include: Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin; Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades; and Jump Write In!: Creative Writing Exercises for Diverse Communities, Grades 6-12. Judith currently serves as training coordinator for WritersCorps, a project of the San Francisco Arts Commission. You can read more poems by Coties, Elmo and Spoon at chapbooks.prisonwall.org