

From the Pen to the Pen: A Narrative of my Journey from Juvie to *Liber-ation* by Means of Books

“Dear Angel,

You mentioned in court yesterday that today was your birthday. I didn’t want the day to go by without some sort of acknowledgement. Happy Birthday! Enclosed is a copy of a favorite book of mine. I hope you enjoy it.”

Sincerely, Judge Mendoza

-Citation from card within *Tattoos on the Heart*
5/15/2013

I still remember sitting on my cot and staring at the oxblood colored bricks thinking about which would crack first: my mind or the bricks. I thought if I banged my head against them enough times I might be able to escape my reality. Reading this, I may sound crazy because the bricks did nothing to deserve such negative attention. Sure, they had held me for almost a year and would hold me for longer, but it wasn’t their fault. I know this for a fact, for the day before I had stood before the Honorable Judge Mendoza in calendar 53, courtroom 7. There, she had mandated me to be brought back upstairs, to be held within Chicago’s Juvenile Temporary Detention Center.

In her defense, it wasn’t Judge Mendoza’s doing either. I mean, technically she was the Judge to impose the mandate on me. However, her hands were tied and I could tell it bothered her to do so. To be honest, my eyes still get watery thinking about how that day Judge Mendoza cried with my mom after she said it was due to something called “Mandatory Sentencing” and that it meant I would receive “Juvenile Life” if I lost my case. She immediately asked for a break to collect herself and so I was escorted back into the bullpen for ten minutes. I know that’s how long I waited sitting on the piss covered floor because for once it wasn’t packed like a can of sardines with brown and black bodies and so I had nothing better to do than stare at the clock. Afterwards, Mr. Brown, the bailiff, returned for me. He informed me my mom had left for work. That day I wanted to tell Mr. Brown he was partially wrong. Sure my mom had left, but Judge Mendoza was still there. She was basically another mother, having seen me grow up in her courtroom since 2009/10.

I guess that’s why I shouldn’t have been surprised when, while plotting to escape those oxblood bricks, my thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Brown. In his hands, the bailiff held a birthday gift bag from the Honorable Judge Mendoza. Within the bag, which he said he had to take away on account of it being contraband, was a card and a book.

That book was *Tattoos on the Heart*, by Fr. Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries. It was a compilation of the narratives of other ex-gang members reclaiming their lives

post-incarceration and affiliation. Without reading it, I don't know if I would have had the courage to pursue the questions I had long pondered concerning my life and circumstances.

You see, growing up in Gage Park, a notorious southside community of Chicago, I knew nothing but crime and violence. I was born into confinement. I grew up in a dysfunctional family, my dad was an abusive alcoholic and had been imprisoned twice before being deported to Mexico, my mother worked multiple jobs to compensate for his inability to provide for us. Unattended at home, I eventually wandered into the streets and at the age of ten, I joined a street gang. Since I was an honor roll student, the leaders saw I was well equipped to lead and I quickly climbed the ranks. By doing so I became more of a target to rivals and police. It didn't take long for me to be incarcerated. Actually, by the age of 13 I had been arrested a total of 11 times, and not long after, before my 16th birthday, my 13th time being arrested, I was charged as a habitual Juvenile offender and sentenced to Juvenile Life.

While serving time, I attended classes at NBJ, it was there that I saw a film called *The Freedom Writers*. After watching the movie, Ms. Arthur, my English teacher within JTDC, asked us to write a poem. I could relate to the struggles of the characters so much that I was shocked when I found out it was a true story. I was truly inspired that day. Not only did I write a poem, but eventually began spending nights without sleep, writing away. Included in the collection is one of my journals from that period of time. I wish I could share more, however, most of my work was confiscated, or thrown away when I was sentenced and transferred to St. Charles Illinois. Luckily, Ms. Arthur had introduced me to an organization called Free Write Arts and Literacy, which was working with me to publish my poems in an anthology of work created by incarcerated youth. This anthology is called *Big Dreams I'm Chasing*, and is included within the collection. Eventually, with the help of Free Write, I began entering poetry competitions, and making a name for myself. One of the competitions I entered was "Louder Than a Bomb", the country's largest youth spoken word poetry festival. I was unable to attend in person, but Kevin Coval, the festival's founder appreciated my poetry enough to visit me in jail. During one of these visits, he gave to me a book of his own poetry, entitled *Everyday People*. This is included in the collection.

Although I did not win LTAB, I continued to write and to enter poetry competitions. Eventually, I won "Words Unlocked", a competition for incarcerated youth. One of the very first poetry books I was exposed to is *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, by Jimmy Santiago Baca. So I was ecstatic upon winning "Words Unlocked", for Baca himself was a judge along with R. Dwayne Betts. Upon winning, I was awarded *A Question of Freedom*, written by Betts. The author personally addressed the book to me, saying that my poetry reminded him of himself as a young writer. Fast Forward a couple years and now in the spring, I will be presenting at a conference in Florida alongside Betts.

As the story goes, it was a long journey from incarceration to being able to having the freedom to share my experience in the hope of helping others like me. The books I read while within my cell allowed me to foster a kind of reflection that measures my own experience against the complications of the system that perpetuated it, instead of becoming lost within my own mind. Many times I battled insanity face-to-face. For example, while awaiting trial, I read *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. Through a conversation between jurors, the play sheds light on the intricacies and biases of the U.S. judicial system towards the people it judges. In my head, I compared this written trial with the prospects of my own. It did not give me hope.

Eventually, I was sentenced and transferred from JTDC to St. Charles, Illinois. This was a dark time. I hate to have compared my trauma to the suffering of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, but in reading *Night*, I found a perverse sense of hope for the future. Wiesel's suffering seemed so distant, and yet so close to mine. I doubt Wiesel would be bothered by this comparison, for I am sure he wrote *Night* with the hope of healing those who have known confinement. That is why *Night* is included in this collection.

During this time, I turned 17. I had shared with Judge Mendoza how much I had been inspired by the movie *Freedom Writers*. She never forgot. I am sure of this because although I had been sentenced by then and shipped down state, a year later I received a copy of *The Freedom Writers Diary* in the mail for yet another birthday behind bars.

Eventually I was released. But, it was within the 8x9 confines of my cell's brick walls that I first found liberation by means of a book. This is a difficult thing to discuss. For I do not want to imply that prison was a good thing, although it may appear that way. What I truly wish to convey is that it allowed me the time to read and liberate my mind without worrying about the cost of living and about my safety. I have found a similar sanctuary here at St. John's College. I am away from Chicago and all the complications of the former part of my life. I am free to indulge in study. I have hope for the future. I am able to transition from being an enslaved child to becoming a free adult. It is for this reason that, should I receive a prize for this collection, I intend to use the funds to purchase a set of the curriculum books that I will donate to Free Write Arts and Literacy Program for my peers --their incarcerated students-- to read. I would do this in the spirit of our motto: I make free adults from children by means of books and a balance.

Bibliography

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *Immigrants in Our Own Land & Selected Early Poems*. Baton Rouge, LA: State University Press, 1979.

*This was one of the first poetry books that I read. It was written by Baca while he was incarcerated, and is a narrative of his experience in jail.

Betts, R. Dwayne. *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

*I received this book as a prize for a poetry competition. However, the book also inspired me to look at my experiences and my life in a brighter light. After reading this, I allowed myself to love myself.

Bonair-Agard, Roger. *Bury My Clothes*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013.

*This book was sent to me by a former teacher while I was incarcerated. Little did this teacher know, I would eventually become close friends with the author, working closely with him to abolish prisons and to teach within the jail. In fact, in March I will be presenting at a writers conference named AWP alongside Roger Bonair-Agard and Reginald Dwayne Betts.

Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart: the Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York: Free Press, 2010.

*A book gifted to me by my former judge. It gave me the courage to stand alone and leave my gang, while in prison...the one time having protection from a gang might be beneficial, if not necessary.

Coval, Kevin. *Everyday People*. Channahon, IL: EM Press, 2008.

*These poems were given to me by a mentor who visited me in jail and later worked with me closely to refine my poetry and teaching abilities.

Coval, Kevin, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Nate Marshall, eds. *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2015.

*I received this book after I was released. Within it is published a poem that I wrote while in jail. Since then, various poets who I have shared the stage with have inscribed messages or signed this copy. It's exciting to know that I am one of the youngest contributors in the anthology and that this book is now used by Free Write to teach poetry to youth within the prison.

Free Write Jail Arts, *Big Dreams I'm Chasing*. Chicago, IL: A Free Write Jail Arts & Literacy Program Publication, 2013.

*I am published in this anthology. My voice is recorded here, along with the voices of my peers. I have used this book as a guide for teaching many poetry workshops to incarcerated/post-incarcerated youth.

Pantoja, Angel. *Personal Journal*. Chicago, IL, 2013.

*My own personal poems are recorded in this journal.

Rodriguez, Luis J. *Always Running*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 2005.

* *Always Running* describes gang life in LA, explaining gang motivations through the author's experience. It was powerful to have met the author and to have learned that he shared a similar experience to my own. It gave me courage to face jail alone.

Rose, Reginald. *Twelve Angry Men*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1955.

*This book gave me nightmares.

***The Freedom Writers Diary*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.**

*Watching the movie adapted from this book inspired me to write. It stuck out so much that I included the title in a letter to my judge, who remembered and later sent me a copy of the book. She inscribed birthday wishes on the first page.

Thomas, Piri. *Seven Long Times*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1994.

*This book is included because its narrative is painfully relatable. The U.S. penitentiary system is unique in its perils.

Thompson, Heather Ann. *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2016.

*I was presented with this book by the author during a conversation on community justice and prison abolishment, at which I spoke as a community organizer and formerly incarcerated youth. The author felt compelled to give it to me, after hearing my story and witnessing my work.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. USA/Canada: Bantam Books, 1960.

*This book gave me hope.

Wolpé, Sholeh. *Breaking the Jaws of Silence: sixty American poets speak to the world*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2013.

*This was also sent to me by a former teacher, to inspire me to write when I felt I was being silenced within St. Charles, Illinois.