

**New York State Literary Center**

**WRITING: ON HAVING AN INCARCERATED PARENT**

**Incarceration: Its Impact on Children and Families**

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*Hard Times*

I am a young Black man.

When I am on the streets,

I get scared

when the police jump out of the white van.

Why do men get women pregnant

and leave them on their own to suffer?

This is why I am writing this poem.

When I was younger,

my dad left me and mommy on our own.

This is why

I am locked up.

When I get angry,

I want to break someone’s jaw.

This is why

when I am sleeping in my bed

it feels like I’m going to fall.

This is why

all my life I wanted to ask daddy

where have you been.

 *Pops, where have you been?*

 *Pops, I have asked God*

 *to forgive me for my sins.*

 *I tell myself*

 *I cannot let the stress bring me down.*

 *Pops, why didn’t you stick around?*

 *Pops, I want to hear your voice.*

 *Pops, I want to be able to look you in the eye.*

 *This is why I break down and cry.*

 *Daddy, how come every time you get out for a couple of weeks*

 *you always end up back in jail?*

 *I know you must get tired of hearing the deputies mouth.*

 *Maybe next time when you get out*

 *you will want to hear my big mouth.*

 *Dad, where were you when I got stabbed?*

 *You were supposed to be the one*

 *taking me to the hospital.*

 *This is what happened to your baby boy.*

 *I was on the run Dad.*

 *All I want to know*

 *is where were you all my life?*

 *R.*

*Untitled*

How would you feel

if your mom abandoned you

or if your dad

continuously went to jail?

How would you feel

if no one seemed to love you?

Would you give up hope

and not love yourself

or would you

try to find the strength to stand tall.

What if you can’t find that strength?

What is your next move,

to cry?

How would you feel?

*R.*

*Father*

Father,

what does that mean?

Is he a person who has abandoned his child and is in jail?

Is he a person who lies and deceives

and never shows up, not even on Christmas Eve?

Is he a person who uses crack and tries to hide it

or a person who makes plans and always forfeits?

What is a father? Do you know?

Do you really love your child? How will you show it?

What is a father

I’ll ask it once again

because I keep crying again and again and again.

 *Y.*

*Reality*

*I have to find another strategy.*

*Sometimes it feels*

*as if the whole world is after me.*

*I have to cry sometimes,*

*it seems to get me out of my mind.*

*I stay on the grind.*

*This seems to happen all of the time.*

*I have to find another strategy.*

*Sometimes it feels*

*as if the whole world is after me.*

*I have to cry sometimes,*

*it seems to get me out of my mind.*

*I stay on the grind.*

*This seems to happen all of the time.*

As I sit back, look out the window right at the stars

I picture my dad doing his thing behind bars.

Could it be real or is it a skit?

I don’t think about those days you couldn’t be there.

I try to forget.

My mom tried to help me understand how to be a man,

but she can’t help me understand how to be a man,

only my dad can.

I feel like Dr. King when he had a dream.

I can’t do everything because I’m only fifteen.

I don’t know if I hate you or I want to be you,

but all I know is when I look in the mirror I seem to see you.

I feel like a drunk lady trying to get her daughter back,

all the pressure surrounding me like I’m the quarterback.

*D.*

*I Wish, No I Want*

I feel so mad,

but I feel so scared.

I think nobody is going to be there

for a kid like me.

Nobody will see that deep inside

I feel so bare

like I was stripped of my clothes

and left with rags,

like the only job available

was putting burgers in Happy Meal bags.

I don’t want to live a life

where my only protection is me.

I wish I had a mother who would simply care

and a father who was always there.

I want to live a life free from drugs

without blood stains on the rugs.

I want to live a good life,

but that simply won’t happen.

I want to live a life without my dad

slapping my mom.

This stuff must stop now.

I don’t know when or even how.

I will just try until the day I die.

I might give up trying,

but my mother would start crying.

It must end.

It must end.

I want my little brother to know 3 + 2 = 5.

I want my little sister to stop thinking of suicide.

I want these things.

I want my little sister to make things out of beads.

I want to go back to my favorite haunts.

This is what I way I wish, no I want.

*Dear God,*

*Why, why,*

*do You make me cry?*

*I want to touch the sky.*

*I keep remembering*

*the last time I was caught,*

*trembling with fear,*

*but it seemed an Angel whispered in my ear,*

*“Chin up, don’t worry,*

*you don’ have to grow up in a hurry.”*

*I felt like I wasn’t myself,*

*like I was the unwanted book on the dusty shelf.*

*I was the broken toy*

*not wanted to be fixed by a little boy.*

*I want to be a brave man*

*and not get drunk*

*and vomit in a garbage can.*

*I want to be me.*

*Can You see?*

*Please let me be me.*

I am so empty.

I am so blank.

I feel I need to belong.

Yesterday was history,

tomorrow is a mystery.
I am me.

I must learn.

I must earn

my way to be free

from all the people who hate,

from the impatient people.

I have seen what I’m not.

I’m not what I see.

I must be free.

Pull over they say.

I feel I need to run away.

I must be blank.

This is what I say.

 *J.*

*Clearly*

Caught deep in the game,

growing up without a pops around,

at such a young age,

I saw a lot of friends shot down.

I went to school

just to play and cut class,

didn’t show moms the report card

because I didn’t pass.

Hanging out in the streets was all I knew,

when somebody asked why

I said there’s nothing else to do.

Pop’s friends on the corner

were calling out to me,

saying you want to be like your father,

can’t you see?

Watching my moms in pain, hurt, crying,

my grandmother working hard

trying to make things better.

*Dear Dad,*

*What’s up?*

*This is your oldest son writing to you.*

*I really don’t know*

*where to start.*

*I’ll start by saying*

*that even though you weren’t there for me just all about my life,*

*I forgive you, and I still love you.*

*It has been real hard for me.*

*I needed to talk to you*

*when I was having problems.*

*I’ve gotten in to some trouble with the law*

*since you have been gone,*

*but it has been awhile,*

*and I have been thinking*

*about what I want to do with my life.*

*Dad,*

*I admit that in a couple of conversations*

*I have had with you,*

*you told me to be better than you were,*

*not to be like you.*

*I have a lot to say,*

*but this is the first letter*

*I have ever written to you,*

*so I’ll make it brief.*

*Dad,*

*just to note I love you,*

*and I love to play basketball*

*just like you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Your Son*

*R.*

*Untitled*

I was born in Rochester.

I am sixteen.

I want to succeed.

I was locked-up for eight months.

I didn’t learn anything that I didn’t know before.

I know what I need to know.

I know how to survive.

Survival is making ends meet.

My father is in jail.

He is in for fifteen years.

I was six when he went in.

I write to him occasionally.

I live with my mother.

My mother raised me somewhat.

Mama can’t raise no man.

Mama needed to know what was going on with me.

Mama needed to understand the life I was living.

I was always aware of the consequences of my actions.

I always knew I had to be man enough to handle the consequences.

I accept that I will die.

I would rather die than go to jail.

I have to accept the fact that I will die

or be scared of life.

To life is to die,

and I always knew this.

I learned this being in the streets.

I was always in the streets.

We moved around a lot.

I was in the streets regardless.

I dream of being wealthy,

having more money that I could ever spend.

I believe I was put on earth to die.

I always knew this.

People always died on me,

friends,

family,

associates.

There were all mostly murdered.

Some just passed.

I believe in God.

I don’t understand why God lets this stuff happen,

bit I believe in Him.

Not much makes sense to me

except what I do.

This is true.

 *Q.*

*Untitled*

My dad was like a roller coaster,

he would come and go a lot.

He may have been doing drugs,

I don’t know

but he would get mad.

He was mad all the time.

He would hit us all for no reason.

It’s sad that he doesn’t know I have kids.

He left for Puerto Rico.

He doesn’t even know what a serious charge I have.

If he was here,

I probably wouldn’t be in this place.

Since I am older now,

instead of hitting me

could we sit down and talk?

Could he help me get a job?

Could he help me do my homework,

get my driver’s license?

I remember

he used to put me on his lap when he would drive.

He would take me to eat

and to the park.

Sometimes

I remember all of the good times too.

It wasn’t all bad.

I am a father now.

I have two girls, one four, one two.

I am starting to follow my dad’s path,

the good and the bad.

I want to change.

I look at my girls’ picture,

and it makes me want to be a better person.

I missed their births because I was locked up.

I didn’t think about how important

it was for me to be there for them.

My baby’s mom brings them to see me,

but is this really being a father?

If I get out of here,

I will be a real father.

I will help my daughters.

I will talk to them,

give them advice about life.

I know their mom can’t do it all.

I want to be more than their daddy over the phone.

I want them to look at me out in the world

and KNOW that I’m their daddy!

 G.

*Untitled*

Why? Even though they tell me to visualize success, I can’t see it?

My father was a missing part of me.

“Mom where is he”…”I don’t know baby.”

Everyone told me to go to school but everyone around me was skipping school and watching life pass.

I’ve been thinking, can I be myself and try to achieve my dreams?

I get out and they will label me a violent felon,

tell me I can’t get a decent job,

tell me I’ll be back.

Ever since I was a kid they said, “Everything will be ok.”

Why did the adults around me lie?

I’m a predicate felon!

What about the system that promised not to leave me behind.

They long term suspended me and called my mom and asked her why I didn’t come back?

Sucked into a vacuum of cruel, meaningless morals, why?

I know why!

Because since the beginning of time I’ve been labeled a “black” thug,

a failure, a disrespectful, baggy, clothed soul.

I’m reaching for the sun yet

all my spaceships crash, explode, or don’t even take off.

The city wants me to bow down to laws

that are from a time when the circumstances were completely different!

Transition is not a reliable way for me to succeed,

let me out and the only thing I have is bed burns and more rules.

I’m in a cell for 20 hours a day only let out to eat.

If I show the slightest disagreement they slide my food through a small slit in my door.

23-hour lockdown only let out to shower.

Barbaric right?

But why do they do it?!

I’m expected to fail so…they’ll be surprised when I succeed.

Death is my only guarantee, death before dishonor until they bury me.

Those who struggle and hope well…this is life…my life.

I’ll keep trying even though they plot and expect my downfall.

I’m all I have,

a hungry searching mammal looking for a place to prosper,

dodging, fighting, ducking the lions that make laws and devour all who don’t obey.

Can I only save myself in this American jungle of gunfire, absent fathers, low expectations

and struggle to climb a forever-falling rope.

*M.*

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