

A. Whitfield

IT COULD BE ME

There was a young man killed in here a couple of days ago. A gray day, like any other day in the joint. A-block, where the killing took place, is one of five cold, dark, dank cellblocks in Antioch. The soft beige of the surrounding walls, the polished terrazzo floors and pale windows belie the character of those within. A is notorious for housing the most violent and callous among us—gangbangers, chicken hawks, the indifferent, and, unfortunately, many arriving straight from reception: lambs staked in the middle of the wolves' den. When the a.m. chow bell rings and you step from your cell onto a company that seems to stretch on endlessly, forty-four killers step out with you, and you'll never feel more alone. That's how this young man got it: stepped out the morning after he arrived and bang, right in the heart.

That same day I was standing in line, waiting to place my weekly phone call home, and I remember thinking, "Some mother woke to some awful bad news this morning."

In all of the talk I have heard concerning the stabbing—the boy, twenty, was dead before he hit the ground—I have yet to hear any concern for him or his family, no sympathy, no anger. At afternoon chow I heard an old timer, covered with inked skulls and twisted barbed wire, wax philosophical to another illustrated con, "Well that goes to show ya—ya snooze, ya lose." In the prison library a young, fresh-faced kid, probably no older than the dead kid, whispered to another in a tremulous voice, he'd heard it was a case of mistaken identity—the killer thought he was someone else. Most conversations center on who did the stabbing and how much time he might get in the box.

We identify with perpetrator rather than the victim, even though the victim is one of us. It scares the hell out of me to think this. But then I ask myself, "What do you expect?"

I have been moldering away in one prison or another since 1985, and have seen too many die, both young and old. I can no longer envision myself waking up in the morning, brushing my teeth, dressing (can I wear these socks a second day?), stepping out of my cell and driving a piece of steel through a man's chest. There was a time, not too long ago, when I could have done it without a second thought.

Now I find myself contemplating the feeling this young man had as that steel pierced his heart. What were the last thoughts that passed through his mind? Did he know he was dead before he was dead?

His last thoughts, if he had time for them, must surely have been of his son or daughter, for the mother who gave him life. Or are these just the thoughts I would have; was he so different from me that his last thoughts would be on something I cannot comprehend? I'm sitting here in my cell as I write this, staring at a paint-chipped yellow wall alive with pictures of my daughter's childhood, years that I've known only through pictures and an occasional letter or phone call. She's twenty now, and I try to recall what the world looked like to me when I was that age. Even through a drug-addled mind I rarely thought of death—I enjoyed a young man's promise of long life, not a life sentence. Now, in my fifties, I'm fast approaching the end of the latter. I've read that once one reaches fifty or thereabouts, the thought of death begins to occupy one's imagination more often. I know I think about it all time.

I can't help but wonder how awful those last few moments must have been for the man I killed (I have long since accepted responsibility for the act). It is repugnant to me, and I tell myself with conviction and sincerity that the creature I was then is not the man I am now. I am more of a human being for detesting and condemning my actions, yet less of a human being for having committed the act.

I struggle. Transformation is difficult in any environment, but in prison the helplessness and hopelessness can be overwhelming. I am often beset with feelings of doubt and guilt and pain and fear. I sometimes doubt not only my ability but my resolve to make the right choices in life. It pains me at times to confront what I could have been and what I have in fact become. And I have to face the fear that my newfound concept of what it is to be human is an illusion, that it is fostered by my mistaken beliefs, that I will be forced to confront obstacles too large for me to overcome, and not have the moral strength to sustain my humanity. I'm scared I'll wake up one morning to look in the mirror and see the monster that was once me staring back, ready to devour me.

Some would say that I should let go of the guilt so the healing process can begin. But I don't want to heal. I deserve to carry this guilt around with me until the day that I die. I refuse to be consumed by it, but it is part of me, as big a part as any virtue or conscience I may now possess. It serves as a reminder of what I was then and what I never want to be again.

The sky is burning into a purplish-orange twilight as the evening count bell rings, pulling me to my feet to stand as I have stood thousands of times before. All is quiet but for the jingling of keys and padding of shoes as the guards make their way up the company, lips silently moving as they pass by one inmate after another. When they have gone, I pour a cup of coffee and return to the cooling sheets of my bunk. Soon, I'll hear the dull, metallic clunk-clank signaling the opening of the cell gates for the evening rec, but I won't stir. I take a sip of cold coffee. In the last few years I venture from my cell less and less. Watching other men pass, sliced up by the bars of my cell, I know that I won't find the solace I seek by walking circles around the prison yard. ☞