

## Listen

By: Travielle Craig and Andrea Romeo

Only one man survived J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*. He sits alone on the periphery—just outside of the 3 x 4 frame—knees pressed to his chest, doomed to rocking back and forth with the tide. You can't see him, lying just beyond the frame but he sees you, feels your breath like a warm humid wind when you get too close to the art. He'd probably say something once in a while if it weren't for the sand in his mouth, pressed into his gums, rubbing his throat raw.

He sits in silence listening, writing messages on the soft parts of the shore. But just when he's finally got a message across, the riotous tide swallows up his words once more.

*I am the last man standing. Every now and then, like a ship or plane that passes by, I get a visit from family. I wave. I yell. I cry out for help, hoping they will see me, hear me, rescue me. But they don't. I walk away mad. Mad because they left me. They left me but I am happy. Happy about seeing them, hearing them, talking to them—even if they don't talk back.*

The man sits in the frame. The frame hangs on the wall. If people looked close enough, they could see the man is still breathing. The waves are still rolling. The chains around his wrists still clink against each other. The painting is centuries years old but oil never dries. There are people still waiting to be saved.

*I am the last man standing. Loneliness and regret are my constant companions. The loneliness is not from being alone. I feel alone because I can't see it, but time is moving. Life is happening.*

Everything is moving, but him. He's seen the same wave live and die in the same instant, retraced his steps in the same circle, and counted the same sunset a million times. And although we aren't all stuck in a frame, we all live under the same sun. While we live beneath the pleasant warmth of distant rays, there are those who live their entire lives burning under the relentless stare of the eye in the sky.

*I grew up in Los Angeles. I was born at Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in 1974. Here I sit in this prison cell where I have been for the last 23 years, writing this letter to you. Growing up in the hood, I learned in and out of the home to fight. The L.A.P.D. used to jack us up. They used to make us put our hands on the hot engine hood of their cars and threaten us with jail time if we took them off. While our hands burned, they laughed.*

While we pretend to walk freely through a world that does not belong to us, there are those who hang like pictures on a wall, and it is not enough to peer in every now and then. History does not only present us pictures of kings with pale skin and

opulent thrones. There are also images of kings in chains, linked to one another, being led onto ships—or more recently, into 6 x 8 cells. The windows on the world are now embellished with metal bars.

*I am the last man standing. I am the only person still behind bars from the Rodney King Riots. I am just number 98882. Can you imagine being a number? Over time, your number replaces your name. All you are is that number.*

2.3 Million.

According to the Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities in 2005, the American Criminal Justice System holds more than 2.3 million people on their castaway steel-and-brick islands.

And yet— **every man is piece of the continent, a part of the main.**

You can keep a man in a cell but eventually he will seep out. His words a sweet milk, a silky black ink, unheard, unseen, will ooze from the pen onto a sheet of paper that will sag, unable to hold his voice within its thin blue lines.

*I used to love writing but I stopped because I felt that nobody was listening. Nobody cared. So I lost my voice and acted out violently and I destroyed lives, families, communities. But I'm learning that I can repair some of the damage I caused with the right words.*

He begins to whisper as he writes and although no one is listening, his voice flows quietly past metal bars. From the paper, to the floor, the words **roll down like water and righteousness, like a mighty stream.** His words, no longer confined by the page, sneak through the cracks on the walls.

*Words can do more damage than any type of violent act. They're more powerful than any gun. They're sharper than any knife. They're hotter than any fire. They are an everlasting record. They are spirit and they are life.*

But the storm in *The Slave Ship* continues to wreck. We are stilling telling the same story. We also are still learning to listen.

*I'm waiting to get off my island.*