

Ta'amari, Salah. Translated by the author and Naomi Shihab Nye. *Memoirs* [excerpt].¹

"You can take the bag off," commanded the warden.

The handcuffs fastened tightly around my wrists made it painful to pull off the bag, which fitted closely around my head. It was like sur-facing from deep under water. My eagerness to breathe freely and my curiosity to examine my surroundings were stronger than the pain in my wrists, however. For several moments I inhaled air in huge gulps, gasping for more. My vision had blurred so it took my eyes a while to accustom themselves to the light.

There wasn't much to see. The room reminded me of a walk-in closet where brooms and buckets and cleaning supplies are kept in a home. It was tiny, no more than four feet by three feet, and painted red with a high ceiling. A huge black bucket occupied one corner, almost one--fourth of the whole room. Next to it sat a dirty plastic jug, half full of drinking water. The floor was rough and wet.

Even after the heavy door had been closed, I remained standing in the centre of the cubicle, waiting for it to open again. I thought I was only there temporarily and would soon be moved to the interrogation room. It was hard to realise this might be my new cell. More anxious than tired, I tried to recline in the driest corner of the cell, leaning my head back against the wall, and facing the door.

I closed my eyes trying to absorb it all. How strangely and rapidly everything shifted in life, instantly altering old conceptions and ideas. The previous cell, where I had spent the last fifteen days, seemed large and luxurious compared to this one. An hour ago it had seemed like the most hideous place in the world. I could barely tolerate it.

Now, in this new place, I couldn't even stretch out my legs. Even a rough mattress would have felt like luxury. Everything seemed far away as childhood dreams. I stared at the ceiling, the walls, the bucket, the jug. There was so little to see.

What did they want from me? I was haunted by that question. I kept remembering things in a kind of hallucinatory swirl. Could it be Abu Dawud and his yellow smile? Everything about him was jaundiced and weird. His

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smile, his eyes, even the way he shook hands with me before he left the cell, congratulating me for my courage! Had I been too reckless by challenging his opinions and expressing how I felt toward him and the rest of the Israelis?

How could I have behaved any differently? He seemed rude, pro-vocative, false. "How can you bear it here without a fan? So hot and humid – and don't you have asthma?"

I wouldn't answer. His false concern was transparent. It must be him, I kept telling myself. I am here for punishment. My back and neck ached and the chains felt so heavy. I tucked the edge of my trousers between the chains and my ankles to keep the flesh from being scraped, but the skin was already raw.

Those were the same chains that are used to tie up horses. I smiled to realise it. There were so many things to think about and now, even something to smile at.

This new cell was too small for any real movement. In the previous cell I'd begun pulling threads off the blankets and rolling them into beads. I could even exercise by stretching.

It became almost a chant. "Pull the threads! Make beads! Stretch! I must be dreaming ..."

Time moved more slowly than a tortoise trapped in a swamp of glue. Each second elongated toward the century mark. To speed up time would have been as impossible as spurring a dead horse to make him go. The cell was so well-sealed I didn't even have daylight to give me a clue about time. The bright, constantly lit bulb made it impossible to differentiate between day and night. It also made the bright red walls seem vulgar, slapping their colour across my eyes. So red it hurt ... how could I bear such ugliness?

Since my knowledge of time and place was lost, it could have been noon or dawn, and I could have been in Lebanon or Palestine, it could be north, south, east, west. A feather in the wind, a plucked-up tree with its roots in the air. That's how I felt. Water was my only possession, more precious to me than to a desert traveller, my only link with sanity. It was not that I feared dying of thirst but simply that taking my small sips of water was the only normal act I felt able to perform. The possibility of losing it made me panic.

I breathed with difficulty in that hot, humid cell, as if a stone had been laid on my chest. The bare bulb's reflection made the red walls seem even more garish. I could hardly have shielded my eyes from its glare even if my hands

had been free, since the room was so cramped. All I could do was sit opposite the sanitary bucket and rest my head against the corner.

I noticed the brand name on my handcuffs – “Smith and Wesson” – -the same famous Smith and Wesson that manufactures guns and pistols. "Which is worse," I wondered, "a product that takes away your life or one that takes away your freedom?" I rubbed the clean, shining metal, hating the very substance of it. Still I realised it was not the metal's fault, but the way man had used it that was to blame. As man grows away from his innocence, I mused, so do his toys.

"Here, in this boxy cell", I pondered, "All I can do is think. I will think positively. How can I choose an idea that will not lead me toward despair? How can I start out along an unknown path without fearing it leads to a dead end? Everything is so difficult! A new idea is like a road in a jungle, it may lead to dark swamps or to open meadows".

I felt on the brink of exploring a new dimension of myself but didn't know if I would be up to it.

Pain in my chest, in my eyes ... aching ankles and wrists. Handcuffs and chains nibbling at my flesh. I didn't know which part of me hurt worse as I floated in that ocean of pain. Was it possible that one pain really canceled out another? My aching limbs almost eased next to the roaring throb of my mind. It is in the human mind that the most ferocious hurricanes take place, not in the oceans.

I remembered the mountains of south Lebanon ten years before, with a group of fighters, in freezing weather.

I had asked someone, "Why does our conception of hell involve flames, fire, people shrieking in the heat? From now on I'll believe hell is cold!" I remember smiling and my friends begging me to quit phi-losophising about our misery.

In this prison cell, I decided hell wasn't crowded either. Hell was isolated compartments, solitary confinement. Shrieking multitudes as images of hell were no more than fanciful metaphors. It was all in the human mind. My mind was still alert.

This new idea comforted me a bit. My mind was still alert. I was sleepy, absolutely exhausted, and obsessed with thoughts about the cruelty of

sleeplessness when imposed on a body. In my previous cell I had been awakened by heavy knocking every time I drifted off.

Now the stench of lysol drifting from the sewers seemed unbearable. Mostly I worried the odour would trigger an asthmatic crisis in me. My lack of knowledge concerning time and actual location in which I dwelled only contributed to my imbalance. I had to invent them. I had to invent everything.

Anyway, time is the invention of people. We pretend dates and records can be absolute marks. Now I was walking in the desert, bereft of landmarks except for one blazing sun which became compass as well as inferno. I could neither see my tracks in the sand behind me, nor how far ahead was my destination. Was there a destination? I invented it.

The moment the door of the cell had closed, I felt deserted. The rest of the world was on the other side, a united front against me. Then the old giant within me rose to protest: "You are not alone! So many others are with you or struggling for you. Don't give in to abandoned feelings! Don't give in to the present moment! In this instant you make your own history, so do it the best way you can. Think of twenty years from now when you will sit around a table with family and friends telling the story of this moment. Think how proud you will be to have survived when the mention of this moment comes up. Don't complain! The more severe it is, the more glorious it will be. It is paradoxical that, for freedom fighters, the moments of prison are the most heroic of our memories. You may be confined inside four walls right now but don't confine yourself within wrong conceptions. That would only help your enemy to pull you down. Your family is not alone in missing you, and you are not alone in confinement! Thousands are in even worse situations. This is not a cell, this is a womb from which you shall be delivered, stronger, purer! Think of it as a womb!"

Before that brave voice within me could catch his breath to continue, I answered, "Oh, but I hurt! Pain, agony, I don't know what I am, I want to see things, I am sick of walls, I want to sleep, you say it is a womb but I call it a filthy horror!"

The voice responded, "Your eyes are lasers. Fix them on the walls till the rays make them collapse".

I did as I was told. Focusing hard, I sent rays forward, onto one spot, till it started to melt. I made a little hole, which gradually grew larger and larger. I

could see the outdoors again, trees, grass, domes-ticated flowers. My eyes roamed through the sky, alighting on trees.

"See? You can see. So don't complain about the walls".

A plastic dish slid in under the door. It could have been breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Now which day was this again? Each second dragged along as if it bore tonnes of sand on its back. How long are seconds? How bright is real light?

The sudden sound of laughter pierced me like a flaming arrow. What agony to be reminded of laughter, life, joy! I felt magnified on the screen of that laughter, desperate, like a subhuman degraded to the very bottom. The person who laughed was completely unaware of my existence. The sound repeated; a man and woman, walking together along a nearby path. I was separated from them by a wall that separated joy and misery, life and nihilism. I pressed my forehead on my crossed wrists.

I felt I was standing up in a small boat, facing hundred-foot ocean waves. I didn't know whether I'd fallen asleep or gone into a trance. The more my body was confined, the more my mind rattled fast and wild. I felt weaker and weaker, crushed by despair, pulled to the bottom.

When you drown, when you go deep down, nymphs and fairies lull you into soft restful peace. But it is the end of the struggle. Your whole life illuminates on a screen. It is amazing how years can be summarised in seconds, how they can be so vivid.

Dream: On my way to the bottom, I passed by our old house in Bethlehem. I could see the old cracked wooden door, the thick stone walls, and our neighbour's house standing opposite. My mother leaned against our neighbour's walls, chin resting on one fist. The other fist was placed on her waist in a stance she used to take when I was a child when she watched me first learning to walk. She looked at me, amazed, and said, "What are you doing to yourself?"

"What do you mean? What are they doing to me?!"

"What *are* they doing to you?"

"Can't you see?" I rattled my handcuffs and chains.

She said, "You must be imagining things".

"Imagining? These handcuffs and vulgar red walls are hardly imag-ined!"

"Remember when you had asthma attacks when you were young? You used to cry and tell me you were suffocating and drowning while in fact your head still rested on the pillow. You only imagined you sank. Now you are doing the same".

"Yes, I do remember". I said, and she told me to go to sleep. Her voice was gentle as any caring mother's. I dozed off. The wall felt softer than a pillow.

But I was awakened by pain in my back and neck. I opened my eyes to see my mother still standing there. "Oh Mother, I am not imag-ining", I cried. "The chains are real, real, real. I want to stretch and move my arms!"

"Even if your arms were free, there's not enough space here to stretch", she said.

My eyes measured the cramped cell and I nodded.

"You're right", I said. And then she vanished, or rather, I went past her to the bottom, travelling more slowly. And at the bottom I saw her again, with the same expression on her face.

"Mother!" I shouted. "Don't talk me out of complaining! It is definitely better and less agonising not to wear chains! At least without them I would have no pain, no torn flesh!"

But my arguments had no effect. She remained composed as ever. In her firm but gentle voice she asked, "Do you remember Ibrahim Ghannam?"

"Ibrahim Ghannam? What on earth makes you think of him now?"

"Do you remember him?"

"Of course! He's a good artist. I always liked his paintings. So?"

"What else do you know about him?"

"He is paralysed, confined to a wheelchair."

"He will never be able to use his legs again, yet he is creative, pro-ductive. Your confinement is temporary, yet you complain. How is he able to cope with his endless confinement while you can't even bear a temporary one?"

The embarrassment I felt hurt worse than my pain. I lowered my eyes to avoid her gaze. "I'm sorry", I said. I spoke more to myself than to her.

Ibrahim's paintings flew through my mind, waving their titles: "The Wedding" – "The Orange Harvest" – "The Kindergarten" – lulling me with their simple, deep colours.

But the pain in my extremities engulfed me with such extreme sharp-ness that I cried out once more – "Mother! I cannot tolerate this! No words of yours can comfort me!"

My voice rose until I was yelling. She did not utter another word. Her green eyes darkened with sadness and glittered with tears. They rolled down her cheeks – clear and silent as drops of dew on a rose bush or leaf. It felt like the same deep sadness and the same silent tears she had known when my sister Almaz reached a terminal stage of her illness. Nothing could help keep her alive, not even my mother's love. Almaz died while my mother and I were watching. I kept alternating my gaze between my sister's small face and my mother's. Through my mother's expression, I could tell what was happening with my sister. When she finally bent over her, her tears were faster than her lips to kiss the little innocent face.

"There's nothing I can do for you, Son. I did my best. Auda'tak Lillah, I entrust you to God."

She turned her back and walked away. I jumped up, begging her not to leave. She paid no attention to my screams. She waved farewell, without looking back, and disappeared.

My desperate screams echoed after the calmly composed echo of her words. Then all the echoes faded away and a stillness prevailed as if I were sitting in a huge hollow cave.

At that moment the tip of my toe touched bottom – the muddy bottom of nihilism. Her last words rushed in, penetrating my ears like a bell that shocked me back to awareness.

One million giants stood up in me and began fighting their way to the surface again, with determination, fury, and force. No way to make me give up. I was stronger, I would fight back, I would rise to the challenge.

1

2 A Palestinian painter who lived as a refugee in Shatila refugee camp in Beirut. He died in 1989.

3 Auda'tak Lillah: I entrust you to God's protection.