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## What Was Missed

A look back on what I've lost due to incarceration has me looking back at a life of a stranger. As of this writing, I have been locked up 16 years, since 2005. I was also imprisoned as a juvenile, from 2000 to 2002, when I was released on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. It's easier for me, perhaps, to list what I haven't lost, because I feel like I've had taken<sup>away</sup> nearly everything that usually defines a person. I lost the final 2 years of my childhood. (Between ages 12 and 16, I was also locked up on and off.) Taken from me was the person I'd have become if not for a broken justice system that sent me prison. The old me is dead and gone. In his place was borne the man I am today: dark, weary, distrustful, sinical; but also headstrong, intelligent, sharp, and a warrior. — for the sharpest swords are forged in the hottest fires. I've lost a hundred friends, but have gained a few whose loyalty is unquestionably more fierce than those former fairweather allies. My life was taken by the State, burned to cinders. But from the ashes rose the phoenix. Much and more has the State taken. The years inside have changed the essence of who I am, my beliefs and ideals, my identity. And Time's close friend is The Reaper. I've lost cousins (most recently Erica Rodarte. RIP), my grandma Boo, and not a day goes by that I don't worry about the Hand of Death seizing another loved one. Imprison-

ment has taken away from me popular culture. During my time down I have watched from afar the rise of the invention and application of technology those on the outside have come to know as things that have always been: smart phones, Facebook and Twitter. Legends have died and new faces of resistance have risen. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of incarceration is the lack of love, the void of compassion and warmth, and the omission of sensuality. To fall in love; to flirt; <sup>to touch;</sup> to kiss; to make love and to fuck; to hold that special someone in my arms; to laugh with loved ones; to feel the morning sun on my skin; to watch the sun set, stay up all night, then watch the sky turn from black to grey to light blue. As my time inside nears an end I often feel overwhelmed not by feelings of great anticipation for my release, but by dread. Dread for the millions left behind. For the desperate children behind bars. For the heartbroken women who remain inside. For the men who have come and gone, and will come again, and again, and again. Dread for a racist, broken criminal justice system and equally corrupt government.

These revolving doors, this poverty-to-prisons pipeline, when will it ever end? What can I do to help bring it to an end? What can we do as a society? Fight! Because this is our war. The "war on drugs" and the "war on crime" was never that. They have always been a war on minorities, on the poor and disenfranchised, on those deemed

less-than by a white-supremist, patriarchal society that labels itself a democracy but didn't allow women to vote for over half its existence. A society that routinely justifies modern day lynchings and murder by police. To take back what is ours we must be willing to fight for it. So that when we look back we'll see our lives richer for what we've gained rather than poorer for what we've lost.

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