

Marc Velasquez
from *A Future Not Our Own*

Only once during the two years I spent teaching in Belize's only prison, was I able to define my job clearly and articulately. Over the two years, I constantly answered questions about who I was and why I was there. My answers changed, depending on the day and depending on who asked the question; I was a volunteer, a teacher, a US citizen, a Mexican American, educated, untrained, clueless, someone capable of making mistakes, someone who wanted only to do good work. Often, I was all of these things at once. Sometimes, only a few.

Then once, in a spontaneous, lucid moment, my purpose collided with my intentions, and the reason for my presence became clear. I was in the newest section of the prison—Supermax—and I was trying to comfort a young man called “Teeth,” whom I had known for less than a month.

Teeth spent only two weeks with us in the prison's youth section. He was over 18, the legal line between boy and man. Teeth did time in the prison's main yard, and that time broke him. He spent the week before he came to us in the prison health clinic—under suicide watch after drinking bleach.

They called him Teeth because of the way his pushed forth from his gums: spaced awkwardly, as if he were missing a few, as if each was trying to escape association with any other. His hair was long, matted, and unwashed. He wouldn't be in the youth facility long enough to get the uniform shave required for residence. The day he came in, during a lull in class, the other boys guessed at his crime.

“Him favor one tief, boy.”

“Nah, man, must be drugs. Him look like him can’t stop smoke rock.”

“Murder,” Teeth said with a sharp edge to his voice.

We had boys in for everything from petty theft to murder and rape. Some were remanded—unable to make bail or refused it while awaiting trial. But some were convicted, serving anywhere from a few months to life. Teeth was serving, but his time was almost up. Murder was clearly out of the question, yet Teeth maintained it was his crime.

Teeth had a composition notebook he had somehow managed to keep with him when he moved from the main yard. In it, he wrote what he called poems. They were in English, and not the Kriol he and all the boys spoke. His poems were words without a context, but with line breaks in clever places. I realized where they came from one afternoon when I watched him copy words from a magazine into the comp book. The words weren’t his, but the breaks were.

After two weeks in the youth facility, Teeth threatened to hang himself with an electrical cord. In the middle of the night, they moved Teeth to Supermax, the only building where he would be under 24-hour supervision, the only building where he would be isolated from any weapon he could use against himself.

I would not have thought of it again, nor thought of him again. Teeth would have been just another in a long line of boys who came in, were around for a few days, and because of bail, or their innocence, or because we couldn’t handle them, were gone. But Teeth yelled my name through the ventilation holes in Supermax’s concrete walls. He asked if I’d come see him, and I yelled back, telling him I would at the end of the day.

He sat on the concrete floor of his cell, resting his back on the frame of his bunk, his comp book by his outstretched legs. The air was heavy and stale, thick with the smell of waste. The one florescent hall light barely shone into his room. He looked up at me as I approached his bars, but he didn't stand, didn't smile. I crouched down closer to him.

"Mr. Marc, you think I could get one pen f' write my poems them?"

I knew I could do nothing for him.

"They don't want me to give you one." I said. "They're still afraid you're gonna hurt yourself."

He threw his book, pages fluttering, against the wall. The thud echoed down the concrete hallway. Then we stayed silently for a long while.

"This so it go, Mr. Marc," he said finally. "Nothing wan change for me. Them think you can take one pig from the mud, clean it so, and put it pon the concrete. But it one pig, understand? It just wan run straight back ina the mud."

I sat with the idea for a few seconds. Teeth was looking at me through his dark, wide eyes. He needed reassurance. He was looking for a reason to believe that there was more to his life.

"Well it's my job," I said, "to teach you that you're not a pig."