



"Remembrance of Things Past" (Proust), "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" (Joyce), "Boyhood" (Linklater) - these are profound coming-of-age stories. "Moonlight," the latest film by Barry Jenkins ("Medicine for Melancholy") will surely join these classics as it heads into Oscar season. Jenkins has aimed his camera gracefully into the heart, soul and mind of a young African American boy as he matures to manhood, struggling at first with bullying at school, a neighborhood of drug dealers, and a mother who he hates and loves as he learns she gets her drugs from the only father figure he has.

Shot in Miami close to the beach with moonlight on the water, the tensions raised in this film are all internal. Dialogue is sparse, while we look behind the masks of stereotypes. At times the camera circles the boy as though he were in a fish bowl looking out at his enemies and his few loved ones who he is unable to defeat or embrace..

The story is told in three chapters, "Little," "Chiron" and "Black," the names others have given him in three stages of his life, each chapter superbly played by very talented actors. While the appearances of all three are very different, the camera is able to follow the internal world through the eyes of each actor, as though each one was possessed by the ghost of the previous. The search for identity continues from chapter to chapter, looking for a place in the world where it is safe to be who you are.

In Chapter one, "Little," (Alex R. Hibbert) is a fragile boy terrified by the world, rescued by Juan (Mahershala Ali), a drug dealer with a heart of gold. Juan takes him to the beach, teaches him to swim, and gives him fatherly advice: "Don't ever let anyone tell you who you are." But Little's sad eyes are too afraid to look at anyone, least of all himself with any self-confidence. When Juan and his girlfriend, Teresa (Janelle Monáe), invite him to stay in their home where it is "safe," his drug addicted mother, Paula, (Naomie Harris), won't let him go.

In chapter two "Chiron" (Ashton Sanders) describes to his friend Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) on the beach that sometimes when he cries he could just flow out into the ocean. But we never see him cry. Kevin is the only man he can relate to, and with whom he shares his defining moment.

In chapter three, "Black", (Trevante Rhodes) he is finally a man transformed from the skinny fragile Chiron. He is finally master of his life but no longer himself and he searches for those who touched his inner core - his mother and then his friend Kevin.

There is suspense and grace in every silent moment in this film, as though something were about to explode against the social realm, but instead it implodes in the character, leaving him at last a full grown man, fully expressed in the arms of someone who cares for him, but who is, alas, unavailable.