

Poems from prison

This year, prison arts charity the Koestler Trust has published the first in a new biannual series of prison poetry anthologies, *Koestler Voices: New Poetry from Prisons*. The poems are selected from winning entries to the Koestler Trust's annual competitions, all written by people who are or have been detained in the UK's criminal justice system. Volume One is edited by Kate Potts and has a foreword from Benjamin Zephaniah. The two poems featured here are from this collection.

Between 1993 and 2017 the prison population in England and Wales more than doubled, rising from 41,561 to 86,256. Survivors of childhood abuse and those with drug problems and mental health issues are significantly overrepresented in the prison population. And incarceration figures reflect discrimination as well as deprivation: a 2016 government report found that black, Asian and minority ethnic people are more likely to be sentenced to prison for some crimes, such as driving, public order and drug offences. There have also been drastic cuts to spending on the prison and probation service, and record-high levels of self-harm incidents, and attacks on both staff and fellow prisoners. At such a time creative work that emerges from and responds to the UK prison system seems more vital than ever.

Though fantastically varied in terms of style and subject-matter, the poems in *Koestler Voices* are shaped by the constraints of time and space imposed by prison life. Constraints are a consideration of all poetry: the white space of the page, the rhythm and time of the line, the limitations of language itself. But prison poetry tends to concern itself with the regaining of power, the figurative breaking out of or transcendence of physical incarceration. As Koestler anthology poet Stuart explains, 'I wrote to get out of the state of mind of being in prison'.

Kate Potts

Soundings

Networked Gym-Fit Recidivist

This is what I've learnt from being
in prison again.
I've learnt five out of 750 of us have three weeks
to sew a creatively written patch.
I've learnt it pays to be first in the queue
for the servery or go hungry.
I've learnt the sound of nonchalant callousness is
a prison officer bellowing.
I've learnt that gym or chapel makes us feel
less like income-streams or cattle.
I've learnt your best source of help is your peers
so I'm networked. And gym-fit.
I've learnt how to make a tattoo gun out of a
Playstation Two.
I've learnt most murderers look like me, or you.
I've learnt of a joint enterprise robbing you blind.
Care UK, Carillion and People Plus; they're on
the inside.
I've learnt that the immigration service's delays
mean foreign nationals have extended stays.
Oh, and by the way, taxpayer
you're the one who pays.
I've learnt a part-privatised probation worker has
eighty or ninety on her books

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And will recall us on a whim, depending on
how her in-tray looks.
I've learnt a paranoid schizophrenic's sojourn
was nine years beyond his sentence
And he'll now trade coffee or food for a burn.
I've learnt the Juno team's ineptness
makes them carpet-bomb all domestics.
I've learnt a broken-legged Vietnamese was
untreated for sixteen days.
I've learnt a man from Vilnius
pulled out four of his own teeth.
I've learnt that a towel and kettle is all
you need
On healthcare wing, under constant obs
for a suicide to succeed.
I've learnt that prison is a Mecca for the shopper.
'Burn', Spice, prescription meds, narcotics of any flavour,
mobile phones of any colour.
I've learnt that despite private profit's prison glass
there's neither rehabilitation nor correction
with many street-homeless post-detention.
It's just a scam, the wrapper's off.

Neil

Soundings

Grandfather clock

You kept my heart under a stone brother,
almost like it meant something.
A thousand tiny fireflies in a jar brother,
unquiet spirits
on the tangled path from childhood.

I'll fight you for the grandfather clock
that stood sentry through our sleepless nights.
I matched you tick for tock then brother,
swing for swing
even as the minutes ate the silence.

Under cover of covers we listened
to the poltergeist smash the plates
to father slamming the door,
and to the tearful ghost
creeping up the stairs
to bed.

Anonymous