Crossing the prison boundary?

A study of UK prisoner writing competitions

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Writing as liberation?

"prisoners, through writing, try to rescue themselves and us"

Davies, 1990, p.7

"prison stories commonly share a hope of transcendence, as represented by the overcoming of limitation or of degradation"

Carnochan, 1998, p.382

Challenges to writing as liberation

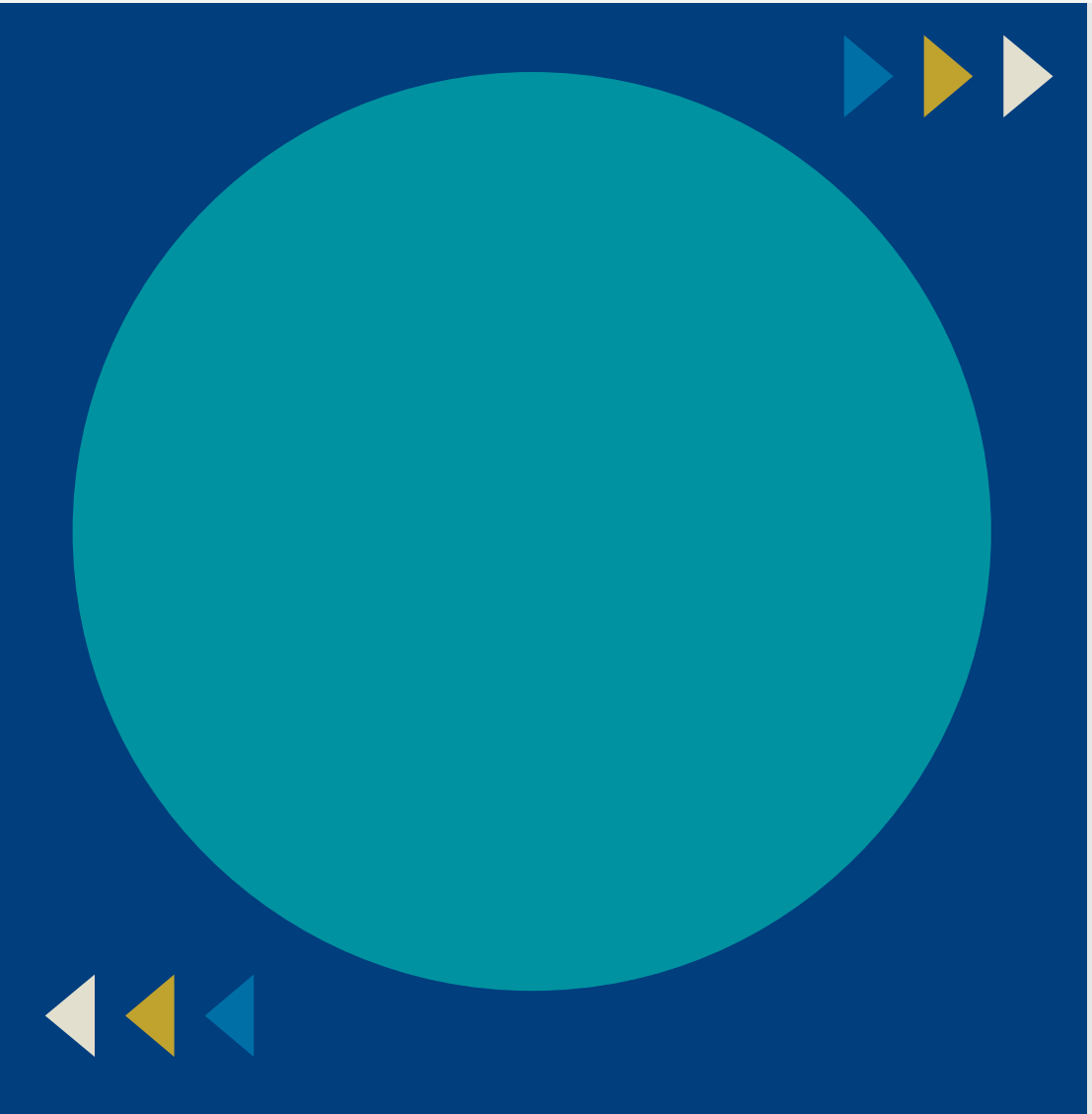
"a cultural production that is both constituted and coerced by state captivity"

Rodríguez, 2006, p.85

"print publication, far from liberating prison writings, enforced new kinds of incarceration upon these texts"

Ahnert, 2013, p.146

Crossing the prison boundary



- “the prison wall itself is porous, permeable, interpenetrated […] it does not spatially demarcate the limits of the prison in terms of the experience of incarceration”

  Moran, 2015, p.102

- “[exhibiting artwork] allows prisoners to symbolically climb over the prison walls”

  Turner, 2016, p.213

What about prisoner writing?

Prisoner writing competitions

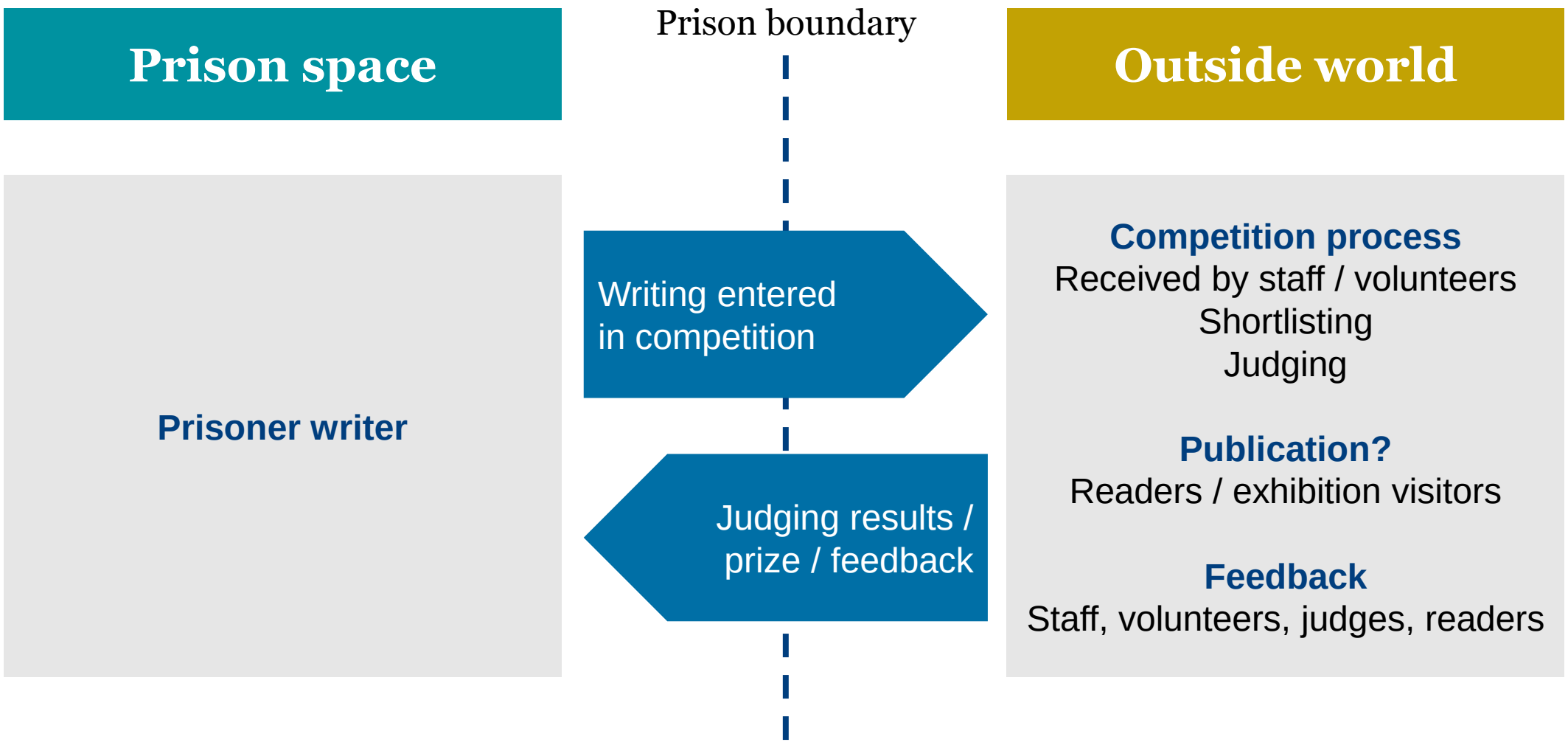
Koestler Trust
arts by offenders

PRISON REFORM TRUST

- Koestler Awards founded 1962
- 16 writing categories in 2018, including poetry, short story, life story
- 1,980 pieces of writing entered in 2018
- From prisons, immigration removal centres, secure units, probation etc…

- Annual writing competition since 1990s
- Three categories: short story, comment, spoken word
- Approximately 800 entries per year
- Open to prisoners plus their friends and families

Writing and the prison boundary



Prisoner writing vs prisoner art

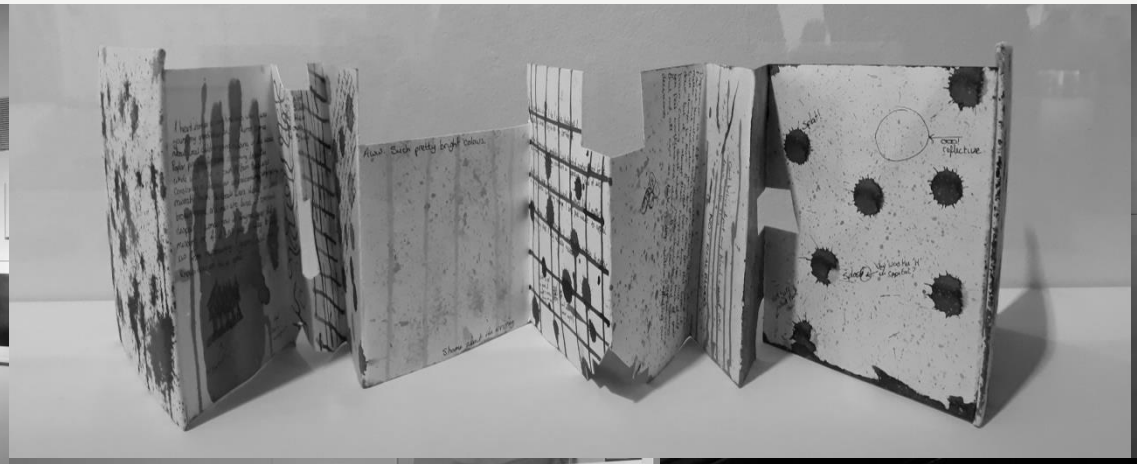
Prisoner art

- Option to sell artwork
- Artwork returned to artist after competition
- Original artwork as artefact
- Two-way communication

Prisoner writing

- No option to sell writing
- Original writing not generally returned
- Reproduction – photocopy or retyped
- One-way communication

Visibility of prisoner writing



PRISON REFORM TRUST

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GET INVOLVED › COMPETITIONS & AWARDS › WRITING COMPETITION ›

2018 WRITING COMPETITION WINNERS ANNOUNCED

THE ROBIN CORBETT AWARD FOR PRISONER RE-INTEGRATION

PRISON REFORM TRUST
WRITING COMPETITION 2018

SIGN UP FOR THE PRT NEWSLETTER

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The Prison Reform Trust is pleased to announce the winners of the

Prisoner writing as an act of translation

"[prisoner writing] bridges the divide between the world inside prison and the world outside"

Shabazz, 2018, p.588

"mediate separate worlds"

Miller, 2005, p.17

"translation […] from one set of social and philosophical assumptions into another"

"translation is in many respects the central theme of prison writing"

Davies, 1990, p.5

Domestication vs foreignisation

Domestication

- Move the text towards the reader
- Removes all trace of the foreign

Foreignisation

- Move the reader towards the text
- Signifies difference

Bring the prison to the reader or the reader to prison?

Paratexts

- “the external presentation of a book – name of author, title, and the rest”

  Genette, 1997, p.3

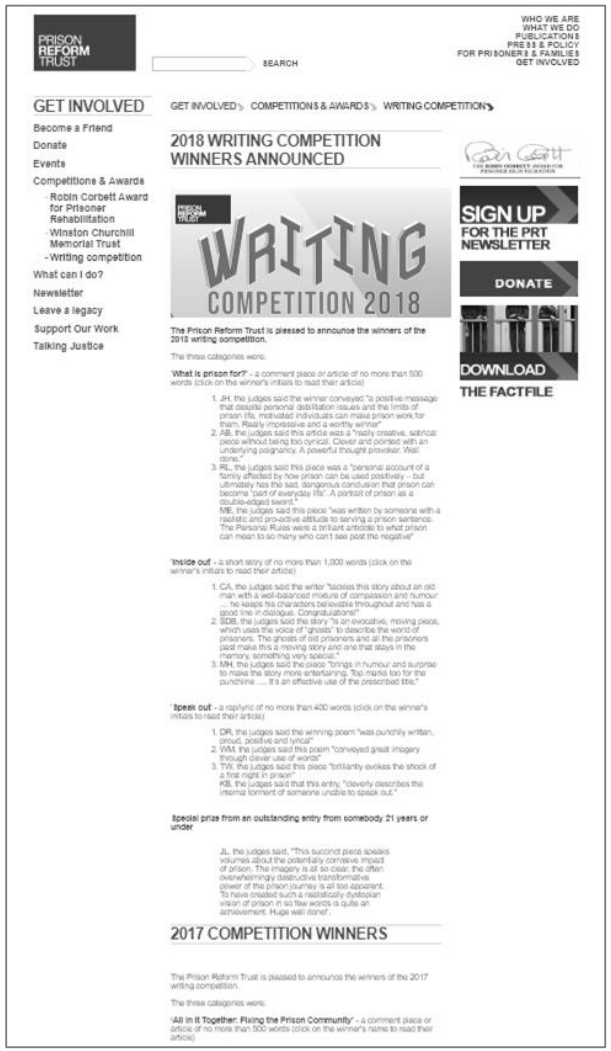
- “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers”

  Genette, 1991, p.261

- “a *threshold* […] a zone between text and off-text”

  Genette, 1997, p.2

Inside Out
Prison Reform Trust short story winner 2018



3. RL, the judges said this piece was a "personal account of a family affected by how prison can be used positively – but ultimately has the sad, dangerous conclusion that prison can become "part of everyday life". A portrait of prison as a double-edged sword."
ME, the judges said this piece "was written by someone with a realistic and pro-active attitude to serving a prison sentence. The Personal Rules were a brilliant antidote to what prison can mean to so many who can't see past the negative"

'**Inside out**' - a short story of no more than 1,000 words (click on the winner's initials to read their article)

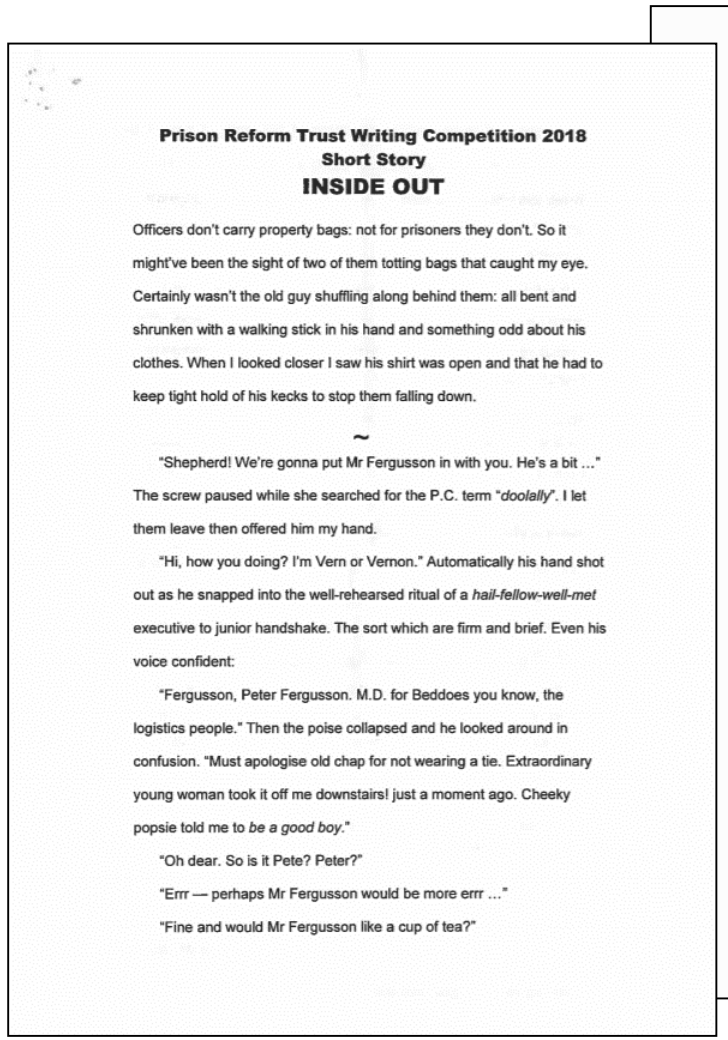
1. CA, the judges said the writer "tackles this story about an old man with a well-balanced mixture of compassion and humour … he keeps his characters believable throughout and has a good line in dialogue. Congratulations!"
2. SDB, the judges said the story "is an evocative, moving piece, which uses the voice of "ghosts" to describe the world of prisoners. The ghosts of old prisoners and all the prisoners past make this a moving story and one that stays in the memory, something very special."
3. MH, the judges said the piece "brings in humour and surprise to make the story more entertaining. Top marks too for the punchline …. It's an effective use of the prescribed title."

'**Speak out**' - a rap/lyric of no more than 400 words (click on the winner's initials to read their article)

1. DR, the judges said the winning poem "was punchily written, proud, positive and lyrical"

http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/GetInvolved/CompetitionsAwards/Writingcompetition

Inside Out
Prison Reform Trust short story winner 2018



Prison Reform Trust Writing Competition 2018
Short Story
INSIDE OUT

Officers don't carry property bags: not for prisoners they don't. So it might've been the sight of two of them totting bags that caught my eye. Certainly wasn't the old guy shuffling along behind them: all bent and shrunken with a walking stick in his hand and something odd about his clothes. When I looked closer I saw his shirt was open and that he had to keep tight hold of his kecks to stop them falling down.

~

"Shepherd! We're gonna put Mr Fergusson in with you. He's a bit …" The screw paused while she searched for the P.C. term "*doolally*". I let them leave then offered him my hand.

"Hi, how you doing? I'm Vern or Vernon." Automatically his hand shot out as he snapped into the well-rehearsed ritual of a *hail-fellow-well-met* executive to junior handshake. The sort which are firm and brief. Even his voice confident:

"Fergusson, Peter Fergusson. M.D. for Beddoes you know, the logistics people." Then the poise collapsed and he looked around in confusion. "Must apologise old chap for not wearing a tie. Extraordinary young woman took it off me downstairs! just a moment ago. Cheeky popsie told me to *be a good boy*."

"Oh dear. So is it Pete? Peter?"

"Errr — perhaps Mr Fergusson would be more errr …"

"Fine and would Mr Fergusson like a cup of tea?"

"Ohhh, kind of you old chap, but I'll have to be getting on soon. I seem to have lost my wife. D'you think the chambermaid might help?" I filled the kettle: this could take a while.

"Chambermaid?"

"Popsie who just left."

"Miss Cassatt? She's the S.O.."

"Is she? Is she? Ah!" From which I guessed he'd never heard the term before. "Appalling service anyway. Look at how they've just dropped my luggage on the floor. Won't be getting a tip from me if that's their attitude, I can tell you!"

"Tea? Coffee?"

"Not for me old chap. I'll have to be getting on — I've lost my wife you see, and she'll be getting anxious if I'm not there to deal with people." I made him tea. "This room! D'you think they know I'm Fergusson, *Peter* Fergusson down here with Beddoes? The logistics people you know. What my wife's going to make of it I couldn't say." He looked lost, so I sat him down on the closed toilet lid and passed him a cup.

"Perhaps we could phone her?" He frowned.

"Well there we go again. Extraordinary thing! This young popsie downstairs, took my tie and shoe laces then she stole my phone! Cheeky *young mare*! I said to her, you'll be getting a very stiff letter from our travel people. Not at all the sort of service I'd expect if you're looking for repeat business. Need to buck your ideas up young lady."

2

Inside Out

Short Story –Entry for Writing Competition 2018

There are ghosts encircling on my motionless body. I could see them and I could hear them writhe in pain, but I could not help them. Actually I could see my ghost too.

Could I help myself?

No, I was not moving.

Was I still alive?

In the far distance, in a building with men wearing wigs sitting on high pedestals and with a wooden hammer in their hands, playing god, and twelve commoners to their left, playing the society, deciding the fate of all the ghosts around me, including mine, and shouting fiercely with anger- you are going down, you are guilty, you are convicted, you are finished, and then all bowed, and this ritual went on and on and on, with each ghost jumping into an abyss we call "Inside".

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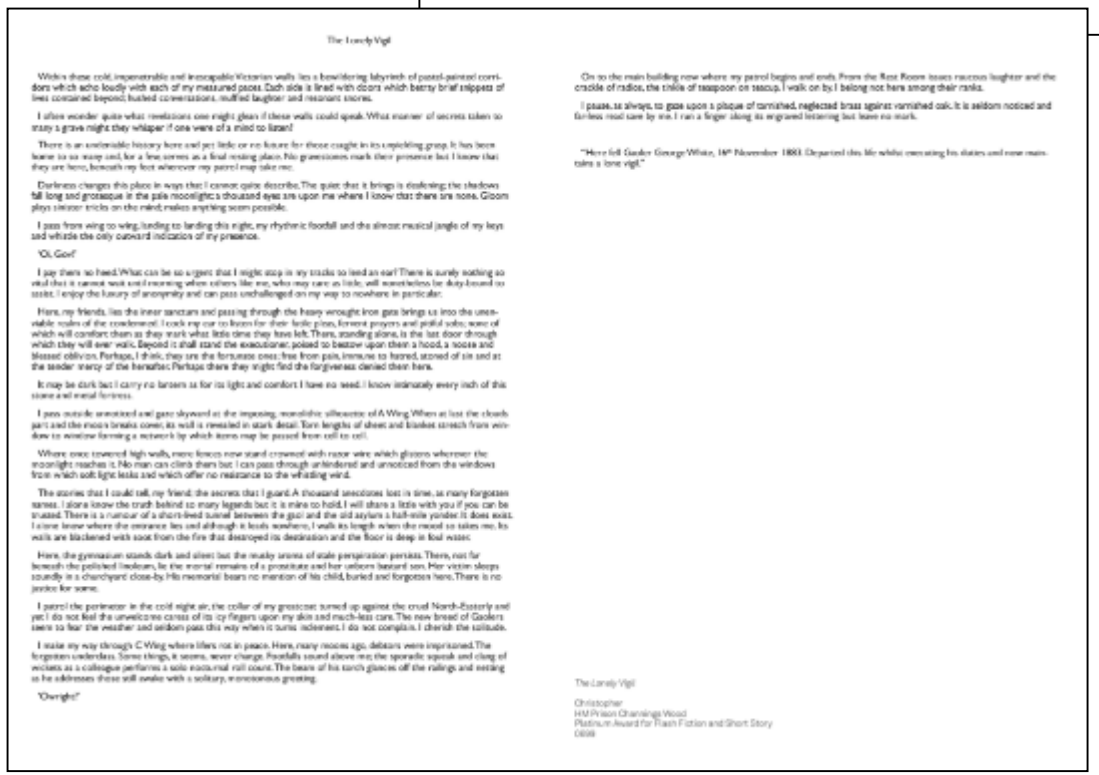
http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/GetInvolved/CompetitionsAwards/Writingcompetition

The Lonely Vigil
Platinum Koestler Award for Short Story 2018

> Click here to see a selection of the artworks in the show.

Read a selection of poetry from the exhibition > here (PDF)



The Lonely Vigil

Within these cold, impenetrable and inescapable Victorian walls lies a bewildering labyrinth of pastel-painted corridors which echo loudly with each of my measured paces. Each side is lined with doors which betray brief snippets of lives contained beyond; hushed conversations, muffled laughter and resonant snores.

I often wonder quite what revelations one night, given if these walls could speak. What manner of secrets taken to many a grave might they whisper if one were of a mind to listen?

There is an undeniable history here and yet little or no future for those caught in its unyielding grasp. It has been home to so many and, for a few scenes as a final resting place. No gravestones mark their presence but I know that they are here, beneath my feet wherever my patrol may take me.

Darkness changes this place in ways that I cannot quite describe. The quiet that it brings is deafening; the shadows fall long and grotesque in the pale moonlight; a thousand eyes are upon me where I know that there are none. Gloom plays sinister tricks on the mind; makes anything seem possible.

I pass from wing to wing, landing to landing this night, my rhythmic footfall and the almost musical jangle of my keys and whistle the only outward indication of my presence.

'Oi, Gov!'

I pay them no heed. What can be so urgent that I might stop in my tracks to lend an ear? There is surely nothing so vital that it cannot wait until morning when others like me, who may care as little, will nonetheless be duty-bound to assist. I enjoy the luxury of anonymity and can pass unchallenged on my way to nowhere in particular.

Here, my friends, lies the inner sanctum and passing through the heavy wrought iron gate brings us into the unenviable realm of the condemned. I cock my ear to listen for their futile pleas, fervent prayers and pitiful sobs; some of which will comfort them as they mark what little time they have left. There, standing alone, is the last door through which they will ever walk. Beyond it shall stand the executioner, poised to bestow upon them a hood, a noose and blessed oblivion. Perhaps, I think, they are the fortunate ones; free from pain, immune to hatred, atoned of sin and at the tender mercy of the hereafter. Perhaps there they might find the forgiveness denied them here.

It may be dark but I carry no lantern as for its light and comfort I have no need. I know intimately every inch of this stone and metal fortress.

I pass outside unnoticed and gaze skyward at the imposing, monolithic silhouette of A Wing. Where at last the clouds part and the moon breaks cover, its veil is revealed in stark detail. Torn lengths of sheet and blanket stretch from window to window forming a network by which items may be passed from cell to cell.

Where once towered high walls, mere fences now stand crowned with razor wire, which glistens wherever the moonlight reaches it. No man can climb them but I can pass through unhindered and unnoticed from the windows from which soft light leaks and which offer no resistance to the whistling wind.

The stories that I could tell, my friend; the secrets that I guard. A thousand anecdotes lost in time, as many forgotten names. I alone know the truth behind so many legends but it is mine to hold. I will share a little with you if you can be trusted. There is a rumour of a short-lived tunnel between the gaol and the old asylum a half-mile yonder. It does exist. I alone know where the entrance lies and although it leads nowhere, I walk its length when the mood so takes me. Its walls are blackened with soot from the fire that destroyed its destination and the floor is deep in foul water.

Here, the gymnasium stands dark and silent but the musky aroma of stale perspiration persists. There, not far beneath the polished linoleum, lie the mortal remains of a prostitute and her unborn bastard son. Her victim sleeps soundly in a churchyard close-by. His memorial bears no mention of his child, buried and forgotten here. There is no justice for some.

I patrol the perimeter in the cold night air, the collar of my greatcoat turned up against the cruel North-Easterly and yet I do not feel the unwelcome caress of its icy fingers upon my skin and much-less care. The new breed of Gaolers seem to fear the weather and seldom pass this way when it turns inclement. I do not complain. I cherish the solitude.

I make my way through C Wing where lifers rot in peace. Here, many moons ago, debtors were imprisoned. The forgotten underclass. Some things, it seems, never change. Footfalls sound above me; the sporadic squeak and clang of ancients as a colleague performs a solo nocturnal roll count. The beam of his torch glances off the railings and nesting as he addresses those still awake with a solitary, unconscious greeting.

'Overnight'

On to the main building now where my patrol begins and ends. From the Rest Room issues raucous laughter and the crackle of radios, the tinkle of teaspoon on saucer. I walk on by. I belong not here among their ranks.

I pause, as always, to gaze upon a plaque of tarnished, neglected brass against varnished oak. It is seldom noticed and for less mad men by me. I run a finger along its engraved lettering but leave no mark.

"Here fell Warder George White, 16th November 1883. Departed this life whilst executing his duties and now maintains a lone vigil."

The Lonely Vigil

Christopher
HM Prison Channings Wood
Platinum Award for Prison Fiction and Short Story
0898

https://www.koestlertrust.org.uk/exhibitions/im-still-here

Koestler Trust: Exhibition paratexts

https://www.koestlertrust.org.uk/exhibitions/im-still-here

Koestler Trust: Exhibition space

Koestler Trust: Exhibition hosts

Exhibition tours

Led by our ex-prisoner hosts
Monday – Thursday 6pm
Friday – Sunday 1.30pm and 6pm
Free, no booking required

Working alongside Southbank Centre exhibition hosts to welcome visitors and invigilate the exhibition, are ex-prisoners specially recruited, trained and employed by the Koestler Trust. As well as gaining valuable work experience and new skills, the hosts will offer first-hand insight on how the arts reflect and transform the lives of those in secure and criminal justice settings.

https://www.koestlertrust.org.uk/exhibitions/im-still-here

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