

Reading Gaol by Isabelle Hunter

As I walked through the squelching, knee-deep mud toward the tall mansion-like building, we passed many empty graves, all gaping for a living thing and with the mud crying out for blood. Small children were weeping for their mothers and fathers to take them home. They were wearing prison dress and carrying white sheets under their arms. Some looked confused, too young to know where they were, others had faces like a white wedge of sheer terror. I entered the main hall to see the rows and rows of numbered tombs, each with a victim either at the door with a blank face or its new victim shuddering and creeping in.

I climbed the stairs to find my cell, 103, waiting for me like a child longing for their mother. As I entered, the prison guards shut the entire outside world off from me just using one door. I stood there, a single tear scrolling down my face as if it was going to save me from this hell-on-earth. I could see in the opposite cell from me, a child who looked around only 7 years old, sitting on his simple bed, screaming to let him out. The prisoner guards came and warned him to be quiet. He carried on screaming until my ears went numb. The two guards went back to the child, opened up his door and picked him up by the ear. He went off to the hole for living things.

I sat down on the distressing bed, waiting for someone to help me. I looked out the only small gap in the door to see the empty cell opposite me, the one where the screaming child once lived. A new victim, covered in mud up to his waist and cuts all over his arms, entered the tomb. The prisoner had long, floppy hair over his eyes and was about 30 years. His eyes were like yellow pools of sorrow, regretting everything he had done.

A day later (felt like months) and the prison officers came. They dragged me out of the cell using chains and brought me to an empty, mud-filled exercise field. There I was made to run. Run until my heart almost stopped beating. Run until I could not feel my legs. 30 minutes later I dropped to the mud, desperate for drink. My mouth had gone numb and I could not feel my arms. The guards picked me up by the neck, as if I was some sort of animal rolling in the dark brown mud, having fun. They dragged me to a dull grey space with mud splattered along the walls and the floor. They pinned me against the wall. I thought this was it. I saw the guard go to pick something up. "The gun" I thought. I closed my eyes waiting for the bang, but all I felt was a cold shock. The water trickled down my legs and onto the floor.

When I entered the tomb again my floor was covered in water from the "rinsing down". I saw three more children enter the prison out from my tiny window. Their poor faces were frightened and upset. They climbed the stairs to find their numbered tombs (200, 143 and 47) and there they would stay until old.

Gaol by Heather Hawkins

The officer held my hands as they were bound together and we started the march of shame into my new home. An insignificant cell amongst the rows of "criminals". I stole an apple to feed my baby brother; I'm hardly a criminal.

The officer didn't look at me as we walked through the madhouse. I tried not to glance inside cells; solitude had driven many a man mad. Twenty three hours a day they said I was to stay in my cell for. I can come out to exercise but nothing else. Minimal human contact is their policy. If you not mad when you walk in you're going to be crazy by the time you're out.

Curiosity got the better of me and I opened my eyes. I was appalled by what I saw. A child that couldn't be many years older than my brother was sitting on a bed shaking whilst wiping their eyes as they tried not to cry. A few cells down was another young child. He was so emaciated that were it not for the oversized rags drowning him you would have been able to count every single one of his ribs. His face was whiter than the sheets on the bed. He was too weak to even cry.

We walked past the bankrupt and the thieves and the murderers and the madmen and the guilty and the innocent and the weeping children shaking as they curled up in their blankets and cried for their parents.

Eventually we stopped.

"In you go then!" The officer shoved me in what was to be my cage. As he shut the door he pulled something else out along with his keys. "Here," he whispered, as he handed me the object, locked the door and left before any other officers could catch him in the act of being compassionate.

I looked at the object. It was a biscuit. Gratefully I started to nibble on it as I looked around my cage. That's all it was: a cage. There was a bed and a bucket. That was it. Nothing but me, a bed and a bucket for twenty three hours a day for stealing a blasted apple to feed my blasted baby brother. My trial lasted six minutes. Just enough time for the shop keeper to point a finger at me and for the jury to believe him. Now it's just me and my thoughts and a blasted bed and a bucket for who knows how long. I didn't even get to hear the length of my sentence before I was carted off to prison for trying to save my brother from starving.

I curled up in my blanket and cried for my parents.

Reading Gaol by Ciara Losel

I was running as fast as I possibly could, running for my life. I looked back and saw the policeman only a couple of metres away. He could have reached out and grabbed my skirt if he had wanted to, but he knew that I couldn't keep it up much longer.

I sprinted round a corner and realised that I didn't know this place well. Wind was rushing through my hair: market stalls and people were a blur of colour and noise. Suddenly, a fruit stall loomed out from the morning fog and I couldn't stop myself. Ten metres away, I saw what was coming. Five metres away, I heard the people shouting. Two metres away, the smell of the oranges surrounded me. Then there was no more running, just the feel of bananas tumbling down on my head and the taste of sour lemons in my trembling mouth. And I knew that my time was up. No one would ever believe me; there was no point trying.

I was in Reading Gaol for twenty years, and it was hell. You realise as soon as you are dragged in there that you're going to die, if not outside then definitely on the inside; your soul and volition. It's grey and cold and the walls look as though they're about to close in on you. The cells are so small that you can't stretch your arms out without smashing your hands against the walls. The widows are smaller than a lampshade and there's only one per wall. The mattresses are so thin that you can feel the tiniest piece of dust that's underneath it. They're made out of a rough material that makes your hands red and coarse if you move too much. And the food, well, I can't tell you anything about the food; there is none that I can remember. There was occasionally a scrap of mouldy bread or a bowl of lukewarm, lumpy soup.

Twenty years is a long time. I saw a lot of people come and go, just like memories and each person reminded me of someone I had known when I was alive. The first person that really stood out to me was a little girl called Prim. She was four years old and she had long hair that was as white as snow. When I first saw her, I thought she was my daughter. She was dragged past my cell by a guard that didn't like me. I clung onto the bars on my cell and didn't lift my eyes off her until she was gone. I cried for the rest of the day, all sorts of thought and memories flying in and out and round my head. I remembered when my daughter had come back from getting some bread and butter and she had a giant black eye. Her father went to go and beat up the man who had done it, and he didn't come back for the next two weeks. We killed ourselves looking for him. Then we found him lying in a muddy ditch, bruised all over and a sprained ankle. My daughter gave climbed down into the ditch with him and told him how much she loved him. Prim was just like her and I hope she thought of me as her mother while she was at the prison. I loved her.

Nobody knows what it's like being in prison; everybody who goes dies. Because ghosts inhabit the Reading Gaol.

The Prison and its Sentence by Ana Opacic

It was my first day. I was seventeen. I shuffled through the door with a guard behind me, pushing me on. As we walked I looked around. It was almost as if we were not making any progress because either side of me were rows of doors, all the same colour, shape and size. The numbers were slowly going up as we carried on down the long corridor. They were only thing that was changing. We reached one hundred and thirty and the guard nudged me up some stairs. As I reached the top I could hear muffled groans and shouts before walking six doors down to stop at one hundred and thirty seven.

“This is your cell.” The guard said gruffly before unlocking the door and pushing me in. I fell to the floor, because the push was quite forceful. By the time I scrambled up again the key had turned in the lock, sealing me in my cell. I turned around to find a bed in one corner, a small sink in the opposite corner with a bucket under it. The walls were a dull grey that matched the floor. The fact that it was a cloudy day did nothing to help brighten up the cell as I looked through the window the size of my face. I sat on the bed and waited, expecting someone to come back and tell me what to do.

Someone did. Five hours later.

“Get out here!” A man barked as soon as the door had opened wide enough for him to see me. I got to my feet and started slowly walking to the door.

“Move!” he thundered and I immediately quickened my pace. He took me out of my cell and down the corridor. I could see other prisoners being taken out of their cells and being pushed in the same direction as I was going. I started to get nervous. Almost all of the men were older than me and most of them looked at me as if I was their next victim. I started to hesitate but the guard pushed me on shouting at me every time. We were all going to a big, menacing building. I now know that this where I would exercise every day for one hour.

I entered the building and was pushed towards a treadmill. I flinched every time another prisoner lashed out at me, testing my reaction and my nerves. Once everyone was on their own section of the treadmill we were ordered to walk and then run. We all had to keep up with the fastest person since it was all one treadmill. After half an hour I started to tire along with some other men but we were not allowed to stop. The treadmill kept turning and so I had to keep running; stumbling every so often because my legs couldn't keep up. After another half an hour of ruthless exercise we were finally allowed to stop; stumbling off the treadmill and back to our cells. All the time we were flanked by guards who made sure no one escaped.

As soon as the door was locked behind me I fell onto my bed and lay there, aching all over. I knew the food was going to be monotonous and would have very little taste or nutrition. I groaned inwardly. Little did I know that I would not be leaving my cell for the next twenty three hours.

As the months passed and turned into years my will was slowly broken. I was beaten and returned to my cell whimpering in pain and fear. I felt such a great loneliness and wished to speak to another

rational human being, although I was sure I was going mad. I regret committing that crime and I shout it to the guards but no one listens. I knew what was in store for me but how soon, I didn't know.

Now, as I sit on the same bed as I did three years ago waiting for the guard who will take me on a final journey. I feel content that at last this torture is coming to an end. Though I may swing as many criminals have done before me I know that I will be free from pain and loneliness, forever.

Prison by Cesca Wormald

My name is Billy. I have one person to talk to, two guards watching me, three meals a day, four possessions, five years of age and six years in prison. That is now how my life goes, an order that never allows fun, never allows freedom and never allows childhood.

Grandfather and I spent many summers together sleeping under the golden glow of the shimmering stars, playing hopscotch while the choir of birds sang their morning hymns. Grandfather always told me I was the best thing that ever happened to him; that I was the only thing that made him forget about Grandma. That's why when Grandfather was starving I couldn't sit there and watch him go to heaven.

That's why I did it. I only wanted some bread for Grandfather, but that isn't what Mr Joan thought. "You're a lying, selfish, little poor boy that doesn't have any place in this world," he said. I didn't mind, it was nothing like the beating and pounding of the gentleman's boots as they looked down on Grandfather and I trembling in the ditches of the neglected street.

None of that matters because I've lost the most important thing I have. The only thing I had: Grandfather.

I heard his voice loud and powerful like the sound of trumpets yet soft and sweet like the nectar of a flower but this time it was angry and unloving. Grandad wasn't usually like this I assumed he wasn't feeling too good that day so I just started to count sheep again until the harsh whip of the cane met my face. My chestnut brown eyes opened wide like a young rabbit in headlights and my heart started to pound like the running of a race, getting faster and faster and faster until it stopped.

I took a gasp as I was violently shoved against the wall covered in peeling paint and infested with cobwebs. My bare skin was battered and bruised from evil in the guard's arms. I ferociously dropped down smack on the floor, arms shaking, legs trebling, heart pounding. I felt faint and as I looked down I saw the lake of red blood trickle from beneath me. I placed my hand on my head and my hand was covered in the blood that ended my life. I said one last prayer to Grandfather: "you...are my.....best....friend...I love..."but before I could finish his heart had stopped pounding. And that is how my story ends and a new one, sadder one, begins: one whip, two guards watching me, three meals a day, four possessions, five years of age, six years in prison and no prospects.

Tears in my heart by Maya Andrews

I was just a young boy. An innocent, stolen boy; seven years old and not prepared for what was coming. I remember it clearly; I was dragged away from my parents, not that they were concerned as I was one of nine children. I stared at the alarming shadows that were towering over me. I felt my dry eyes fill up with youthful tears, my vision blurred and a monstrous man elbowed me into a dark damp cell. This was no place for a seven year old that was highly unaware of the petty crime he had committed. I placed my hand on the cold damp wall and cried desperately. I remember distinctly a low voice telling me to be quiet otherwise there would be consequences. I didn't understand what the voice meant and I screamed even louder for my parents. The screams echoed across the empty halls and confined cells. I questioned: when I would be let out? Who was talking to me? And where I was?

I lay breathlessly still in the corner of the confined cell. I turned my head and I saw the huge iron door that was keeping me away from life. I tried my best kick it down, instead I injured my weak and bruised legs. Then my vision fell upon my feet; they were coated by my worn and battered shoes which used to be brown. I used to cherish them but over time they had lost colour, there were a few small frayed holes where I had out-grown them and it left my smallest toe sticking out. When I arrived I was stripped down from my clothes and put into a dirty prison suit. The dull material itched and it had already left a ghastly red sore down my left arm. I thought about my older sister Elizabeth, she was the only person who cared for me. We used to play games together I vividly remember us running around the alleys chasing each other: she was always faster than me. I prayed and wished to go back to those moments. I gently looked down at my sore battered hands, blisters swelled and stung and my crushed nails dug into my fingers.

I didn't know how long I would stay there and I pleaded to be let out but it just made things worse. I heard screams and doors being slammed but somehow I could still hear the silence of guilt and torture. I covered my ears with my hands to block it out, but I couldn't, it was infectious. I wanted to get out: I was so young and weak and terrified. My hands were still covering my ears but I could still hear the deafening silence. The memories were creeping into my brain I couldn't understand, I couldn't cope. My mind was lost like a needle in a haystack. No matter how hard you try you will never find me.

First day by Claudia Rowe

I was taken by two men twice my size through the tall prison gates. Among themselves they cackled and sneered like schoolboys picking on the weakest child. Their cold hands gripped at the back of my neck and their cold cuffs tightened and tore at my wrists. If I would ever know what hell looked like, I imagine it would look like this. The men shoved me through hallways and multiple metal doors until finally I reached the vast lifeless box of which I should stay. Eyes of lost souls rested upon my modest figure. Each step echoed through cells and bounced off metal. Rows and rows of symmetrical rooms, not bigger than a cart, housed each floor. Each held a different man and each man held a different tragedy.

I was thrown into a cold cell with nothing but a bed, sink and toilet, exposed to all other inmates and any other man with an intention of peering in. The walls were yellowed with age and mould grew in the cracks and ceiling where water dripped through. Strips of light streamed through the bars leaving the back of the room in darkness. Two years for two loafs of bread seemed barbaric. The beasts that trap and separate children from families deserve to be behind bars themselves. As I stood trembling and alone in my cage, I resented the cruel men who put me here.

Night came slowly and I shivered under the thread-bare sheets. I desperately tried to think of my home, on the other side of the country. My mother's warm embrace and father's reassuring words, always tricking me into thinking we would be fine. A tear rolled down my paled cheek. My thoughts were interrupted when shouts filled the large room. I ran to the metal bars and could only just make out a prisoner attacking two guards in the hazy black. I was terror stricken and couldn't breathe, how can I stay in this nightmare for two years? They had now pinned the man to the floor and two more guards had joined in the game of kicking and beating him but no inmate objected or banged on the bars. The man was then thrown into his cell and he lay there bleeding and gasping...I don't remember when he fell silent but it wasn't until long into the night.

When morning came I had barely slept an hour and my feet were numb and pained from the bitter cold. My back was stiff and my neck shot with searing pains. My cheeks, stained with tears were crimson I looked around my grey room and familiarised myself with my surroundings. I remembered the torment I was in all over again.

Reading Gaol by Katie Wood

I stood shaking in the dock of the court room, answering the charges of my father's debt. The judge's hammer fell violently upon the wooden table.

"Guilty as charged! I sentence you to three years in Reading Gaol," declared the judge.

I, Elsa Whittbum, being the eldest daughter of a merchant, John Whittbum, was paying the price of his debts. He had been away for several years after the business took a turn for the worst. He could handle it no more. So he abandoned us. Leaving our family destitute.

Harshly and hastily I was bundled away like a sack. I was stripped and then dressed in prison uniform which looked just like a pillow case with holes in to me. I did not struggle. I did not attempt to flee. My brain had lost connection with my limbs; I just did what I was made to do. Wrapped in chains and labelled like a parcel, the guard and I made our way across the gardens to the gaol. The sun blazed brightly in my face, the sweet scent of pollen hung in the air and birds chirped merrily. For a moment I was back in a dream; then we reached the prison. I was overcome by the irony of the situation. Such a beautiful day; such a hideous building. They disagreed so much. The brick work was poor with jagged side which looked as if they would kill you if you got too close. Windows were smashed and screams came from within. We entered into a vast hallway. Plain and lonely and forced to walk, I was shoved into a small cell and the door was locked. My head hung so low, I didn't realise the other prisoner in my cell. A boy my age. We looked at each other for a while. He was rather attractive but all was on my mind was to get out of here. Light beamed through a small crevice in the window which reminded me of the day outside. The stench of waste filled the air and as I leant against the wall, grains of brick came falling down.

Once a day we were given a little bowl of gruel. It was less than the strays on the street receive! We are only taken up to exercise for one hour a day. The other twenty three spent locked up.

Three Years Later...

I am much elder now. The boy I first shared with... he was hanged as he attempted to run away. Now I share with an old man who is no trouble to me as he can't move or speak. And he is deaf as well. The guard came in for our daily 'feed'. Just another day. But just as he was going to leave, he pulled a yellow stained letter from his pocket and handed it to me. Gob smacked, I clenched it with my trembling finger and read it rapidly in my head. My father. A letter from my father! He had paid back his debts and had reunited with mother. I was free!

The sun, once again, beat down gently on my face as I strolled proudly out the gates and away from hell.

I now help out at the prison as a cook. I am not allowed to give them good food as it is against the rules but I try my hardest to help an innocent in prison have a better experience than me.

Reading Prison by Afreen Mohamed

I walked into the building. It was old and the walls looked weak. The smell of the prison was intoxicating. It was crowded; people of all ages were walking in groups. They were being shown to their cells. We walked in silence, down dark corridors and down old staircases. At last we stopped at a door. The door had the number 167 on it. The guard opened the door and shoved me in.

The walls of the cell were a grey stone. There was a small window but thick metal bars stood in front of it. The only other source of light came from the gap under the door. It was cold. There was a mattress on the floor in the corner and on top of the mattress lay a thin blanket. It was silent. I walked over to the mattress and wrapped the blanket around myself. I tried to close my eyes and allow myself some sleep but I was too scared. Finally, I fell asleep.

I woke up to a loud knock on the door. The door opened and I jumped up. The guard ordered me to follow him. I didn't know what was going on. Opposite me, another door opened and a young boy around the age of 8 stepped out. He was about 5 years younger than me. The look of terror crossed the boy's face. I began to wonder what he was in here for. Most of the young children hadn't even committed crimes. The boy joined the line and we continued walking.

We stopped outside a large field and the guard explained what we were doing. I found out that we had to do an one hour of exercise a day. After the hour was up we were lead to the kitchen. There were long tables lined up we were served bread and gruel. It wasn't the best meal, but I was grateful because I hadn't eaten in ages. The last things I ate were some turnips and they were the whole reason I was in prison: I stole some turnips. The little boy was sitting opposite me. We were supposed to be silent but I managed to whisper to him without anyone seeing me. The boy looked terrified. I asked him what he did to get himself in here. The boy remained silent. After a while he looked at me and told me that he hadn't done anything. That was all we said.

I went back to my cell. We had been made to rub the doors and scrub the floors. My hands were hurting and there were tears in my eyes. I missed my family. I was taken away from them and I don't even think they know I'm here. It was completely silent apart from my own heavy breathing. I continued cleaning. Suddenly there was an ear piercing shriek. You could hear the pain in the voice. And the guards whip beating the back of the inmate. 'I told you no to do that.' howled the guard. The inmate whimpered. I hadn't noticed the man standing next to the inmate. He was silent until he spoke up, 'he killed a man sir, I think he deserves to be hanged.'

The guard beat the inmate again and the inmate let out another groan. And then the guard grabbed the inmate by his collar and dragged him away.

I carried on cleaning the floor. But then I heard the same whimper, quieter this time. I ran over to the window and strained my eyes to see what was going on outside. I could just about manage to see the figure of the guard and the inmate. A crowd had gathered around them. Before I knew what was about to happen, There was an agonizing sound and the inmate was silent. I closed my eyes trying to forget the image I just saw.

The tears fell freely down my face. I wondered how long I was going to be kept here. It was cold, dark and I was hungry. I lay on the mattress and cried myself to sleep.

The Reading Gaol by Beth Anderson

That day is still a blur in my mind. All I remember is that I was thrown and abandoned in this dark and gloomy cave. I had been put into a cell at Reading Gaol with as many as 225 criminals alongside me. My heart drifted away like a boat and my eyes produced tears like they were trying to tell me something. I clambered onto the small, uneven and broken bed, grasping my head as though telling it to regain strength; I always tell myself that everything will be alright.

I heard in the distance guards calling and shouting names and then suddenly a bowl of gruel was slid under the door, oozing and leaking from either side. I heard, 'Joe, Joe' whispered from the next cell. Wait, that's me I murmured to myself. I edged a little closer to the wall. I could still hear, 'Joe, Joe can you hear me?'

'Yes!' I replied. 'Who are you? How do you know my name?'

'I am Paul and I know your name because I am your father!'

'How do I know that you're telling the truth?'

He slid his arm under the gap by the floor and said, 'see'. Clutched in his ripped and scared hand was a small photo of me and my mother. Written on in thick black ink was the words 'we will stay as a family forever'.

'Why are you in prison?'

'Because I robbed a bank. We needed money and that was the only way we could afford to keep you alive! You were extremely young when I started to become a robber. Your mother and I didn't want to lose you due to being poor. One day when you were about thirteen, probably a year ago now, your mum told you to go to the shop and steal a few items without being caught; she thought it would be easier if you did it because you looked very innocent when you were younger. That's what both you and I got arrested for.'

'Dad, I am almost fourteen so you have been here with me for almost one year, why haven't you talked to me?'

'Sorry son I thought it would be for the best if I didn't say anything,' he said, 'so you wouldn't be disappointed or ashamed of your mother and I.'

'Don't worry dad, I would never be ashamed of you and mum.' In the next moment before anyone could draw a breath or even speak a guard came marching up to our cells and yelled, 'over here cell 10 and 9 are having a chat'. He asked another guard to come and separate me from my dad. I was about to ask for reassurance from my dad when the door to my cell was flung open and a great gust of wind blew into my face. 'Get him up', said the guard, so both of them grabbed me by the arms like I was some sort of puppet and paraded me out of the door and to another cell at least twenty cells away from my dad.

There I was again cold, scared and alone in a dark, gloomy cave which was my 'home'.

A Description of Someone's Life in Prison by Amber Young

I sat on the bed, startled, confused and lonely. The stained, yellowing walls closed in on me. The cell was bare and small; nothing to do besides play with my fingers. The one and only window was situated behind the bed and only let in a glimpse of light, shadowed by the bars that stabbed through it.

The smell of an old garden shed, dusty, damp, drained through my nostrils. I looked around and thought how long I would be here. I was ten after all; I had my whole life ahead of me.

I heard voices from down the hallway. A deep, coarse voice. I knew instantly that he was the one who put me in here. I then heard a much higher pitched, sickly-sweet voice, obviously standing quite near him. Then I heard doors open and even more talking, although I couldn't quite make out what they were saying. One door would open with a squeak then after a few seconds slam shut. Then the next, then the next. Suddenly my door was pushed opened.

A piece of hard, ripped bread was flung at me. I held it in my hands and felt the coldness. I felt the coldness of the room, I felt the coldness of everything and everyone around me. I looked up again and the door slammed shut. Then I knew that life for this period of time was not going to be easy. I bit into the bread hoping it would be fairly decent only to then spit the whole lot out seconds after taking my first bite.

It was now dark outside. I was lying in bed, so cold, so miserable, but most of all so tired however I just could not sleep. I lay awake thinking of what I did. Why I did it. I thought of my family, how ashamed they must be of me. I scared for the future. All these questions kept coming into my head, I answered each of them to myself and slowly I fell asleep.

I woke up to the banging of doors and the shouting of men. I stepped out of bed, walked to the door and pressed my ear up to it. All sorts of noises were coming from the hallway and I knew that I would be the next one to be pulled out of their room.

Suddenly the door flung open and to my surprise I found myself being gently pushed, along with everyone else around me, by the little woman with the sickly voice.

They lead us up through the walls and down one flight of stairs, through what looked like some type of hall and straight outside. We carried on walking across the pavestones and then reached a smallish grass area. I was guessing that this was going to be some sort of exercise hour. However, before I knew it I was back in my cell, back on my bed asking myself the same questions as the night before. My life here was going to go round in circles and I knew it. I just couldn't wait for the day I left.

Reading Gaol by Charlotte Kilpatrick

The huge, red brick building towered over me like a giant. I screamed as loud as I could as but the officers shoved me through the large entrance to the prison, squeezing my arms tighter and tighter as I tried to free myself from their evil grasp. I wanted to go home. I had to help mother get better. "Let me go!" I pleaded.

"Did you steal the bread?" one officer growled.

"Mother was starving and seriously ill, I had to feed her!" I cried. "She's dying! I need to look after her! Let me go!"

Prisoners stared while they scrubbed the floors and cleaned the shining rails as I was dragged up the stairs. Nobody spoke. I was shoved into a cell. The door slammed shut. I was all alone.

My cell was tiny. There was a bed and one, small, barred window. The walls were plain. It was awful; I wanted to go home and see mother to make sure she was alright. I hoped someone was looking after her. The officer came back and made me put on the prison clothes. They were rough and uncomfortable, but at least they were clean and didn't have holes in. He marched me downstairs to where the prisoners were still cleaning and led me into a different room where there were more people all sitting on the floor with baskets of rope in front of them.

"Sit down!" the officer ordered as he pushed me to the floor and placed a basket in front of me. "Pull this to fibres and don't stop until it's done," he said. "Oh, and no talking to anyone, ever, understood?"

"Yes sir," I replied as I started pulling the tarred rope to shreds. I sat for hours and soon my hands were aching and pouring with blood. I started to cry.

"HOLD THE NOISE, BOY!" the officer yelled at me. I carried on crying as I ripped apart the rope. One prisoner stood up. He walked over to me. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared.

"SIT DOWN!" the officer shouted. But the prisoner kept walking.

"Let me help you," the prisoner whispered as he lifted all my remaining rope out of my basket. I was shocked and happy, but I felt awful. He had his own rope still to unpick as well as mine.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?" shouted the officer. "YOU, COME WITH ME," he said, pointing to the prisoner. "AND YOU," the officer said pointing at me, "FINISH THAT ROPE!" The officer left with the prisoner and another officer came to watch us.

The other officer returned and we were sent for dinner. We were given a small bowl of thick, grey, tasteless gruel. It was disgusting but I was starving and ate it all. As soon as I had finished eating, I was dragged back to my cell, but on the way, we walked passed a hole in the ground. A grave. An open grave. And there, lying in the grave was the prisoner. The prisoner that had tried to help me was lying with the noose still round his neck. I screamed. I was shoved in my cell and went to bed

but did not sleep. I cried. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my mother, make her better. But I was trapped here with no escape.

Reading Gaol by Ann Ghaly

They forced me in; I couldn't understand why I was here. I was just a little boy then. The walls began to close in; the only hope was the ray of sunshine glooming into the cell. I remember the endless wait to freedom. I would sit in the corner, staring at the scratches on the dull walls, probably from the psychotic man before, who was also trapped in this endless wait for freedom. I would wait for them to come and take me out onto the field with all the other children who were here.

As we walked outside our cells, I could see the fear in all the other children's eyes. I think we all had the same thought then: am I going to be the next to be buried in the midst of all the other prisoners? All I could hear was the slamming of the chains against the hard floor and the deep breaths of the children. I looked up and all I could see were the eyes of the men in the cells, watching us go outside. It reminded me of my father and where he was. When we walked through the women's cells, I decided to look down as I knew that the thought of my mother being hurt would have killed me.

Then we were back to our cells, at the twelfth hour. The old clock tower would ring twelve times and this would bring the average man closer to madness. At a certain time two guards would come round and hand us our dinner. I didn't want eat it, but if I were to ever be let out of this mad house, mother would want me alive, not starving. When it came to six in the evening, everyone would pray that they weren't the next to be chosen.

As the two guards came closer and closer to my cell, my heart started to jump, my mind would be filled with the worst case scenarios. As I saw the light from the torch shine the other way, another man's chance of being killed was becoming bigger. Eventually you would hear the odd scream or two; the guards would drag them out.

At the eighth hour, after the unlucky prison left the smell of burning flesh, it would just remind us that there is no escape, from this mad house. When I would attempt to look through the thick metal slabs on the door, I saw this guard staring at me, it looked like he pitied me but also felt a little sympathy. He wasn't like the other guards he didn't treat us like dirt; instead he would allow us with little freedom we had to look. I wondered if he had children, and that's why he was treating us nicely because he couldn't imagine his children in here and be treated awfully by a guard.

After the guard had left, the other guards would yell at us to go to bed. The bed we slept on wasn't a bed; it was a piece of hard wood with metal feet, nothing to rest your head onto and nothing to cover yourself with. My sleep would either be hiding the pain quietly or never ending nightmares. As all the men, women and children calmed down, it was the end one of many torturous days here. When the sun had set, it reminded me no one is safe now.

Reading Gaol by Emily Cunningham

I gawped at the deep purple, yellow bruise weeping on my arm. It wasn't the first one though. My battered face, now turning a sickly green pummelled the inside of my face ferociously. I can't believe the state I am in. A curled up wreck, huddled in a corner of my damp cell. The bitter cold nipped at my skin all the time and crevices in the surrounding walls glared at me, strangling me in their mighty grasp. Tears streamed down my face and into a beating wound that stung. I've realised that shouting is useless; I'll only meet with 'the stick' for another time. This cage, is supposed to cut me off from communicating with anyone while I'm here. However, the old infrastructure is decaying. A small fracture in the wall allows me to speak to Billy on the other side. Like me, he is a petty thief – a bit older than myself just providing for his family. Family... what I would give to see their faces again. Distant screams of tortured men echoed around the Gaol. I'm lucky; I'm only serving a short sentence of one month for stealing a loaf of bread from the local bakery. I can't wait to be released but I won't go back to my old life and family. My parents were pickpockets and one day they got caught and were hung in the village square. The amount of people who turned up to watch, smug glee painted all over their faces sickened me. My eyes closed as I buried my head deep into my curled up knees.

"Psst. Psst." A faint cat like-hiss filled my ears. I looked up to see parts of Billy's face staring at me through the hole.

"Psst," he hissed again. I wasn't in the mood for talking, it was visiting day: a 'happy' day where all the sympathetic parents visit their bedraggled relatives.

"Psst," The sound was beginning to annoy me now, "ps.."

I swung my head round in an instant my fiery eyes glaring at him. "What!?" I asked with utter annoyance spread onto my words.

"It's, it's visiting day and I just thought you could come and visit my family today because I know you..." his voice trailed off into oblivion.

My heart melted like butter. That's the kindest thing anyone has offered to do for me yet. I still snapped back with a hint of spite in my tone. "Well thank you but no thank you. I wouldn't even get past the guard. Just leave me alone." A solitary tear rolled down my cheek. How could I have done that to him? It's this place, it's twists your insides and warps your emotions. From where I was sitting I heard Billy sigh and gargle down what I thought were tears.

"Billy?" My voice was sinking down deep into the floor. There was a hint of hope there amongst the tangled despair and disgust.

After a while he replied, "Yes?" He sounded forgiving

"I'd love to come and meet your family, if you would like me too." My voice stayed strong.

"Jane Elizabeth, It would be an honour."

Reading Gaol by Lauren Mann

I wished I knew why I was in there. I didn't realise that stealing a loaf of bread could have got me into so much trouble. You see, my mother was sick and so my brothers were going hungry. All I wanted to do was be there for them and show them how I could be a strong brother they could look up to... but I ended up in Reading Gaol, after a policeman had seen me commit my petty crime.

As I was escorted by a grey-haired, stern-looking police officer, my stomach was churning inside me, as if it was trying to alert me that danger was about. We passed cell upon cell, each housing a terrifying criminal, each of whom was shouting out to be let free. Dozens of men stared at me as I walked through the dull, dusty corridor, many with an evil smile on their faces, like hyenas waiting for their latest meal. The smell of body odour lingered in my nostrils. We get to cell number 234 and I gasped.... the letters "P R T" were inscribed on the wall; the initials of my name.

After the prison officer had pulled open the steel door with a large screech, he shoved me inside and locked the door rapidly. I stood by the bars of the door, my only look out area, and my feelings of terror must have shown on my face as the strong police officer gazed sympathetically at me and exclaimed "oi lad, don't look so sullen. It's alright in 'ere it is, as long as you stay on the right side of all us guards and prisoners. Just keep your 'ead down and I promise you, you will be alright. After all, you got me looking after ya, and no one messes with my prisoners!" He gave out a large, deep laugh.

After talking to my new friend Gary, I felt a sense of relief. However, as I turned around, that relief suddenly turned to shock. Before me stood an iron bed, a sink and a toilet. That was it. No books for me to read, no one to talk to; just a bed, a toilet and a sink. Sadness and loneliness crept into my body. The fear tingled my chest. I realized I was all alone in this cell.

Prison writing by Amy Penrose

I don't remember my mother's face too well, but I still whisper and whimper in the corner of my cold hard cell for her to come and help me. Of course, if the guards hear me I'll be in trouble. Silence rings through my ears as I try to remember the rules of being here, and why I'm here. For such a solemn, quiet place, you wouldn't think there were many rules but there are many: silence, following orders, exercising solidly and not slacking off. I stole a loaf of bread at the market to feed to my hungry little brother, not knowing the consequences. I feel as though I should now. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to cause more havoc on this place that has ripped me away from my family.

Stored away from the public eye and behind bars that are cold to clammy little hands such as mine, we see guards after guard march the uncoloured, hardly painted halls. We're treated not only as adults here, but as adults who have done serious wrong. I was trying to help my starving family, but this seems not to be what is taught as the right thing to do. There's nearly 200 of us here, that's 400 eyes, with either numb and blank stares or glistening, dripping. I go between both. The limp weight of boredom hangs over my shoulders when we are not out for our one hour of heavily watched exercise. My childhood, if any, has been cut very short. Only one guard has ever looked at me with any kind of sympathy and, sure as ever, he was gone within a week. Many days have gone by since I arrived here and I wish I could remember how many. All I know is it's been enough that I know the routine, how I am pushed around.

The food here is terrible. Hardly edible but we have to try. If I get any older here, and I'm sure I will by the looks of some men here, it may not feed me enough daily to stay alive. So I eat whatever's put in front of me.

I turn around in my cell. I wish I was like a fish that I saw when I was even younger and outside of here, back home. You see, fish are always interested in wherever they go because they don't remember what it was like last time they were there. But I have spent many an hour looking at these four walls, my one grated window and my 'door' that is locked shut and is only ever used to squeeze me in and out of against my will. Sadly, I remember more than a goldfish would and the memories of crying and panicking have no escape trapped in this stuffy little room. My bed has faded sheets and it crumples like my face when I sink down onto it. Will I really be trapped here for the rest of my life and never see the people I love again?