Beyond the Bars

High up and out of reach, the first beams of sunlight trickle in through the barred windows. I watch crisp shadows move slowly down the walls, bringing into focus my whitewashed room. A fan blows in the corner disturbing the green pallor curtain that divides the room. I watch a spider’s web in the light. A bird cries outside; it reminds me that life goes on, for others whilst my memory remains stuck on replay like a broken machine.

I live for light and the cry of birds at daybreak. They are my routine, indicating the start of a new day. Not that it matters. I am an observer in this life now, waiting out the days. Sunlight bathes the tired, rough skin on my face; it coats me in warmth but leaves my core untouched. A man like me does not deserve such luxuries.

The distant slamming of doors and loud footsteps make me shudder in anticipation. They are coming to get me. Human contact is unnatural now; I converse with the birds who nest on the other side of my barred window. They are my friends, my external clock and my sanity. I assume my captors in white uniform call me mad and a disgrace to humanity. They probably take one look at me and decide I’m a gonner, a loony. I agree. Betrayal is the worst crime. I do not even deserve the I.D tag around my neck for what I have done.

Stark walls loom down upon me. The light plays tricks with my eyes. Noises in the corridor. The drape twitches. People move around my bed with clip-board like hostile hyenas preparing to pounce. I shiver with claustrophobia; back prickling with sweat on the chilling bed, hands hold me down, restrain me. I flinch from the contact, who are these strangers that inject me with drugs? I reject their touch with mind screaming but my body has wasted away leaving an empty shell, I have no fight left. The icy glare of a torch prises open my eyes, I am blinded. Water pumps in and out of my lungs through small tubes. Forced breathing, chest compressed. I feel an easing in the crook of my elbow before I begin to drift into unconsciousness. I have not left this room for a long time.

I cry out in the night as dreams of my capture wrench and tug at corners of my mind, like vultures fighting over rotten flesh. Bright lights and water tanks. I feel the scars stretched tight across my back as I roll over in my sleep. Yet nothing can compare with the pain of those first dark hours when secrets were extracted from my mouth without my permission as I sat, slumped in agony. I had no right; those secrets were not mine to give. My loose tongue put a nation’s security on the brink of destruction. I am not to be trusted. I let my country down. I do not belong anywhere anymore except this prison. I thought I would have been stronger but they broke me with apparent ease. I am stuck within these four walls, racked with guilt and what ifs. At first I tried to force my way out but the walls were relentless and I only bruised my hands.

These days I stare at the roof and listen to the birds; they escape for me, my eyes on the outside. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. The walls compress and make me breath quick. I could never break out, the walls look solid and thick, I tunnelled through a section but soon lost the will to continue. My body is weak and tired. I think the end is near. Adrenaline pumps through me at the slightest sounds in the corridor, making the memories rush back in floods holding me under. Confined by my memories, I watch the words slip through my mouth again and again and imagine all the people I have put in danger. Guilt slithers down my throat and settles in my stomach like a rock. The life I had on pause whilst undergoing my mission shall never be played out. I will never live a life outside these walls or move on from the past, as the memories of my capture are what keep me alive in this half-life of guilt. Stuck in this in-between, restrained by stationary mindset of remorse and self-pity. Perhaps, I might eventually leave here in a coffin, but there will be no Union Jack draped atop as I am not a cause to be commemorated. Until then I wait it out with the captors in white uniforms. My eyes are drawn again to the window high up and out of reach. It is calming when I lose myself.

There are so many things I would have liked to have set right between my family and I. Trivial arguments I will never get closure to or be able to apologise for. They were always there for me and I have repaid them with an absence. They will never know what happened to me. They will never know what I did; some things cannot be shared. I miss them; they miss a false image of me. A family man. A loving father. A devoted husband. I spend hours remembering and mourning, yet I cannot come to terms with my sorrows. How could I save my own skin like that? In giving in and sharing secrets I have built my own prison of guilt destroying my life that I was trying to cling to. All is lost. Even my mind has started to deteriorate now, splitting open like a cracked nut broken beyond repair. The memory of my capture plagues my mind. Every noise invades and haunts my self-made prison.

The cry of a gull summons my eyes to focus on the small window, high up and seemingly out of reach. Dust catches the light, swirling like petrol on water in the disturbed air. It settles on my face like snow. I see myself reaching up and testing the strength of the bars. My muscles protest against movement but from somewhere I find the strength to try. I grasp the bars in my fists and pull. My arms’ screams echo in my head. These bars will not break; they are made of tougher stuff than me but perhaps they will bend. Voices murmur in the distance, punctuated by the nearby steady bleeping of a machine. I sit back against the iron bed and wait for the uniformed people. The curtain twitches, voices move closer. I decipher the words “stress” and “promising signs.” Amid the torture they bring maybe they know how I feel? Someone opens the small window unsettling the dust. I feel the ricocheting vibrations of ripping paper in the air. A muffled voice I recognise whispers close to my ear. My heart rate accelerates, one of those moments was coming. I start to shake and shudder but this time something’s different, soft hands steady me. I hear the passing of words before a familiar warm trickling starts in the crook of my elbow. My eyes are drawn back to the open window by the soft cooing of a dove. Dust recedes as a gentle breeze sweeps it out the window, sunlight trickles in.

Word count: 1230