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The Prisoner of Fremantle: A Remix

Niall Lucy
Curtin University

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NIALL LUCY

The Prisoner of Fremantle

A Remix

I
Who thinks to keep me here
For longer than a day,
Until my hair turns grey,
My spirits beaten to despair,
Eyes downcast and dreary?
Three months on the *Pyrenees*
Hardened me to misery,
And ten years in the colonies
Have made me stronger still.
You cannot crush my will.
There's gonna be a jail break,
A media earthquake,
So to speak,
When I escape,
And the public laughs at you,
Governor Hampton, who
Lacks the imagination —
Basic instinct — to see
The failed jurisdiction
Of British law in this country.
But for your guns and swords
And words,
Not one of you would stand strong,
Could live out here for long,
As I have lived among these native men;
And will again.

II

The prison walls are thick and high,
Built by convicts — a bitter irony —
From local limestone mixed with clay
And blood; on a good day
A man can pass the time away
Performing his duties at a leisurely pace,
Dreaming of a world beyond this place;
And even though each day is spent
In grim confinement,
There remains tomorrow for a man to conjure,
Denied to those inside the prison's gruesome other,
The madhouse yonder,
Where each man, if not a cipher
From the first, becomes one
In time as he is lost to reason,
Made over into what he is required to be:
Fleshly sentience devoid of vanity;
A docile body, a drug-fucked piece of shit,
Alive without — or worse, while — knowing it.
That I am here and not at the asylum
Guarantees my freedom.

III

Chained by the neck to a wooden pole,
For three days whole
They kept me under guard
In the exercise yard —
To get my mind right.
At night,
Thrown into a communal cage,
I put my rage
On hold and fell into a deep repose;
And in the morning when I rose,
Strengthened from the rest,
Pride still beating in my chest,
I feigned to look forlorn:
My head hung low, my trousers torn,
Silent and foreworn,
I shuffled back out to my post,
There to satisfy my host
That in truth my mind had been reset,
And, without caveat,
I no longer posed a threat —
For all I had was lost.

IV

And so this jail within a jail,
This special cell,
This hell within a hell,
Was built that I must fail —
Built of iron and stone and solid wood,
Exclusively for me,
Befitting my notoriety —
Must fail, or should,
If ever I thought to shape
Another plot for my escape.
Thus was my cell designed with one intent
(I kept a straight face all the while,
Not once succumbing to a smile) —
To thwart my style.
For what fear would prison hold
If men sent down to prison,
Feeling bold,
Left at their discretion,
Before their time was spent?
A man who would submit to no one
Is his own sovereign —
That is the image
I project from this cage.

V

Silent, eyes downcast,
Neither slow nor fast,
Enduring what I must endure —
This wretched capture —
I have indeed retrained my mind:
My thoughts fixed on days to come,
And not the days behind,
I imagine my freedom
And welcome
The embarrassment
I must cause the government
When I vanish from this place,
Like a spectral thing —
Living,
But without trace.

VI

The sea lies beyond Fremantle's walls —
A vast expanse of nothingness,
A fathomless abyss;
No man, however strong in faith,
Would dare to cross that watery path,
Which to the west our world intrals.
Eastward, out past Toodyay,
A half-day's ride away,
The land is flat and dry;
An endless, barren plain,
Seldom visited by rain,
Beneath an empty sky.
The terrain
To the north is no less cruel,
The chances of survival
Up there being all but none —
Such is the fierceness of the sun
That a man must surely die of thirst.
Only the south is not accursed.

VII

When I think of the soft light
Of home — swallows in flight,
The valleys, the rolling hills,
The bluebells and the daffodils —
Nothing swells in me, least of all sadness;
What others see as the barrenness
Of this new land — desolate
As the moon — I associate
With a page not yet written upon;
The old world is gone,
Long live the world we make anew! —
The world of the quokka and the kangaroo,
Echidna and dugite,
Cockatoo, numbat and twenty-eight —
Of scented eucalypts and salmon gums,
Egg-laying mammals and black swans —
This is the world I embrace,
This yet unwritten place,
Where I was sent to in disgrace
For stealing from the bourgeoisie
What they first stole from me;
This world, this offence
To our imagination, immense —
Some say miserable — in appearance,
Calls to be read in different ways,
If the clichés —
Empty, harsh, unoccupied —
Which at present are applied
Without exception,

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Are ever to be put in question.
The imprisoning fantasy,
Sprung from poetry,
Of home (men here are nearer the gallows
Than verdant meadows)
Does not imprison me:
I think, and therefore I am free.

VIII

I have seen terrible things,
Terrible beatings —
Fractured skulls, eye sockets caved in,
Bones protruding through skin,
Faces pulverised,
Arses sodomised;
I've seen men and women
Cudgelled to oblivion;
I've seen them fucked and bashed
And pissed on, smashed
With rifle butts,
Spat at and kicked in the guts;
I've seen prison guards —
Pitiless bastards —
Men (if that word may pass)
Of my own social class,
Blind a fellow for insolence,
Whose only offence
Was to lower his head
Too slowly, they said,
When they passed by —
For which they took an eye.
I've seen death, too,
Many times, each death anew,
Each death a singular event
Beyond my power to represent
In words poetical or plain —
No sad refrain
Or honest speech

Could reach
Inside a death,
Breathe a man's last breath,
And give to you or I
What it is to die.
(But I wonder at this 'is' —
Were we to quiz
The dead I think
They might deny this link.)
Such terrible things I've seen,
So often, so routine,
That I have been
Inured to woe,
And long ago
I lost all trust
That when I return to dust
A better life awaits me —
Of boundless felicity
In outer space,
Bathed in eternal grace!
Meh. I don't buy the story
Of everlasting glory
To come: it's the opiate
By which they alienate
Us from a future
That is ours, and a culture
That is ours. What takes
Us from ourselves makes
Us less than we could be;
It lessens our capacity

For freedom, our right
To decide as we might
A future that is yet
To come, and ours to beget.
This prison — do you understand
It now? — does not command
Me to submit.
My birth commands it.

IX

I am a resource
For men of wealth and power,
Part of a downtrodden labour force
Paid a pittance by the hour.
At the age of nine
They sent me down the mine
To work at my father's side;
When he died —
I can still hear his voice —
I had no choice
But to keep digging coal,
To put food in my mother's bowl
And help out with the family.
All I believed in was AC/DC.
There's gonna be a jail break —
No matter how weak
I became, no matter my despair,
That song was my prayer.
I looked at the sky,
And wished I could fly.

X

Sometimes in my cell at night,
If only for a minute,
I wake in fright
And, I admit,
I feel a chill come over me
Of such intensity
It seems almost to be alive —
An impossible thing: inconclusive,
Yet not therefore unreal,
Which no appeal
To reason might decide,
As though it did abide
Elsewhere, in another zone,
Somewhere like our own
And yet unlike it, coming forth
At night to shift the earth
From under me —
An icy daemon, cunning
As a bunyip, shunning
My entreaty
To be left alone,
And then — 'tis gone!
The dream is over.
Slowly, I recover
My senses and begin
To see again the coffin
I am held in, the realpolitik
Of the jarrah panels, thick
And indestructible,

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Covering the walls of my cell
Like the scales of the Wagyl;
Again I smell
The stench of my shit
Coming from the bucket
Beside my bed,
Strong enough to raise the dead,
And the sickening odour
(All too familiar
In here) jolts me
From my reverie.
Reality, I've heard men say,
Is in the mind: that way
To madness leads, this
Way to a life of bliss —
And no matter where you go,
From this day to the next,
There is no outside the text;
And they are only more perplexed
Who think it isn't so.

XI

The doctor came at break of day,
My condition to survey,
And for the benefit of my care
Prescribed more exercise and air.
At last I knew the chance had come
To win my freedom!
I took to the rock pile
With a hammer and a smile,
Knowing that the whole day long
I was growing strong
Again, and (there was no hurry)
In time a plan would come to me.
For now, there was sunlight
To enjoy; clouds to delight
In; the wind to savour as it blew
Across my face. A plan, I knew,
Would surely formulate —
I had but to wait.

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XII

Out Walyunga way,
Past Cobbler Pool,
West of Toodyay,
The outlaws rule —
So often is this sung
By old and young
Alike, Hampton
Worries that in London,
Too, he is a comic figure,
Whose tenure
May be at its close
Unless he can dispose
Of that villainous fellow —
Moondyne Joe!

XIII

A feisty little bird
(I cannot call it by another word)
This morning landed on my sill —
A wagtail, strong of will
And sweet of song, and lovelier still
The more I watched it watching me.
I wondered, could it be
The little thing
Was moved to sing
For my happiness alone;
Had it flown
To bring me joy?
I knew the answer to be no,
Of course, but even so
I drew comfort from the question,
And in its contemplation
Took perhaps a greater pleasure
Than the charming creature —
Now brazen, now coy —
Aroused in me, until
I saw, as clear as crystal,
That they were as one:
The bird *was* the question —
Not merely an object
For me to inspect,
An occasion for philosophy,
But an other entity,
A thing of mystery
In itself, sacred and mundane,

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Which words could not explain
Nor thinking hope to capture.
Thus in rapture
Did I greet the day;
And the bird flew away.

XIV

Tonight will be my last in here,
For tomorrow I'll be gone;
I'll disappear
Through the limestone,
Like I was never here at all;
A hole will I make
In the southern wall,
And up will go the call:
There's been a jail break!
Moondyne Joe is on the run!
Everyone
Will wish me well,
And the tales they'll tell
About me,
Tall as they may be,
Will spread like bushfire
To inspire
A myth;
Forthwith
I will become a legend
Whose fame will extend
Beyond his days,
Praise
Heaped upon the story
Of my memory,
Near and far,
Befitting a rock star.