

*Excerpts from an Exile*

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Year 12

"I took inspiration for my submission from the extract of *The Plague* by Albert Camus that featured in Contagion Cabaret. I chose this extract because I felt I could relate to what it was trying to say so I took some of the ideas touched on such as the 'wounds that the imagination inflicts' and the issue of being caught in memories and used them as a starting point to build on. My submission is a series of short excerpts from an unnamed narrator in lockdown which gives an insight into their experience."

The world has banished us, we are not wanted on this earth any longer. I wonder what we did to invoke its wrath. We must have done something. But it can not rid itself of us entirely for we have nowhere else to go and so we have been pushed into cages of concrete that we call our own. We can not touch the soil, the sea, or the sky. We are not worthy. What sins have we committed that we find ourselves shut away in prisons of our own making?

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There are four walls enclosing me. They are white. So is the ceiling. And the floor. My eyes trace the joints looking for a crack but there is not one. The white is endless and wraps all around me. Except for the window. There is my crack. I can see the world outside my own head, but it is tightly locked, and I cannot open it. I can see the sky but not taste it on my tongue or feel it brush my cheek. In some ways it is worse than the white; it taunts me. The branches of the tree outside my window twist to form bars and I realise nature is ensuring I can never escape. Through the woven arms I can catch glimpses of birds, sometimes there are groups of them and sometimes they are alone but that is not what is important. What is important is that they are flying. The wind and sky love the birds and guide them on their journey. Today, there is a murder of crows perched on the bars of my cage and it feels like they are watching me. Their caws twist into cackles and each twitch of a wing makes my muscles tense. I wish for glossy, black feathers to spill from my shoulder blades and sweep out in a magnificent arc so I can join the murder and be loved by the sky.

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As much as I long for the world outside, I am safe here embraced by my white walls. Although I am kept from the good of the outside, I am also protected from the bad. Here, no one can see me and only I am witness to my folly. There is no pressure except that I put on myself – I can control this little world within these four white walls. I am stood upon a large, black rock that is ragged and beaten whilst above me the clouds are bearing down, heavy with rage and striking with swords of light. Below the shadowy depths grapple against themselves until they come together to stretch up and try to take me in a mighty flood of strength. Here, on my rock, I am safe.

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The world has stopped spinning. The movement of the hand on the clock is useless because nothing else is moving forwards, we have all paused in that still moment before taking a breath. I hold onto the constant changing of the numbers on my screen just watching them always changing. I do it for hours. It reassures me it is real. I am real. Time. There is never enough of it. We are always running out of it. This deadly disease has given me the gift of time. That which it has stolen from others has been presented to me in the form of suffocating seconds. I contemplate the second that ticks into a minute; to an hour; to a day; to a week; to a month; to a year. I come back to the second. What does it mean? How can it hold so much power in one hand? I have studied the second for many a second and have come to a definitive conclusion. It means nothing. There is an abundance of seconds. And they

mean nothing. Nothing has the same meaning. Such endless time and nothing to fill it leaves no other pastime but to think. It is a dangerous thing. Such fancies grow, twist and morph from reality that reality ceases to exist except the reality of one's own mind. It is a reality entrapped by flesh and bone with no way to escape. The thoughts seldom cease; they are condemned criminals rattling at the bars. They used to be content trapped in their nine-to-five because they had their illusion of liberty. But now the cage is all too visible and they long for what they never realised they had.

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From the white carpet, stubs of grass sweat dew as they stretch up to blanket the ground in a forest of emerald. The paint on the white walls begins to flake away, it starts in the upmost corner to my left revealing a bright, beautiful blue and a wind gathers up the flakes to form soft clouds that drift lazily around me. All the white has gone now, and the tree's branches unravel and reach from me. I can hear the creak of the wood and smell the fresh grass and feel the gentle breeze and taste the freedom of the sky and I can see it all - the beauty of life. But then the blue is ripped away, and the grass is stomped down and the branches recoil. All I am left with is the white and my door is open. My mother is asking why I am still awake. The seconds whisper to me that it is seven minutes past four in the morning, so I turn out my light and lay back in my bed.

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My chest has been ripped open. Sliced and flayed so you can see inside, and the muscle is torn, and the bones shattered so that my heart is vulnerable to the vulturous memories that slip in and entwine with my arteries and veins. I am stuck breathing in the past whilst my heart is beating for a future. Dark memories unfold within me – the ones that were hidden and buried beneath daily mundane tasks – and they take over my mind so that thoughts crowd like dark shadows that consume everything that I am. There is no distraction, no respite from the past. And I want to do anything but think but I can't stop. I tell myself it is good to think, to reflect and grow. But you can only grow so far in the confines of your own skull. I am stuck thinking the same thoughts with no way to escape them because the bars remain, and my thoughts are as heavy as red-hot chains that are melting through flesh and muscle until they leave charred engravings on bone.

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At my scream, the windows blast outward – shards of glass arching like an arrow loosed. The walls fracture and crumble pulled away by the wind. And I can breathe again. The air does not smell of me but of the earth and sky. I am free. Until I am not. I am back at my desk starring mindlessly at a screen that is teaching me how fish breathe when surrounded by the sea. Maybe if I had slits in my neck, I would stop drowning. But my sea is not of hydrogen and oxygen. It is an endless flood of thoughts.

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Despite spending weeks living in fantasy or memory, I always find myself returned to the now. It is a fruitless now, but it is the only one I have, and I must live in it. I would not say I have accepted this life that I am unsure you could even call a life, but I have found myself resigned to it. I have no control, so I just float and allow myself to be pulled by the current. One day I should find myself in the sea. We must always hold on to hope so I live hoping for a ripe future when we are welcomed by the world again and returned from exile.