

Voices from prison

A selection of writing from the 2018 Koestler Awards, with writing tips and ideas to inspire you to pick up a pencil yourself



This resource gives a taste of some of the thoughtful, inventive and moving writing produced by entrants to the 2018 Koestler Awards. We've pulled out some of our favourite written entries, a fraction of the nearly 2,000 that came in last year. They give an idea of the vast range of approaches and ideas sent to us, and we hope they will inspire you to try new things!

People

Characters can bring your writing to life, drawing in your readers and giving a voice to your narrative. Have a look at these very different approaches to describing two people.

Funny Business (extract)

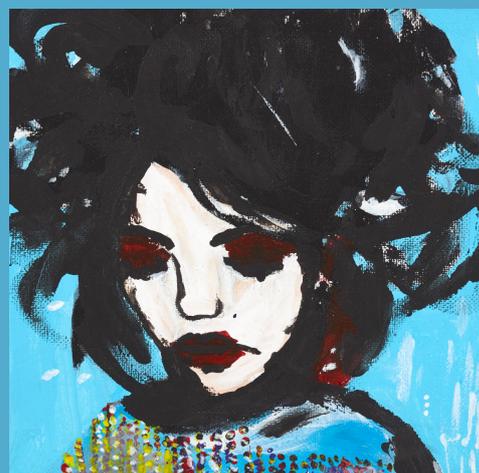
HM Prison Isle of Wight, Parkhurst

The brothers bore a family resemblance but not judged by their looks; they had the same facial expressions, body language, even patterns of speech – as if somebody had duplicated the same person in the bodies of two strangers. Jacky (otherwise Jackson – don't ask) was tall with dark thinning hair, as lean as a broom handle and had that rumpled look that you'd get by sleeping in your clothes. Johnny (otherwise Johnson – again, don't ask) was short, paunchy with a Bela Lugosi [Dracula] hairstyle, totally inappropriate considering he was ashen blond. His rumpled look was of a sort that appeared other people had been sleeping in the clothes with him. These were my dinner companions, the Longstreet brothers...

She And I (extract)

Shaftesbury Clinic

I like coffee, she likes tea
Her favourite cake is banoffee where mine is cheese
She likes to party when I want to chill
I think riding should be easy but she likes struggling uphill
I'm fond of jackets. She really likes coats
The Sea; I can't hack it; she's a fan of boats
Art makes me gaze about; she hardly bothers to look
She likes to dine out but I like to cook
We both enjoy books



Lucy

HM Young Offender
Institution Cookham Wood

Both authors give us a vivid impression of the people they're writing about through contrasts. Try describing two characters who are total opposites, or someone who's completely different to you. Do they look different? Do they have different tastes? Do they react differently?

Place

Writing can transport your readers to a fictional world, or somewhere you know like the back of your hand. These entries all conjure up a strong sense of place...

A Walk (extract)

HM Prison Isle of Wight, Parkhurst
Highly Commended Award

You are the mud on my boots
You are the trees' twisted roots
You are the blackbird I do not see
You are the breath coming out of me

In this extract from *A Walk*, the countryside becomes a character itself. Choose a place that means a lot to you – somewhere you've lived or that makes you happy, and write a poem made up of the different elements that make it special.

The View

HM Prison Stocken

Insolent dewy air
hanging and smelling like rainy camping.
A distant owl three times
moans to the drunkard wind,
'Who are you?'
as confused gusts fail to snare
a million taunting fairies
playing bulldog:
'Reach ground and you're home.' They whisper
and a third settle stripped branches, abandoned nests
or razor wire crowning the perimeter fence,
outrunning the slap of the monster cold.



Moon

HM Prison Standford Hill
Painting

In this poem the weather comes to life, becoming 'insolent', 'drunkard' and 'confused', snowflakes becoming fairies and the cold becoming a monster.

Look out of a window, what can you see? Can you see the wind blowing leaves around or rain splashing in puddles? Try describing the wind as an animal, or rain as a swarm of insects.

***With Passing Time* (extract)**
HM Prison Isle of Wight, Parkhurst
Bronze Award

In the dimly lit room
the wallpaper hangs in threads
and dusty curtains block the light.

In the dimly lit room
an old armchair tattered and torn
is drawn up to a two bar fire.
a large clock ticks
on the mantelpiece.

These two poems give vivid impressions of their settings with very different methods.



Reflections
HM Prison Wakefield

Deep in a pool by the rockery, beyond the scented glade
The willows bow and gently sip
While electric tadpoles fizz like lemonade
Burping frogs on skating lilies sit
While the heron, stately stands as fish with mirror scales parade
Breezes softly swirl around dancing with the thistledown
I sit, beside the pool and ponder how all this was made.

Wildlife Clock
Stockton Hall Hospital
Commended Award
for Woodcraft

The writer of the first poem tells us about the room and its contents in great detail, making it easy for the reader to picture themselves there. In *Reflections*, the descriptive language brings the location to life through similes ('like lemonade'), carefully chosen adjectives ('scented' and 'electric') and verbs that make the animals sound like people ('bow', 'sip', and 'parade').

Think of a room you know well and imagine you're inside. Describe it through all the objects it contains. Is it full of furniture or empty? Are the walls painted or papered? What time of day is it – is the light bright or dim?

Like the author of *Reflections*, try describing a natural setting. Can you hear water? What does it sound like? Are there animals there? If so, try describing them as if they're human – their mood, their movements or how they speak.



Astronaut
Cambridge Probation Service
Highly Commended Award

Got the Earth right out
Our front window!
I can block it out with
My thumb up on the glass.
It's a sight I won't forget.
Still, sure is lonely up here,
They say we're made of stardust
But I don't feel at home.
My life's there below a thumb nail.

Reflection: Coming Back Down to Earth
HM Prison Send
Pastel

In this poem, the place being described is very far away, small enough to be hidden by a thumb. The writer gives us an idea of two places, the Earth down below and the loneliness of space. Try writing a poem about two places and the contrast between them. It could be somewhere you've been on holiday, or you could be a deep sea diver or explorer in the jungle.

Imagine you're in outer space looking down at the Earth. What can you see? Is it hidden by clouds? Can you make out the electric lights of cities or the blue of oceans? How does it feel to be so far away from home?

Things

A well-described object can add great meaning and weight to your writing. Instead of just thinking about what something looks like, consider how your senses react to it, who owns it, whether it has a story behind it and how you or your character feel about it.

Time for Bang-Up (extract)

HM Prison Grendon

I was lying in my cell recently watching the news, when an item about a group of prisoners in Cardiff caught my attention. Apparently, they fashioned a small explosive device out of prison-issue whiteners for tea and coffee, and successfully detonated it. Thankfully, nobody was hurt. Upon hearing this, my first thought was that the whiteners are so foul they should all be destroyed in controlled explosions. You see, each week we are issued a 'tea pack' containing some round paper sacks of dross masquerading as tea bags, sachets of a soil-like substance alleged to be coffee, some sugar, and the offending whiteners. The compounds arising from the addition of hot water to these noxious products take a bit of getting used to...

Coffee

HM Prison Castle Huntly

The smell of coffee
Horrible stuff
Reminds me
Of a teacher's breath
Shouting and spitting
As I get
In to trouble
Needless to say
Av never tried it
The smell of coffee
Horrible stuff



These entries are about hot drinks, but also tell us something about the narrator's past or present. Describe an object through a memory. It could be a food you love or hate, or a smell or sound that transports you back to your childhood.

Life is Like a Cup of Rosie Lee
Kent, Surrey and Sussex
Community Rehabilitation
Company
Vanessa Jackson RA Bronze
Award for Drawing

These poems both describe physical objects in order to convey an emotion; feeling overwhelmed or missing home...

A Midnight Jar

HM Prison Wakefield

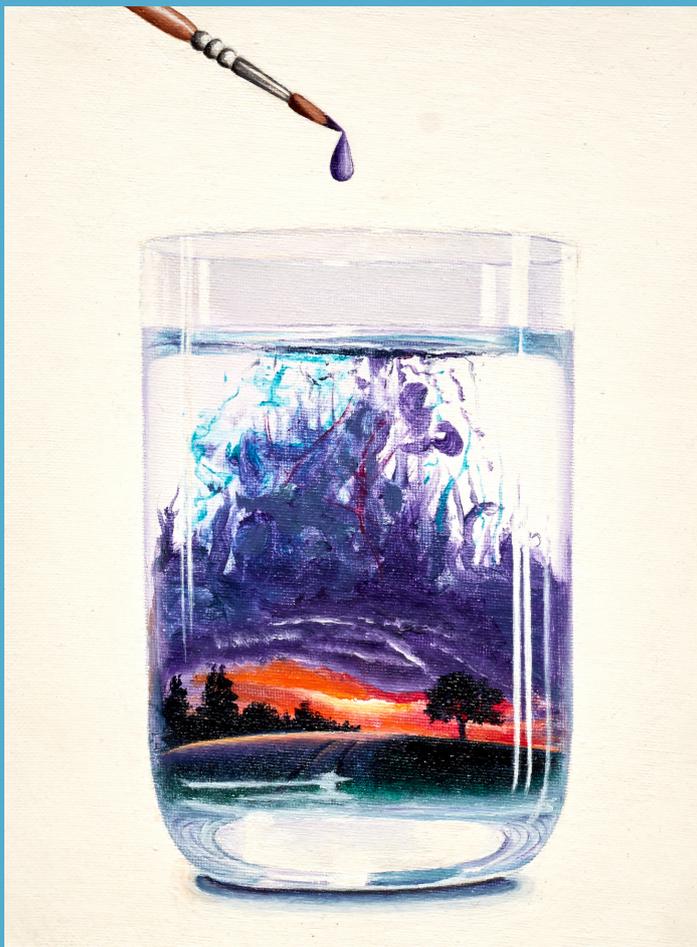
If I could capture midnight and put it in a jar
I'd keep it on my mantelpiece and view it from afar

When the world was sunny, altogether too too much
I'd carefully take it down, and with the softest touch

I'd slowly open up the top and night would gently creep
across my wall and ceiling would silky velvet seep

Then, in inky darkness, from the clamour I'd retreat
to dwell a while in silence and drift happily to sleep.

Here, midnight becomes an object that can be stored away. Is there a time of day or a place that you wish you could keep for when you feel overwhelmed? Where would you keep it? What would happen when you opened its container?



Missing Home (extract)

HM Prison Risley

I haven't had toast now for over a year
Or walked down the street wearing new gear.
It's funny in prison the things that you miss –
McDonalds or BK right now would be bliss.

This writer conjures up a sense of home by telling us about the things that he misses. A lot of our entrants write about the foods they miss! Write a love letter to the foods that you crave.

Storm in the Glass of Water

HM Prison Isle of Wight, Albany

Frederick Davies Platinum Award for Painting

Form

Using different forms of poetry like sonnets, haikus or limericks can guide your writing by giving you a set of rules to follow. Experiment and see where it takes you...

Leap Year

HM Prison Dartmoor

Highly Commended Award

Not three sixty-six
Only the usual amount
It's not a leap year

Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry, with poems of three lines. The first and last lines have five syllables and the middle line has seven. They often feature an image, or a pair of images, meant to describe a specific moment in time.

Broken Robots

HM Prison Magilligan

Silver Award

Just, Broken Robots
Brought In For Repair, Waiting
To Go Home, Rebuilt.

Institutionalisation

Dyfed-Powys Probation Service

Why does everything in jail end in TION?
Like, come on Boys, ur time for association.
Or if you get in trouble u get adjudication.
On your first day at work they call education,
I suppose it's to get u to think about realisation
In the outside word on the way to probation
To keep u outta trouble and out the pig station.
You want anything you need an application,
Even when u add phone numbers they want verification.
Unlock in afternoon 'last call for medication'.
It's a bit of a **** when they change location
Coz u settle in then 'Bam' another relocation.
Some kick off but they don't get a reaction.
They need to sort out the system with organisation,
Then maybe the prisoners would think a lil cooperation
Is in order, let's get together an do this operation
Steady feeling unhappy in this institution.
INSTITUTIONALISATION



Adam

Ilford Probation Service
Highly Commended Award
for Textile Art

This writer has created a poem with the same rhyme at the end of every line. Pick a sound, see how many words you can come up with and create a poem around them.

Voices

The characteristic speech and thought patterns of a narrator can make them stand out, letting the reader hear an accent or tone. These poems are written in a way that shows how each word sounds out loud, or use words that are specific to a way of speaking.

My Catz

**HM Prison Long Lartin
Silver Award**

My cat dem no kin teet,
my cat two cat dem no ramp fe eat.
My cat dem no ramp nar play,
my cat dem catch bout three mice ah day.
My cat dem bad an hard,
my cat dem no run from darg.

My cat dem cold hearted,
dem bad no-rartid.

My cat dem no yam food out'a tin,
my catz yam fish out'a sea whe swim
My cat dem no hitch nar gaze,
more time my catz dem garn fe days,.
My cat dem big an fat,
one brown an white, one gray an black.

My cat dem cold hearted,
dem bad no-rartid.

Jist tay let yi know

***Inspired by William Carlos Williams
and Tom Leonard***

**HM Prison Castle Huntly
Commended Award**

Jist tay let yi no
I'm coming hame
I've hid enough a this jail game

In a want ma space
In the bed again
You've been lying there
awe these years
you and yir big floppy ears

noo get yer toys
and get tae ****
efter awe yer only a dug

Try writing a poem or story using a distinctive voice. Convey the pronunciation by changing spelling – do they have a strong accent or a lisp?

Bad Timing (extract)

**Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company
First-Time Entrant Award**

I fort I'd 'ave it sorted an' by now be stinkin' rich,
But som'ow that ain't 'appened so I fink there's bin a glitch.

Did wot I was spose'd ta do t' make me life run smooove,
'n still me wheel of progress jus' don't sit right in the groove.

Don't be fooled, I've 'ad me chances, more'n I can count,
But all them doors I stepped fru don't add up to no amount.

Play with your choice of words, using slang or words that are specific to an area of the country, or the order you put them in. Maybe the character uses certain specific idioms or phrases?

Images

Try using an image to inspire a piece of writing. It could be a photo, a view from a window or an illustration in a magazine. Here are some artworks from the 2018 Koestler Awards that could spark a story...



The Therapy Journey

HM Prison Warren Hill

Commended Award for Painting

Write a letter to your future self – what would you say?



Family Tree, HM Prison Shotts

Patrick Holmes Platinum Award for Painting

What is happening in this scene? Is it a dream? Imagine you're the little boy – how did you get here? What happens next?



How I Felt, HM Prison & Young Offender

Institution Low Newton, Lamberth Family

Highly Commended Award for Needlecraft

Start a piece of writing with these words, or imagine that you've stitched them – who is this person?



1805

HM Prison Lewes

Painting

Who is walking along the beach? Where are they? Where are they going?

Finishing your work

After you have written your poem or story, remember that writers always write several versions of their work, making improvements each time until their writing is as good as possible.

Once you have finished your poem or story, read it aloud to yourself. Are there any phrases that are a mouthful to say or which sound out of place? Take a few minutes to change them. Read the piece of writing slowly, one sentence at a time. Are there any ways you could make the sentence more interesting or more precise? Are there any words you could swap for a more exact word?

We hope you've enjoyed reading these pieces of writing from the 2018 Koestler Awards, and that you're inspired to try new things!

"[Writing] has helped keep me sane. I have found an ability to create perfect monuments to memory and experience that I can fashion like sculptures. In conversation I tend to say too much. Poetry gives me the ability to pare away the nonsense and aim towards the essence of what I really want to say."

A poet featured in our 2018 national exhibition
'I'm Still Here'



Cover image:
That Sink-ing Feeling, HM Prison Leeds
Artists' Collecting Society Silver Award for Drawing

