

# I'm Still Here

**Poems & Literature  
Selected by Janet**

Contains some strong language

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## Leaves On The Line

Time was passing like treacle through a sieve. Inconsistent. The light struggled through the scratched and tinted window in much the same manner. The sweat-box from court had made a few stops on the way (how many jails are there?) sporadically disgorging souls before I was finally cuffed and discharged at my destination. No smiling hostess to thank me for my patronage this time!

I was spinning. I felt like a man that had just finished a long sea voyage, with rubberised legs that weren't quite up to speed with following instructions yet – almost like there was a delay in my neural relays. Perhaps it's leaves on the line?

Leaves on the line?

WTF?

It's shock. It must be. It's just random thoughts popping and trying to find some obscure association. It's like a dream, when the school bell actually turns out to be the alarm clock. I know that, I'm a smart guy. Get a hold man. Calm down, deep breaths. Relax. Breathe in, breathe out...in...out.

Oh God. House. Mortgage. Car. Fuck. Work. Where's my phone gone, how do I sort them. What about the holiday deposit. Is that insured? Oh Jesus H Christ, it's all gone tits up. Hey Dorothy! We're not in Kansas anymore.

“Are you suicidal?”

“How would you describe your ethnicity?”

“Strip that cubicle.”

“Have you served in the armed forces?”

“Sit on that scanner for me”

“Are you drug or alcohol dependent?”

“Any allergies lad?”

“Who's your next of kin?”

An amalgam of anonymous faces blurring one into another. A collage of blue and black uniforms enveloping my inquisitors. I sense my petitioners are willing me to deliver compliant, monosyllabic answers in exchange for open-faced sympathetic nods.

Single room alone.

Room with prisoners.

Empty room.

Interview room.

Noisy room.

Alarm.

I hadn't even seen a fight but I was minded of 'Monty Python's – Life of Brian' as a preposterous procession of white shirted prison officers all but appeared from thin air. Like soldier ants they identified a threat, swarmed and removed it. Whatever 'It' was, the only traces left behind were the swirling dust motes that danced in angry protest at having been disturbed.

Quiet room.

The pungent smells of sour urine competing with the sweetly acrid disinfectant assaulted my nose. Like smelling salts it seemed to pierce the fog as I found myself in a weird waiting room. With banks of metal chairs bolted at intervals to the floor, I almost felt like I had arrived at a purgatorial train station to a dread realisation – I've missed the last train home.

Maybe it's leaves on the line?

My eyes fell down to my feet. Ding-Ding! We have a winner! Ultimate Fashion Police faux-pas! My shiny black shoes did not match my recycled and re-issued grey tracksuit bottoms.

Now what would Gok Wan say?

“It's all about the confidence darling!”

Oh I've really lost it now.

Mouse like, I surveyed my surroundings.

I scanned the walls. The posters were unlike the usual offerings I knew from the tube. Gone were 'Cats' & 'Mamma Mia' at the West End; no more luxury rentals at Canary Wharf! Forget the London Eye and Cirque du Soleil. The special offers here included treats such as Hepatitis B, HIV, drug addiction and even longer sentences.

When I saw the toilet I was relieved that my insides were knotted. There was no door, no seat – in fact no visible flushing mechanism. Its rim and sides bore the scars of frequent high altitude bombing raids. It was sandwiched in a corner of this purgatory with a waist high partitioning on the room facing side.

I blew a lunatic's gasping chortle.

"I was worried there for a minute lad. Thought we'd lost you"

I sharply reclaimed the breath that had momentarily left in said gaspish chortle while I located the source of this voice. Usually the sight of this speaker would have inspired no small discomfort. But on this occasion, on this day, I was delighted that he was here. It wasn't just voices in my head! At worst it was full-on hallucinations and the prospect seemed far more exciting!

As I looked at him it was hard to figure out anything about him. He was just so non-descript. He had a face that could have been 28 or 48 years old. He was wearing a mismatch of brands and badges from head to foot. In truth, had I seen him on the street I would have crossed the road – or at the very least busied myself in order to avoid eye contact – no doubt he would want to bum change!

"You OK lad?"

Scouser. Broad accent.

I replied, "Dunno. I'm still finding my bearings I think."

"Well, and mind you I'm going out on a limb here lad, but it looks to me like it's your first time?" When I nodded, he reciprocated, then continued, "And that being the case I would say that you're doing OK. You have finished the worst bit already, that's getting here."

"What about you – *lad*" I asked, adopting the vernacular. "Is it your first time?"

"No lad, (he chuckled), I'm on me way to having a wing named after me here!"

The Scouser stood and made his way towards me, "Do you smoke?"

I nodded again and delved into the clear plastic bag that contained all of my worldly possessions now. Amongst the basic toiletries, faded photo-copies of leaflets and bedding I found the smoker's pack that I had been issued. A precious pack containing tobacco, rolling papers and a lighter. I spent the next few minutes in a cringe-worthy attempt of trying to roll my cigarette, until finally the cigarette paper split and I ended up with a lapful of tobacco. This was the strand of tobacco that broke the camel's back.

"BOLLOCKING BLASTED BOLLOCKS!" I blurted.

Any semblance of my previous withdrawn shyness was cast off in a petulant tantrum, "It's over, my life is over. I can't even roll a poxy smoke. What's the point?" I launched the smokers pack at the wall.

Scouser, who had perched himself at the end of my bench while I was failing to roll a smoke said nothing. He stood calmly, walked across the room, recovered the pack and sat back down beside me. Embarrassed as I was, I couldn't look him in the eye, I opted to watch his hands.

I was entranced with the digital ballet that followed, a crisp, practised series of motions that efficiently delivered a perfectly rolled cigarette, waiting to be licked, stuck and smoked. He handed this to me, "better using your own spit lad" before he returned my tobacco and papers. He then produced a polished wooden box from his pocket. I noticed it seemed to be made of matches. With a delicate twist, the seamless lid revealed itself. Scouser opened the box and produced a pre-rolled smoke of his own.

There followed a brief, comfortable silence as we smoked. The only sounds being the crinkling of burning paper as drags were dragged, and accompanying satisfied breathings.

"Listen lad," said Scouser, "Things may feel a bit shit right now, but as for life being over? Well I don't like to hear anybody talk like that. Like I said earlier, you have already done the worst bit."

I looked at the Scouser. I told him, "It's hard to see that just now."

"Fair enough" said the Scouser, "But indulge me, just for a bit will you?"

When I nodded he continued, "You seem like an educated sort. Tell me this. How many people are on this planet?"

I paused briefly before I answered, "They reckon it's 7 Billion plus now"

"Wow, 7 Billion is it? Fair enough." The Scouser paused and considered the enormity of the number. I must admit that I did the same. To my shame my first instinct was to feel so sorry for myself that I wished I was any one of the 6,999,999 others!

Scouser philosophised, "So what do you reckon the odds are that while we are sat here smoking, some poor soul, minding his or her own business, is walking home along a mountain path somewhere on this planet."

I shrugged my shoulders as I thought about his suggestion, and on the whole it seemed a realistic proposition, "Probably a fair chance if not a good chance really. Probably more than one person, likely to be dozens I expect." I eventually ventured.

Scouser accepted my point with a reciprocal shrug, “Dozens you reckon? Right now, this minute?”

Now I can smell a rhetorical question a mile off, and they were a pair of rhetorical questions if ever I heard them, therefore I did the polite thing and didn't answer them. Instead I waited for Scouser to continue, which he duly did.

In almost the style of Peter Falk's Columbo adding that ‘...*just one more thing...*’ Scouser asked “So let me get this straight in my own head here. Right now, across the world, there are likely to be dozens of people – *innocent* people mind you, making their way across mountain pathways while we sit here and smoke?”

His questioning style reminded me of my recent experiences with a rather zealous prosecuting barrister. “Yes, that sounds likely.” I could only agree the logic.

“Therefore, it stands to reason that at least one of the poor bastards – an *innocent* poor bastard, has just slipped and is falling through the air to their death right now?” Scouser stubbed his cigarette out on the metal bench to perfectly emphasize his point.

I was shocked. There was literally nothing to say. So I said nothing.

Scouser continued, “Or somebody else in another part of the world is just now letting go of a steering wheel and bracing for impact. Their life is flashing in front of their eyes. They can see their end now, with no way of avoiding it, too late to change anything, too late for apologies or making amends.”

Scouser had a defiant look in his eye, a look that said ‘*I can do this all fucking day long!*’

I knew that he could, I meekly volunteered “I had never thought about life like that”

Scouser saw that something had clicked in me. He turned sideways to face me and crossed his left knee over his right ankle. As he spoke I saw that his right leg was a prosthetic limb – what a way to rub it in! But Scouser smiled at me as he referred to his earlier examples and said, “Now THAT is life over lad. Yet here we are. Me and thee talking, having a ciggy. While it might not be the Ritz, we have a roof, food and TV provided. While you are here you can re-educate yourself. You can take stock of your life. What I'm saying is that you still have choices lad and as long as you have a choice your life is not over.”

That Scouser may have saved my life.

## CONFINEMENT

The works of the masters both inspire and discourage:

The fury of a Turner sea-storm;

The melancholy of a Lautrec bordello girl;

The radiance of a Monet flower meadow.

I struggle to escape my yoke of ineptitude:

Passion above precision,

But my old adversaries: light and perspective,

Still defy my bungling eye.

So the butterfly still flutters

On the cell-side of the glass.

*Prisoners (Confinement)*

David  
HM Prison Whatton  
Highly Commended Award for Poem  
2514

## **Thank You Mr Listener** **A Narrative Poem**

Chapter 1

***“Thank you Mister Listener for coming to hear me talk  
I promise I won’t kill myself or cut myself or walk  
I want to give my story; to tell you how I feel  
I know that you’ll believe me. No one else would think it’s real.”***

Those words I heard in Wandsworth when I met him the very first time.  
That was how it started just after half past two.  
I had been asleep when the voice said I was needed.  
I dressed and went to meet him.  
He looked old and weak and gaunt;  
He knew he needed an ear to hear.  
He felt he had to talk.  
And so he did.

He had been in young offenders when he was but sixteen.  
His mother met him on release  
But he was back within the year.  
She wasn’t there the second time  
And he never saw her not ever, ever again;  
For she had died of cancer, alone and in great pain.

He never had a home again  
For he was in and out of jail,  
As each year came along.  
When he got out he found a squat  
A park bench, shop front, underpass or not.

He couldn’t draw his benefits  
As he didn’t have a home.  
And he couldn’t find a home  
When his benefits weren’t paid.  
He didn’t want to die  
So to feed himself he begged.  
He hunted through the dustbins  
And he looked through all the waste  
He was a regular at kitchens  
And restaurant back doors.  
But often he stayed hungry.

And then he stole.  
But when he stole he saw a Court,  
A van and a blue steel door.  
But he also had a bed each time,  
Some warmth, three meals a day  
A shower albeit filthy  
but at least he could get clean.  
He could become a man again  
He could breathe and sleep, relax and think  
He could even try to read;  
But the best of all this was; he could get well again

He talked on and on and on and on  
But then he yawned and yawned again.  
I pressed the bell and he shuffled back to bed.  
I asked the officer his age  
He was only forty one.

Chapter 2

It was exactly seven days later when the light went on  
It’s just after two she said as I heard her call my name

***“Thank you Mister Listener for coming to hear me speak  
I hope you won’t be angry or think of me as weak  
My story isn’t over; indeed it’s just begun.  
I’ve only had bad treatment and this has run and run.”***

He looked alive. He said he’d been eating well.  
He hadn’t liked his cell mate and he’d got a single cell.  
He then started once again his grim story to tell.

Each sojourn in the prison  
Each time he was put behind bars  
Each time he was due to be freed  
He’d asked for help with housing.  
He’d wanted to live like a man.  
He’d hoped to find his way  
To have a home and benefits  
Then move to get a job.  
He dreamt he’d find a partner  
To live her life with him;  
He wished to become a father  
And save his son from crime.  
But the people wouldn’t help him  
They didn’t give a damn.

But then the last time they said they’d done it.  
They told him they’d found a place,

A room all of his own.  
It was far away in St Albans.  
He’d never been there before.  
His probation office was changed,  
To far away in St. Albans  
There they’d look after him from then on in.  
There they’d check his home and benefits;  
There they’d keep him safe and sound.

He was happy to go out for once.  
He was happy to be free.  
He was happy to be a man again  
He was happy.  
He was happy.

He left prison with some money  
He bought his ticket and some food.

He met his Probation lady,  
In St Albans far away  
But she didn’t know his name.  
She told him to go to the hostel  
And see her in seven days time.  
He still had cash in his pocket.  
His hopes were really high.

He walked four miles to the address  
He'd been given that very day  
But he found out when he got there  
They knew nothing at all about him.  
And they were totally full up.....  
Perhaps in a month they could help him.  
So he bought some food. He found a bench  
He slept the whole night through.

By the third day he'd spent his money;  
He walked back to see the office  
But the lady wasn't there and the others didn't care.  
Then the rain began to fall.

He stole some food from Tesco's.  
He was arrested for the theft.  
In the morning he saw Court again  
Where the Judge gave him a warning  
And set him free to go on his way.  
So he stole some wine from Tesco's.

***“And that time they sent me here.”*** He said.

Then his shoulders slumped  
His eyes fell shut  
Silence reigned in the Listener suite.  
It took him ten minutes longer  
To rise and ring the bell.  
His hope and heart had vanished.  
He shambled off the wing

### Chapter 3

The next week was our third session and he wept.  
The prison couldn't help with housing;  
St Albans were in charge of him now.  
The prison couldn't help by calling  
St Albans needed him there  
But he knew that they had nowhere  
And he knew they didn't care.

He wept and wept  
And wept  
He wanted a home but there wasn't one  
And so he wept.

### Chapter 4

In the stillness of the night I was wakened by the light  
It was by now the fourth time I'd been called to hear his song  
To listen, with little talking, of his lifespan going wrong.

***“Thank you Mister Listener for coming to hear my moan  
Without you I'd have nothing and feel so much alone.  
You can see they've sent me here and now they've sent me there  
I think they have no interest; I think they do not care.”***

He didn't want to die he said  
He wanted to do such good  
He wanted to help some others  
To save them from his path  
But this time without a home he said  
It was bound to be his last.  
His body was bound to fail him  
His mind and soul and hope  
Would be left without a frame.  
The cold, the damp, the dirt, the grime,  
The filth, the loneliness and pain  
Would take his final ounce of strength  
He was bound to breath his last.  
He fell silent for some moments  
Then he rose and pressed the bell

***“Thank you Mister Listener for coming, by now I am a fan.  
You will not tell and will not warn, you've helped me all you can.  
I will think of you with kindness; I will bless you for your time  
As I close my eyes that final, final... final, final time.”***

### Chapter 5

He left the prison the next morning  
Just after daylight came.  
he was going out to find a squat  
Or not.  
He had no home to go to.  
The system had let him down  
Again  
Again  
Again.  
He was going out to die.  
I knew that I would cry.

*Thank You Mr Listener*

Denis  
HM Prison Ford  
Sir Stephen & Lady Winifred Tumim Gold Award for Poem  
1656

## The Ghost Inside

I

Within a shroud of stone and steel  
When keys are turned and doorways sealed  
When light it leaves and darkness comes  
And silence beats as loud as drums  
When living are kept from their dreams  
That's when the Ghost Inside is seen.

II

Upon the air an icy chill  
Where fear sweeps and time stands still  
A phantom shimmers into sight  
Unnerving terror fills the night  
A vision screams in silent pose  
That's when the Ghost Inside is close.

III

A flickered spectre to the eye  
In scenes that haunt and terrify  
One lasting memory of a death  
When rope was strung to stop a breath  
From pale features panic spreads  
That's where the Ghost Inside hanged dead.

IIII

And every night upon that cell  
That ghost is trapped within that hell  
And those who stay awake too late  
Are witness to that life forsake  
To suffer damned forever bound  
That's where the Ghost Inside is found.

IIII

Within that prison chamber tomb  
Where life was ended far too soon  
Where hope had left and sorrow stayed  
And to soul the price was paid  
There's no escape – there cannot be  
For I am dead – That Ghost is me.

*The Ghost Inside*

Daniel  
Prisoners Abroad  
Gold Award for Poem  
0870

### **A Prisoner's Poem**

Do not condemn me for all that I do,  
Fundamentally I am the same as you.  
Try not to censor all my words,  
It's only the chatter you have often heard.  
Do not intrude upon my thoughts,  
Or in the trap of prejudice you will be caught.  
In every life, mistakes occur,  
In that, I'm just like him or her.  
I'm paying the price for what I have done.  
Once I'm out let it be gone.  
Don't hound me forever for one misdeed,  
Allow me to truly, here after, be free.  
Burn me not with the prison brand.  
Don't let go, simply take my hand.  
I am not just things I have done.  
Like you, I am a mother's son,  
With two sons and two daughters of my own,  
Their thoughts and feelings towards me are unknown.  
My wife in my arms, I love you dearly.  
So, all I want is the chance to be free.  
You have no idea how much that means to me.  
Love from the four walls xoxo.

*A Prisoner's Poem*

Jason  
Probation Board for Northern Ireland  
Bronze Award for Poem  
0853

## The Lonely Vigil

Within these cold, impenetrable and inescapable Victorian walls lies a bewildering labyrinth of pastel-painted corridors which echo loudly with each of my measured paces. Each side is lined with doors which betray brief snippets of lives contained beyond; hushed conversations, muffled laughter and resonant snores.

I often wonder quite what revelations one might glean if these walls could speak. What manner of secrets taken to many a grave might they whisper if one were of a mind to listen?

There is an undeniable history here and yet little or no future for those caught in its unyielding grasp. It has been home to so many and, for a few, serves as a final resting place. No gravestones mark their presence but I know that they are here, beneath my feet wherever my patrol may take me.

Darkness changes this place in ways that I cannot quite describe. The quiet that it brings is deafening; the shadows fall long and grotesque in the pale moonlight; a thousand eyes are upon me where I know that there are none. Gloom plays sinister tricks on the mind; makes anything seem possible.

I pass from wing to wing, landing to landing this night, my rhythmic footfall and the almost musical jangle of my keys and whistle the only outward indication of my presence.

‘Oi, Gov!’

I pay them no heed. What can be so urgent that I might stop in my tracks to lend an ear? There is surely nothing so vital that it cannot wait until morning when others like me, who may care as little, will nonetheless be duty-bound to assist. I enjoy the luxury of anonymity and can pass unchallenged on my way to nowhere in particular.

Here, my friends, lies the inner sanctum and passing through the heavy wrought iron gate brings us into the unenviable realm of the condemned. I cock my ear to listen for their futile pleas, fervent prayers and pitiful sobs; none of which will comfort them as they mark what little time they have left. There, standing alone, is the last door through which they will ever walk. Beyond it shall stand the executioner, poised to bestow upon them a hood, a noose and blessed oblivion. Perhaps, I think, they are the fortunate ones; free from pain, immune to hatred, atoned of sin and at the tender mercy of the hereafter. Perhaps there they might find the forgiveness denied them here.

It may be dark but I carry no lantern as for its light and comfort I have no need. I know intimately every inch of this stone and metal fortress.

I pass outside unnoticed and gaze skyward at the imposing, monolithic silhouette of A Wing. When at last the clouds part and the moon breaks cover, its wall is revealed in stark detail. Torn lengths of sheet and blanket stretch from window to window forming a network by which items may be passed from cell to cell.

Where once towered high walls, mere fences now stand crowned with razor wire which glistens wherever the moonlight reaches it. No man can climb them but I can pass through unhindered and unnoticed from the windows from which soft light leaks and which offer no resistance to the whistling wind.

The stories that I could tell, my friend; the secrets that I guard. A thousand anecdotes lost in time, as many forgotten names. I alone know the truth behind so many legends but it is mine to hold. I will share a little with you if you can be trusted. There is a rumour of a short-lived tunnel between the gaol and the old asylum a half-mile yonder. It does exist. I alone know where the entrance lies and although it leads nowhere, I walk its length when the mood so takes me. Its walls are blackened with soot from the fire that destroyed its destination and the floor is deep in foul water.

Here, the gymnasium stands dark and silent but the musky aroma of stale perspiration persists. There, not far beneath the polished linoleum, lie the mortal remains of a prostitute and her unborn bastard son. Her victim sleeps soundly in a churchyard close-by. His memorial bears no mention of his child, buried and forgotten here. There is no justice for some.

I patrol the perimeter in the cold night air, the collar of my greatcoat turned up against the cruel North-Easterly and yet I do not feel the unwelcome caress of its icy fingers upon my skin and much-less care. The new breed of Gaolers seem to fear the weather and seldom pass this way when it turns inclement. I do not complain. I cherish the solitude.

I make my way through C Wing where lifers rot in peace. Here, many moons ago, debtors were imprisoned. The forgotten underclass. Some things, it seems, never change. Footfalls sound above me; the sporadic squeak and clang of wickets as a colleague performs a solo nocturnal roll count. The beam of his torch glances off the railings and netting as he addresses those still awake with a solitary, monotonous greeting.

‘Owright!’

On to the main building now where my patrol begins and ends. From the Rest Room issues raucous laughter and the crackle of radios, the tinkle of teaspoon on teacup. I walk on by. I belong not here among their ranks.

I pause, as always, to gaze upon a plaque of tarnished, neglected brass against varnished oak. It is seldom noticed and far-less read save by me. I run a finger along its engraved lettering but leave no mark.

“Here fell Gaoler George White, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1883. Departed this life whilst executing his duties and now maintains a lone vigil.”

*The Lonely Vigil*

Christopher  
HM Prison Channings Wood  
Platinum Award for Flash Fiction and Short Story  
0699

## Pen Friend

Unrelated lives converge through music  
Parallel universes abridged by words  
Destiny of two minds criss-crossed by chance  
It all started in a prison library  
Inside a tear-out leaf of a music survey

From opposite social strata  
Culture, age, gender, background play no part  
Shared interest in music and performed arts  
Draw them together like wind to a sail

From rural idyll of South England  
Through high fences in the Northwest  
From her roomy multi-media studio  
To his tiny cell of 10x8 en-suite  
Distance and location pose no problem  
Cos words, music know no boundary  
Pen-friendship redefined and sealed  
Like a violin humming seamless melodies  
Despite soundbox and bow being apart

From finger tips over her keyboard  
To a Biro on his OL paper  
Letters darting back and forth  
Like swallows rushing to build nests  
Personal stories being swapped fortnightly  
Mutual understanding pieces together  
Like Turner's landscape on a jigsaw

She is a world music producer  
He, a serving first-time offender  
Like chalk and cheese  
Or a princess and pauper  
Ever drawing closer

She an English rose  
Substance and sophistication  
He, a Confucius disciple  
An autodidact learning machine

She a keen advocate  
Of penal reform and restorative justice  
Believing in giving prisoners  
Work, education and a second chance

He wants to turn a new leaf  
Through hard work, education and rehabilitation  
Pen-friendship becomes a catalyst  
Triggering positive chain reactions

Friendship grown organically  
Rekindles his longing for re-connection  
Doing bird without wasting time  
Reaching out from within  
He cracks chains of isolation and seclusion

She describes the tranquillity of her pastoral locality  
Covered by green meadows and golden fields  
Spellbound by the magic of seasonal colours  
She immerses herself in the rural idyll after work  
Soaking up the splendour of The South Downs

He, the harsh surroundings fenced by barbed-wires  
With rubbish strewn outside his cell  
Attracting vermin, rodents and avian pests  
Or dodging ubiquitous bird droppings everyday  
Along caged walkways to work  
Where a swarm of pigeons try to roost

She unwinds at weekends in amateur dramatics  
By morphing into a starring role in *The Crucible*  
Aiming high for her next challenge  
She also wants to break into musicals

He plays soothing Beethoven's Pastoral on flute  
Against the backdrops of blaring noises on the landing  
Or releases his pent-up energy down the gym  
Through high-tempo badminton games

Witty anecdotes exchanged on the same wavelength  
Intellectual connections made with identical key  
Artistic and melodic conversations flow in unison  
Stimulating their literary and creative expressions

She is his unsung heroine  
Abridging peoples through cultures and traditions  
Promoting peace and understanding  
Through folk, roots, theatre and dance

Friendship fosters tolerance and compassion  
Friendship gives her perspectives in performing  
Friendship enriches his life behind bars  
Friendship a perfect recipe  
For his re-integration back to the society  
Cos making a new friend beyond prison walls  
Is like an extra strand of social support  
Woven into his future safety net

Tomorrow will be bright and sunny  
For those who hope and dream  
Tomorrow will be warm and breezy  
For those who reach out for humanity

Come on, my fellow jailbirds  
Pick up a pen and start writing  
Keep searching until you find a connection  
Cos pen-friendship is a gateway  
To starting a bond of a life time!

*Pen Friend*

Frank  
HM Prison Wymott  
Gold Award for Poem  
0552

## Chess Board Wasps

My chess board, placed in the middle of  
the B-wing arena

Gathers Wasps.

Picnic, this is not.

Site of shaking and shouting, fire and fight.

Pausing the surveilling and the dealing now hovering

Puzzled, one or two aim for a game.

Chess board wasps hum with empty threats

Missed directions and distractions

Hovering hands hiding average moves

“Do you want to buy a phone?” is the real play.

Unpredictable friends-and-family-robbing fraudster type, innit.

Chess board wasps dominate territorially

Skilful Sicilian, that's the defence

Selling simultaneous spice deals around the board.

“Check....my bruvva.”

Mid-level London-dangerous dealer type. Innit.

Chess board wasps sacrifice queens politically.

BOOM! To lose pointlessly

Allahu Akbar, planning Belmarsh break-out

Predictable, ginger-haired, white-skinned,

Welsh jihadi convert type. No, really. Innit.

Chess board wasps could sting.

Concealed shark. “Check mate, mate?”

No, no, no! Get a bloody pencil you dipstick

and do a fucking cryptic.

Disordered personality armed robber type. Innit.

Chess board wasps perplex the gathering guards.

Mouth-foaming, arms-lashing, teeth-biting schizophrenic

‘Cos five minutes ago he was fighting three of them.

Now, it's en-passant.

Newly trained “could you open all those doors please guv?”

6 week course type. Innit.

Chess board wasps swarm around

A debt-fleeing spice-wrecked body

Jumped, maybe thrown off the floor above.

Noticed the thud with a glimpse.

Standard for the wing.

Game plays on.

Typical fraggle type, out, carried away. Innit.

Taps on my cell door after evening bang up at 4.30

That I'm five months used to

Tall guard's face filling the Holie Judas.

“You've been acquitted”

The board is already under my arm.

“You're going home, you're buzzing off.”

Innit tho'.

*Chess Board Wasps*

Neil  
HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Chelmsford  
Knox Cropper Gold Award for Poem  
0425

