

Poems from a Once-Upon-A-Time Inmate by Ra Avis

"Ra Avis's poetry reflects on experiences from her time incarcerated and her journey as a returning citizen. Ra is an award-winning blogger, and author. She is a once-upon-a-time inmate, a reluctantly-optimistic widow, and a generational storyteller." She shares two of her powerful poems here.

Flushed

In county jail, the toilets flush hard,
hard enough to leave a bruise behind if you're too slow.

I was too slow once, but I learned to be faster.
I learned to think fast here.
I learned to hurry up, hurry up,
hurry up
and wait.

I waited to use the bathroom
for 20 hours after my wrists were first cuffed.
I sat on my thoughts
instead of a throne,
and stewed.

Less than a year later, I made stew,
and stored it in a toilet lined with a trashbag.

Prison is an empty place
so we did what we could-
scrubbed, and
scrubbed, and
filled the negative space with something heartening.

The girls in another county empty their toilets
all the time, as they do time.
They're housed on the 2nd floor,
and the boys are housed below.
If you empty the toilets, you can talk through them.
Flirt through them.

Promise through them.

They get through their trials that way,
preferring a place to put their love
over a place to put their
waste.

There's so much waste.
We flush it all.

Contraband flowers made from toiletpaper
and yesterday's news,
flush it.

That extra bra, the cigarettes you made
from tea and strips of the Bible.
Flush it down.

We're locked up,
sometimes, for days in a cell.

In prison, the toilets flush once,
then once again,
then not again for minutes.

The first flush is for courtesy,
the second to finish,
but if you time it wrong,
you and your bunk choke on the smell.

The toilets are three feet from the bunk
where her face rests.
The flush will wake her up at night,
and she will see inside you
every time you wipe yourself clean.

But you have to wipe anyway.
There's so much waste.

In county, they turned off the water,
and didn't tell us.

The toilet flushed wildly that night when the water came back.

I was startled off my bunk,
and chipped a tooth.

I cleaned chipped toilets,
and toilets used by fire captains,
and almost all of them without gloves
because I was part of the waste.
I was flushed.

I begged for toilet paper, and
was strip-searched after promising
that my room had none.

The woman in the cell next to me ate hers,
I suspect,
and when the badges stopped giving her any,
I would smuggle the sheets through her door,
and her eyes would fill with tears
of gratitude.

She wasn't a kind person (yet),
but I never believed she was waste, either,
no matter what they said.

You don't flush people,
you flush things.

I flushed a toothpaste tube
full of cocaine,
several dozen apple cores,
and-
on the day they told me I was a widow-
when they told me he ran out of time while I was doing time-

I flushed
everything I had written
since those cuffs
first touched my wrists.

To go to his funeral
I stood over a toilet
and peed,
a woman I had met that morning
watching the stream land
in a tiny plastic container.
She taped it up
and wrote my name on it.
Not the one that goes back countless generations,
But the one that is nothing more than a count.
WF0124.

What a waste.

I held it all in,
and left it all behind,
but opened my eyes
so I could see.

There's so much waste,
so

much
waste.

All of it bruises,
but only some of it
flushes.

Fish God

The doctor asks me to step on the scale,
& the stranger asks why I went to prison,
& both are trying to weigh me without any heavy lifting,

but only the doctor admits it.

The barkeep pours himself a shot of bourbon,
& the stranger asks why I went to prison,
& both are trying to numb themselves to what the things they hear,

but only the barkeep admits it.

The whole city buys tickets to feed the one-winged eagle,
& the stranger asks why I went to prison,
& everyone is just trying to see the mistake.

To behold a broken bird,
fascinate on a free thing flightless.

To squeeze a small fish, and quench a big appetite.

No one wants to think about the feeding,
except the little girl in line who demands to know what crime deserves this,
this dying,
this dying,
this dying
slowly for a show.

The adults ignore her, but fish hears.

fish prays she stops searching for reasons,
fish prays she finds cruelty reason-less,
fish prays she, big handed daughter of nature, mends this distortion.

but the little girl decides she wants to stay in line.

She rips fish flesh and prayer to feed the eagle,
& the stranger asks why I went to prison,

& both

are just waiting for a chance to wash their hands of blood,

but the stranger just wants to stay in line,
and doesn't know how to admit it.

From Ra's blog

Recently I helped curate art for a group I work with- Liberated Arts Collective. We were included in The Other Art Fair, a big virtual event, and our booth is dedicated to the work of system-impacted artists. Registration is free. <https://www.theotherartfair.com/la/virtual-editions/> The fair goes for a few more days. [Until April 4th]