

Poignant cries for freedom

Another country, edited by Rosie Scott and Thomas Keneally,
Halstead Press and the Sydney branch of PEN

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Another Country is a valuable collection of writings by asylum seekers and refugees who have been held in Australian immigration prisons under the government's mandatory detention policies. Edited by acclaimed local novelist Thomas Keneally (*Schindler's List*) and Rosie Scott, a New Zealand writer, the book was initiated by the Sydney branch of PEN, the international association of poets, essayists and novelists formed in 1921 to defend freedom of expression.

Mandatory detention was introduced in Australia by the Keating Labor government in 1992, and further bolstered by Labor in 1994 and then the Howard government, after it came to office in 1996. It requires the indefinite imprisonment of all undocumented refugees—men, women and children—without charge or trial, until they are either deemed “genuine” or expelled from the country.

The mandatory detention laws constitute clear violations of international covenants on the treatment of refugees and have been widely condemned by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations.

All up, over 9,500 men, women and children have been incarcerated in Australia's immigration detention centres, most of them in remote semi-desert areas or on offshore locations such as the South Pacific island of Nauru, since the legislation was brought in. The main detainees since 2000 have been Afghan, Chinese, Indonesian, Iraqi, Iranian, Sri Lankan, Palestinian, Bangladeshi and Vietnamese, with their periods of detention ranging from eight months to six years. No journalists are allowed inside the centres.

The book's introduction by Rosie Scott powerfully outlines the inhumane and soul-destroying character of mandatory detention:

“For this is a nightmare country they're mapping for us, and it lies in the heart of Australia. It is a place where innocents are locked up for years without charge, without trial, without hope, where children live behind razor wire without trees or dreams. It is a country where people sew their lips together in acts of courage and despair, and the fostering of hopelessness is law, deceit the language, the breaking of the human spirit official policy. It's a country where politicians lie to the public and count their votes in private, where jailors are a law unto themselves and their corporate employers and where the processes of justice—labyrinthine and Kafkaesque as they are—have almost creaked to a stop.”

While many of the government lies used to justify mandatory detention—that in 2001, asylum seekers threw their children

overboard in order to be brought ashore to Australian territory, or that they are potential terrorists—have since been exposed, hundreds of asylum seekers remain locked up in the privately-operated detention centres. As of last month there were 678 people languishing in them.

Another Country gives a voice to these innocent victims, who have been dehumanised by government officials and passed off as abstract, faceless statistics. Most of the anthology contains work by writers, poets, journalists and cartoonists, although there are diary entries and some oral transcriptions from people who have never had their work published before.

Some of the poetry is personal and lyrical in style, such as that by Tony Zandavar, an Iranian writer who was detained in Port Hedland and Baxter immigration jails for five years. Both detention centres are located in harsh semi-desert country, hundreds of kilometres from any Australian urban centre.

His poem, *Return*, is a plea for salvation from the harsh physical and psychological conditions inside the razor wire of the jails:

*Fellow creature I am here in this cage, in the far desert
My cage is not empty, it is full of my withered shade.
My veins loaded with pain toxin, my chest is throbbing in
Deadly silence.*

*Into the repetition of black days, into the gloom of long
nights*

*My cage wants a window, no matter which side or what
size,*

But it matters, for heart consolation, until day

From inside the black and infernal cage

To yell loudly to God, to Satan, to Genesis to ...

Another Country includes several works by Yahia as-Samawi, a well-known Iraqi poet. In *Some Visions* he writes of the destruction of Iraq as if it were a nightmare from which he has yet to wake:

*And between my slaughtered country and me there was pus
and blood flowing from the minarets of my city ...
and an orchard with dead seedlings.*

*Once I had a dream that I was Iraq
and when I rubbed my eyelashes
my hands fell...*

As well as a number of these lyrical poems, the anthology has work of a more overtly political and cathartic character.

Hassan Sabbagh, an Iraqi political refugee now living in Sydney, was detained in Villawood detention centre for five years. One of his poems traces a journey begun in 1986 and describes life, and torture, under Iraq's Baathist regime; his experiences during the Gulf War in 1991; the flight from his homeland and his illusions of a safe haven in Australia.

The following stanza is from a poem entitled *Smoke*, which has ten numbered stanzas or "pictures", running from one to ten.

Picture Eight

I am sorry I didn't send a message.

Didn't wait in a queue.

But I'm not a criminal, terrorist, or potential carrier of disease.

I'm locked up, isolated, mentally tortured and I have lost My children.

Fifteen hundred days in custody, then they want to send me home

To protect Australian borders.

There are other deeply moving accounts of journeys. Some of these are hopeful but most attempt to deal with the emotional and psychological breakdown, disillusionment, loss and despair.

Aowham Al Dujayli, for example, arrived in Australia in 2000 from Iraq and was detained at Port Hedland. In *My Life's Flower* she describes the terrible voyage of a father on a refugee boat.

The journey is organised by so-called "people smugglers" and the father eventually realises that he has been lied to about the size and safety of the boat. The fragile vessel is hit by a terrible storm and breaks up. As they struggle for their lives, the father, who is clinging to a plank of wood with his son, hears the desperate but gradually diminishing voices of drowning refugees during the night and into the dawn.

He writes: "I was very tired and we were floating on the water hanging onto a piece of wood. I wanted to look at him to make sure he was all right. I moved a little and turned his cold face towards me, but you know what, he was not my son ... he was not my Mohamed."

A letter by three pregnant women is stark and striking in its pitiable demands and deserves to be reproduced in full:

Request

We are three pregnant women, our numbers

Tum 46 (6 months)

Nim 12 (8 months)

Nim 14 (7 months)

Our problems:

our cloths is very narrow, we complaining of restlessness, so, we need wide cloths to be comfortable because our abdomen is increase in size gradually.

we need flat shoes, because our shoes is not healthy for pregnant women.

they give us milk in one meal at morning, so, we need extra milk at lunch and dinner meal, also we need fruit OR orangejuice.

- we suggest to give the workers in the mess our numbers to give us extra milk and fruit.

OR we suggest to provide us with identity cart.

with thanks

These basic requests further highlight the criminal character of

the government's detention policies which deny the most vulnerable people—refugees in a foreign land—their most essential and yet easily provided needs.

Cheikh Kone, a 29-year-old journalist from the Ivory Coast in West Africa, provides a detailed and chilling account of his treatment by Australian authorities. He was forced to flee his country in October 2000 in fear of his life, after publishing articles critical of election rigging and dictatorial military and civilian regimes.

A year later he arrived in Western Australia, after stowing away on a container ship. He was seized and immediately interrogated by Australian immigration officials and then transferred to the Port Hedland detention centre, where he was held for almost three years.

Evidence establishing his political history was ignored and his claims for refugee status rejected, despite several legal appeals. Finally, after an international campaign by PEN, he was released in 2003 and granted permanent residency. He now lives in Sydney where he works at a well-known private school.

His freedom, however, came at great personal cost. Not only was he forced to suffer years in detention, but on release was billed \$89,000 by the Department of Immigration for the cost of his incarceration. In fact, every released asylum seeker is billed by the Australian government for their jailing—over \$120 for every day they are held behind bars.

Kone now confronts a Kafkaesque situation. While nominally free, his immigration detention debt restricts his ability to obtain visas to travel overseas, because some governments fear that he may be trying to visit their country in order to escape the bill.

While *Another Country* is artistically uneven, it is a remarkable achievement given the traumatic circumstances in which it was written. It not only reveals the soul-destroying conditions inside the immigration prisons, but highlights the inner strength of ordinary people and their deeply cultured determination to secure freedom and happiness in the face of government brutality and humiliation. It deserves the widest audience.



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