

Two and a half minutes.

TWO AND A HALF MINUTES

barks a voice to your right
in that alpha tone;
it's a cross of
dog bark and spite,
echoing through the mint green brick and
plexiglass barrier between
them and us.
But you don't make a fuss
and calmly proceed,
as the sound of jangled keys
recedes down the corridor,
you clock
the doleful eyes of the
guys around you dart
from ceiling to floor
now they've undone,
unshed, the tight
war skins they once wore,
wondering how they've gone
from wishing for less time
to now wanting more.

You hear
orange plastic creak
as you lean forward
to retrieve a box of heroes from under your seat.
You pass the holy purple tin
around the circle, watch
tracksuit and tattoo clad limbs
slowly, delicately, drop hands in.
See chewed up, blood stained fingers,
open mouths, eyes closed, delight,
a divine ritual lit by
bright white strip light
and eclipsed
by the foresight of that
same shoebox sized ceiling
they'll be staring up at
when day turns to night.

You remember your first day
ID badge checked
bag scanned on a tray,
taken to pastoral wing 2A,
advised to wait and pray
someone would give it the time of day.
Won't have any of them lads dain any of that arty shite i'll tell ye that for free.
And then they arrive
one by one
a single file of figures
already infinitely more alive
than the headlines and textbooks
from where preconceptions derive.
The one sat next to you asks
you gonna forget about us when you're gone miss?
Eyes faithfully marked with the dark circles
of his past.
You smile, chew the inside of your gum,
trying to find words to sum
up the magnitude of how far
you watched him come.
How once the edges of his body
skimmed the parameters of this space,
chin up eyes down
barely able to meet your face,
his skin prickled with
an adrenaline cold sweat
induced by the shrieks of
unspoken things he couldn't forget.
But over the week you watched

something shift,
a creative spark begin to lift
his spirits, to exist
in the present, feeling seen in the
floating state between
the care free realm of an improvised scene,
or an acrostic poem,
releasing part of his uninhibited brain
once unknown.
You think of the prisons
of the mind we all exist inside when we
don't have the right words to call our own.
You saw a man find
in the undergrowth of his regret
the strength to express
something you'll never forget.

ONE MINUTE

One minute to spare,
of just you and a group of people breathing the same air.
Bodies and clothes and teeth and hair.
Fathers and sons, brothers and friends,
once fractured, separated
from the mainland
of roundabouts and dead ends,
dividing lines and over time,
stop signs and penalty fines.
Cast away from wide eyed
curtain twitchers who'd sooner see
them lose their spark.
Switch channels on the TV
Before the redemption arc.
Set the timer running
inside an eternal glitch of black and white.
But these men see the grey area
after paying the price
and here with you
in amongst the mess: vape smoke, coffee stains,
discarded hero wrappers
sits
the stillness
of everything
existing at once
in this 2 and a half minutes before you lost them
and they went off for lunch.