***Trop de Peines / Too Much Time* by Jane Evelyn Atwood**
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Frances is serving a life sentence for the first-degree murder of her husband. Married at nineteen, she had been used to abuse from a young age, courtesy of her own father. So, when her husband began sleeping around, leaving for long periods, hitting her, using cruel language and descending into alcoholism, she never told anyone about it.

He threw her down the stairs. He slapped her, beat her, pulled out her hair, and sexually abused her so violently that she was left with irreparable internal scarring. She watched him terrorise their children – shooting their beloved pets, knocking them down, breaking bones – but it was the sexual abuse of her daughters that made Frances snap. After twenty-five years, she found the courage to leave and file for divorce. But he followed her, trailed her, threatened her and eventually found her, beating and choking her, pulling her hair and beating her head against a wall. Despite the bruising and the broken bones, police would not issue an arrest warrant or even a restraining order.

Late one night, a friend of Frances's daughter decided enough was enough, and went after him. Frances followed and tried to stop him, but shots were fired both ways. 'They arrested me six months later', she says. 'I was only the second woman ever in the state to go to trial on a battered-wife defence. The way the law is written, I was guilty of first-degree murder.'

Frances's is just one of the many stories captured by Jane Evelyn Atwood in her nine-year investigation into the state of forty women's prisons across nine countries. Names have been changed, and testimonies anonymised, but Frances's could be any number of the faces captured on the pages of *Trop de Peines / Too Much Time,* the bilingual edition of Atwood's 2000 opus recently republished by Le Bec en l'Air. The work is, she says, even more pertinent today than it was twenty-five years ago. Despite a few small measures of progress in the conditions faced by incarcerated women globally, things are now 'the same or worse than before.'

Against huge odds and punitive restrictions, Atwood persisted in gaining access to some of the world's worst prisons and jails, including death row, exposing the lived realities faced by their occupants. A lack of adequate mental health and gynaecological care, limited access to hygiene facilities, lack of adequate exercise, work, education and in some cases even basic warmth and dignity – all of which deprivations are invariably more extreme than those faced by their male counterparts – are conveyed at a level of detail that is at once brutal and sensitive; intimate, uncompromising and undeniably ambitious in their reach and rigour.

Having spent sustained periods of time – or as sustained as she was allowed – in each location, building relationships with women, Atwood's commitment to this vital global story and to the individuals with whom she has worked is evident. Each of the black-and-white pictures (black-and-white because, she has said, this is how she sees the subject – it could not have been done any other way) depicts hostile spaces designed for men, occupied by women who are invariably there, Atwood maintains, because of men. Women who wonder, one after another, why they have been given longer sentences than the men to whose crimes they were mere accessories. And those who are guilty mainly of 'ignorance' – of refusing plea deals on the advice of inadequate legal counsel resulting in life sentences when they could have had a fraction of that time.

In her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* activist and former prisoner Angela Y. Davis writes that, 'as important as some reforms may be – the elimination of sexual abuse and medical neglect in women's prisons, for example – frameworks that rely exclusively on reforms help to produce the stultifying idea that nothing lies beyond the prison.' Atwood does not directly comment, within this body of work, on debates about prison reform versus outright abolition. But her work provides, nonetheless, an astonishing body of evidence – direct, visceral and undeniable – that the system is beyond redemption.

This is borne out in one of the recurring themes of the book – motherhood behind bars. Stories of what motherhood *means* in prison, from antenatal care, to birthing conditions, childcare and visitation rights, vary greatly from country to country. But it is the image of a woman in labour in handcuffs in a prison in Alaska, USA, that has arguably made the largest public impact of all of Atwood's photographs.

Like the work of her contemporary, Donna Ferrato, whose legacy of campaigning against domestic violence suffered by women since the 1990s also crystallised around one single image (of a man in a New Jersey bathroom, caught by Ferrato's camera hitting his wife in the face), Atwood's picture of this one birthing mother, handcuffed and in anguish, actively changed things for women. It precipitated an international campaign that was successful in changing legislation (including in the UK, which changed its law in 1997), forbidding the chaining, handcuffing or shackling of women during or immediately after birth – though this law is sporadically observed. Like the whole of *Too Much Time,* this one photograph is a piece of incontrovertible visible evidence for what had up that up to that point been easy to ignore because it remained unwitnessed: an archetypal female experience as the world would not wish to see it, exposed.

But reproductive labour is only one of the facets of female experience that causes women to fall outside of the dominant social stereotype of 'prisoner'. In the words of author and prison abolition activist Vikki Law, 'the public, the politicians and the media often choose to overlook them rather than grapple with the seeming paradoxes inherent in women prisoners, who, by virtue of their incarceration, have somehow defied the societal norm of femininity.' One of these forms of defiance, evidenced carefully by Atwood in both words and images, is a profound reframing of the very concept of a 'violent offender'. Her work demonstrates painstakingly, story by story and testimony by testimony, that when women are incarcerated for violent crime, and especially for murder, it is overwhelmingly the case that they are acting in self-defence against men. 89% of incarcerated women are in prison for non-violent crimes, but for the rest, this is not as a character trait, a pattern or a way of life. It is a last resort. Or even, as for Frances, a freak sequence of events in which they become caught, no matter how they try to avoid it. Generalisations about this – as about gendered violence more broadly – risk an essentialising that harms rather than helps the cause of equality for women, imprisoned or not. But the extraordinary contribution of Atwood's record is that it does not simply tell, but *shows*, in story after story, the force of the pattern in action.

'I am often asked how I could have spent so much time on such a sad subject,' she has said. 'Initially, curiosity was my main motive. Surprise, shock and amazement took over. Then the rage carried me to the end.' The women she met are united by one characteristic: 'They had been crushed not only by ignorance, poverty and a shattered family life, which are common to almost all prisoners, but also by years – if not a lifetime – of physical and sexual abuse by men.'

Ten years into her life sentence, Frances had come to the same conclusion: 'the biggest part of the women in prison are abused in some way.' As in her own case, this background of victimisation is routinely then compounded by an inexcusably unequal system of sentencing and blame, which amounts to a no-win situation: 'if a woman doesn't stand up to a man who's abusing her children, if she doesn't do anything, she is charged with aiding and abetting. But if she strikes back — if she took a baseball bat and hit him in the head and killed the man that killed her little girl, like one woman here, she'd be in prison.' The pattern recurs. 'Another woman here caught her husband trying to rape their little girl and she killed him,' Frances goes on. 'She's got a life sentence. She's doing it right here with me.'

Despite US government cuts to education inside prisons, Frances educated herself, managing to access enough psychological support and information to be able to name her experience for what it was, and to lead an activist campaign. 'I started making tapes, and sent them out at my own expense. Every week I made a tape talking to women about the dangers, and sent it to some shelter across the state. I started reading a lot of books on abuse, learning about what had happened to me, and why it had happened.' This resulted in the establishment of a women's shelter in Frances's hometown, with a room named after her.

'This didn't need to happen,' she reflects. 'But it did, and I've tried my best to make some good come of it. I'll be fifty-five this year, so I'm going to have some real age on me, time I get out of here. And my grandchildren all grown up.'

References:

Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?,* 7 Stories Press, 2003.

Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women,* second edition, PM Press, 2012.