

WE ARE

AN EXPLORATION OF
FOOD IN PRISON

WHAT

BY THE PENTONVILLE
PRISON ART GROUP

WE EAT

CAN I HAVE SOME SUGER

Do you ANIT
GOT ANY
CRISPS
I CAN
HAVE

Do You HAVE ANY
COFFEE

GOT ANY
SPARE MILK
I CAN HAVE

Do You
EAT YOUR
CEREAL

GOT ANY
EMPTYIES

WHAT You GOT FOR ME

WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

FOREWORD

In 2021, the Museum of London approached HMP Pentonville to see if people serving sentences would contribute to its collecting programme, 'London Eats'. The programme aimed to acquire objects for the Museum which represent contemporary food cultures across the capital.

The Art Group at Pentonville agreed to take part on one condition: that through its art, it could give an honest and unfiltered account of the food prisoners eat.

Prison food is a very contentious topic among prisoners. As Ahmed says in his introduction, it is a critical part of their day:

“What we eat determines how our day goes and how we feel. I know I feel much better after I have had a good meal, so I think food plays a part in rehabilitation.”

For a long time, academic research has agreed. Many studies have recommended the criminal justice system should make healthy, nutritious food more of a priority.*

Over the course of the project, the Group decided it would be possible to present its art and frustrations in a booklet. Here then, the Group documents what it believes 'the outside' should know about prison food – both food prepared by HMP Pentonville and that which people make in their cells.

We are sure you will agree, with support from arts tutors Kirk Lawrence and Helena Baptista, the Group has produced a powerful collection of artworks. Together, the works open up a difficult subject in inventive and compelling ways. What is more, because Group members led the design and content of this booklet, *We Are What We Eat* stands as a unique body of first-person research that demands wide attention.

More generally, the booklet also highlights the importance of learning partnerships in prisons. For everyone who took part in the project, it opened new horizons, provided new fields of learning, and developed potential networks for life beyond prison.

JOSE AGUIAR

Prison Educator at HMP Pentonville

GUY ATKINS

Artist-researcher commissioned by the Museum of London to work with the Art Group as part of 'London Eats'



INTRODUCTION

They say a picture speaks a thousand words. If only my taste buds could paint a picture.

Being a big foodie has made food an issue for me at HMP Pentonville. Before I even arrived here, for the second time, I was dreading how much weight I would lose.

I know what people are thinking: "You're in prison. What do you expect?" But this is a view shared by the majority at this establishment, as this booklet shows. This is not just me bashing all prisons. I've been to HMP Brixton and the food is great there.

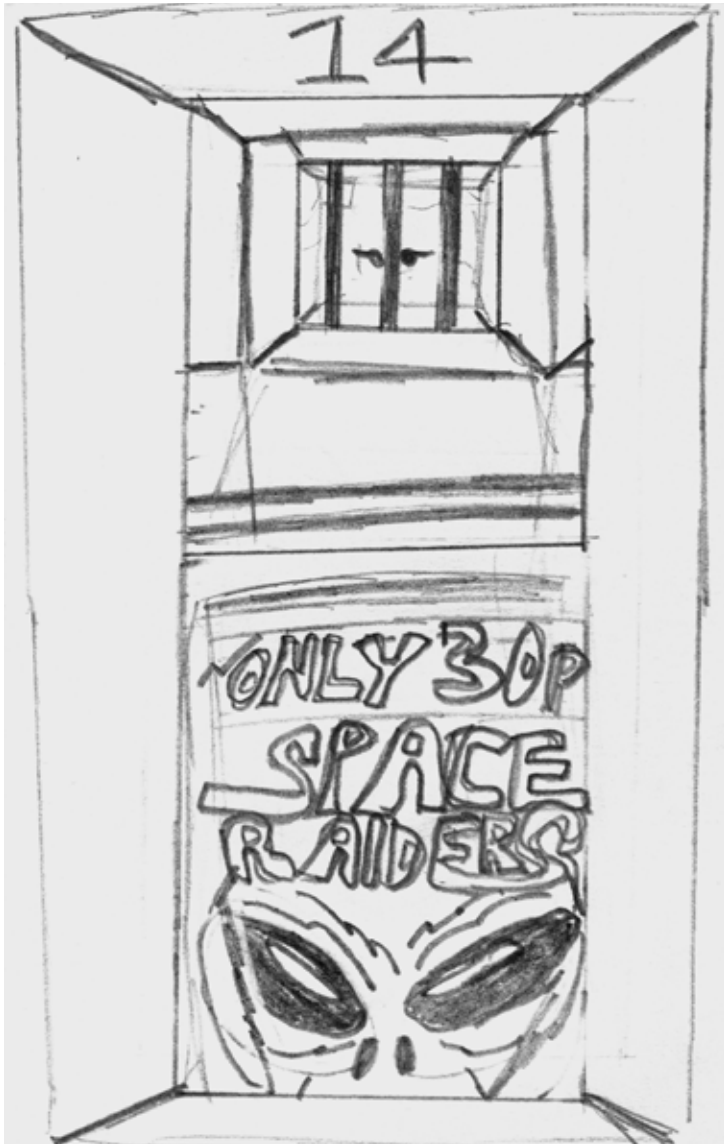
Food is an essential part of a person's day. What we eat determines how our day goes and how we feel. I know I feel much better after I have had a good meal, so I think food plays a part in rehabilitation.

In this booklet, a few individuals have come together to express our opinions on the food at Pentonville in a creative way.

We hope you can appreciate the work we have put together.

Thank you.

AHMED M.



JK Space Raiders

When I get hungry, I get angry. Everyone does. That's what is so stupid about the food here. It makes people angry.

AHMED G.



TOMMY Yes Chef

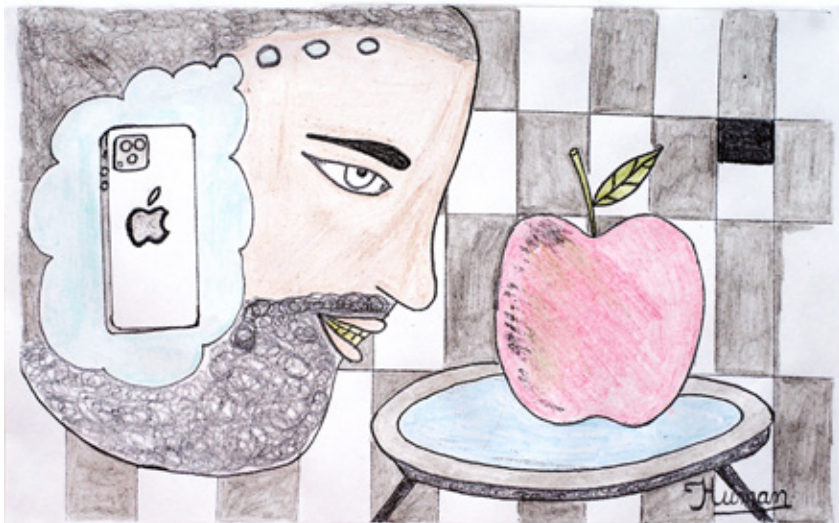
Food is a currency. Any spare food is traded. I trade food for haircuts.



TOMMY *Prison Life*



FRANK *Life All*



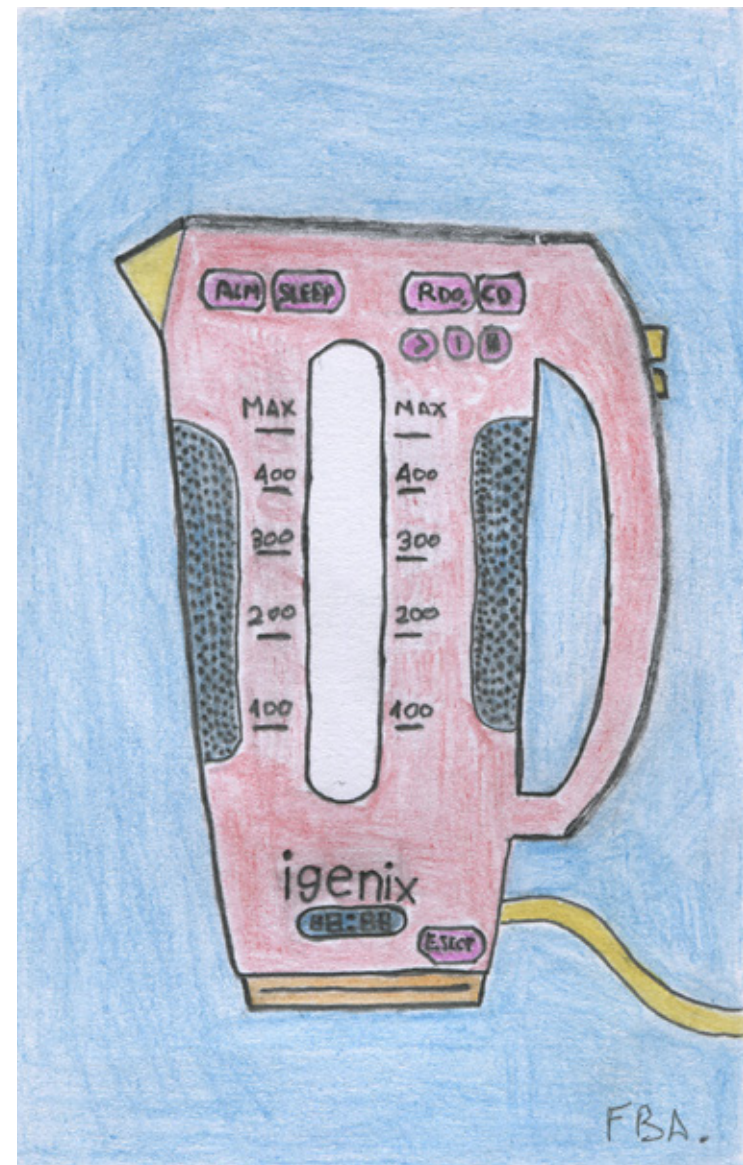
HUMAN *Secrets of Prison I*

When I speak to my family on the phone,
I never tell them what I eat. It's too depressing.
They'd get upset.

AHMED M.

The kettle is a holy object.

M.I.A.



FRANCISCO *Kettle*

There are cockroaches in the cells, where we make food,
where we wash. It's the worst on the ground floor.

TOMMY





HUMAN *Secrets of Prison II*

HMP Pentonville

<p>1.00 Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p> <p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p>	<p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p> <p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p>	<p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p> <p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p>	<p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p> <p>11.00 HS Soft White Rolls 4x (V)</p> <p>11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)</p> <p>11.00 "Tostitos" Tostitos 4x(V)</p> <p>11.29 Jamaican Honeylun 75g</p> <p>11.00 Mcc Jamaica Ginger Cake 200g</p> <p>11.00 HS Blueberry Muffins 1pk (V)</p> <p>11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)</p>
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MEAT

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11.29 Tortilla Wraps Various(V)

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11.18 Balcort Mix Max 12x (K, V)

JK *Jerking You Off*



M.I.A. *Cell Settings*

I'd say a quarter of the people in here have either no prison job or no money coming in from the outside. They struggle to get enough food worth eating. They go begging for food.

If you don't have a job, you get £2.50 a week from the prison. 50p of that goes on your TV. That's not a lot left for buying food for your cell. If you don't have money from the outside, you're screwed.

There's a lot of poverty in prison. There are people who go from cell to cell begging for spare noodles, for cereal. I'm asked for food every day.

JK

A friend of mine was a big strong guy when he came in here. He left weak – his health gone. He died, I'm telling you, of TB.

FRANCISCO



ELVIN *Health Is Wealth*

There are fights over food.

ANONYMOUS

People make amazing food in their kettle:
curries, stews, Caribbean...

AHMAD



HUMAN *Smell Is Free*

The mince is shocking.
We call it HMP fertiliser.

HUMAN



HUMAN *Secrets of Prison III*

Cooking in your cell is pressured. You only have one shot as you have no more food.

My recipe for basmati rice,
like my mum makes:

*add rice, water, butter, salt, thyme,
cover the kettle with a bag so it
keeps the steam in,
takes about 10 minutes,
a lot of people don't realise it's the
steam that cooks the rice best,
when the bag deflates, you know
it's ready.*

You rewire your kettle so it doesn't cut out, so
it keeps on cooking your food.

The kettle is a symbol of us rejecting the
food of the prison.

AHMED G.



M.I.A. Whippin in the Kettle

The toilet may as well be the plate. That's where most of my food from the prison goes.

PAUL



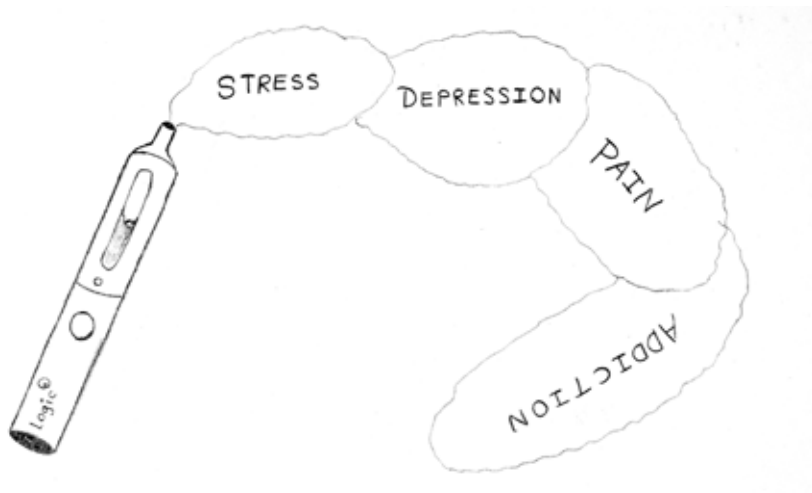
FRANCISCO *Wheat*



FRANCISCO *Grind*

Because the prison food is so bad, we have to cook in our cells, which is also where our toilet is. We put a curtain up for privacy.

AHMED G.



HUMAN *Vape Logic*

I sometimes buy cake with packs of vape.
Vape for cake.

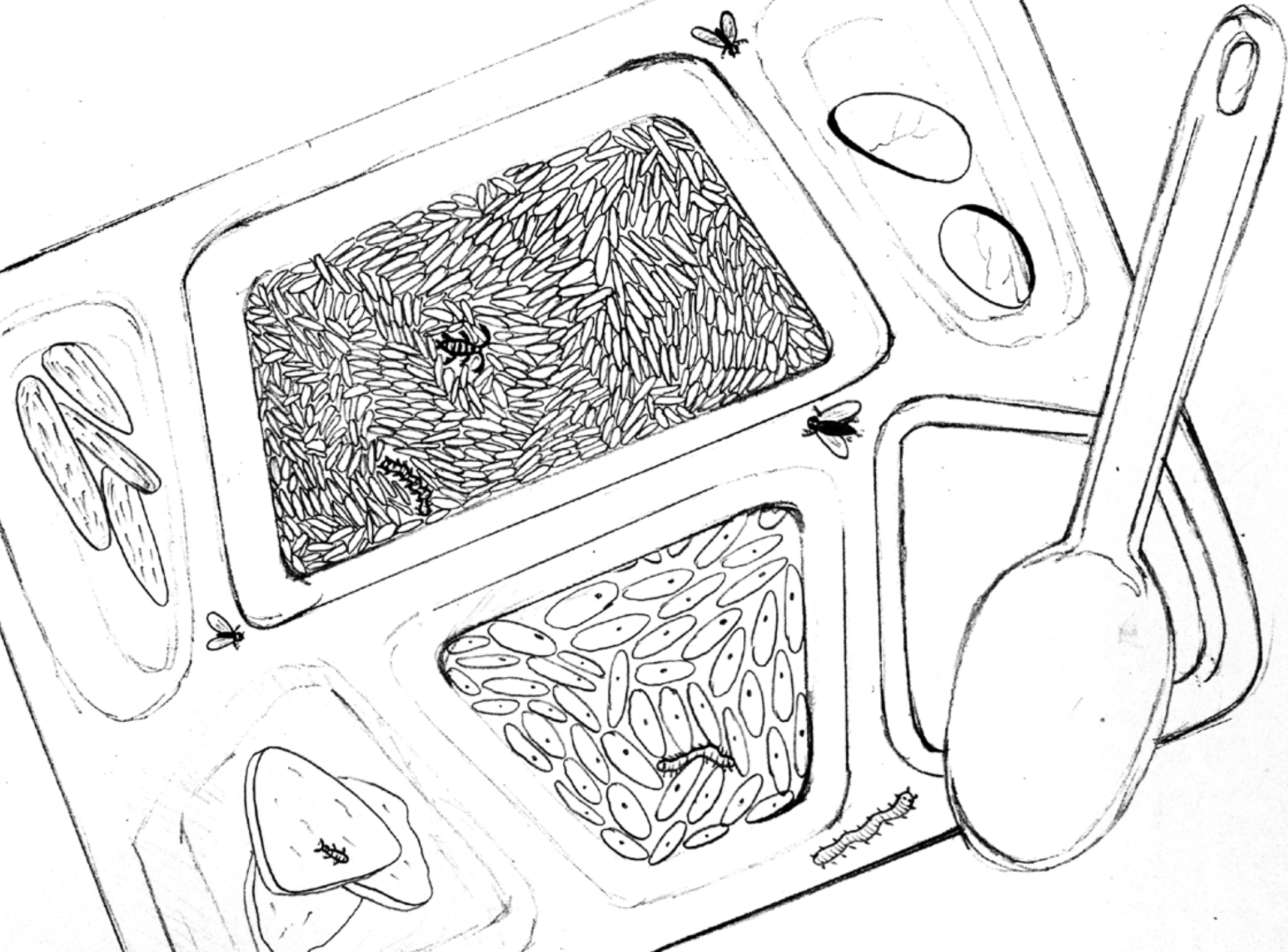
AHMAD

For Covid lockdowns, we were in our
cells for 23 and a half hours a day.

MIAH



AHMAD *Power Food*





ROBERT *Life Is What You Make It*

Life-is-what-you-make-it cake: put smashed digestive biscuits in a plastic box, add melted butter and brown sugar, a layer of oats and bananas, a layer of melted chocolate, and then sunflower seeds on top. Put the box by the window, what we call 'the fridge'.

ROBERT

Cells are locked at 5 o'clock. That's bedtime. In the morning, cells get opened again at 8 if you need meds or maybe 9 if you don't. The breakfast pack is delivered before we're locked up. You eat it in the evening.

MIAH



TOMMY *'Kettle' Fish*

In prison, you unlearn and readjust.

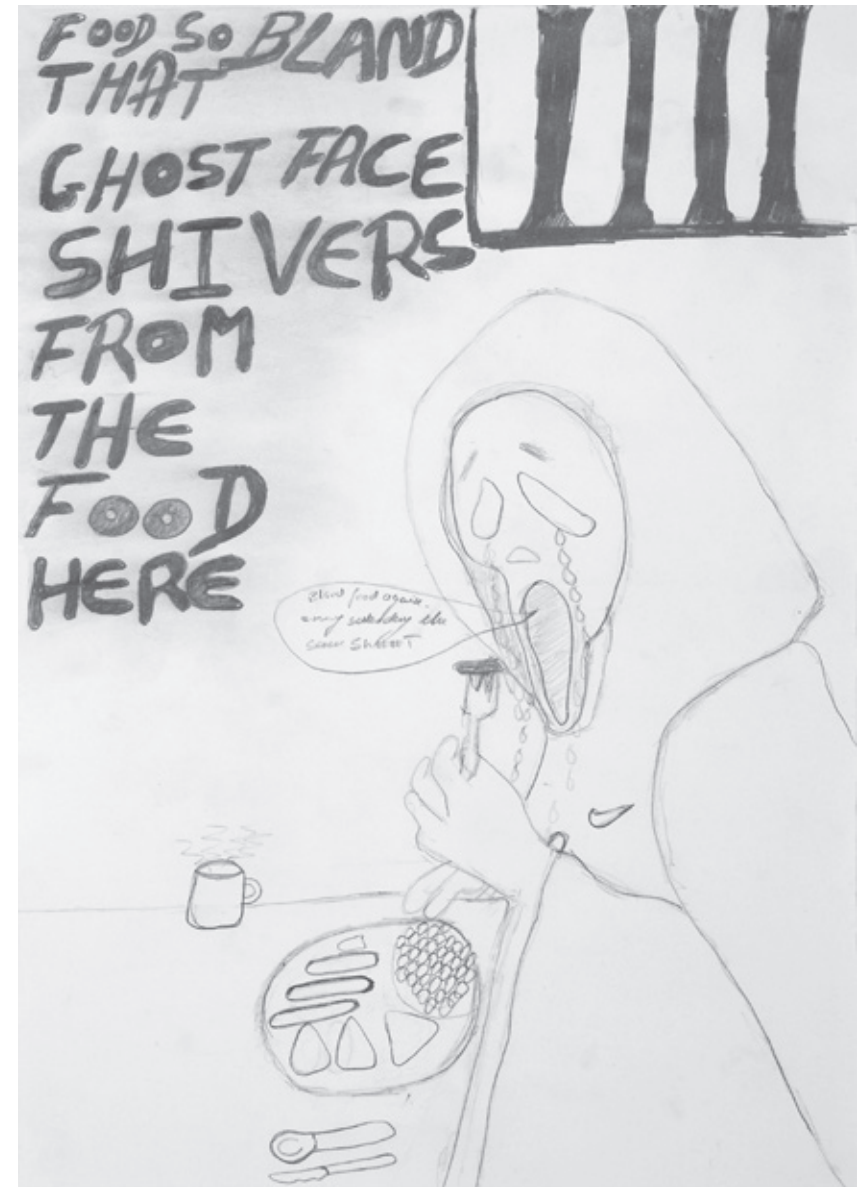
OSMAN



AHMED G. *Still Life Table*

There's a servery on each wing. We go down to it like sheep, all at the same time, every day.

TOMMY



AHMAD *Ghostface Shivers from the Food*

There's no shared area to eat. When you get back to your cell your legs are sore and your food is cold.

DAMIEN



ANONYMOUS *Untitled*

The smells from people cooking in their cells make me jealous. When I smell fish, I think of home.

HUMAN



AHMED G. *Flavours of HMP*

You can make good food in your cell, with what you buy from the canteen list. Tin of chickpeas 59p. Tin of tuna £1.30...

TOMMY



AHMED M. *Fend for Yourself*

When it comes to food, everyone should be treated the same. At the hotplate, which is where we go to collect our food, I hate it when people get more food than others.

DAMIEN



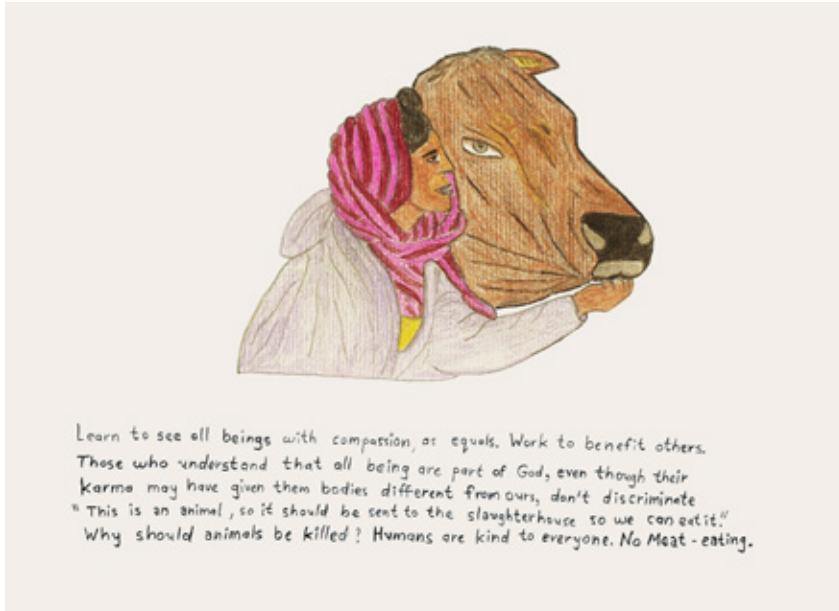
AHMAD *With and Without*

Someone takes the role of chef. They cook for guys around them. I call my cellmate my sous chef.

AHMED G.

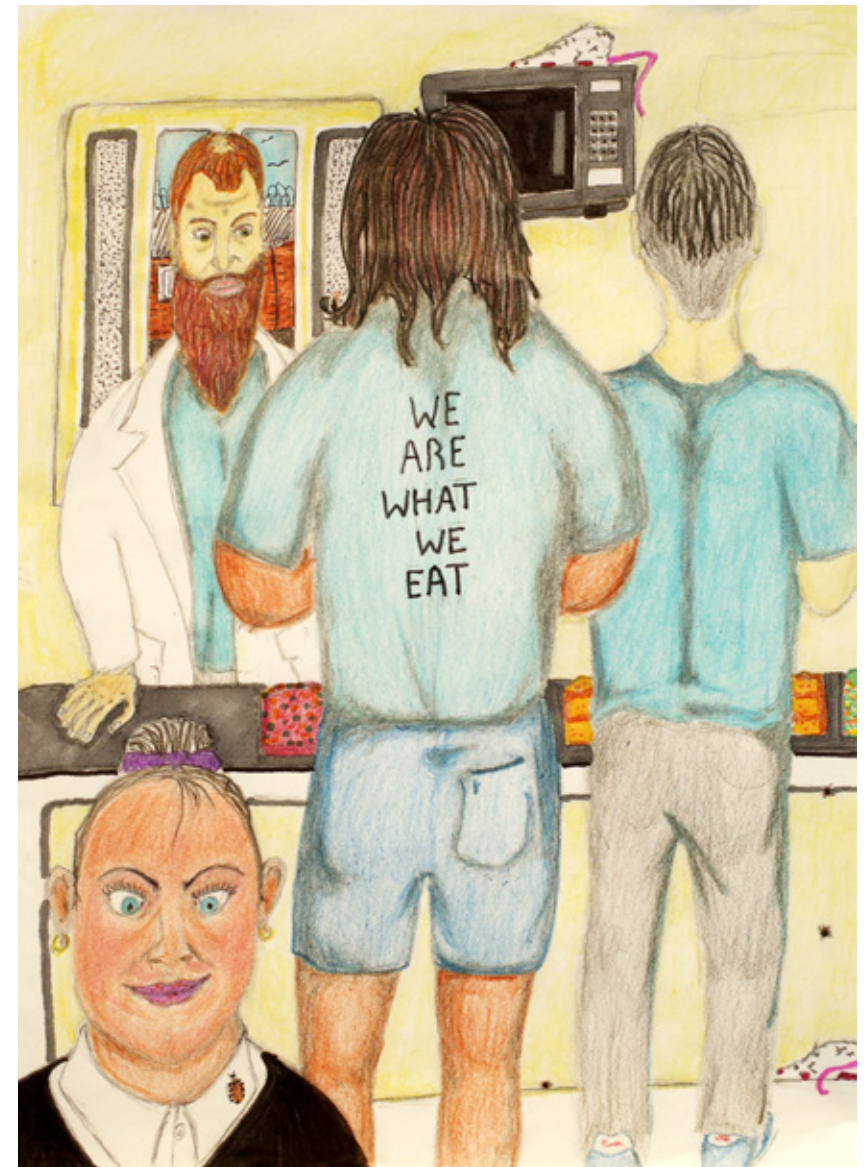
Some guys get in trouble for making alcohol in their cells, from orange, sugar, and bits of bread. It's called hooch. You hear the bangs of the bottles exploding.

ANONYMOUS



Learn to see all beings with compassion, as equals. Work to benefit others.
Those who understand that all beings are part of God, even though their
karma may have given them bodies different from ours, don't discriminate.
"This is an animal, so it should be sent to the slaughterhouse so we can eat it."
Why should animals be killed? Humans are kind to everyone. No Meat-eating.

HUMAN *Untitled*



DAMIEN *We Are What We Eat*

ENCOURAGE

"NO THANKS"

SAUCE

PATTERN A ONION"

"F*EK PRISON Food"

"THIS IS THE REAL HELLS KITCHEN"

MORE WEDGES

"Im Gonna CHEF UP TODAY"

Dinner is served

"BIN IT BRO"

LOOKS LIKE SH*T

"BUSS ME MORE"

"DONT EAT THAT"

THE FOOD IS CRAP

"IM NOT EATING THIS"

"IS THE CHICKEN HALAL"

"LOOKS LIKE SH*T AND SMELLS LIKE SH*T"

NOT HUNGRY

DASH IT IN THE BIN

"THAT IS STILL RAW"

"I CANT EAT THIS"

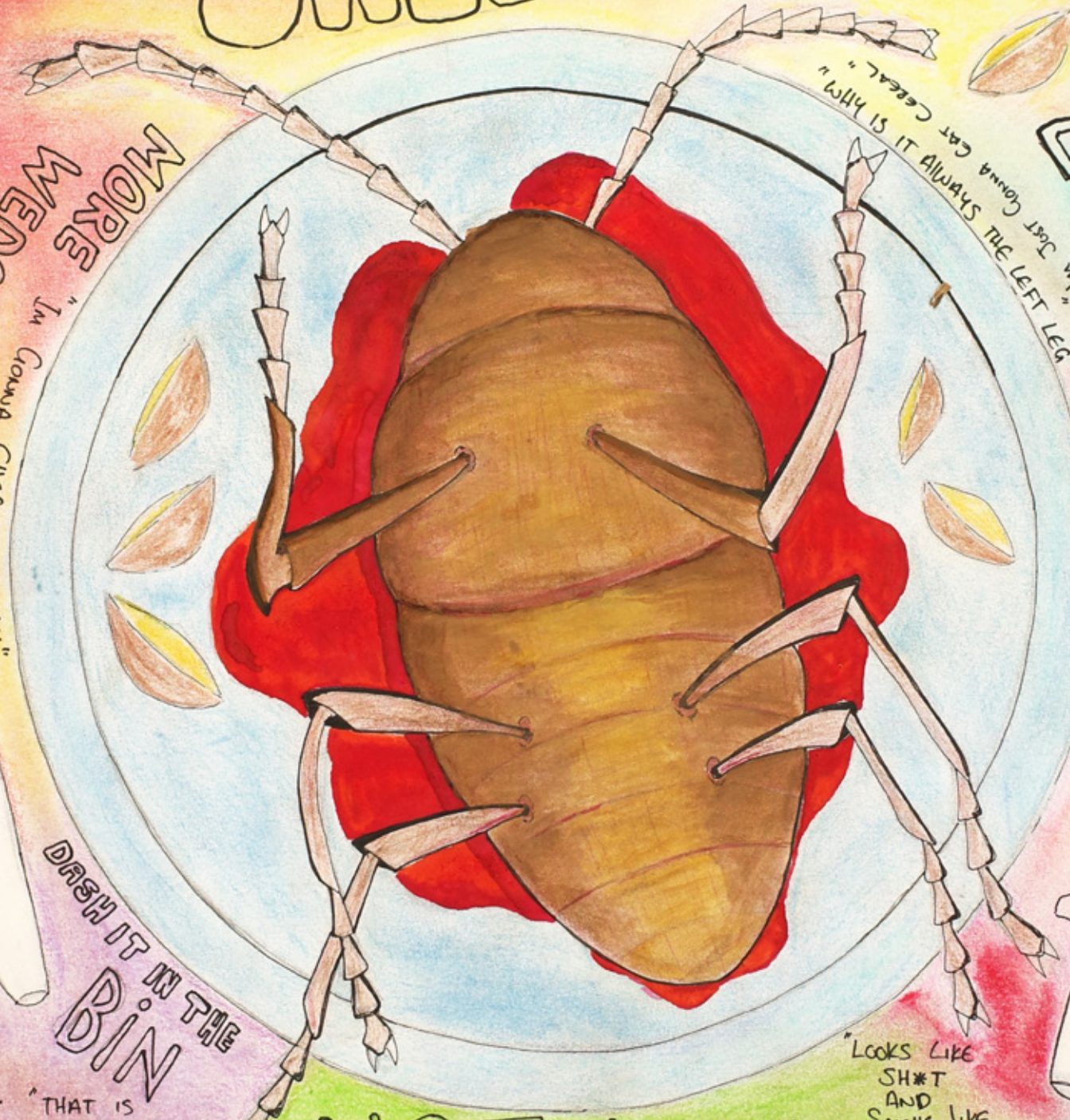
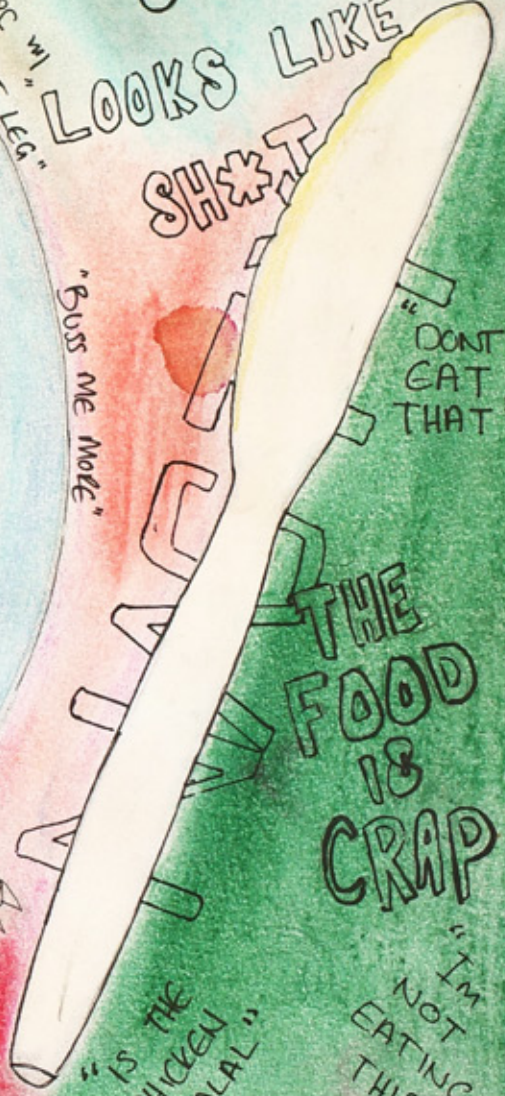
"NAH Im GOOD"

"YOU WANT MORE"

HOT PART

"LET ME GET YOUR CHICKEN"

"WHAT ACE YOU GOT"



Menus give a great deal of misconception. Everything on the menu sounds great. The reality is it's not. Jam cakes have no jam, cheese baguette is half-cooked bread with a couple of slices of cheese.

OSMAN



ALEXANDER *Nish and Chips*

Everything is the same here. It never changes. The menus repeat every two weeks. Then once a month you get a beefburger. No bun, just the patty. I eat it and then I'm ill half an hour later.

AHMAD

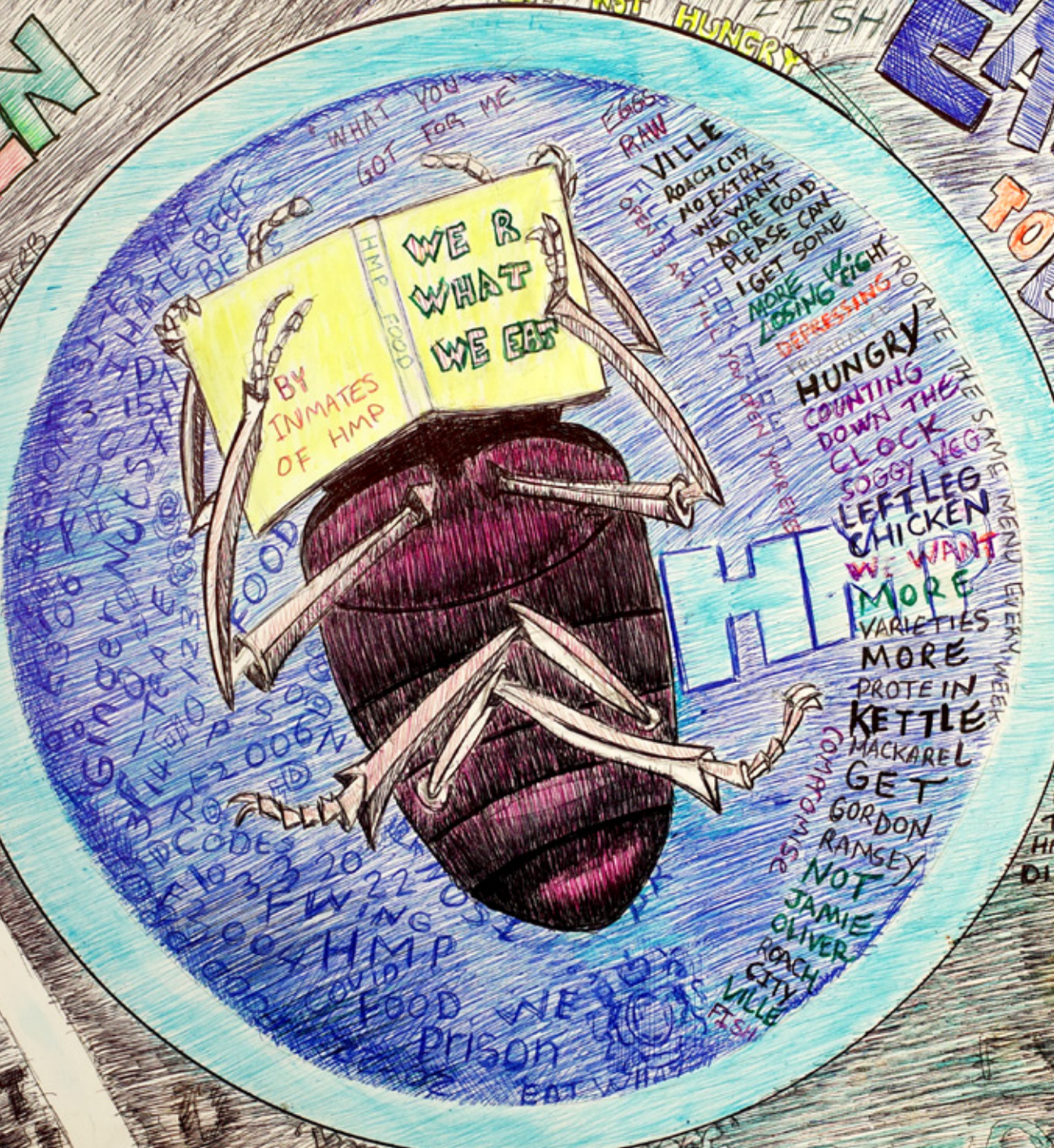


DEAN *Beef on the Wing*

overleaf AHMED G. *Reading a Book*

HELL'S KITCHEN

THE FOOD IS GREAT
CELL PENTONVILLE
A MAN WAS IN CHARGE OF THE HEARS
I FELT THE POT HOT
BUY ONE GET ONE FREE
EAT



IM NOT HUNGRY
BE E F & FISH

EAT THEM TO FEAT THEM

WHAT YOU GOT SERVED
who's got the rice I got chicken
HUNGRY STRONG
The food makes me feel bloated and I hate eggs
Shot the chicken

EAT FIRST TASTE LESS

JAIL FOOD

ABDUL DID DID THE MEAT HE DIDNT HAVE A BROILER SO ABDUL DID EVERYTHING IN THE IGENI
HUNGRED UP BY LONG EXTENS
GORD TO THE ELE

RAZOR
LET SOMETHING TO USE
LOVE

WE R WHAT WE EAT
BY INMATES OF HMP
EGGS RAW
VILL
ROACH CITY
NO EXTRAS
WE WANT MORE FOOD PLEASE CAN I GET SOME
LOSING FIGHT
DEPRESSING
HUNGRY
COUNTING DOWN THE CLOCK
SOGGY VEG
LEFT LEG CHICKEN
WE WANT MORE VARIETIES MORE PROTEIN KETTLE MACKAREL GET GORDON RANSEY NOT JAMIE OLIVER ROACH CITY VILLE
HMP
FOOD PRISON
EAT WHAT WE WANT
THE SAME MENU EVERY WEEK

YOU EAT NOT EGGS
HARD TO

In prison, sugar can be a replacement for drugs, a legal hit.

AHMAD



COLLABORATION *Nasty Fish*

They give you just a taster of the outside world. A spoonful.

MIAH



COLLABORATION *Dead Chicken*

I dream about the last meal I had with family n friends. I try not to wake up to the harsh reality. But the slightest sound of keys and I'm awake.

OSMAN

Cockroaches eat better here than prisoners.

AHMED G.



M.I.A. *Food for Thought*

There's a phrase you are what you eat,
we are what we eat.

TOMMY



PAUL *Not Fit for Human Consumption*

The Pentonville Prison Art Group consists of Ahmed G., M.I.A., Damien, Ahmed M., Paul, Miah, JK, Francisco, Human, Osman, Ahmad, Frank, Elvin, Alexander, Tommy, Robert, Dean, and Bouakai.

For their support in producing this booklet, the Group would like to thank Guy, Kirk, Helena, and Jose, as well as Patrick Fry and Beverley Cook, Curator of Social History at the Museum of London.

Graphic Design: Patrick Fry Studio



PRISONER APPLICATION

Log Number: Z1E900245

Section 1 – To be completed by the prisoner and/or the Insider.

WING/LOCATION: E2-14

DATE: 22.11.2021

PRISONER NUMBER: A1

NAME:

DETAILS OF YOUR APPLICATION:

Please Sir,
CAN WE HAVE SOME
More.

Signature: THE HUNGRY PRISONER

Section 2 – To be completed by the Insider

Name	Signature	Date
REFERRED TO: DEAF EARS	[Signature]	8.9.2026

Section 3 – To be completed by the department identified above.

RESPONSE: KEEP EATING THE CRAP

Name: MR DEAF EARS Signature: [Signature] Date: 10.2.2021

PLEASE CONTINUE OVERLEAF IF NECESSARY

In 2021, the Museum of London asked the Pentonville Prison Art Group to give an account of food in prison. In *We Are What We Eat*, the Group presents its response, which it hopes will prompt a rethink of prison food.

Through a collection of urgent and imaginative artworks, the Group challenges the current place food has in prison priorities. The men's art proposes a link between low quality food and poor mental health, questions why they are offered no food between 5pm and 11.30am, and documents the struggles of prisoners who cannot afford to buy food for their cells.

At the same time, with humour and ingenuity, the Group's art highlights creative ways people in Pentonville make the most of their circumstances and how – for those with enough money to cook in their cells – food offers an opportunity for self-expression and community.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**CURATING
LONDON**

We Are What We Eat was commissioned as part of 'London Eats' by 'Curating London', a Museum of London programme supported using public funding by Arts Council England.