



Gonzalo Leston

PRISON WITHIN

A Latin American Prison.
Bars Outside, Bars Inside

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor
BAZ DREISINGER

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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First published in 2025

English language version - First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917566902 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781917566926 (ePDF)

ISBN: 9781917566919 (ePUB)

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Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy

Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design

Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing

P.O. Box 1845

47 Echo Avenue

Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

Abstract

Prison Within is an autobiographical novel set in Montevideo, Uruguay, along the Río de la Plata. The book reconstructs a real experience of incarceration following a violent incident in which the author intervened to defend his brother. From this event, the narrative examines everyday life inside a South American prison, including its informal hierarchies, survival strategies, internal economies, and codes of coexistence.

Engaging with the field of carceral studies, the work offers a situated account of incarceration in a Latin American context. At the same time, the narrative develops the concept of the “inner prison,” referring to psychological and existential forms of confinement that may persist beyond the physical walls of prison.

Through a structure that intertwines personal memory, social observation, and references to Río de la Plata musical culture, the book explores the tensions between freedom, identity, and personal transformation in contexts of incarceration.

Keywords

incarceration; prison experience; Uruguay prison system; Latin American prisons; autobiographical narrative; inner imprisonment; prison culture; institutional violence; Montevideo; Río de la Plata culture

Contents

Learning Objectives	ix
Discussion Questions	x
Suggested Readings	xi
Academic Positioning Statement	xii
Introduction for the English Edition	xiii
Plagiarized Preface	xv
Preliminary Words	xvi
Foreword	xix

I	The Uncertainty Principle	1
II	Black Guitar	7
III	Bureaucratic Zoo	13
IV	The Verdict	19
V	Hotel with Bars	23
VI	The Cage and Fate	27
VII	Fingerprints, Teeth, Limbo	33
VIII	Gothic City	39
IX	Socializing in Overcrowding	45
X	Update 2.0	49
XI	Short as a Doctor's Visit	53
XII	The Misunderstanding	57

XIII	Protection Comes with Shackles	65
XIV	Long Coexistence	71
XV	Cell 025: A Crowded Family	79
XVI	Sleeping in Prison	83
XVII	Cell Search and Thanks for the Cold	89
XVIII	Johnny and Baby	95
XIX	<i>Latero</i> and I	99
XX	<i>A Chamarrita</i> About Being Someone	105
XXI	The Shaved Kid	111
XXII	Every Prisoner Is Political	115
XXIII	Sentences of Freedom	121
XXIV	LiberArte	125
XXV	Art Attack	129
XXVI	The Outside	137
XXVII	Stories Born in Captivity	145
XXVIII	A Visit from a Fairy and Other Stories	153
XXIX	Natural Violences	159
XXX	Lost Toys	167
	Notes	175
	Glossary	177
	Index	185

Learning Objectives

After reading this book, readers will be able to:

1. Understand the social dynamics and informal hierarchies that shape everyday life inside a South American prison.
2. Analyze the relationship between physical incarceration and psychological or existential forms of confinement.
3. Identify survival strategies and informal codes that structure prison communities.
4. Reflect on the institutional dynamics of incarceration and their impact on individual life trajectories.
5. Examine the role of culture and music as forms of symbolic resistance in contexts of confinement.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the author describe the informal rules that structure everyday life in prison?
2. In what ways does incarceration transform the perception of freedom and identity?
3. How does the concept of an “inner prison” develop throughout the narrative?
4. What role does music play in shaping memory and resistance within the story?
5. How are power relations represented within the prison environment?
6. How does the narrative connect personal experience with broader social and institutional dynamics?

Suggested Readings

Foucault, Michel—*Discipline and Punish*

Davis, Angela—*Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Dreisinger, Baz—*Incarceration Nations*

Goffman, Erving—*Asylums*

Pacini Hernandez, Deborah; Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor;

Zolov, Eric—*Rockin' Las Américas*

Academic Positioning Statement

Prison Within contributes to the fields of carceral studies and Latin American studies through a lived-experience narrative that examines the everyday dynamics of incarceration while reflecting on the psychological and existential dimensions of confinement.

Introduction for the English Edition

Prison Within is an autobiographical novel set in the capital of Uruguay, a city built along the banks of the Río de la Plata. Few capitals in the world share as close a bond as Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The Río de la Plata culture of both territories blends like fresh and salt water along their amorphous border. Prison dialect, descriptions, expressions, multiple musical references, and small fragments of songs—especially from the iconic Argentine band *Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota*—reflect this cultural closeness.

The events in this book are 100% real; they are the raw, real-life experiences that changed my life: the judicial machinery, the mechanics of prison life, people, coexistence, living conditions, deprivation of liberty, as well as the other kinds of confinement one can experience without being behind bars. Before the material prison, I lived in a prison within. The book was born from a personal need to remember something profound I discovered within, as well as to share marginalized realities of individuals who had been discarded in this social sewer system.

It began with a fight between neighbors in a middle-class neighborhood. The trigger: someone attacked my brother in the street for no reason, and he defended himself. I went to break it up; the conflict escalated, the aggressor fell and fractured a bone in his

face. Days later, we were remanded in custody despite having explained the event to the authorities several times. “I was trying to break it up” and “my brother did not start the fight” were not enough to avoid prosecution.

The story unfolds in 2006, under a version of Uruguay’s criminal justice system that no longer exists. The process was essentially written opaquely, with little or no emphasis given to public oral hearings. Fundamental decisions that affected the case were often made behind closed doors. The judge not only presided over the case but was also its principal investigator, a single entity that both produced the evidence and ruled on it. Oral proceedings were the exception, not the rule.

In my experience, contact was mainly with the court clerk and the public defender; the process felt distant, bureaucratic, and with limited opportunity to contest the charges or testify in one’s defense. The adversarial system most Westerners are familiar with was only implemented in 2017, changing that dynamic.

The preliminary words of the book were written by Juan Miguel Petit, the parliamentary commissioner for the penitentiary system, an independent figure appointed by the Parliament to oversee the prison system and safeguard the human rights of people deprived of liberty. The foreword was written by the renowned psychoanalyst Jorge Bafico, a media columnist with experience working in prisons. A glossary at the end of the book explains prison slang and other local terms used throughout the text.

Plagiarized Preface

Prison Within is not a text written from a moral standpoint; it does not blame the penitentiary system or accuse anyone.

Nor does it attempt to be an apology for wrongdoing or a justification of crime.

The book comes with debate and reflection woven through its pages.

There are many tragedies, many mountain ranges like the Andes, and various labyrinths. The narrative invites us to observe nuances—some from the outside, others from within.

Preliminary Words

Juan Miguel Petit, Parliamentary Commissioner for the Penitentiary System of Uruguay

The deprivation of liberty is one of the situations that tests human nature, as it entails an intense restriction on what is natural and inherent to our species: freedom. Gonzalo Leston takes us into that world. It may be said that this is one of many such stories, but like any human experience, it is unique and unrepeatable. He recorded it and now recounts it, with direct language and a clear narrative full of situations that stir emotions, make an impact, and give rise to multiple reflections. The lessons and marks of this journey are there. It is up to those who read it to weigh them and draw their own conclusions. It is a meaningful contribution, open to reflection.

Prison stories are always very intense, very powerful, and compelling. But *Prison Within* is not just a prison story; it is a text of literary value and also a chronicle. Gonzalo chooses each word carefully, describing dialogues and places without demagoguery, without constructing a hero or remaining in the position of the victim—which is one of the pitfalls: staying in that place, because the horror leads one to relive what happened over and over again.

Yet there are those who manage to transform that horror into a positive force, into a current that allows them to build and give meaning to things. The book generates that force and, at the same time, raises the issue of prison as an artificial “orthopedic”

mechanism. Total institutions—as studied by Erving Goffman, one of the first to write about them—are highly rigid, hierarchical, normalized, and compartmentalized realities. Foucault described them as reticulated.

This journey through prisons has been a very long one. In the eighteenth century, humanity began trying to move away from barbaric punishments—such as hanging a person in the public square and dismembering them—toward more limited forms of punishment. These were dreadful prisons where, first, one went to die; then, to suffer; later, in the twentieth century, to receive treatment; and in the twenty-first century, to encounter rights. But it is an unfinished journey, and the reality of the prison Gonzalo experienced will gradually come into view as one progresses through the pages.

There are thus two major dimensions in the text: on the one hand, the denunciation of the penitentiary system—with its overcrowding, violence, and lack of humane treatment—and how it might be improved; and on the other, reflection on this system as an artificial “orthopedic” mechanism: like a hospital, a home for children without parents, a form of enforced, normalized coexistence governed by a very strict set of rules.

That is the other great challenge: to build not only better prisons but also alternatives. Critical criminology frames it this way: it is not only about improving the system but also about imagining different measures—restorative justice, community-based sanctions. I believe progress must be made on both fronts. And it seems to me that this book is an extremely valuable contribution, from the inside, to thinking about both.

Prisons are environments that place human nature under strain: everything good and bad that happens outside also happens inside but in a more extreme form. What is bad becomes worse, and what is good becomes better.

Everything becomes extreme.

Foreword

The Prison Within: The Cell as a Mirror

by Jorge Bafico

There are people who, in order to find themselves, need to lose it all. *Prison Within*, the first book by Gonzalo Leston, is not merely a prison narrative: it is the raw testimony of a young man who discovers, behind bars, that his place in the world was neither on the street corner, nor in the gang, nor in a bohemian life disguised as freedom.

Because this is not the story of a criminal, but of a son, of a brother, of someone who did not know how to avoid repeating the past, and who ended up in the place most symbolically saturated in culture: prison. A place where the body is constantly exposed to the gaze of the Other. Where the scrutiny of the system, of fellow inmates, of the visiting father, and of oneself becomes unbearable.

Yet the singularity of the protagonist does not lie in his guilt or innocence. It lies in the way he allows himself to be affected by what happens to him. In the way he questions. In the way he breaks without shattering. In that sensitivity that survives the logic of confinement. In that stubborn insistence on remembering others, giving them names, voices, gestures—as if writing were his way of paying off a debt no one ever asked him to settle.

In this, Leston recalls Primo Levi. Not because of the context—one was a prisoner in an extermination camp, the other in a Latin American prison—but because of the ethics of memory. Because of that way of narrating without resentment yet with sharpness. Because of that writing that seeks not redemption but understanding. As if telling were the only way not to become a shadow, not to let pain win completely.

Leston constructs a map of confinement with humor, anguish, and poetry. He idealizes nothing; he does not denounce everything. What he does is unusual: he observes. He observes how one survives. How a blanket is shared, how a cigarette is exchanged, how one negotiates safety to avoid being stabbed. And there, in that minimal gesture, singularity emerges—not in heroic exception, but in the way of being there without becoming dehumanized.

Perhaps that is why what moves the reader most is not the prison, but the “within”—as in the title. Because the real prison is not made of bars. It lies in silent inheritance, in family mandates, in the fear of not measuring up to anything. Leston escapes—from that, literally and metaphorically. And in that escape, he writes. For there are those who need to hit rock bottom in order to find words. And in that fall, he finds his voice. Like Levi, he understands that telling his story is not about looking back; it is about taking responsibility for the present with words that do not surrender.

I

The Uncertainty Principle

"What the hell went through your head, Javier?!" I shouted as I helped him get up. He answered with silence. He was bleeding. He got up as best he could and started walking, doubled over, toward his house. Dawn was breaking. Marco, Monito's older brother, opened the door for him, and Javier Pituca went inside. Everything had happened fast—Javier came out of nowhere and, without warning or reason, punched my brother, Gordo, in the face. They fought, and I tried to break it up. Marco and a woman stood there, stunned, watching the scene. We were at the door of our house when Javier showed up, coked out, muscles clenched. We were all neighbors, except for Marco's partner, whom none of us knew. We lived on one corner, Marco on the other, Javier in between. As we were finishing a beer and *Jugetes perdidos* played on the guitar, all hell broke loose.

A week went by, and nothing. No police complaint, no threats, nothing. Everything in the neighborhood stayed the same. I expected a bunch of Javier's buddies to get out of some old BMW and try to beat us to a pulp. Something told me trouble was coming. I could see it, I could feel it. Things had gotten complicated—street fights are often messy and unpredictable.

My brother, both defending himself and blinded by rage, kicked him in the right cheekbone.

Not long before, we used to play hide-and-seek, *arrimadita* tag¹, we built treehouses. Snack time smelled of cocoa, and the street fell silent during cartoon hour. The block where the fight happened had once been the block of our childhood, of soccer matches and adventures. An average Montevideo neighborhood, where kids would play in the street until midnight. "Everybody, run free!" Maicol would shout when he'd save us all in the last round of cops-and-robbers. My old man would whistle from a window, and Marco's mother would walk out to the corner when the game—and the night—came to an end. The trees on the block were carved with stories. "The treehouse has a second floor, shelves, and an elevator," Marco told the kids from the other block, smiling with pride. The elevator was a milk crate tied with ropes.

The 90s: the street and adolescence. That need to belong, that pain of growing up, our tribe in the middle of the asphalt.

"Hey, Marco, give that wine to me instead, you're just a kid."

"Gordo, don't be stingy, I'll give you a sip if you give me a drag of that joint, you've got every vice."

Hours and hours spent on that corner as if it were ours. With the loose paving stone to hide forbidden things. With that streetlight pole that would flicker out if you kicked it. With Maicol's uncle always awake at dawn watching TV. I remember his yellow fingers, and that he always woke up at three or four in the afternoon.

"What do you want?" he'd say with narcotic patience when we knocked on his door at three in the morning.

"Give me a light, your idiot nephew took the lighter."

I remember late-night conversations with Maicol about extreme hypothetical scenarios. Whether it was possible to jump from a rooftop onto a tree, whether you could dodge a car crash milliseconds before impact. How we would have survived the 1972 plane crash in the Andes, or what we would do if we ever landed ourselves in jail.

"Damn, can you imagine that moment—ending up in jail! Shit! The first thing I'd do is find something sharp and rip my braces out."

He pressed the cigarette against the little concrete wall. Maicol went on, excitedly, about losing a tooth in the process and fighting to the death.

The corner was becoming darker and more violent; cocaine paste and powder fell like snow on the streets and weed was disappearing from the neighborhood.

"Hey, Andrés, lend me your bike—I'm going with Momo to handle some business," Limón, a kid from the other block, said to me, grinning.

"Man, no way, Limón!"

"Oh, don't tell me you're going to play cop over a damn bike!" He used the classic neighborhood phrase.

It was important to get along with the guys from the next block over—they were older and more educated in the ways of the street.

"Fine, but bring it back soon, I'm leaving in half an hour," I said, trying to sound confident.

Half an hour later, nothing. An hour later, still nothing.

"He screwed you, took you for a chump," my brother said.

Two hours later, he showed up, a bit pale, didn't even say hello, and ran off. Lending your bike to kids from the other block was reckless—if they weren't out stealing, they'd be trading it for *pasta*.

In the neighborhood, cocaine paste was simply called *pasta* or *lata*: a cheap, low-quality drug made for the poor, capable of turning people into zombies. They also called it *lata* because many smoked it out of a punctured soda can, over a bed of cigarette ash. Where the small holes were, they placed the goopy substance, the ash, and, after lighting it, inhaled that disgusting smoke.

The effect lasted only a few minutes and left the body buzzing with adrenaline. Once it wore off, users—*lata* lovers—just wanted to smoke more and more *pasta*.

The Past Was Better

Javier Pituca was in his early thirties. A neighbor we'd known for a while, he had what he called "street smarts." Once a year he'd buy you a beer and tell stories about himself. I recall one conversation.

"Don't come at me with that Mickey Mouse shit—what you pulled is amateur hour, 20-year-old punk stuff. Back in our day we were *really* out of control. Tito had spent the whole night at the police station after the New Year's party we used to throw in the street," he told me, sitting on the curb. He lit a cigarette and tucked his hair behind his ears.

"But seriously, Javier, you have no idea what last night's party at Vascolé's house was like," I said, passing the beer bottle back to him.

"Bullshit! Once, me and Marco's older brother ended up at three in the afternoon in Ciudad Vieja after spending the whole night at the wildest party you've ever seen in your life," he said as he snatched the beer from my hand.

II

Black Guitar¹

I was going through a self-conscious phase—early twenties. I had finished high school and was working. I had dropped out of university some time before; I felt privileged and wanted to work while studying. Besides, I didn't want to follow in my father's footsteps. I worked at an auction house, in a bookstore, at the street market, as a children's entertainer, playing guitar on buses. Later, a dream came true: moving in with friends and starting a rock band. But it came true so badly it ended up being my undoing.

I was trapped inside the shared living situation. It was like a padded, comfortable nightmare in which some string was out of tune and, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out which one. An arrogant shyness had me imprisoned; mental bars kept me numbed, and spectres of familial depression haunted me. While I was running away—from that dream, that house, my friends, and my life—I couldn't admit that I was scared out of my mind. I had buried myself behind an eccentric, confident persona that was the complete opposite of who I really was.

Overflowing with anxiety, I wanted to fix myself just to keep existing. I tried everything. Mind-altering substances, fasting, existentialist philosophers, yoga, meditation. I wanted to beat the hell out of hopelessness, to rip that anguish out with dental pliers. I hid in the streets and in my childhood home, with my mother,

depression, and countless family conflicts soaked into the walls. My brother lived partly there, partly at my father's place. The corner, the alcohol, and that house harbored me once again, but it was a rancid, foul-smelling sanctuary.

I spent months stuck at the bottom of a well, living in my head, trapped in freedom. The night before everything began, for example, I slept on the rooftop, under the stars, and felt no sense of wonder at all. I often did things like that—an attempt to recover the beauty of life.

Initiation

The doorbell rang frenetically at six-thirty in the morning—if I remember correctly, it was a Thursday. I looked out the window and saw a white Nissan Investigations van pulling up in front of the house.

"This is bad," I whispered, biting my lower lip as I peered through a crack in the blinds.

It was my first day of work at a wall putty factory. I thought about calling to postpone, but it was too early. Besides, I couldn't find the phone number anywhere. My brother was just getting up.

"Gordo," I said to him, "I'm not going to lose my job over this—I'm getting out over the rooftops, easy."

I climbed up to the rooftop, where my mattress still lay facing the sky, and began climbing down the side opposite the street. It wasn't simple—there was some urban mountaineering in it, a bit of parkour. The house was on the third floor, about thirty-three feet up. The bars on a window helped me shorten the first