Creative Writing Portfolio 2020-21

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5 min Stream of Consciousness #1

The air conditioner continues to suck the life out of me, clasping at my throat it gloats at its prowess. No finesse! It just inches away at the taking of my life, my soul, my will to live. I am in a dark cavern in the centre of the school. The rules do not apply here - the sun does not touch my face. At times I am here from morning to night and the fight to live a life of mindfulness does not apply when you live in a cave in the belly of the beast. I watch as the monster feeds, poor souls thrown down to my world to writhe in the acidity of life before shuffling off into an unknown foulness. At first I screamed with them, then I silently empathised, now I watch impassively. I have seen too much to care, seen too much to want to seek to repair damage done by a left incisor. Inside here we cannot do much more than patch ‘em up and send them on their way.

I once dreamed that we could together fight back and show this world what is really meant by those hell bent on getting change passed through. We could have cut our way out... Now I wonder if we somehow prefer the comfort of this bowel in which we exist, maybe a primeval understanding that is like the womb from whence we came. Or the grace towards which we run.

5 min Stream of Consciousness #2

The first thing to hit me was the smell of rotting corpses: corpulent, obese bodies making up a writhing sea-like floor. In a doorway, a figure turned them over with a pitchfork, as if he were a chef looking to see them slightly browned on either side. And the stench made me heave and retch. The flood of nausea that it caused, screamed inside of me to every side of my core. I do not want to underestimate the value of the words that I am giving you: the smell was like a fish left over a week, or the bed of a weak bladdered old man that had for the past twenty years pissed his sheets, the ammonia- tear inducing, leaving me puking up my insides in this torrent of words.

The second thing was the distinct lack of warmth of any kind. I have always had this vision of hell to be a flaming red castle of fire and brimstone but there was no wrath, nor any warmth. Warmth pre-supposes love and connection. Here this was cold to its centre – like a night carved out of utter darkness –a gut piercing screaming cold that rushes you with the terror of being left; the wind racing through the hole where once your heart had been. And the blood flows from the new found orifice as the world spins and sucks the pity from you. And every time you think you might get used to it or die, the pain returns like a night dragon's breath of freezing air over a decaying cavity in a broken tooth…

Other than that, hell did not seem to be so bad.

20 min Stream of Consciousness

Looking out of the window I could see her sat hunched on the hill, half way down, her feet just in the shadow, as if she were paddling in shade. She was crying and, though I knew she was looking for the foci of the day to shift, for attention to be once more upon her, I felt drawn to her; despite this demand, she was vulnerable. Was there some residual sibling love still simmering beneath the years of bitterness and distance? I poured her a cup of tea and wandered down to her. Sitting there it was as if we had travelled back in time to 1999, when I had lived with her. After one of our surprisingly infrequent fights I might take a cup of tea, a utilitarian metaphor on a par with the laurel branch, and sit silently waiting.

Today, it did not take long. Maybe she had been planning the words, careful crafting them. I hope not for many of them fell hollow without a ring of truth. They did display a sad emptiness, powerlessness and something else I could not put my finger on but their foundations were false and built on sands of whimsy. She asked questions but failed to see the answers, much as we all do. One question surprised me. It was not the question itself that took me by surprise but the answer coming as it did with the instant feeling infusing me that the answer was indeed the honest one and truth.

“Are you happy?” she asked.

I can not know what answer she wanted, what answer she was hoping to glean. Maybe she wanted to hear that I, like she seems to be here, was wallowing in self-pity for a family she could not control. Or maybe she was reaching out to hear true empathy that I too was sad. But my answer came from deep inside of me.

“Yes. I truly am.” And I was. And not happy in that temporary moment of I am happy but that deep-down-in-my-soul-despite-whatever-you-could-throw-at-me happy

And I felt myself grow light much as the swallow flicked low across the lawn and swept into the sky was light.

“Yes, I have everything I could ever want right here.”

She seemed surprised. But at this point in my narrative, I shall leave her to her thoughts and to where that wave of time ended that day for her and on to where another would begin, and another, and so forth.

For that wave took me somewhere very different. A moment of enlightenment. A glimpse of my own reflection in which I could indeed see that I truly did have everything I could ever want. And that, sometimes I could not see that as I had filled the spaces, spaces that should be empty for reflection, with things I did not want, did not need.

The problem was what to do with that knowledge. For a while I sat basking in the knowledge. Basking in a self-satisfied glow until I realised that it might be too bright for the gloom in which she so evidently was sat. But it was hard not to be pleased. I knew as I know now my life was not perfect. Nor would it ever be but deep down where the mind can only scratch at, I was happy.

An Object

The Lead



The morning sun was glinting off the Irish Sea as Emily set out on her morning dog walk across the sands. It was ‘splitting the rocks’, her husband would have said, God rest his soul. On the distant rocks, a Heron turned his head, watching her suspiciously.

At forty-eight, Emily had fast tracked her way to Head of the local secondary school. Her grit and determination were second only to her keen sense of order; something, she felt, essential to a good teacher. Everything in her office had its place; that way you knew where to find it. It was said of her that she had her Christmas presents bought and wrapped by September. When asked by a young teacher if this was true she looked at him for a moment,

“Young man,” she replied, “You are just beginning as a teacher and have much to learn. The Autumn Term is a busy one; what with new students settling in, not to mention new teachers, mock exams, work experience, school productions, carol concerts. As Head teacher there are

piled on ever more commitments: Governors meetings, Local Head of school meetings, invites to numerous concerts and other social engagements where it seems that, though my presence may not be of paramount importance my absence would be! So you see that maybe getting these things out of the way in good, and well organised time, is just common sense."

The young man considered her words and agreed, though he couldn't help wondering if this didn't make Christmas seem a little sterile and un-magical.

All through her life she had enjoyed what she considered to be this clarity of focus through absolute organisation; until that is on her 40th Birthday when it all changed.

She awoke promptly at 6.30am as was her routine, and by 7.00am she was sitting in her garden drinking coffee. Behind her the door opened and a small nose poked through. She turned at the sound and there she saw something to make the hardest heart melt; a small Labrador puppy, a leather collar around its neck. They sat there both, in the early morning sun, sizing each other up. It was the puppy that was first to break. It fell over the doorstep and rolled to Emily's feet.

"You poor thing," Emily almost sang as swept it up, the puppy buried its wet nose in her embrace. Behind them both, Emily's husband stood watching and smiled softly to himself as he saw Emily wipe away a small tear.

Before the week was out a routine had been established and typed up neatly in a chart fixed next to the fridge. Unfortunately for Emily it seemed no-one had told the puppy. By the end of the first week Emily had read the books, tried various training methods and had been relieved of two mobile phones, three shoes, an armchair and her tv remote control. Accordingly the pup had been awarded his name: Chaos.

By the end of the month the new routine had been settled and Emily now religiously enjoyed both her morning and evening constitutional. Even as her husband grew sick, she could never miss a walk. After two years, Emily's husband passed away. The walks, particularly the

evening one, grew longer. Chaos became her constant companion and in the evenings they would curl up together by the fire, watching till the embers died. Often Chaos would look up and see the sparkle of a tear on Emily's cheek, and would wriggle closer.

"What would I do without you, eh?" she would ask. But the only answer would be an echo in the empty house.

With her husband gone, Emily began to close herself away. She took to staying home at night, as 'Chaos needed her.' She turned down more and more of the functions she previously thought prerequisite to her position. And the walks began to take on a new meaning.

During the walks through the glen she would watch Chaos as he would to and fro beneath the trees, diving into the river and racing round, always checking to see that she was there. She would watch as other dogs appeared, she loved the way he would stand tall and proud and, should the other dog make any kind of advance, then scamper behind her. Then as the imposter would leave Chaos would spray his scent as if to say,

"Yeah! You better keep on walking!"

She would watch him as he swam in the sea, on those beach walks. The way his tail would slide from side to side like a rudder. He would chase the birds, hopelessly wondering if today they would play. Sometimes she felt that his presence would define her entire happiness; at other times she felt more alone watching him play- her one true focus. Sure, he still drooled in her shoes, ate her remotes and well more that he had organised her. It was she that stood in rain and shine, waiting for him to finish his ablutions, nappy sack in her hand. It was she that fed him, brushed him, and sat through the thunderstorms and fireworks being there for him. And what's more, she liked it that way.

Breaking Emily's reverie, the Heron suddenly turned its head and, lifting its clumsy wings, climbed into the air out of reach of the large Springer spaniel, an auburn blur barking and dancing in the waves.

“Hello, ma’am!” The voice came from behind her. Turning she could see a young man of about 21. There was something familiar in his eyes. “Colin, Miss! You probably don’t remember me!”

She thought for a moment, “Dempster! Third from the back behind McFarland. Oh yes, I certainly remember you. In fact if I remember correctly it was you stuck the Freshmint chewing gum on my picture in the hall.”

“Actually it was juicy fruit, ma’am. And I never did understand how you knew it was me.” He looked her straight in the eye and Emily noted there was something different there, something she didn’t recognise.

“McFarland,” she replied. “Five minutes detention and a threat to call in his father and he was crying like a baby.”

There was that awkwardness of not knowing what to say to someone you have met on the off chance and with whom you have nothing in common.

“Well I best be on!” She said at last. “Take care of yourself.”

She went to move past him but Colin caught her arm.

“I...” He began. Emily froze for a moment and looked hard at him, wondering whether she ought to scream.

“I just wanted to thank you, ma’am!” He said at last. “You taught me so much. I was a waste of space; everyone told me so, but you. You taught me to look forward. You said the past was only a foundation - You ain’t nothing but your future.”

She smiled, “You are what is yet to come. But close enough.”

“Well I am a soldier, ma’am, doing me exams and all. They say, if I keep me head down I might even get promotion. But I ain’t there yet. After all, what's past is only past, eh?” He

looked over at where his dog was worrying at a rock and whistled for him to come. The dog looked at him- and proceeded to keep on worrying. “Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you.”

“Well, thank you, Dempster. That means a lot to me. You...” She began but then thought better of it. “You take care.” She finished instead and turned to walk away.

“Ma’am!”

She looked back and Colin was picking something up from the sand. It was her dog lead. She must have dropped it when he had touched her arm. Colin handed it across but she couldn’t help notice the question in his eyes as he saw the collar attached, still, to the end.

Emily felt the world open up on her and a cold wind rush through her stomach. The sunlight blurred across horizon and the sound of the waves that up till now had gently lapped, now roared in her ears.

“He died.” The words fell from her lips and hung in the air like a guilty confession.

“It’s okay, ma’am...” he began.

“No!” she cut him short. “No, it’s not okay. My husband died and I carried on, I organised him into a little box, neatly buried in a plot of land; everything neat and in its place. Do you know I must have cried only five tears before I drew myself up and resolved to carry on? But my bloody dog dies and I fall to pieces. I have been walking this beach now for three months without him. Morning and night clutching at this lead as if...as if I don’t what? As if he would suddenly bound out of the water, shake himself over me , wagging his clumsy great tail and look at me as if it has all been one great big joke. And it hasn’t.” She paused and looked at him earnestly, “I have.”

Colin looked at her, not knowing what to say.

“Because Dempster this is the joke. You are stood here thanking me whilst it is you that maybe just is saving me. How time changes things, eh? Dodgy Dempster, teaching me with my own words. Thank you, Dempster, thank you.”

“Erm...no probs. You’ll be alright then, ma’am? Cos if you are I’ve gotta get going, like.”

“Yes, thank you” and then adding softly, “Colin.”

He smiled but she couldn’t help but notice the relief in his eyes as he let go of her hand and scuttled away across the sands. She looked down at the lead and placed it in her pocket. Taking a deep breath she tasted the morning air.

Morning: The beginning of a new day. And for the first time in a while she felt she could take it on. She knew that an empty house still awaited her at the end of the day. But there were several hours before then. And a lot can be achieved in several hours, if you organise them properly.

(Between 500-1000 Words)

A Picture

The Gorilla



He is sat there watching me. Watching me-watching him; his grey head resting on his powerful arms. His sad eyes look out at me, somewhat obliquely, from under a large dark protruding brow. His silver back, a sign of power and greatness, is hunched disconsolately on the scaffold under which swings an old worn tyre on some frayed orange rope.

And I cannot help but ask myself what he is thinking. The bars that surround him, entrapping him, also emasculate him. A king of the mountain forest brought down. Here, there is no kingdom for him to survey lest you count the barren concrete shell in which he dwells.

A child sidles up the front of the cage; her eyes wide open with awe. She presses her face to the bars, waiting, waiting for the gorilla to do something: to charge, to roar, to bare his teeth. But the gorilla does not move and the child begins to sense that his power is not there. It is not long before the child's face has changed; the awe has gone. What replaces it is scorn. The child begins to dance from foot to foot, waggling her hands up by her ears and crying out in what she considers to be a monkey language. The gorilla sighs and remains there, motionless. The child loses interest and rushes off, dragging her parents by the hand to see the snakes.

And the gorilla sits there. Thinking. Sad. Maybe.

Maybe he remembers the past. Maybe he remembers the freedom he once knew; early morning mists floating through the trees; the mountains rising high above him; flashes of colour as dazzling birds flit overhead. Maybe he remembers his family, the mother he clung to: who brought him food when he was hungry; who carried him when he was tired; who looked after him when he was in danger. And the great silverback who was always there proud and protective- shot by poachers as he faced the danger, never shirking his duty to protect. Maybe.

I wonder at all he has seen; taken as a young ape from the mountains of Rwanda- stolen by poachers who murdered his mother and many of his family; then sold to a private collector before being discovered, skeletal and battered. He was brought here to recover and, over many years, remained- a star attraction in a vast freak show. I wonder at what he has seen, in Rwanda, a war torn country full of barely hidden violence; a country at once sublime and chaotic. I wonder at what abuse he has known- in the hands of a collector who showed no care beyond his first child-like years. I wonder at his loss.

I look sadly into his eyes. He raises himself to his full height, all 5ft 6", all 400lbs. He swings down from the scaffold and wanders up to me. For a moment I experience that awesome power he has chosen keep at bay. I feel the thrill run through me and cannot help but reach out a hand through the bars to touch him. But he is too far back. He edges casually forward toward me and sniffs, as if to say I see you and then proceeds, it seems to me, to examine me. I stand there motionless unable to move as his eyes scour me, inside and out. I dare hardly breathe- the connection is palpable. At last he stops and I feel I must have made the grade, for he sits himself down in front of me never taking his eyes off me and I feel that he is about to share his burden. And it is then I notice a disturbing truth. For, as I stand outside looking at him- pitying him; I see in his eyes that he pities me. Suddenly I feel strangely naked in front of this great beast.

I look into his eyes and I see how he sighs not for his own loss, but for the loss of humankind. I see the perversity with which we pursue our lives- rushing from place to place, from stress to stress. I see the ways in which we trap ourselves in spirals of sleeplessness and fatigue, blocking out nature- killing it with our hum; a hum of machinery, of production lines, of progress; the hum of destruction, desecration and greed. I see the hypocrisy of how we paint ourselves as nature's saviours and providers; whilst taking and destroying with our other hand. I see rainforests dwindle, fields explode and skies blacken. I see species disappear whilst scientists splice genes, life crushed whilst we seek to preserve and extend.

And all the while we trundle on setting each night the alarm for the focus of tomorrow. We rail against the gifts of nature- blocking it out wherever possible with cars and radios, with iPods and covered walkways. We look to the radio to predict what the world could tell us in a heartbeat. We shut ourselves in gyms rather than enjoying nature's space; watch pre-recorded television documentaries of nature's magnificence rather than seek to explore it for ourselves. And when we do venture out? We package it with expectations and designs. And rarely, if ever, do we listen.

What could he tell us? And I see, as the afternoon unfolds, a continual production line of tourists arrive. They read the signs, point and, seeing little but a stationary figure- unwilling to 'perform', pass by. Some stay for a while, full of expectation for the gorilla to act as they believe a gorilla should act, and leave disappointed. Others jeer and dance. Some merely read the signs and barely glance at him, caged in front of them for their perusal. None stop to listen.

For it is the listening that escapes so many of us- listening to what remains yet unspoken. Listening to what a world, so much older and wiser might teach us. Listening.

And now I hear his calmness as he examines us all and asks us, "Why?"

(Between 500-1000 Words)

Poetry

Fading Pictures

When he was ten, his teacher, Mr Bennewith
Might or might not have asked him to draw
A picture which was not hung above his fireplace,
Of what he wanted to be one day, in 2024.

If he had, he would have drawn a Harrier Jump Jet pilot.
At fifteen, he would have sketched an army physician.
At sixteen, a watercolour - working in a shower of April rain;
A Ranger in the service of the forestry commission.

It certainly would not have been the scumbled portrait
Of a fifty-year-old who had sampled a miscellany of sights
Travelled foreign worlds, ridden on camels and elephants,
Pulled at a full-grown tiger's tail; and seen so many, many nights,

…Carried scars;
Come through tragedies and triumphs; married a beautiful bride
He too passionately adores and with her raised
A triad of boys of whom he is silently so proud.

This might not be the life he would have rendered
Had he had a choice to block it from the start. He'd found
This was not his picture; his earliest aspiration
Just the life that step-by-step grew comfortably around

Him, like perfectly imperfect rings make up a living tree.
But he would choose this life- real and raw- to replace
Pictures that he was not asked to draw nor do not hang
Dusty, faded, framed above his aging parent's fireplace.

Final Piece