

To the Centre for Mental Health

by Rogan Wolf

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Forward

I wrote the poems below in the mid nineteen-nineties. I had just left a community centre for people with severe and enduring mental health problems, after being officer in charge there for the previous seven years. Before that, I had run a smaller centre a few miles to the south for well over a decade.

You don't leave a working life of this kind lightly. It cannot be just a matter of shutting the door behind you.

You are leaving a building that feels a bit more like home than office ; you are leaving circles of people who feel a bit more like family, or community, or parish, than "colleagues", or "clients" or "service users." (I always preferred the term "members" - members of the community). You have spent more time here with many of them, day in day out, than you normally spend with your own family.

All the names have been changed, of course. They are fictional. But the actual people described are not.

The people I "selected" to write about here were not necessarily the people I worked most closely with, or found the easiest to like. As I slowly let go of the place and its occupants in my mind, having left it physically several months previously, I actually didn't "select" anyone. They selected themselves. They insisted. They threw themselves into my brain and then out onto the page. And they helped me take my leave and make my peace with the leave-taking. And I thank them for that, as for so much else they and the rest the centre community gave me. The times were humanly so very rich.

One irony to end up with. In the poem on page 12 -"The Meal" - there is a reference to queues of people in the dining room. For there was a time when there were no tables there and at lunch-time people sat round the edges of the room, with plates of food on their laps.

I was responsible for buying those round wooden tables for the centre dining-room, seven years previously. They had gone down well then and had lasted well, since. They were treasured, partly for what they symbolised.

For when I started in this work years before that, in the 1970's, your average mental health community centre didn't even have a building to itself, let alone tables, with a proper dining room, a proper kitchen, home-cooked food. You lodged precariously in church halls, and queued for your lunch.

Let us hope that "social inclusion," the "recovery model", "co-production" and all the rest does not simply drag us back full circle to where care in the community began - people on the edge of things, queuing up in church halls, with no tables at which to sit and eat.

Rogan Wolf

Lorretta

She does not expect us to take her in -
one can never be too careful these days -
so she seats herself outside the ring
and looks absent and ill-treated there
like someone the whole world
has sticked and stoned
and shouldered into exile.

Crochet keeps her from idleness
and Church from death
by disassociation.

She sits in silence,
spinning out exquisite nothings.
She doesn't like them.
She stores them in careless piles
on the shelves and tables of her still flat
in its quiet and genteel street.
She lives in a dainty warehouse
of vacated cobwebs.

Illness surrounds her like a fog,
almost a skin. She is epileptic.
She is diabetic. Her ankles are
constantly swollen. She is diagnosed
Chronic Schizophrenic. But in church
she lets rip, she flies,
and her glad hands clap
and she sings smiling
among all those black faces -
all that safe and gentle energy.
Her world becomes clearer in church
and she devotes herself
to its calls upon her,
struggling over there
almost daily.

We went on holiday once
and towards the end,
at breakfast on a fine day
there in the perfect English garden
(before us the sea, sparkling ; behind us
the old Purbeck wall, the buddlia,
the hollyhocks) she let rip again
and for a clear hour or two in that far place
she praised and she celebrated,
she grieved and she reminisced....
For a clear hour or two
there we were, looking out.

Now as she sits each week
alone outside the ring,
I pause and touch her shoulder.
She turns.
The room dances with her smile.
The whole room
dances with her smile.

Rogan Wolf
May 1994

The Women's Workshop

The basement workshop
has a lovely new floor surface -
a metallic lino, moss green.
And the walls have been painted
sun yellow.

My blue overalls are now deep lakes
in a fragrant plain
and working here
I'm a fish in my element
laughing under the sun.

I make sense when I'm down here
no-one gets to me
I can mean something
I can just belong.
I laugh

at my reflection
in these blue overalls.
I just get on
down here.
I laugh in the sun.

Rogan Wolf
May 1994

Jeannie

Somewhere between here and Africa
Jeannie is prosperous.
She takes her ease.

She flits genteel
from chamber to chamber
checking performances -

the children quiet in their
prescribed arena,
the servants refining the light evening meal.

Satisfied she retires for an hour
to scan some novel of rave reviews.
She will bring grace at dinner

to the task of hostess
with her gentle elegance
her trans-national dignity.

She likes to be *doing* -
to garden, for instance,
out there with the men.

Silence surrounds her
like a cell, a private
circle of the world's air.

She works enclosed out there
making the garden fit for visitors
somewhere between here and Africa.

There are whispers in the corridors
and unkind corners
that tell of a drink problem,

of teeth neglected and a faltering step,
of an eye once grossly swollen.
But no one speaks out. No one comes near.

Jeannie reclines at her ease
and keeps fast her secrets.
Somewhere between here and Africa

lies her true name.

Rogan Wolf
May 11th 1994

Winston

He walks like a grenadier -
chest out and back straight -
a slender man of note
cruising the patch.

He's a sharp dresser
a waistcoat man
a dark umbrella in the sun man
a man who makes much of his hands
with a cacophony of worthless rings.

And sometimes he's a camera man,
smiling on the market crowds
through shrewd predatory eyes.
His camera's a dud, though,
a meaningless shell
and raises an old question
of where the true picture lies.

Some days ago
the neighbours managed it at last
and got him re-housed.
By appearing from time to time
at his front door
with nothing but frilly pink knickers on,
he frightened their small children ;

by cramming that miserable black hole
he rented from the Council
full to the brim
with old food,
trinkets and other street market refuse,
he constituted a serious
and genuine health hazard ;

and a few neighbours of course
having just bought their own
on extremely generous terms,
just his being there
threatened their profit margins
and lowered the new tone.

The iron discipline
of the market place
and all that....

“It’s all right
for you
fucking do-gooders,”
snarled one neighbour
who knew her rights
and how to secure them.
“You don’t have to *live* ‘ere.”

He’ll cruise a new patch now
our slender grenadier
our man of note.
Chest out, back straight,
he’ll be taking new pictures now.

Rogan Wolf
June 1994

The Meal

Something special about the meal
something electric forging the dull elements
into a new and hushed
and human vibrancy -
a making.

The food here is actually good
each choice of menu a matter of passion
personal risk and urgent debate
resolved in meetings weeks in advance.

The tables are round
of plain deal
but five years on
still surprisingly smart.

They like the tables.
They remember earlier times :
“We used to eat on trays
all around the two rooms
and we had to queue
quietly
in a long line.
No-one questioned it.
Who were *we* to complain ?”

The two cooks get a tenner
and a free meal.
There is a stringent job description
so the money's hard earned.
They sit apart
once the meal is served
eating with their morning's worker.
The morning's sweat
drying on three foreheads
seals their fellowship.

And they come, the people,
from all their far edges
their fastnesses
to sit here at the plain deal
eight per table
forming the circle.
They come with their famishment
no food can satisfy
with their lostness
no finding here can heal.

The limitation of the event
with its essentialness ;
the simplicity of the being together
in these plain circles
with the distance each has travelled
to get here ;
simply the eating
makes a new sense here
a true valuing.

No-one would dare
say a grace here
but grace is present
in all the racket of the business
of eating, the clatter, the voices'
rise and fall ;

in every movement
of fork to lips of eye to eye ;
in every word that is spoken ;
in every moment the circles
remain unbroken.

From what forsaken places
are we gathered here
today.

Rogan Wolf
May 28th 1994

Nancy

Nancy died in flames. A holy death.
Months before, she asked to work
with wood and joined our workshop.

It was good having a female there
and not just some right-on kid with shaven head,
but an older presence, quiet, in a print dress,

perhaps just beginning to state herself
in her own terms. She embarked upon a shoe rack
for her husband.

Now, when I handle the dowelling
that she so carefully sanded
week after week,

I wonder what do you do
when you're in flames ?
Do you look out ?

What does the world look like
through the wall of your own fire ?
Nancy lit herself in the family hallway.

She had three hairs on her upper lip
and she couldn't bear it. Her husband
had taken her to the Emergency

only that morning.
"Oh doctor, she's bad.
It's really bad this time."

But Nancy
as usual could talk of nothing
but those three barely visible hairs

and they sent her home
with the usual flat few words
and small brown bottle.

For years she had watched herself
in the mirror and seen nothing
but a sprouting monster.

No words freed her.
No sedation.
Nothing but fire could make her whole.

And where had we been
when she came to us
her fire already flickering there

yearning to break loose ?
If we had seen it
would she have allowed us

to grab the extinguishers,
to call the fire brigade ?
Would any of us

have known what to do ?
I believe some dreadful joy was felt
at the heart of the fire she made herself

in the moments just before she died.
For just those moments she felt clean,
entirely, triumphantly, innocent.

Rogan Wolf
June 2nd 1994

Abraham

Abraham is so meagre thin
my thumb and finger tip to tip
can circle his wrist like a bracelet -
and all around leave air between.

And Abraham's mouth seems so
pinkly enormous that his great laugh
could bracelet my bracelet three times over -
and all around leave air between.

And each time we meet
I bracelet
his poor wrist and each time
Abraham laughs greatly.

"Hey, Abraham!" I say.
"I had some sweet today, Mr Rogan,
honest," says Abraham, laughing.
"But Abraham, look!" I say, braceletting.
"Ah well! Ah well!" laughs Abraham,
limping away.

Abraham has had a stroke.
It was not his age nor living habits.
Abraham is still largely a boy
and his living expenses are not yet due.
It was a side-effect
rare but known
of his psychotropic medication.

In life he's always limped a little.
Now you can see it.

I keep pressing him to eat.

Rogan Wolf
May 1994

Damon

Damon fears the plain
exchange of words
it's risky
you never know
what might
come sliding
out. So Damon
shouts
Damon keeps
shouting.

He even
finds it hard
to smile. Any
softening
and the roof might fall in
or demon jump you.
He screws his face up
and roars at us : "Aaaah !"
We jump. Damon celebrates.

We had a moment
of quiet once
after a long interview of terror
when Damon in the rage of his helplessness
threatened us with death
and his partner looked on
her eyes glassy
and their beautiful small son
stood there
as still as death

and when the deadline had passed
and the others had all gone away
we paused together
we two on the doorstep
the evening sky
clear and vivid
a fat thrush declaiming
and Damon asked :
“Seriously now
as a father yourself
what would *you* have done ?”

Damon knew exactly
why I was leaving.
He told me immediately.
It was to save on tax.
I'd got it all worked out.
My pension.....
And he knew this as well :
in the end I had let it all
get to me.
I was finished. Done.

On my final day, he brought
his farewell gift, a huge set
of Chinese porcelain
boxed and complete.
He shouted:

“This is my *heart* !
No ! No !
My *heart* !
From my *heart* !”

Rogan Wolf
April 1994

Morgan

When I hear the church clock strike
I know at that moment
Morgan, somewhere in torment,
has just begun to inhale.

For this is Morgan's parish.
St Mary's sounds the quarters
around Morgan's soul.

Time hangs heavy on him.
It forces flesh on him.
Beneath the haggard white line
of that anchorite cheek-bone
four old clocks
on blackened lengths of string
ride him everywhere he travels.
Should one get stolen, or just plain stop,
he reasons three ought to do
to fly him like a wounded Jumbo
home for a crash landing.

Home is all *oeuvre*, a live sculpture
formed from within.
For years the parish has supplied him
with his materials
and as the supply
has continued unchecked
so Morgan's room to breathe
has slowly diminished. Meticulous
and fragile collections of litter
now fill each room like library shelves.

Only his narrow bed
remains clear for him.
In the dense darkness
radios hang like bats from the ceiling
each tuned to a different world station
each turned full on.
All night and from all quarters
the world engages him.
Babel-Lord
Morgan gathers round his bed
whatever is waste
whatever discord.

The sweetness in his smile
is incomprehensible.
But that melodious voice,
those fastidious
semantic games we engage in,
do sometimes seem to carry pleasure.
The bruised eyes sparkle,
harbouring gaiety.
We make much of him.
We sit with him,
tolerating the smell,
the innumerable tatters,
the festooning plastic bags,
those brutal clocks.
Perhaps after all it is permissible
to clear pain away
from an instant or two of each day
here in Morgan's parish.

Rogan Wolf
February 1994

Angela

Spasms of rage suffuse her face
until the freckles ride like tiny sand-bars
the wild red surge that beats and beats
on the steady blue burn of her tired eyes.

"It's me age
them hot flushes
and then again it's me illness
makes me say them things
I don't mean them
you must know that."

She was brought up in a Home.
Cast off before ever
her cradling, still she managed there.
In the cold, crowded water
she learned to swim not drown.
But you see it at the meal-table
that frantic grabbing
at all that tends her way.
Nothing escapes her.
She's an expert.
And her rage is insatiable
and her desolation
deeper than speech.

Up at five each morning
she heads straight for the pool
and covers eight lengths without fail.
She 's fighting furiously
to keep her weight down
to keep fit
to keep young
to keep *going*.

The few brave hearts
who join her that early
are strange birds. She's sure
they mean her harm.
They are vessels of hurt
she dare not spill.
She holds them at bay
by drilling them daily
with a handsome blue glare.
They'll not stop her
swimming where she may.

"Every year I try to get away.
You got to have something
to look forward to, for God's sake.
I save for *months*.
But Paris last Autumn
was, *oh*, so lonely,
so *hostile*, you know,
and I just felt too ill this year."

Rogan Wolf
April 1994

Cliff

Cliff visits once a week
just for the Art Group.
He's touching base
between far-flung voyages
at a place of calm waters.

His eyes hold so much light
they frighten us - as if drops
of the Aegean have been translated there
lit by their own wild skies.

And his paintings hold a frightening power.
Some have been exhibited. His figures
are Saints calm-faced
their bodies knotted

like martyrs in agony,
their sexual convolutions
a nightmare of unfulfillment, a climactic
frenzy of the artist's clothing crayon.

He is the despair of his poor mother.
Night after night she twists
between the sheets
at each new thought and turmoil of him.

Her love is nails.
He slouches into the Art Room
like a frightened bear
escaping into the hills.

Rogan Wolf
May 22nd 1994

Jem

He thrills with unease
like an abandoned baby.
He can't sit still
he can barely sit
but ramps all day like a ringed bull
from end to end
of our snooker table.

The clothes are ridiculous.
He's been hanging tough
for thirty years now.
The baseball cap, the long shorts,
the swaggering shirt-tail -
they hold together with increasing strain
a baby with a bull neck
ballooning towards middle age.

He assures you his Staffordshire
is a Pitball. And no way
will he be getting some wanky
old muzzle, law or no law, fuck'em.

He's had no-one to show him
how to be. So he turned for teacher
not to the wild lethal street
but the furtive shades of the tabloid.
Murdoch groomed him
in the manners that maketh man -
the pets that intimidate
the words one smears on the meal table.

Strangers exist to be mastered
and humiliated, especially women.
Aggression must be met
with aggression twice as destructive,
even if no anger is felt. To cry
is unthinkable (But such a relief!
“When someone leaves I’ve got to know,
I get really pissed off, y’know, but then
I cry. And I cry - *proper*.
It’s not often I cry, mind you”).
Fuck ‘em.

Rogan Wolf
May 11th 1994

Gloria

Gloria greets me in French
her gift from Dominica
and she gives her Rasta to me
in a chant of slow grace
and steeled unhappiness
and she gives her
Marxist intellectual to me
her ideas like winged fish
rippling and flashing
from space to blue space.

That shiny pill-box hat she wears
and the sweet round spectacles
and the clean bright colour of her blouse
hanging from hunched shoulders
that seem to apologise
that so refined a body
should have somehow contrived
to venture no further than its girlhood.

Sometimes her voice is the air
a hurricane of rage and pent poetry
driving us before her like dry leaves.

And sometimes she reverts
and oh-how-delightful
becomes small child
and simpers and defers
and wriggles in the sun.
We crane. We croon.

She is a commander
without an army
an admiral
who has no map
a star
stageless.

Responsibility is taboo.
She knows it winds her up too much.
Her subjection to the wholly perfect
drives her to mania.

There is a straight scar across her face
a diameter that measures
that fine arch of her cheek-bone.
All alone she made this thing
by accessing a razor.
“Self-mutilation” is how the files put it.
Unanswerable voices called for it.
She had no choice.

Rogan Wolf
January 1994

To the Centre for Mental Health

At the time this poem was written, the centre was being “tendered out”. Isaac came into the Centre to clean after everyone else had gone. In those days people were still able to smoke on the premises.

Our elegant, cream coloured face
looks blank this late
somehow ill-fitting,
a cream-coloured question-mark
at the terrace end.

Where tiredly alive
silhouettes should be
tending their lone evening meal,
nothing but shadows
occupy these bare cavities,
hollow projections
upon some dangerous screen.

Only Isaac
now animates
our tired rooms,
bellowing hymns
of solitary ecstasy.
As his Hoover roars
today's shy ghosts
hover round the ash-trays
reluctant to separate.
Isaac smiles on them
he soothes
he comforts them
then tenderly tidies them away.

Tomorrow we'll try again.

They begin to congregate past midday
like ragged butterflies
around the buddlia.
A park bench out front
offers some dignity
but most prefer the door-step
and way before time
start leaning on the door-bell
having nothing to be
here for but here.

From the hostels the bed-sits the bare flats
from lives lived in shadow
and on the edge of everything
it is here they congregate
to establish meaning.
Here is their centre.

They say this :

“I am someone here
I am heard
I am not alone.”

“Here I have substance
I matter
I mean something.”

“I feel more at home
here in this place
than I ever feel at home.”

“I have a share in the world.”

“I am not odd
I am *even*, here.”

“I am not assailed.”

And John the most “deluded” one
says this :

“If someone *erm*
if someone came to buy
if someone *erm* wanted to
spoil this place
surely that
that would be
er sacrilege, y’know.”

We may now be clear.
If sacrilege holds meaning here
then holy also may be real

and a hyphen
ride
the unsafe waters,

the Ark at bay.
Tomorrow
we’ll try again.

Rogan Wolf
March 1994