

# 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*