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Which Story Is It?

by MaryPat Campbell

“Everybody in my world knows that regular work is only another name for being robbed and dying of boredom.” That’s what Thomas, one of the lads at the foundry used to brag loudly to us at Whitechapel. He stopped saying it once he was threatened with the sack, but I could see he’d fixed his mind. I could see hatred in his eyes, narrowed and fixed in the gaffer’s direction whenever he came round hollering at us to work faster.

I didn’t agree. For me it was all about skill and pride, being praised when you got it right and cursed when you didn’t, the great learning in it all. The smell of the white hot metal, the heft of the moulds you could hardly carry and had to be so careful of, so they didn’t break. Hoping you were strong enough to carry them with your mate to the great enamel sink to cool off after the metal had been poured inside.

Building the moulds was gruelling work for us foundrymen, and the sweltering heat from the beech wood fires that heat the furnaces would almost make you pass out. When the heat is profound and at its limit, a few blows of the hammer are needed to remove the bung from the furnace, and then the glowing metal is poured out. I loved to watch it flow down the channels into the mould, like life itself into the crucible. I was minded to think of the beginnings of the world, of volcanoes spewing up their molten insides to pour down the mountains to ruin, and then fertilize the land.

I do remember something, or have I made it up. One summer long ago for instance, was there ever a June as glorious as that one? A woman with a clear voice, sat with me and other children in a small stuffy room where she was reading us a story.

I remember gazing out the window at white clouds in the blue sky, the smell of grass and buttercups coming through the open window. I had a sense that if I died there and then, everything would be alright with myself and the whole world. The story wound its way into my mind and stayed there, inextricable from the voice that told it, painting pictures in my mind of the people, places and adventures happening in the story. I was transported to a world that felt real and my own and yet belonged to everyone. Which story was it? I don't remember.

I miss that learning of the classroom, and the learning I had at the foundry. What happened between the small room, the foundry and the asylum? Everyone looks at me and thinks that I know, but I don't. I'm surprised at what people tell me about myself. The stories and the bells and the making and the sound and the ringing of them were my life.

Then everything went wrong. I found myself without lodgings, without my job at the foundry, without being able to look out for myself, or knowing where I was or who I was. And then I ended up here at the asylum, with Ursula.

The way I see it, myself and Ursula are like-minded people. There is an outside and an inside to both of us, which don't fit together sensibly at all. Ursula's outside is ugly, crude and menacing, while her inside draws beautiful maps of the churches round about here. She has knowledge and beauty about her, but doesn't like anyone to see it. She pushes people away so that no one wishes to come close.

My outside is silent and wordless, I know I can look vacant, as if I have no mind. I follow instructions, I do what I'm told and hope for the best. But my inside can wend its way to foreign lands and adventures. I can read, I can fathom and I can learn.