

2006

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Publication details

Hase, S 1996, 'In exile in my mind', paper presented to Landscapes of Exile Conference, Byron Bay, NSW, 26-28 July.

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Landscapes of Exile 2006 Conference

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Abstract

This paper is a narrative written from the perspective of a person with a severe mental illness. She describes four places of exile. The first of these is as a child and from those close to her. The second is exile in her mind where she is an exile from herself. The third is in a mental hospital as an exile from society in the seventies when this was the 'place' for the mentally ill. The fourth is as an exile in the community in the nineties when the hospitals were emptied and care of the mentally ill changed dramatically. The writer used to be a psychiatric nurse and is now a psychologist and psychotherapist. So, the narrative is written with the insight of someone who has been involved with the mentally ill for over three decades. The narrative seeks to understand the meaning of exile for the mentally ill and for those who exile her in these four places.

The Narrative

She was lying in a foetal position, her body turned towards the concrete pillar of the bridge. Water dripped onto her cardboard bed as traffic shuddered past; unseeing, unknowing. Swaddled as she was in her heavy overcoat you'd never really know there a person underneath but for the arm thrust carelessly aside, naked although barely distinguishable amongst the grime and dull light. The needle and syringe hung from the skeletal arm. I couldn't quite see her face under the matted hair but I imagined eyes wide in surprise as the last hit coursed through her body and her brain.

Just another OD, I thought and started to turn away. Out of place in the squalor of her riverside death bed my eye caught the outline of a book. Rifling through the pages of what seemed to be a diary I came to the last undated entry, almost indecipherable written as it was in long hand in black biro on damp paper.

I'm so cold. Cold through to my soul. Alone for a while; the voices are quiet and I feel quite lucid. That's what they used to say in my medical files.

'Lucid today, after a quiet night'

Short, impersonal and mostly wrong.

There has never been a quiet night or a moment when I have not felt as if I am in a dense fog. Dissociated, detached from everything and everyone around me. It has been a constant battle with myself. There has never been any peace. But now I feel an unusual clarity. There is nothing behind me, nothing here now and nothing for me in

the future. No hope. An emptiness so dark that every sense is numbed; feeling nothing. My eyes are open but they see only inside myself. My limbs move but I go nowhere.

But now I am clear. These foils I scored will do the job. Danny said they were good shit. They're always cut 'though. But if I take the lot all at once it should be fine. Mum used to talk about death a lot after my brother died. As if it was somewhere bad an awful place to be avoided. I think she was mostly talking about herself. Poor old mum, didn't know how to love and was never loved herself. Too busy being scared of life. I've never known what life is other than fighting the monsters within. And now this nothingness that weighs nothing, feels nothing, is nothing.

I belong to no-one. I belong nowhere. I am a part of nothing. Exiled. An exile in my own mind.

The entry ended and I sat down next to the body. No, I mean next to her. Some sort of mutual comfort, while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. I opened the diary at the first page.

My first experience of exile was from those around me. It began early, so I'm told. Mum used to say that I was always different. It's funny being different and not really knowing it, unless someone tells you. Who do you believe? Yourself, or what you're told? I was a loner. It was as if there was an impenetrable barrier between me and others, and I was stuck behind it. But I somehow didn't really want to get out. Just be inside myself. I had 'friends' at primary school but I was happier playing by myself. Kids have a low tolerance for potential friends who won't join in games or who get upset easily. They give up quickly. Well stuff 'em. Bitches, mummy's little girls. What would they know? Wouldn't know which way was up. Had it easy I bet.

Getting upset was normal in our house and nothing was easy. Dad would beat the crap out of Mum when he was drunk, which was a lot of the time. Then she'd beat the crap out of me and my brother for doing nothing. Afterwards she'd hug us and tell us how much she loved us. It was hard to feel whatever love there might have been through the bruises and the confusion.

I was an accident according to Mum; the result of my parents making up after a drunken fight. Harry was 12 years older than me and was number one son, except when Dad took to him with a whip. Funny 'though, Harry never got confused. He knew exactly who he was. But that didn't stop him killing himself one night when I was thirteen. Mum and Dad always said it was an accident but I know better. He'd fallen out with his girlfriend and he really loved her. She'd gone off with another bloke after they'd had a fierce row. Harry went on a binge. Early that night I found him alone at the bottom of the garden, surrounded by what was left of a carton of beer. He told me he was turning into Dad and he was scared. They say he died instantly when his car hit the tree on McPherson's bend on the highway.

It wasn't long after that that the voices started and I began my second exile-from myself. The psychiatrist said it was because of puberty. I think it was because I felt guilty about Harry. One of the really persistent voices was about how I should have done something that night. Told Mum or rang the police. Others would tell me how

bad I was; a dirty, slimy creature with no heart. That my soul was possessed and I would rot in hell.

It was worse at night, laying in bed in the quiet. At first I thought it was me talking to myself in my head. Then it was like having someone else in the room. I'd turn my head to listen. Or I'd switch the radio off only to find that it wasn't on in the first place. They'd wake me in the night and I'd lay there in the dark shivering and shaking with fear until the dawn, There was no-one to tell. Alone but not alone. Then they'd leave me for a while and I'd wait. The fog started to come about then. Descending like a dark blanket over my mind. Holding me in, a black shroud.

They say it was the drugs that made me worse. As if smoking dope really hurt anyone. If anything it eased the fear. It was the first time that I truly felt understood by people of like minds. Mum and Dad ranted and raved about me hanging about with the 'wrong types'. As if they had any right to judge. At least my new found friends didn't try to make me someone I was not.

I gradually started to realise what I was up against. The teachers at school were definitely out to make sure that I didn't get my High School Certificate. They didn't want me to succeed, to be anything. I could see them discussing me in the corridors and playground; planning. They would ring up Mum and find out what I was doing so they could have something on me to use. I think that's why I didn't have many friends at school too. The teachers set others against me. It's been like that my whole life. Fighting the agendas of others. Fighting the demons within and the faceless outside.

I'd be off the air for days. Just couldn't get it together and the voices would be real bad. Some days I wasn't able to get out of bed. It was like being paralysed with my head disconnected from the rest of my body. I started to imagine that I was rotting from the inside out. I could feel it happening inside me and there was nothing I could do except stare at the same spot on the wall for hours on end, unable to move. I thought I had cancer.

The cops were in on it too. They came and dragged me out of bed. They didn't mind a bit of biff either when I didn't want to go. What gave them the right to invade my space. My Mum put them up to it for sure. Silly cow!

The bin was a real joke. I don't think. It was just another way of making sure I was under control. Mum said it was the best place for me but she never come back for a second visit. She said all the crazies give her the creeps and then scuttled off to her own madness. The inmates were in on it too. Reporting on me to the nurses and the others. I could see them doing it. Bastards. Where was the honour among thieves? In the end you can't trust no-one.

They said that I was sick. How can you be sick when you are being yourself?

It was like being on Alcatraz. No-one ever came near the place. Maybe the occasional visitor but they didn't stay long. It was a world within itself, like Alice in Wonderland, and I was in a world inside myself. It was almost mystical. The shock treatment was the worst. They started me on it after I kneed one of the male nurses in the balls. He

was one of the bastards who liked to come around late at night to have a quick grope. They took more, everything, if there was a couple of them. The worst thing was that I wasn't taking the pill. He tried it on in the bathroom after I'd been for a pee. Took me by surprise and I did what was natural. So they decided to blast me. I felt in a deeper fog for days after being zapped than I'd ever been before. It was far worse than my 'sickness'. Couldn't remember anything for days. I think it was punishment really but they called it treatment. Funny how words can mean different things depending on where you are coming from; especially when you don't know what others are experiencing or knowing.

They started me on drugs in the bin. Well not drugs 'cos I'd been on them for ages. Medication they called it but it's no different than getting a hit on the street. It's a real downer. A new psychic prison. The voices slowed down a lot but so has life. I'd rather put up with the endless chatter. They were still there in the background, just not so loud. Sometimes my legs wouldn't work and I couldn't get out of the chair. I peed myself more than once because I couldn't make it to the toilet on time. Then there was hell to pay from the nurses. They'd tell me off for doing it on purpose and then up my medication. And away we'd go again. My arms and legs were so restless and they wouldn't stop moving back and forwards. And my mouth watered all the time and I drooled like one of those zombies in the dementia ward. It was impossible to talk properly; it was like having a really swollen tongue. Not that I had anything much to say because my thoughts came real slow and by the time I worked out what I did want to say the moment was gone. Even asking simple things was impossible. I was even more inside myself than before, except I was completely alone in there; mostly. They said that was all a side effect of the drugs. It was better when I was tripping. It's the main reason I don't take the medication now. Much better to be mad than the walking dead.

The psychiatrist was a decent enough guy, except for zapping me and putting me on those downers. He gave me the best advice ever. He told me not to let on to others that I was hearing voices or that I had strange ideas about people out to destroy my life (even though it was true). Act normally, he said. Then when you get home you can be what you want. He said that if I did this then I wouldn't get arrested or be noticed by people. Act normally, he said. Whatever that is.

I was in the bin for a while. They tried discharging me and sent me home a few times. But where was home? I'd stop taking the pills because it was impossible even going to the shop or catching a bus because everyone looked at you like you were from out of space with my zombie expression, stiff arms and shuffling gate. And I just couldn't think. How can you go buy the vegetables when it took half an hour to count out the change. And then you'd get ripped off. I felt like I was from out of space. An alien.

Then the voices would start. But as I became more alert I noticed how people were sabotaging my attempts to live a normal life. Whenever I tried to stop them doing it there would be aggro, then the police and back to the bin. It was a well-thought out plan they had, I'll give them that. The depression was worse though. It could put me in bed for weeks and then someone would find me. Those times I didn't mind going back to hospital. At least I got a good feed and a clean bed.

But those days are gone now and with it another type of exile. Exiled from society, while still in it. They closed the big hospitals and changed the system to community care. Some dopey, do good social workers thought it up I bet. A stay in hospital only lasts a couple of weeks now. They get you back on the drugs and boot you out to a hostel where they can keep an eye on you. Well at least some of the time because once you can walk out on the street what can they do? I got to say, 'though, that the short stay hospital is a lot more civilized than the bin even though it's full of crazies. There was no biff and no groping in the middle of the night, which was a blessed relief. I hated it and it reminded me of Dad's evening excursions.

So, here I am in the community. Mostly I am left alone as long as I keep out of the way. My psychiatrist was right. If I just don't get noticed I'll be alright. There are a lot of us out here not being noticed. And we hardly notice each other. Except when there is a fight or someone new moves in on another's turf. Can't get social security because they keep wanting to send you off for a job and I got no chance with everyone working against me and the voices. And if I take the medication I can't think and who wants a zombie working for them? So it's handouts, the soup kitchen and my part of the bridge. Getting a feed has got a lot harder now that some mongrel burned down the soup kitchen and the locals put up a stink about it being there and Council wouldn't let it be rebuilt. I bet the locals torched it. Bastards! Now we have to get to the outskirts of town and it's a bloody long walk. I only go every second day. It's just too far.

The voices have been really active lately and I can't bear it. You'd think I'd get used to it. Sometimes I manage to curl up go deep inside myself and the voices are somehow more bearable. If I don't move then everything seems to slow down. But eventually they come back with a vengeance. They've been really on to me this last week. How worthless I am. That it's hopeless. That I'm just dying inside and I may as well be dead now. Looking at this stinking, dripping bridge and the muddy puddles around my bed they are probably right. I scored a couple of foils today, for sex. Well, not what I'd call sex but they were happy and they didn't beat me which was a bonus.

Last night I had a vivid dream. I don't dream much because of the chatter in my head I guess and I hardly sleep anyway. But the dream was so real and I woke up crying, sobbing my heart out. I was curled up in a warm bed. It was a room that a little girl would sleep in. There were white curtains with pink frills and flower patterns. A mirror on a dressing table with knick-knacks, a large brush for her long hair, and a porcelain doll sat alongside a jewellery case. Soft toys were scattered around the room and the overflowing book case stood in the soft glow from the embroidered shade of the bedside lamp. It was so peaceful. I was curled in the arms of a woman. I could feel her softness. She was slowly, tenderly stroking my hair and gently kissing my forehead. Somehow she was telling me that everything was fine and that I was surrounded by love.