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Correspondence

Oor Loons

A Poem by Jean Marshall

Aa manner o loons got sent tae us.
They didn't hae a choice.
Brave loons we kent them as,
takkin their chances wi us
the unknown.

Emergency, short term, supposed tae be
and planned respite.
Regular weekend laddies
alang wi unexpected loons.

Beloved loons came in a cocoon,
self worth webbed through
the layers o their ain labelled luggage.
Cases carefully curated,
packed wi clean claes
beyond their needs and
wi familiar transitional attachments,
invisible umbilicals keepin them
fae driftin awa.

The broken an lost loons were the
laddies withoot luggage
but plenty o baggage.
Loons fa felt they never hid
a chance o being a 'beloved loon'.
Fa stood at wir door,
delivered wi a black bag,
nae case or robust container.
Black bag, black affronted.

A thin black plastic bag that rips like
the linin o yer hairt.
Far dis a black bag belong?



Metaphor, imagery, symbolism,
foo mony degrees tae decipher?
The loons a kent an felt it.
Black bag, black affronted.

Nae mair loons withoot luggage
It wis ruled and regulated.
Ower late for the loons
fa came thru oor door
wi aa their being in a black bag .
The loons fa felt themselves
tae hae been binned.
And fa cairy the feelin still.

Black bag, black affronted,
Abolished, consigned tae the past ?
Aye, luggage came wi oor last loon.
Cut loose and adrift ,
he arrived wi his regulated case.
Tagged wi a 'lost loon' label,
the case wis empty o attachment.
Nithin personal for touch or smell.
Nae even much claes or
a spare pair o sheen.

Years later I still mine that case.
It wisnae a banned black bag
but my feelings surface the same.
Black affronted, hairt sair and still
ful o deepest shame.

Poetry: Why?

The meaning of 'care' has been discussed and debated for as long as care has been organised and overseen by the state. As a foster carer I was part of the system, and later I was part of its governance through Alternative Family and Fostering and Adoption Panels. I have had plenty of opportunities over the years to feed back my reflections on policies, and I certainly hope I did so. Why then have I chosen now to construct a poem from my experiences?

I have discovered that poetry gives me a different voice from that used in the feedback forms, the reviews, the interviews. The language used then is the formal, the bureaucratic, the legalese and the academic.

In my poems, in contrast, I am using Aiberdonian/Doric and the language of emotion. Doric however is not the normal manner of my speech. I was brought up surrounded by family members who spoke Doric, but I was certainly firmly discouraged from its usage! I was sent to a school where only English was to be spoken and my family voiced their strong opinion that only by speaking 'proper' would I succeed in life.



For the time they were probably right, but I have felt over the years that I lost a lot of connection to my roots by having the language cut off from me. I think that feeling can resonate with others who have not just had language displaced but country as well. I now live outside the north-east of Scotland and I think that my use of the Doric is a response to missing hearing it spoken around me.

One of my first poems was my attempt to understand an event which probably was part of the foundation of my own decision to become a foster carer. My great grandmother, who I remember very well, was abandoned as a baby in the lodgings housing herself and her mother. Her mother went out one day and never returned. The year was 1871 and fortunately the woman whose house it was, kept her.

I found that writing a poem, *Speirin 1871*, focusing on the day of the abandonment and asking questions allowed me to engage with the event in a far more direct manner than a prose piece of writing. Through this process the Doric voice just came naturally to me.

This piece of commentary is partly a response to the question 'does writing poems help me to make sense of powerful emotions and help me highlight issues?' My answer is most definitely yes. I hope my poem regarding abandonment highlights the horrific choices women were often forced to make, and the consequences.

I hope my poem *Oor Loons* reflects my still strong emotions when I think about the poor state of arrival of some children who came into our care. I am writing here about boys who were already allegedly 'looked after'. I also hope it highlights the importance of 'good care' and what this can look like, as well as showing what obviously does not constitute even 'good enough' care.

Whilst we were fostering, I was fully immersed in family life, our fostering and my own full-time career. We had to give up fostering when my husband became terminally ill. Sometime afterwards I joined the Fostering and Adoption Panel, and a large part of my motivation was as a response to the boys who had in my view experienced inadequate care. Unfortunately, a large number of boys came from 'care' breakdowns. It was heartening for me to see at panel so many carers who demonstrated really high levels of very good care. They restored some faith for me in the system.

I have only now turned to writing myself. I think that the space in time between fostering and writing has maybe been beneficial in terms of allowing for greater reflection.

I still have my childhood poetry books, and those more up to date as well, and a love of reading. Although I did not specifically promote poetry for the boys we fostered I did very much try to encourage reading. From my own, at times, challenging childhood, I remembered how much of an escape, and positive



experience, an immersing piece of poetry or prose could provide. The Night Mail by WH Auden for example was a particular favourite.

I hoped that some of our boys could maybe find a reflection of their own emotions as well as insights into and routes to other lives, other worlds, through reading. Some of them did!

Poetry for me stems from feelings and expressing them. However, although I have ownership of the voice in the poem, I do not want to exploit the emotions of those most affected. What I write is what I felt and that came from what I saw, listened to and experienced.

Our first fostering experience was planned to last for three weeks and lasted 13 years. It cannot really be said to be finished even now. I have read the poem to my first 'loon' and I was anxious as to his response. I got a positive response in that he said that it expressed for him the shame involved and the loss of self-esteem.

I hope to continue writing as a means of quite therapeutic self-expression! I am grateful for the opportunity to share Oor Loons with journal readers. I hope it conveys not just my own feelings but opens a small route through which other folk can reflect on 'care' – particularly how important it is to get it right.

About the author

Jean Marshall worked in education and originally trained in social work. Now retired, she was a local authority foster carer for 13 years and subsequently an Adoption, Fostering, and Alternative Family Care Panel member.

Glossary

Loons/Laddies - Boys
Kent - Known
Claes – Clothes
Hid - Had
Hairt - Heart
Far - Where
Foo mony -How many
Fa - Who
Cairy- Carry
Black Affronted - Embarrassment or shame
Sheen - Shoes
Mine - Remember
Sair - Sore

