

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Buttermilk

by MaryPat Campbell

The inner door is almost always closed and often locked. Occasionally it's left open just a sliver. You can hear it's hinges creak loudly, but if it's just ajar, a bright ribbon of light can sometimes shine in, with a tantalising sense of what might lie beyond. Fantasies of escape, of running through the door, across the yard, over the gate and away to God knows where. Back home probably, if you have a home to return to, or even to remember.

My friend Jarvis, in his more lucid moments talks of fields and sunshine, of working outdoors, of getting thirsty from the heat and the long summer days of farm work. This ribbon of light gives his mind enough freedom to look beyond the noise and the clamour occasionally, and remember his life before he came here to Bedlam.

In those moments if we happen to be sitting next to each other, Jarvis and me, I ask him what it was like out there, while remembering my own past of labouring in the bell foundry. Occasionally he can listen and understand me. His eyes become soft then, less wild and staring as he remembers and shows me with his talk the pleasures of heat, of sun light or moonlight, the smell of wild flowers, blossoming trees, of cows and chickens, the sound of curlews and church bells in the distance, of walking barefoot through dry grassy fields.

I can almost accompany him then as I imagine the two of us striding out together across the fields, dandelions and daisies flattening under our feet as we go. Our shirt sleeves rolled back to reveal freckled, sunburned arms that swing in rhythm with our stride. We are young, strong and healthy from the heavy outdoor work.

“Buttermilk”, Jarvis said yesterday, as we sat musing like this in a moment of quiet that sometimes descends.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, a kind of sour, sweet tasting milk,” said Jarvis licking his lips as if tasting the buttermilk then and there. Suddenly the clatter returned and he was unable to continue.

Being a city lad, I had not heard of this buttermilk, although I know that butter is churned and made from raw milk. I imagined it lemony and cold on my tongue, refreshing.

A place like Bedlam can be thought of as the basis of all human fear, I thought. A closed door, left ajar on the other hand gives us hope, especially those of us like Jarvis and me who have lived here many years and will likely grow old here.

The ribbon of light gives us a chance to imagine, or remember if there are memories good enough to remember, and if there are not, it provides freedom to imagine all that is good and possible in the world. Who knows if my friend Jarvis or I would survive if we ever had the luck or the wits to escape. The fields grow and flower in our minds, and give us daily nourishment, like the buttermilk.