

Justin

By Gary Robinson

My friend, Justin, went to a place in Ottawa where poets go to have their poems and vanity judged, usually by a smaller crowd, either bored or in a foul humour. Sometimes both. Justin must have sensed they were out for blood when he began to read.

The poem wasn't that bad. It just meandered too much, as though Justin couldn't make up his mind. It started out as a bleak commentary on the human condition but staggered through several non-related themes only to end up as a surrealistic description of a breakfast he'd eaten! He had been writing like this for a while.

Justin's poetry typically mirrored his life: whenever one suffered so did the other. He was very ill and bedridden not long, and as if in commiseration his poetical flame (his description) refused to burn or even glow while he convalesced (or so he claimed, then delirious and off the wall).

He had tried a number of stimulants to kick start a creative spell: alcohol, drugs, even prostitutes (ridiculous in my view). There was desperation in him now, which you never saw before. He had lost the motivation to sit down and put something on paper or his laptop unless compelled by a drinking binge or an evening of cocaine. But, with fine irony, Justin's Muse only appeared when he was insensible and unable to write. By the time he had recovered any ideas were gone.

A mania overtook him. He sought inspiration anywhere like a man dying of thirst in a desert digs madly for water. He'd listen slavishly to music of all kinds: blue grass, rock and roll, rap, even Gregorian chants! Then there was a religious leap into Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. He poured through them to find some primeval spark. Yet nothing helped. He sank more and more.

That was when he stumbled onto the one thing which had so far eluded his imagination. Over beer he asked me to name what every person fears? I shrugged. Death, he answered, the source of all artistic struggle (his words). He framed it in terms of a battle. He said the artist battles to keep Death away. Out of his creative space. Naturally in the long run he fails but only if you don't see the bigger picture. In a sense the true artist and his work gain a measure of immortality. But the important consideration was that without Death's nudge you really can't persevere, and it was Death that would rekindle his drive (an absurdity which wasn't the problem but I couldn't bring myself to tell him).

He went on, almost feverish. He also confessed to being in debt to a drug dealer: he had bought on credit and had to figure out a way to prevent his legs from getting broken - or worse. I left him, disturbed.

The poems became darker, more brooding, but the overall quality was unchanged. Whether he was aware, who can say? Maybe he viewed himself and his poems as in transition.

The evening Justin read one of his new poems and realized something wasn't right, he didn't stay to talk. Was he confused and trying to understand what happened? Maybe he was thinking he only needed more time with Death (his Muse) to work out the rough spots. I don't know.

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What I do know is that my friend walked to an intersection not far away, crossed on a red light without looking, and was struck and killed by a speeding van.

Bio:

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