**Dictionary Keeper**

“When a word is born, every new word, it is written down and recorded. There is a man who writes it. Inks it in a leather book, with an explanation of its meaning. When a book is filled, another begins, and so it goes. It is usually a man, and the role continues, like the words. The books are secured in a huge old stone building, in an ancient University or Parliament, dark wooden vaulted beams and dusty leaded windows, floor and walls thick with dust. His job is to make, or show, or capture, or record, a new word every day or so. He is The Dictionary keeper. Hardly anyone knows.

I am being considered for the job of the person who keeps the records of the person who documents The Dictionary keeper’s observations about documenting each new word. I am a step or two removed. After writing down the word and its explanation, he writes down something later, something brief, about the meaning of that word coming into the world, or how he felt when documenting it, or else someone else writes a brief summary of how he was and how it seemed to fit. Kind of like a temporal observation of its birth, and the context into which it is born, and what its existence might signify. Not the meaning of the word, but the meaning of the word’s being there at all.

I am being considered for the role of keeping these records of why words exist, or how they were felt or welcomed, or what was thought at the moment after their birth.”

The old building is bigger than a cathedral, more like a stone-built aircraft hangar with some supporting wooden beams hundreds of years old. Floor and walls are thick with grey dust, and the cobbled floors slope and dip as if fitting the land, which must have moved since it was built. I am given a heavy leather book. When I take it I feel embossed ridges along the hard leather spine. It is open at the page of a new word’s recording, perhaps not today’s as its inked note is a little faded. The pages are in a rough paper, in a drab brown the colour of tea and rice husks, and the pages are lined, which surprises me. The lines are in a thin-printed green that has become perhaps paler now than the paper. The writing looks like it was done confidently with a thick fountain pen. I have to take it somewhere.

There is a name for this place, or what we do. They mentioned it. CSD or CFD, or SFD…? Walking through the rooms and corridors, I try to remember it. “…The dictionary keeper of the Masters, Saints or Scholars…”? No. “…The Chancellor, Scholars and… something”, but none of it fits, as I walk fast among cement-stone walls, so dusty there is a haze in the air. Heading for where the book is to be stored. Around a corner, a man is with me. I am outside, at a doorway at night in lamplight, beside railings with some green grass tufting through as I look down. The man is to my right and a little behind me as I turn. He is in a robe, hooded and head bowed, rather like a monk. In the lamplight I can only see his chin. We walk swiftly along orange-glow silent streets, the cobbles all rounded, smooth and dark, and wet from recent rain, then into a large open circular room or turret, where a lady sits on the floor, in the centre of cobbles laid in concentric rings. She is lit from above, like the smoothed stones around her, from high windows’ moonlight. It seems like this is part of a long induction or interview or test, to see if I should get the role of keeper of this level of records of the first discovery of words.

We join her.

In the monochrome of shadows and moonlight, seats have been brought, soft sofas in something like thin corduroy, barely dusty, and almost black like the cobbles and all around. White glints off the tall silverwork curves of the elaborate tea carafe. I accept a glass of clear tea. They talk, quite quietly in this air that absorbs, as an un-needed silent observer, to learn and see. She is the Queen. There are two others here, plus me. Some sit closer. Spoken phrases move this way and that, with elegance in their play of purpose, and the silvery light falling on shifting robes seems to fall also on what is said, and how it is heard and listened, absorbed and reflected upon.

This moment of sharing… They brought me here with eyes and ears to give me a glimpse of how the endeavour of words weaves through minutes and centuries, through politics and states beyond parties. Maybe also to show the Queen a new prospective employee. Not for her to decide upon, but because the ongoing play includes, sometimes, gently showing the Queen that efforts are always made. Reassuring everyone that tiny changes still occur consciously, in selecting the capacity of people who support and think in the tiniest parts of this work of society. I do not understand much of it, so much is in nuance and prior knowledge. But some makes sense enough to have an opinion.

Quite soon, without anyone leaving any pause enough to invite my thoughts, I insistently interrupt as she is speaking. They stop, not pleased, and then their listening yields nods. I feel better. If this is a test, they should look for someone who shows that they know their existence matters, and who will speak up when necessary.

That assertion works both ways. We need to test them too. A role which does not accept your presence, is not a role to be in.

Moonlight on sleeves and shoulders, and on spoken phrases. Its silver shimmer is sharper than the bright light of day, and more illuminating. When light is scarce, it picks forms, mostly in black and white - as words do, and similarly ever changing.

As we leave I realise she is called ‘Queen’ not because she rules but because she draws people together.

I am with another senior, or the same one, and we are in a central city street at night, near a chap with a metallic pale blue Bentley convertible, with the black hood up, parked outside a huge department store. This is someone else I am supposed to meet. He is young with a well shaped short black curly beard, and bright eyes, a deeper blue than his Bentley, in a thin blue suit. He looks slightly Greek or Lebanese. I am a little wary of his wealthy confidence and how his slightly cheeky eyes suggest to me that he might enjoy causing pain.

We are under kovid rules, so should make minimal contact – I have not touched or been touched by anyone so far – and I am surprised when he offers a hand, with some insistency in his broad shouldered manner. And it is an open hand, though he did initially gesture a fist-bump. I accept, and he draws me in for a hug, which is tight and very close. He pulls our necks together. In this hold, he kisses me on the right cheek, as if it is custom, and I feel his wet breath, like sweat and nervousness. There’s a sensation in my right cheek like a scratch or pin. It’s near the corner of my jaw. I can’t tell if it’s real. He lets go and we separate. He seems a tiny bit flustered, like he’s changed from around a hundred times the self-confidence and potency of the average human, to around ninety-nine and a half. No-one else would have seen anything, or this subtle change. And I’m kind of wondering if it’s an effect of the poison. He steps back, stooped forward a touch, like a slightly fatigued boxer with more strength ready for the next bout, shaking himself. That was it, no more words. Apparently that is the end of the transaction.

Walking away, with the senior fellow who introduced us, my fellow mutters “It's off of him to wear lipstick. Or odd. It’s as if it's to incriminate you.”…to stop you getting the job by leaving a bit of lipstick on your face, to be seen as a transgressor in these times of kovid. I can fill in the rest of his thoughts, but…

I’m puzzled.

My jaw still feels the pin-prick, and maybe aches a bit. So many poisons freeze the muscles first. But my fellow, in the monk’s habit, didn’t see that I got punctured. The guy was very handsome, and clearly wasn’t wearing lipstick, and would not do so, unless I’m missing something. I say “Was he wearing lipstick? I didn't notice.” I touch my cheek, to rub it off in case it’s real, and to see if I can see any lipstick on my fingertips. Rubbing my jaw feels better. I look at my fingers. There are tiny droplets of thin blood, watery and pale.

It looks like I have been poisoned. Maybe, in some battle of worldviews, part of the interview is to find out whether the enemy would tolerate me. Best not recruit someone who the enemy would not approve of. I wonder how long I have to live.

Then I wonder if this is the real target. This fear. The poison is a smokescreen. The test is really about my fears and imagination. It could have been an act, to make we wonder all of this. Are they both in on it? Is it a test to see how panicked I will get when my life may be threatened. To test if I can recognise real and fake dangers, and how I will act. The guy with the Bentley is a very good actor.

I feel safe. I feel as though, by declaring this truth to be the more beautiful truth, that is how it is. Passing the test of self-conviction.

Back in the building, huge and dusty, I am walking again over the cobblestone floor, and I reach where I believe I should store the book with its catalogue. It’s an underground storage room that I had been looking for. I approach at an angle. The room is large, no sense of roof or ceiling, and it slopes downwards, open on the side opposite me, all expansive, with the left wall nearby about fifteen feet away. The opposite wall is mostly absent, and cluttered with metalwork, as if there is a lower floor beyond and some way below, and this is some sort of balcony overlooking a load of deep work nearer the centre of the earth. To my right, the long part of the room slopes down, away. To my left there are some huge old painted radiators and pipework. If you can call this space a room, most of the floor is open, with boards lifted and long-gone, to leave, between the beams, storage gaps which slope away like long rows of a ploughed field. All is dusty. Each row is a stride wide, and all are full, with small gaps, like shuffling books on a shelf.

Some of it – frankly, a lot of it – doesn’t look like books. There are books up top left, and along the far rows, but the stuff nearby looks like CDs and videos cassettes, and big bags for holding stuff that carries perhaps less dignity than the origins of words. It’s plastic cases for videotapes and books, like regular books.. and a load of lines of old CDs. What has someone been storing here? I dig into it, and find bag after bag of copies of an old VHS video of something inexplicable, that might be a music video or a lecture or even home family recordings. And the CDs are all old, like in a market stall or charity shop.

Loads of the videos are the same. Many copies. The jacket is brown card, all printed in a surprisingly modern style. There are diagrams like circuit board art, and wording in modern fonts, stacks of red-ink versions or green. Unsold copies or promos in VHS format. A predecessor in this role has tried to become famous, spread their own word. And gathered CD’s, which if not at home and played, look like they were intended to flog. I’ll need to get all these things out of here.

Someone quite posh from the Uni, a senior student I think, looking into the video pit, says “I can’t believe they’re considering re-releasing ROAR.” Another replies “but it was rather good”. It appears that the previous custodian, or one of the previous custodians, made a song while he worked here, or a short film a video track, with a load of accompanying talk and explanations. They had tried to release it, and maybe even had launched their tune in some way, but without the massive success they had wanted.

So now I have a load of someone’s un-used “ROAR” videos, and old CDs, to get rid of before I can use this space. I could take all this stuff home, but that would be a lot of storage space. I could maybe flog the CDs, if they’re any good. As I unzip the large bags of storage, in padded nylon, blue and white, dust rises, and I step among the rows, opening more storage cases and bags, with the real old books all along the far edge, lined up in dust-ploughed hard leather.

I stand there, looking down at this jumble, like an abandoned garden of what was then and now – an indoor cathedral field of dust to sort out so that I can maybe store records of what things meant when they first happened. And around it, the muddled jungle of metal pipes and huge old radiators…. clanking away. The heating system making distant gut noises. It doesn’t work. They put it in years ago, as some kind of industrial-revolution monolith mycelium, spreading its iron pipes through this ancient structure, and now it’s here, kind of part of it all, sometimes crunching and clanking, and presumably soaking up coal or oil or something, somewhere in the depths. A big furnace with elves and orcs, shovels in orange-red silhouette, if you can find them. But we can prove it doesn’t work. no matter how high it is cranked up, there is never more than a 2 degree change anywhere. When powering the heating system, where does it go? And I think – or the words flow through me, “Deus ex machina”, god in the machine.

Just then someone comes up half-behind me, a man quite monastic, robe of brown, and partly shaven head, quiet in his early middle age, authoritative, and a servant to greater causes. He stops behind me for the briefest moment, then walks away, back the way he came. As if I should follow. I follow a bit, not sure, towards the huge open room, and he stops and makes a very faint gesture that, yes, I should follow. It feels like this is the start of the interview, the selection process to see if I am the right choice. Or another part of the whole test. As it gets closer to me being me, I think that I will need to work out what the job is, what it really means. They want me to understand the role’s significance and place, and what is needed or expected from its holder. I want to know that too. A serious question, which I have to answer.

We head up the cobbles into the open area, where the congregation will happen soon. Towards the far side, under huge windows like a cathedral, all coated with dust that filters light into this stony place of dust air. He stops, and there are other people, similar, around the floor ready to go in and take their places. I hear muttering, and the air holds a little of the movements of their feet as it all gets ready to begin – while he and I stand and talk. This spot in the room is probably his designated place. I do not yet know if I have a place. He quietly talks. Then I head back up the slight incline and the storage room, huge and cavernous with pipes and open boards and dusty dark wood beams.

In a smaller room, with an arched doorway, a man approaches. I sort of recognise him. He is probably Italian. He is referred to, by a couple of other people nearby, and I know it is the previous holder. An artist, around 50, curly bearded, in a robe, hands together, with a tie-cord rope around his monk’s habit waist. Sort of cheeky for a monk. I wonder if it is him who tried to release ROAR, Falco Amadeus. He is a revered artist, though I do not know what he has done lately, or before either. It seems like this is an artist’s job. An artist’s gig. Part of the requirement is to be creative, to achieve the outputs or the conversations or conversions or comprehension that is sought, or the way to explain it, or to express it. In one of the books I see that, in the most recent entries, the descriptions were drawings on old paper. Not writing. Dark ink sketches, staring into figures of ink, deep blue-black lines and dark emerald green, and rich dark red… on dark paper with lines, rather like Blake visions, but these are daily lights, in a huge old school workbook. To mention how it was and how it felt. The contributor of these drawings was a woman, with some seriousness and some creative humour. I like how she shifted the narrative from written prose sentences to a single drawing, sometimes with written words accompanying it. Explaining how words fit into the world, by using an image.

It starts to make sense. Words reflect that time is not linear. This role is a part of it all. Words are not made in a line of time going from the *Past* to *Now* to *Future*. All times interweave and word together at the same time.

We have the Dictionary Keeper, who creates each new word, or observes it, and records what it means. Every new word is created or recorded *now*. The Dictionary Keeper records each word *now* to be used in many more *future* moments of *now*, based on the *past*. Each word is to be used in the *future*, often to describe the *past*. We make words from the past, but also from a future that we imagine will need them, and in doing so we create that future. The future exists now. The past that exists now is a different past to how it will be in the future, because the future will see and describe it differently. So with the making of new words, we shape the future and the past. The person who writes, or draws, about the significance of the birth of each new word, also holds the *future* in the *now*., and makes that now from a past which has partly been made by the projected future, which exists. The person who keeps the records of those records, which is this role, holds that *past*, for the *future*. All words are an image of thought or form, drawing from a *past* which is made partly with the words being created.

All times exist in each other. In all of this, everything is made. All times are among us, as is everything.

I realise it is not cold. Or maybe I just feel warm. And it occurs to me that, when I stood with the man in the wide open room, under tall windows in dust, it should have felt cold. ‘Deus ex Machina’. God in the machine. The heating system does not work in the physical world, but maybe its existence or intention causes warmth. “Normal” and “Metal” are words that ring through the huge wrought pipework of the machine. The hum of “Normal” is the echo of things we didn’t make. Forms which were here before us. “Metal” is the ring of things which are industrial, made with purpose, by people wishing to convert Normal’s raw ingredients into a banquet. Yet often in opposition to what was there. We think that “Normal” and “Metal” cannot be one another. The birth of words has this same quality, enclosing thoughts and sounds which in older worlds had meanings and connections broader than the intentions of our harness.

Here in the buildings which house and protect the records of all words, with the constructed existence of a heating system which does not work, the air is warm. If it is not the Metal which makes us warm, it may be the natural Normal of the place underneath, which knows what we want, and silently makes warmth for us, or at least makes us feel warm. This vast intrusion of industry in a sacred place. Radiators and heavy pipework into the land of us, and of gods. Deus ex Machina, we are in warmth. We have also brought in commerce, through layers of plastic media, which go unsold, among pipework which does not heat us. Inflicts and stains. These are things we could worry about, and also be thankful that the Normal world is forgiving.

* Words keep coming into being. The book never stops

Part of this role, if I have a role here, is to speak of God, and to see god, and to speak what you see.

This realisation is truth, however it is not the full truth of this place. Being a dictionary keeper is that, and more. The tests have been placed to let me see that, every day, grand truths may become graspable or describable, while more truths presumably begin to grow. In the short time that I have been here, each realisation has seemed like an increasingly encompassing lesson. Yet this is normal for any day or moment in this vast stony place. There is never a whole truth. Every test, and every realisation will tell you so. It is as if truths are foundations, and every great truth is a foundation for further truths. And so, through time, they grow like layers. Like the pages of a book. In the depths of this place, books pile higher as lower layers gradually return to earth.

We feel this in our guts and eyes and blood. No matter how much we touch the stone, look through the murky the windows, and smell the pages, our words capture a mere fraction of wealth of a planet and a civilisation.

Words are silver mines, or graphite mines, or the discovery of ceramics, or a tool to cut trees and lines in earth where seeds grow. Words are tools to describe, in one way, some parts of the world and how it changes. They cannot encompass all of it. To fill in the gaps, and enlighten further, we make more words. What do the words mean? What do the origins of these words mean? What do they say of where we are, where we have been, and where we are going? I record it, in ink, blood, stone.

Metal pipes clang loudly again, rattling in some language, maybe. While beneath the building the books of the words of the world return to earth, to regrow as trees and animals, and become paper and leather bindings. I take up the next book, and prepare ink for tomorrow.

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