

# **CRPLA ESSAY PRIZE - COVER SHEET**

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The flat screen televisions in the window of *Symposium Hi-Fi* seemed to be displaying a snow blizzard. Passers-by took the hint and passed by. In any case, business of late had been somewhat quiet. Connor had been sitting at the till for most of the morning, but there had been no-one to serve. Heaven only knew how JJ managed to keep the place going. Still, it was a nice earner for Connor: five pounds an hour, cash in hand. As casual summer jobs went, you could hardly ask for more. Every few seconds, a tall electric fan in the corner made a little 'tut' as it changed direction. Connor's twenty-fifth summer was being quietly clicked away.

A sudden shout made Connor turn to look out the window. The dustbin men were making a collection, but something was wrong with their lorry. Like a whale, the giant hulk seemed to have beached at an odd angle on the pavement just outside the shop. One of the men was jacking up the front while another was trying to peer under the engine hood. The driver was becoming increasingly agitated inside the cabin. He seemed to be repeatedly pulling a lever, but to no obvious effect. The large mechanical claw moving inside the back of the vehicle kept on groping and groaning as a swarm of flies hovered around the back of the vehicle, and the pungent smell of refuse wafted into the shop.

Connor remembered with a dull tightening in his stomach that he was still waiting to hear his exam results. They were supposed to have been announced weeks earlier, but there had been some kind of administrative delay. Nobody was quite sure what the problem was. The marking criteria had been changed at the last minute. And then a computer failure at the bank had prevented some of the markers from being paid. Some of the unpaid markers, in turn, had decided to go on strike. Connor harboured a vague hope that the confusion would work in his favour, that in all the chaos his faltering, panicky answers would be given the benefit of the doubt, that the deep aporia in his understanding of Sartre, Husserl, and Scheler, not to mention the fault lines in his knowledge of Joyce, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare,

would somehow be overlooked. For all he knew, the results had that very morning been pinned onto the philosophy notice-board at the university – there was a rumour that they would be. But there had been too many such rumours in recent weeks, and Connor's expectations had been dulled. No longer did he rise early in these sunny summer mornings and cycle in from Royal Leamington Spa to the department to see if the results were up. He only knew one person who did.

Connor glanced at one of the TVs in the shop and noticed that the picture had returned. It showed the familiar green trapezium of Wimbledon's centre-court. Perhaps play was resuming after the rain delay. But as he turned up the volume he realised they were showing a replay of a match from the nineteen-eighties. The commentator, a reedy voiced English gentleman of the old school, had been dead for twenty years. A youthful John McEnroe was glaring at the umpire. The umpire moved closer to the microphone and intoned slowly, "Code violation, Mr. McEnroe, I am awarding you a penalty point". "Oh, thank you very much", said McEnroe. The crowd started whistling, trying to goad McEnroe further. The commentator explained that if the match went to five sets there would be no tie-break in the final set. In theory, therefore, the match could go on for ever. It was, Connor decided, a very English form of torture.

Connor heard JJ's Irish tones piercing the commotion outside.

"High long are you going to be stuck here?"

The men shrugged and exhaled cigarette smoke, one gesturing toward the engine, another pointing to a mobile phone held to his ear. JJ looked to the heavens and stormed into the shop.

"Unbelievable." he said to Connor. "High are we supposed to sell anything with that monster sitting outside?"

JJ was about twice Connor's age, about twice Connor's width, and had been divorced, as far as Connor could gather, about twice. Apparently JJ's first wife had informed him that he didn't talk enough, his second wife that he talked too much, and an ex-girlfriend that he didn't say the right things. Connor's view on the subject of relationships was that the single life was under-rated. JJ had agreed with this but said it was an unfashionable view to hold.

The smell from the truck was getting worse. Initially it had seemed to Connor sickly sweet, something like rotting apples and pears. Now it was becoming baser, more bodily, more putrid. Connor was almost beginning to gag when JJ marched quickly into the little back office and closed the door.

Perhaps it was an effect of the strong odour, but Connor was beginning to feel light-headed, even strangely detached from his situation. How marginal this little summer job now seemed. He got on well with JJ, but there was an implicit understanding between them that Connor was aiming for grander things. Connor had been offered a job at a small London-based educational publisher called Perry & Son. But the offer was conditional upon him gaining at least a lower second class degree, something which he knew was now very much in the balance. His trip to London for the interview had awakened him to how different his life might soon become. The atmosphere in that glass and steel office by the Thames had been cool, sterile, air-conditioned. The receptionist had seemed as pretty as a plastic flower. After his interview he had taken a stroll along the river, past the HMS Belfast, then crossed over to St. Paul's Cathedral where he had gone inside with some Japanese tourists, found a quiet seat on a bench and flicked dreamily through the Perry & Son annual report that he had been handed by the receptionist as a kind of parting gift.

Outside *Symposium Hi-Fi*, a gentle June drizzle was beginning to descend. Connor always liked walking in the rain, and he needed some fresh air. Stepping out into the warm mist, he opened his umbrella and allowed himself to drift down the Parade. He enjoyed the

smell of moisture coming off the road. The Saturday milieu was strangely subdued by the rain. For once, it seemed that no children were screaming, no ice-creams were being dropped, and no family rows were breaking out. Most of the people had not thought to bring an umbrella, and were happy to let the warm rain soak their T-Shirts and summer tops, happy to let it sprinkle their hair and their arms. Connor enjoyed the anonymity of being swept along, the unspoken fellow-feeling that sometimes animates a crowd. Before long he took down his umbrella and let the rain soak him too. He took his glasses off and let the warm drops run down his face, down his arms and hands, down the back of his neck.

When Connor reached the gates of Jephson Gardens he noticed that his phone was vibrating inside the breast pocket of his shirt. No doubt it was JJ, wondering where he was. Connor ignored it and headed up to the botanical garden. When he reached the large greenhouse he pushed his way in and climbed the iron staircase to gain a better view of the park. His glasses steamed up as soon as he put them on, making him take them off again and wipe them with his handkerchief. When he could see more clearly, he pulled out his phone and found that there was condensation building up on the inside of the display. Through the condensation he could just make out a message.

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bobby got a 2.2 fritz got a 2.1 wang  
got a 1st bulb got a 3rd jp got a  
pass schmidt got a 1st piggy got a  
1st anna got a 2.1 i got a pass u got  
a 3rd mwiwa got a 2.1 nakasone got a  
2.2 shazia got a 2.2
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At least he hadn't failed. Somehow the view across the park seemed to soften the blow. There was something about its givenness that made Connor thankful. It was as though the whole of nature was a gift. It seemed miraculous that there should be trees in the world bearing fruit, or herbal remedies. How strange that the universe should care for humans in

this way; that there should be sentient animals on the ground; that there should be creatures soaring in the air and inhabiting the ocean; that a river should flow its sinuous course and provide a conduit for the transport of goods. It struck him as remarkable that stores and warehouses could be filled with the goods that people needed; that the earth should contain minerals and precious metals; that mountains should exist in their immensity; that diamonds should be so perfect under the microscopic gaze: complexity within endless complexity. Connor could see a couple looking into the window of De Beers. Their closeness at that moment was unambiguous, univocal, transparent. He saw the Parade rise up to the north with its quiet flow of traffic. The mighty uni-bus looked like a toy. How many hundred times had he sat inside it? The white shop frontages gleamed and shimmered in the wet road. He saw the Leam flowing under the iron bridge, Canada geese on the water, and graceful swans gliding on the pond. How strange it was to think that beneath the surface a whole different world of life and survival was taking place. He saw willow trees, redwoods, giant oaks, cedars, cherry blossom, litten trees, labernum, ash, and pine. Chilled out students, exams behind them, played football nonchalantly in the rain, some more gracefully than others. Connor was happy for them, and marvelled at how the water sprayed off their ball spinning in the air.

Perhaps it was time to go back to work. The boss would be wondering where he was. It would be warmer inside *Symposium Hi-Fi*. The tie-break which had begun twenty-five years earlier might just be playing out. Connor could not remember who would win.

When Connor got back to the shop, the dustbin lorry was gone and JJ was sitting in the back office smoking a cigarette.

“I won’t be going to London after all,” said Connor. “I didn’t get a 2.2 but I’ve got a degree. How about that?”.

“Congratulations,” said JJ. “If someone had told you before you started it that you would pass the degree, would you have settled for that?”

“I suppose so,” conceded Connor, as he opened the door of a little refrigerator sitting on the floor, and pulled out a can of cider.

“What made you do it in the first place?” said JJ.

Connor took a large mouthful of cider and sank down into a leather car seat that had been made into a swivel chair.

“About five years ago I was working nights stacking shelves down at ASDA. Something wasn’t right. I was sleeping during the day, but when it was time to go to work I couldn’t seem to get out of bed. All I could think of was the next thirty years stretching out in front of me and I couldn’t see any meaning in it. It was as though I was being overtaken by something. I don’t know what it was. A tiredness and a sadness all mixed up together.”

JJ said, “I dare say that our feelings do sometimes inform us of what is true.”

“The logic of the heart?”

“You got it. It’s not something to be denied. You know, I used to think death was like falling off a cliff. Now I think it’s more like walking down into a valley. It’s happening all the time. There’s two sides to it. In the midst of life we are in death, and in the midst of death we are in life. It’s the tide of things.”

“The tide of things,” said Connor, “If I’m not mistaken, that’s Wordsworth.”

“You knew that, and they couldn’t give you a 2.2?”

“It doesn’t mean I deserve a 2.2,” said Connor, “It means I should be on *Millionaire*.”

“Way back in the eighties, I wanted to be a millionaire.” said JJ, “Then I started feeling a bit odd. The business was going down-hill and I was about to go bankrupt. I figured I needed a change of scenery so I withdrew what was left in the company’s trading account flew out to the far east for a little holiday and went looking for this little niche supplier of amplifiers and

musical instruments that I had read about in an old hi-fi magazine that I had dug out from my attic. When I got to their little warehouse outside Yokohama it was all closed down. There was a sign up saying 'To Let'. On my way back home I popped into the airport shop looking for some duty free and a pulp novel to read on the flight. It was only after I had boarded the plane that I realised that what I had assumed was a horror story was actually *The Dead* by James Joyce."

JJ stood up and ran his finger along the short bookshelf above his head. Sure enough, in amongst the paperbacks by Stephen King and James Herbert, he still had the slim pamphlet that he had picked up in Tokyo airport. He opened it up and began to read aloud.

*Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.*

JJ handed Connor the book, sat down again, and lit up a cigarette. The pair sat in silence for a long time.

"I need to sleep", said Connor.

JJ said, "What do you think Joyce meant when he said 'His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead'?"

Connor thought for a while before replying, "If I knew the answer to that, I would have a better degree."

"And if you couldn't say for sure?" said JJ.

"That wouldn't matter too much. I would just need an idea – something more than mere feeling."



JJ laughed and said, “I have a mere feeling that I need to go to Dublin next week to meet a supplier. Can you mind the shop for me? You never know, a customer might walk through the door.”

Connor gave JJ a double thumbs-up and walked out the shop.

Outside, the summer drizzle was still floating gently down. Connor was ready for another walk in the rain, so he set off on foot down the Parade towards Sydenham. After about a mile, Connor felt the familiar weariness come down on him, the strange mix of sadness and tiredness that he couldn't seem to shake off. He paused at the next bus stop with a group of shoppers, pulled out *The Dead* from his breast pocket, and began to read it carefully from the start. It wasn't too long before a vast uni-bus pulled up and swept him home.

### *Bibliography*

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