

***When Mi Was A Youth I Used To Run Up And Down Playing Cowboy:
A Story Of Cannabis-Induced Psychosis***

Miguel Cullen

Schizophrenia comes pretty low down on the offensive words index, but to me it's a curse word, if you'll pardon my American. Aesthetically, to me it implies a swarm of insects, the buzz of that fateful 'z' – the inside word 'schiz', like the *schism* I learnt about in GCSE Divinity, feels like an infected cleaver wound sliced through the 'phren'. And that trailing ending – 'ia' – the endings medical conditions have, adds a feeling of unsewn-ness, of gammy stitches trailing surgical string, stinking, the final fly in the congealing ointment, implying reinfection or worse, and always the 'zzz-ing' noise of insects.

Some of the first cannabis I smoked was hash; 'hot rocked' was a phrase I was delighted to add to my slang, once a friend noticed the burnt plastic on my rayon bowling jacket (blame Cecil Gee). Soon we were rolling Gatling Guns (with a four-roach bouquet instead of the solo one), using the now-extinct Red Rizla Kings. At Eton (my school) a Popper (prefect), wearing his Mizuno trackies low over his high jockeys, would take a break from smashing the reds on the snooker table to fish a bag of skunk out of his pocket and complain, languorously, about being skanked for a ten-bag by a

friend called Devereux – his casually (expellable offence) thrown-down quibble was alluring for a 14 -year-old.

According to lore, weed and the hard stuff was rife in my first year at school, 1995; the fourth-floor attic (D-floor) another world, that housemasters would avoid for fear of having to expel the whole of B-block. I also heard tell of a stoned boy – in the year 2000, I'd left – dangling a cocky 13-year-old by his ankle from that attic window: a bull's-eye. Anyhow, the safer remove of London was my smoking place – rewinding to 1999 – an exciting place of parties, and after a while I had a weed-induced solution to my teen angst – à la Kevin Spacey in the film *American Beauty*, where smoking weed went hand-in-hand with working out – and many of my anxieties seemed to hurt less. I was blissed out, I was learning the sitar... blossoming, losing weight and engaging in homoerotic rapprochements with former enemies – the joke at the time being that you would get expelled for being caught with a girl, but suspended for being with a guy.

And, while all this horseplay – the weed plied to gain sitar-induced nirvana, the gender-bender curiosities that school cosily incubated – continued, all was as it was, but once I left, the big wide world seemed to conspire against me. There seemed to be a kind of taper that would flare in the oxygen after boarding school, something that no longer had the brick boundary of being institutional. Lighting up made for a combustible atmosphere on planet Miguel some time in his Gap Year. The world was something that I was not prepared for.

My thinking became a bit more distorted, but still with the amiable what-seemed-like-foam-feel of weed allowing me to cloud-step over any gaping holes in my confidence or knowledge, in my hang-ups. I remember having discussed 'the language within language' in the writing of García Márquez

with my Oxbridge-prep tutor, and he would understand. But I ended up not giving the exams a go, because...

A chemical reaction, in my brain (dopamine depletion), toxified my thinking. What seemed like a soft-play of weed lucidity would seem to ebb away out of my hands – lifeline-imprinted snow becoming water. My higher state of consciousness was a mixture of blooming intuition and 'false lucidity' engendered by cannabis, and once what felt 'intact' in this false lucidity cleared, the dopamine ran away. I would not trust my intuition again (who would?) until I was older. My mind, like a poisoned tree, began to die back.

For, in the days after my first 'florid psychotic break', the normal mind-routes that had played such a core role began to clench, crackle, and then break apart, like an old-school *Mission: Impossible* message. In terms of how frightening it feels, it was like driving with a fuel tank that's leaking petrol onto the road, a road that catches fire, and dies behind you, while the real world's carrying on past you, moving its lips, but you can't hear what it's saying.

One night in October, at my parents' in London, I was finishing my UCAS Personal Statement, and began to feel strange. I left at 7am, unslept, to visit an ex-girlfriend who lived in Oxford. Feeling out of myself, I walked to Victoria Coach Station and got on an Oxford-bound National Express coach. I was stressing, feeling weird, for no apparent reason. Agitated, I got off quickly at Marble Arch or Notting Hill Gate (can't remember) and took (switching lines, eating an orange, scared at myself by this time) the tube to Waterloo, where I forced (or was it an alter-ego daring me?) myself to attempt, somehow, to jump on the Eurostar to Paris. (In Seine? Perhaps.) The first gauntlet I had to run was buying a ticket, when I only had 20 quid. I bumped into the brother of a friend of mine in the Eurostar terminal and

tried to get him to swap his ticket for my Minidisc player. He said (obviously) no, so then after scouring pawn shops I thought I'd blag it past the barriers as I was used to doing on the Tube at the time (I know, incorrigible scallywag). After a chase, in which I remember I hurdled one of those zippy airport cordons in my Merrell Slip ons, trendy at the time (I can still remember the snapshot of my shoe at the barrier), I was arrested, cautioned and they couldn't believe I hadn't been taking drugs (I hadn't). They called home to my parents and released me.

I walked home, along the Victoria Embankment, and had a moving meeting with my dad, who'd gone out to clear his head on his bike. He played it cool, and I had so many things going on in my head and felt so scared, I didn't know how to tell him.

Anyhow, life goes on. I would (still) do the strangest things. I went to live in Argentina, and worked as a gaucho on a farm. I would leave cryptic signals for an insinuatingly seductive gaucho's wife, which so angered said gaucho he brandished a *facón* (a gaucho knife) at me whilst we were disemboweling a cow, saying '*Es mia!*'.

On the Pampas, there were also imaginary mealtime battles I devised with the head-honcho gaucho's slightly touched brother (but then, I was slightly touched, too), who had a gummy, wheezy laugh he would deploy at my moments of weakness. Maybe we were communicating on a mental illness level. I ended up running around – though I can't remember – naked, or in soiled, ripped New & Lingwood boxer shorts from school, and was sent to a lovely Argentine shrink. It was she who gave me a beautiful cocktail of tranquilisers, some of which I still take.

The past is another country, and the shameful trail of my mental illness finally ended with me back in London. Grieving is a long process after a psychotic break. There was a lot of rage – no one warned me! – at my mother, that I only caught sight of later: the in-out-in-out matter of who or what is your mother. Home is your mother. Boarding school is your mother. Then suddenly... that's all over, mate, no more sitar. No one is your mother. It was a kind of in-outness that has characterised my own role as a father.

'When mi was a youth I used to run up and down playing cowboy', sang Barrington Levy. And I still do run up and down. Maybe they'll say of me – I quaver, in falsetto reverie, romanticising, oblivious of the self-parody... that I played the out-at-elbow boulevardier, man-at-arms, in-medical-sleeves, jersey awry with moth holes, sending out distress signals to my mother, when she used to let me cry it out, mercifully for her, but not for me...

Weed might have been a way of obfuscating, populating the lonely, skimpy feeling of the way I was mothered. I feel like there was a lack of contact, and a consequent over-compensation (on my mother's side), a trying to organise my life. In school, there was a 'keep an eye on the main chance' ethos of staying the course at this prestigious place. There was also the fear of disappointing my grandfather, a first-generation Etonian, who was paying for it. For all this I had to forgo any complaining or actual reflection on the depth of snobbery, casual racism and... and eventually, I would feel being forged inside me an indebtedness focused in on and enlargement of... on a map... a very thickly populated, old-upper and upper-middle class society (believe me mate, I've been there and seen the freakish inhabitants), which would go on to exert an iron grip over the stratifications that boys (and parents) would inhabit and feel tense about for the remainder of their lives. So, in her tenseness, my mother skimped on major contact;

yet home was mother, with dad, and farmed-out help. This led to a feeling of having been part of an avoidance – not exactly a neglect, but, to be blunt, to have been mothered by someone with only a broad panning view of a scanty horizon instead of an ability to home in on me, in a busy, surrounded, nested cuddle. (Schizophrenia comes from my mother's side in the family; well, mainly... dad's, too. I didn't stand a chance!)

My sense is that – if your routes flake and curl up behind you, but you refuse to roll over and die – you have to improvise. An intimation of this as a child was how my judo white belt would find itself (by me) attached to my bedroom doorknob, then to an electrical mains wire, all to be looped around my wardrobe handle, attached to a tie, then a belt, and how from this abstract of linear objects, a sort of trap would take shape, from which I could flick open my wardrobe and door in one. I feel now that organisational thinking has died away. I am now forced to improvise with inadmissible tracks of thought that lead nowhere – a sort of clandestine intersecting comes about, a sort of running-on, of lines, enjambment, an inadmissible articulation, an illicit railway train coupling.

My sense, moreover, is that this connects me with the kidnap-story of slavery, and the wider discontinuities of immigrant culture. Given the inadmissibility of my thinking, its joints, its 'rigged-up'-ness, its 'not quite right for us' attempts at bonding, in yearning to connect, what I feel could be the same as immigrants feel – a need for connection, for making bonds, coupled with a scallywag's opportunism, for the next break, the next deal, the next tentative (shaky?) liaison, a willingness to take root!

When I started out as a poet, aged 27 or so, my dad said, 'Before, I was worried about you, now... it's all okay, you're a poet.' All meant as the sincerest praise, don't you doubt it. But I saw it, cynically... surely... as him

describing me putting on an outfit, the 'grafting' of an inadmissible thought process onto an inadmissible job, onto a career that might provide a home, or more probably, a homeless man's shelter, a half-way house for my inadmissible, inessential, throwaway litter thought processes. 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?', asked C. L. R. James. Quite what the fuck, dad, do you want to tell me about what it's like to live with what afflicts me?

Now my story has a semi-happy ending. I'm married – with a beautiful wife and daughter – am a writer, and yes, a poet. What happened was not dramatic, it happened in therapy. If my mind was a body, it was one cramped in its position of schizophrenia. Thanks to the small mercies, or big ones, really, the return to a happy wide open plain was similar to when I started smoking weed – except it was sustainable. I found that my old mind had only one aperture of perception, from a sort of hidden compartment, a wire box or a sort of unhealed fracture, but my 'break' had given me the reset needed to explore the possibility of a wider space in which I could start to move, to let it all hang out, let my hair down, my Medusa hair, with all its polyp-like sensitive feelers. How was I going to link up my sensitivity to my intuitions, my instincts, my feelings? I would guide the feelers, at first, with code words, a bit like physical rehabilitation – for instance; 'hair' was my code word for danger, like 'hairy'. I had plenty of these, so my stultified instincts could start moving, start connecting.

It was like I had to rewire my brain – a long, meticulous job, that takes time, with little sudden progress, and low yields, like dispersing seeds and waiting for a garden to grow. In my mid-30s, I used to see it like unlearning all the mafia connections passed on to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* film: in five years the Corleone family is going to be completely legitimate... and so on.

Postface:

'Beating back and forth like a gaffed fish... / There's the head face-up in the glabrous slop' wrote the poet Frederick Seidel describing his poet's block of 17 years. Not a lot of options, maybe. Off the hook, I sometimes think I'm going to get so demob-happy I'm just going to sit and chill, and listen to the world to which I'm now slowly readapting, as it talks to me, through signs, code, at first, a garden growing, making itself heard.

The world isn't perfect, and much as I would like to say all the pieces fell into place after falling out of place, they sometimes don't. I live in the city, which can do its own rewiring of my mind, mostly erroneous, from advertising copy that gets into my head or the feeling I can check into any electronic bugs around London and immediately link them back to police targets. But for now, I'm like Lieutenant Dan, in *Forrest Gump*, making peace with God, himself and the world when he swims in the ocean off Alabama near the end of the film... using a reverse butterfly stroke.

Miguel Cullen

Culturally, Miguel Cullen is a Kelper (Falklander) evacuee, nourished in London by cocoa butter liniment.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

