

Small History

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Seren Adams : *Small History*

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Alan Wall : *Raven*

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hors de série

Shira Dentz : *Leaf Weather*

Small History

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“Since exploration underground is ruled out for the majority due to roof
and shaft collapses, flooding and gas, our appreciation of the enterprise
which shaped the culture of the district has to depend nowadays on
what has been brought to the surface. [...] Radstock Museum [...] holds
custody of artefacts, records and emotions which respect the memory of
those who made, and sometimes endured, their lives here.”

—Alan Bentley

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“Places are like love affairs. They claim you in different ways. Some live inside you forever, others drift in and out without ever taking root, still others exist in the imagination—in shards and snapshots, slivers of summer light.”

— Tishani Doshi, ‘Off By Heart’

I

Time Lost

PRELUDE

A pale archipelago of light on the wall, split by dark space, an expanse of shadow. In this gulf, this absence, I trace the lines that remain there, carved deep and ancient now, slow excavation. Shapes that translate into film, and the soil itself, preserved as if paused mid-breath, a mouth opening, preparing to speak.

Stillness is what brings me here. A peace that has forgotten its dark underground, hollowed out by hands, soft strata laced with blood and urine, the sweat of bodies working seams of coal by candlelight. The turning of the wheel, the tramway and railway, a long-term decline.

Stillness is all that remains, since trees grew over the valley. Small traces can be found beneath the new growth still: a piece of rock uprooted from deep below, an enduring metal post, a slip of disused track running nowhere, bare open space where a building once stood, the scattered batches.

This landscape remembers every language, each dialect to have filled its valley. History is what it speaks, its mother tongue. It speaks to you, if you listen, through the quiet and stillness, soft spoken. You can look and miss it all, live within it and not know.

FIVE LANDSCAPES

I

Marked by collieries and printing factories, a scar, sealed by long grass in wild fields behind the house like thick, new skin. Quiet and overgrown, ageing trees planted less than a century before you were born, or sprung up naturally, somehow, over the shoulder of raw, black heaps of waste coughed out from where a maze of roots now burrows. Batches at Braysdown and Old Mills, heaped tall and solid, like real hills, remind us of a past so different, each dark eye overlooking a town more bloated each year. Hidden now, compressed layers of rock and the thin coal seams, precious work, dangerous and deep below the soft, muddy earth. On the surface, in the light, it crumbles between your fingers, almost oily sediment in the folds of your hands, under your fingernails. Red-brown soil, flattened and creased into imprints of heavy boots, following the same paths worn hard into the ground by a restless tread.

II

I walk out into the garden from the cold of the house, out into the steady, warm light of the late afternoon. The houses and gardens that surround our small patch of land are quiet and still. The far end of the garden, transformed, overgrown with the leaves and dying flowers of earthy potato plants. The pond beyond that. The enclosing walls. There is no-one gardening, getting into or out of their cars, and no distant murmur of a radio beside a lounging body on a garden bench. Everything is still, except me and the soft hum of insects, quivering at the fringes of the longest flowerbed, violet and amber, pale and bright against the left stone wall, just visible within the wet centres of petal clusters.

The daily bloom of sweet pea. Small, tentative raspberries, their blood red juice. The birds, a whole busy family of sparrows, a pair of visiting smart collared-doves, one stout pigeon, call in groups from the leafy branches of the yellow-flowered tree and the holly bush, speaking animated chatters and songs, invisible from their high look-outs.

III

It's across the road, the wilderness of it, past terraces and the dog that barks behind its closed gate. You could walk either way, the edges of the valley connected by their trees, the sloping grassland, the familiar, underlying bed of rock. Behind the house, a route leads through the park, past the neatly trimmed football pitch, the soft rumble of the clubhouse, muffled laughter on Saturday nights. Through the metal kissing gate and over a leaning worn-out wooden stile, you reach the first field. Sloping, a hill furrowed with crests of mud and grass, pitted rabbit holes, wisps of fur and droppings. Down to the line of the old railway, bent into disuse, replaced in parts by a cycle track, thick treacle tarmac, a newer smooth singular line traversed by smaller wheels on the way to Kilmersdon. You come to a long meadow spread flat and treeless, an expanse of grass enclosed by hills with no sign of anything but land or village at its edge, a special site, a church tower on the far side over hedges and meticulously laid roofs. *Jack and Jill went up the hill* here, behind a stand alone house in which a man has lived all his life, the whole of it, with no plans to sell.

IV

Between each point on the map, the brook that can't be moved, that snakes through the valley following its own trail, searching, seeking a wider bed and longing for the sea. Child of a broken

river, shattered across Somersetshire, a lost name for where a different boundary line once stood, its water fingers carving a pattern of valleys. Born in its county town, my own course leads to here, where the River Avon meanders into the smaller River Somer with a whisper of origin, *born at the end of the Ice Age*, born of sea miracle and fault lines, archaic. Stretching from its deep, muddy banks beneath the bridge, shallow in wooded silences, off the main road, into the trees. The River Avon, feeding its tributaries. A name that suggests its form, *afon*, chanting river, river past clusters of houses, limestone cities, small, irregular shaped fields.

V

Small roots unearthed by wild noses, glass light, a spectrum of browns and ephemeral shadows, spreading up the contours of the valley in spring. Tales of what men found there, saturated in a lack of light, the damp intestines of the earth, spat out, remnants of a history lost to time. Fossils baked in swamp heat, fault lines that have forged hills, basins, shards of metal rusted into skeletal towers, exiled in wilderness. The earth, locked in sleep but beneath, where the tunnels once were and are now caved in, or empty shafts, split wooden posts rotting in their watery tomb, a blanket of coal dust, a silence that resonates through rock, tree and bone.

HOURS

Gaping caverns, circular shafts
would carry them down,
four feet in diameter, though
five by 1800.

Tunnels dark, as if a room unlit
and windowless, the door
locked for hours and hours
and hours and hours

staining skin, coal dust
in your eyes, your mouth,
accentuating each fine line
of your blistered hands

and for some, the guss
and crook, pulling at the
waist, would rub and bleed
wounds washed with urine

until the skin hardened naturally
until the shift was up
until the ceiling came in or
eventually, 1973.

RADSTOCK

“the place is becoming a town”

— *Kelly's Post Office*

Directory of Somersetshire, 1875

I see it, as it is and as it might have been. Stretched between, the gap, the gulf. Change and turmoil, ageing, forming, echoes that resonate in the long aftermath and our own, since coming here, of rooms, places life has been spent. The isolation of the fields, a quieter fear, not knowing codes of remembering who once lived here. I acknowledge a distance felt from somewhere, and walk into it, look into its woods and hollows, trace the outline of its cobwebbed bark. Treading ground long sheltered by the shadow of trees, a twisted veil, elements that make sense, something more than overgrown. A wilderness still more beautiful now than it would have been then, the ground sliced open, carved from inside out, the violence of it, rending the earth. I fill in the space behind and inside, from dust, a need to know, to better understand. In silence as I pass through I picture their faces, the strangers who worked here, there, two places fused into one, their lost time. The market building still stands, the clock the same clock. Radstock, with its short row of modest shops, people in close proximity, not knowing how the other lives.

Home is our house and the surrounding fields. Those that share it could live anywhere, together, and be content. History. Learning to love. Radstock is becoming a town, again.

FIELD, TREE, BROOK

It will all be forgotten later, as everything always is in some way, when life once again assumes its own rhythm. I hold you in my hands, what is left of you now, after so long. You flow from me in uncommon ways, a figment, a vein of silver. I lower you into the water, the small brook that moves through the valley, older than all of us and bloated with memory. You slide into it, almost a glint of scales, a shimmer in the branches of the upside-down trees. The coldness cleanses, a shiver spreads up my arms. My face, reflected, my cold pressed cheeks. I will still see you in that room, that city. In every field, tree, brook. I will see you, but you slip further with the turning of each season, a shadow, still shaped like you but hollow. The resemblance is fading as I walk this land again, the place to which everything returns. Kneeling at the water's seam, I hold you in my hands as you break apart, taken by the current, coursing away in the water's foam. Desire, unbalanced, destroys itself and since I looked, I lost.