

## Umbra

Early morning. The sky hangs dark over the drained fens. The moon evaporates and reappears teasingly through clouds. Silhouettes of reeds sway slowly on the riverbank, Stourbridge Common alongside flat and ghostly. *It is like, on some days, the air is too clear, too transparent, and one sees everything sharply and exactly outlined, and then one will say that rain is coming.*

A figure flits slowly across the grasses, evidently unperturbed by the cold, for it seems at ease on its bare feet. Feathers of the bittern, reed warbler and kingfisher are tangled in its wild hair, as well as snapped willow twigs, ragged-robin flowers, catkins, burrs and various scraps of lichen. Low figure moving low towards a low horizon. The man is scarcely distinguishable from the dried-up fenland, other than his bare feet.

He drifts quixotically towards the edge of the river. Seeming to look deep into the water, he gathers his lips together across the odds and ends that make up his teeth and whistles a kaleidoscopic tune across its starry surface. Oddly patterned ripples appear. His whistling stops abruptly. His eyes roll upwards, harkening to some as yet inaudible sound.

It arrives. A soft, insistent tapping, spreading in all directions. Irregular to begin with, then growing steadier. A patter-pit, a tip-tip-tap, then a splish-splash-splosh. He turns. Droppedy-drop-bedy-drop and a tap-a-tip-rap-tap, even a bom-bam-bim rattling in amidst the wash of swish-hush-shosh. A thousand tiny wet worlds arrive each second, unspooling, overlapping, scattering.

It is raining.

He is dancing.

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I do not belong in the fens. When I first arrived, the fens and I tried to make it work, but soon realised our differences were more than we could tame. We're just not the right temperaments for one another.

I belong in an alpine world. A rural town, far to the east of here. Far. Where home is wet, the fens are drained dry. Where home is mountainous, the fens are all flats. The sky is too big here. You can taste the entire too-big sky sedimented in the tap water. Hard, dry, far away. Much, much too big.

That sky has watched me run for years. Running from family, from rumours, secrets, from war and the ways small spaces foreclose love. Though however far I've run, I'm still to escape these knotted pasts. They cling like bedstraw burrs, trail behind me like bindweed stems. When arriving in this flat fenland city, I didn't expect to stay longer than anywhere else. Yet, I stay.

The fenland city is where I found him.

Late autumn, late evening, that first time. I am sitting at a bench where the parkland fringes the street. Eyeing the splintered pine benchtop and tracing the storylines of its sundered skin. Pushing around an earthworm with my big toe absent-mindedly. Robins nearby are conjuring giant songs from their little bodies, but they're barely audible. Fenland city is whirling past, cacophony speed, rush hour. Someone is shouting on the corner. Tense traffic sound is spilling from the road and vibrating along the space above the pavement. It's so flat here that sound has nowhere to go. It just lingers in the air, like tarry pollen from an agitated old willow catkin. But then... him.

I see him.

A small, shabby figure. Barefoot. Seeming to walk in slow motion. Or trying to walk in slow motion. Not particularly smoothly. A stumble at times, more like a slow commotion perhaps. But remarkably slow to be sure. He is a small man, in scruffy clothes. His hair is wild, matted into its own fuzzy ecology. My mouth comes slightly open.

The pendant moment, almost an infinity, as the muddy skin of his left heel suspends. Then the interminable arc: onward, forward, downward. Planted firmly, tamped. Stillness. Then the right foot, softly, slowing ascending.

At moments his procession is badger clumsy. Other stretches there are steps of such consistent low velocity that he is like a river on the cusp of freezing. Then he slips, transforms from river to man again, and resets his pace.

The shadow of the bench grows three thumb-widths in the time it takes for him to turn the corner. The slowest disappearing act of all time. Perhaps forty yards. I watch every step, urgently. I lay my little hands flat on the benchtop, staring at the point where he slips from sight.

Bus come, bus go. The restaurants close. My fingers numb so completely I can no longer feel the bench underneath them. I walk home. Street lamps, then no street lamps. Something is flitting around in me. I watch my feet compress grasses and clover in the darkness on the last stretch of Stourbridge Common. They spring back up behind me, unperturbed, as though I leave no trace of past as I pass.

Arrive at my garden shed house in Fen Ditton. Everything is silent, captured in a hush. Turn the lock, inaudible click, leave the lights off. The street dogs don't even wake up. Kneel and roll. Pull the quilt up to my eyes.

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I blink. And blink again. Light under the door. The skin around my eyes is softer. A dreaming. A dream. I dreamed a dream last night. I sit up. The first dream I've dreamed for a long, long time. Tip-tap-tip-tap-tapping on the roof. The first rain there's been for a long, long time.

A change on me this morning. Long blurred edges soften into sharpness, sharpen into softness. I'm looking out the window from my makeshift bed on the floor. First rain for weeks, it's true. It ravishes me to realise how long I've been stifled. Flattened. Adrift in what remains, the past hanging along me like fog on the common. No longer. I shake myself down, stand up. New motion in my body, after that night I first see him. River motion.

Sweet deluge, deluge and gutter-party, more rain rolling down through the afternoon. I follow the river on foot. Earthworms writhing up everywhere. Ecstatic snipe and water voles. Chalk stream at Coldham Brook gurgling happily. New steps. Not the slow-motion gait that I'd watched him do. More that every step I'm falling. Falling, until, somehow unexpectedly, my own foot catches me, lifts me. Every step I am falling but then I am lifted. Toes are all giddy in the damp earth. Heron overhead. Flash of kingfisher. Every step I am falling. Falling in life with him.

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I glimpse him more often, from that day on. Walking backwards over the mathematical bridge one spring afternoon. In Coe Fen at sunset, dancing with his shadow, twinned bodies in penumbral slow motion. Evidence of him in a public library just before I arrive late at night; moss and muck all along the carpet. Through a train window I see him standing on a roof, perfectly still. All night I am dreaming again.

We speak only once.

It is a windy day.

He is drifting along the path across Midsummer Common. I see him from a distance. I can't say why I speak to him today in particular. I found a jay feather in the woods this morning. I just ate a pie in a little silver foil pot. A greyhound in my belly demanded it. You learn to trust certain impulses when you run for years. It is time because it is time.

I stand blocking the path. Takes him a long while to get to me. Long enough for the shadow of the grasses to grow a good breath. Up close his hair is even wilder than I had realised. A feral bushel, wrought with little presences. Feathers and twigs like baubles on a Christmas tree. Smell of peat. He doesn't look up at me, even when we are directly before one another.

*Hello, I say.*

His foot hovers as he pauses. My heart flutters and hops around my ribcage on little wren feet.

Some things to know about me.

Just because I am now no one doesn't mean I am without preferences. I prefer not to beat around the bush, especially not if the bush is on fire and beating it could put it out. I could do with more miracles these days. I know one when I see one.

*I think you saved me, I say.*

His raised foot, slowly, descends.

And I prefer not to try to speak tactfully anymore. The conversational obstructions of this world are so much of what I've run from. The mountains they place between the sounds of words and the vulnerabilities hiding beneath them. Now I prefer wayfaring direct.

*I think I love you*, I say.

A gurgling comes from somewhere under his ragged felt hat.

I smile. I speak from the space above my head, too. Not just speaking from where we already *are*. We already know where we are. I prefer conversations as an interlude out of the past and into where we could be. Why not speak our way to where we might belong, impromptu orators of an honest new world. These are my first words for months.

*I think that we belong together*, I say.

His gaze rolls up from the damp ground, hovers somewhere around my left ear.

The too-big sky regards us.

A visible hush separates off from the breeze, ribbon-like. It causes a drooping reed stem extending from his hair to wave slightly on its way past and then nestles itself into the space between us. I've never seen his eyes before, an untidy mash of greens and browns. The hush brushes through his silvery moustache. It lingers around his eyelid. His eyelid twitches for a hushed infinity. The hush flutters momentarily towards my face, then lets itself be carried away on the breeze again.

*you did not know*

he says

*that life*

a seed falls from his hair

*could go at a run*

grizzly East Anglian dialect

*with drums beating*

wind whipping his coat

*did you?*

His laughter clatters like magpies.

*now you stop running*

voice like the shadow of a marsh harrier  
voice like a shade of the past lifting

*now you know*

One of his eyelids closes.

Then he steps around me, continues his slow walk along the drained fenland. His shoulders are the only slopes in sight. When he reaches the treeline, he turns back towards me. Too distant for me make out any expression on his face. He reaches up, pulls a snapped branch of willow from his hair. Lets it go. I watch it fall, improbably slowly. Three more interminable steps, and he is gone.

I do not follow. A nearby lapwing chitters me to move along. I flow home like a crackling haze of light, eddying and falling like a signal, out of time.

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*unrecognisable world*

he thinks.

*I'll give it all another try once it's wet again*

There are only so many ways to stop stepping on the feet of your shadow.

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I find the short newspaper article about his death under the same pine benchtop I had been tracing when I saw him first. Stepped from the causeway bridge one night. Years ago, so it read. Presumed drowned.

I imagine him standing on the ledge. The silhouette of his wild hair, brushed by hushes one last time. His muddy heel outstretching, pendant. The interminable arc of the step. Forward, downward, onward.

I feel no resentment for his choice. I am glad, glad to think that he could be everywhere now.

I am still dreaming. Always of rain. And he is always amongst it somewhere, dancing with shadows. Like nearly frozen water, moving through the darkness. Sometimes he is a red fox going at a run. Sometimes an avocet with wings like drums beating.

I am standing by the river, drawing a lungful of sky to whistle. There's this aquifer hidden somewhere in me now. It's willow root tangled. It fills me up. I could stay for years.

A rain is coming.

I am dancing.