

THE COPSE AT THE BROW OF
SCHOOL HOUSE LANE

How to begin writing this down? Shall it be a simple inventory? A list of parts. Names. Dates. Genealogies. Sound begetting sound. Endless melody.

If I were to say – a robin sings in the trees across the field from this coppice – would that be enough? Could you flesh things out from such a meagre outline? Or should I describe its song? Onomatopoeia. But the bird has long fallen silent before the words begin to form.

And what of the other sounds – the constant polyphony?

Distant hum of motorway traffic.
Delicate rattle of leaf against branch.
Everything in between.

I fill the page as best I can, replace the diary under a stone, and retrace my steps down the darkening lane.

But as I walk back under the eaves of those trees, I ask myself – could any film, recording or photograph tell you this? That whilst I dwelt within that wooded chamber, listening to those brief glimmers of song, I forgot about her, the river and its promise.

All that mattered was without weight or consequence. Nothing lingered or resonated beyond the instance of its own making. Everything listened.

A MEADOW BELOW NOON HILL WOOD

A sheep corpse lies near the fenced borders of a pine plantation. Just one of many I've seen in recent months. The eyes are gone. Always the eyes first. But what half-light breaks now, through those wretched hollows? What tenure now held in other places? Nearby, a body of metal fencing lies discarded in a rusted coil. Something more than proximity binds these things together. Perhaps when that fleshy corpse has long surrendered to the moor, this metal one will remain? A marker for something. An oblique form of testimony.

NOON HILL WOOD

I quickly leave the meadow behind and climb the narrow stile which grants access to the plantation. Pausing briefly on the threshold, I glance along the first row of trees, and then back at the field below. A moment of transition. Passing between worlds.

Dark throat of woodland. Crow of pine, spruce and beech. Gargling the water that runs from Noon Hill Slack. I first came here in the promise of the year. Sloshing up the small stream and the steep banks. In its higher reaches the trees gather closely together, and the light is dammed by their outstretched branches, occasionally flooding through the gloom in brilliant flashes. And here and there are clearings, natural amphitheatres, nothing but sky, framed by trees.

A place I return to time and time again. Originally with musical instruments. Now with recordings made on those first, tentative forays. Gently bowed strings. Concertina drone. Bird clamour. The sound of leaves and water. This time and that time together. Returning the music back to its birthing chambers.

Hearing it drift, thick, across
The dark earth. Taking root.
Brushing against leaf and moss.
Gathering in the shivering treetops.

And the wood listens to itself.

SOUNDS OF THE MOOR

In some oblique fashion this music has come to work its way into the moor itself. Played over and over again at various times and places, it mediates my experience of this landscape. Conjures it. Summons it. *Suffuses it.*

Bowed, plucked and chafed steel strings. The sound of stones gently rubbed together. Soft soil sprinkled on resonant wooden bodies. Grasses and leaves intertwined around neck and fretboard. Bone and wood plectra. Sound folded on sound. A collusion of place and instrument.

CAGED

Blood and the facial disc.
Noiseless. Unmoved.
A bright crest of optic nerve.
Against my dull eye and the hovering dark.

Keep watch the bruised horizon?
Watcher? You? Of fur, quill and bone?
Amongst the stone and fenced remnants.
Along the banks and the black fields.

Tiny palpitations. Filaments of life.
Hidden dramas of shade against shade.
And my senses are wretched. Caged.
Whilst you cage the sky.

MIRROR

A lone foxglove grows between
two collapsed roofing beams.
Nettles gather around the blasted
fireplace. Masonry lies covered
in a lattice of lichen and moss.
Beetles, ants and woodworm
thrive in natural litter. Tiny specks
of bright fungus trace contours
along rotting timber. And as
I follow these contours, they
seem to recapitulate those of the
surrounding hills. A grey mirror. A
subtle echo. Question and answer.
You in me, and me in you.

Fallen

Flutter

Flown

Swell

Leaf

Last

Wing

Whir

Fur

Blood

Clot

Scar

Wire

Bark

Gape

Sky

Hand

Veil

Wool

Clay

Stream

Back

Brick

Wound

Feather

Tide

River

Down

VOICE OF THE BOOK

More and more, words from *the book* come to me, unbidden.
Fragments. Unconnected. Untethered.

- A corbel stone over the barn door.
- The house has gone.
- Raspberry canes in the old garden.
- A complete ruin in 1936.
- The date read 1649.
- The stone edging of a flower bed.
- Some land on the Noon Hill side.
- Found overgrown with turf.
- Referred to in 1765.
- Two joined into one.

But not a riddle, begging to be solved. Or a series of clues,
pointing to something. Instead, like the call of that grey bird.
Simply there. A presence. More real than the landscape.

The heather. The cotton grass. And bracken. And the wind.
And those words, over and over. Two joined into one. A
hideous murmur.

Two joined into one.

ABYSS

I remember, in those first days, sitting on the high banks of the fledgling river. Staring out at the expanse of moor that seemed to stretch into infinity.

Aire leagte air saoghail dhorcha.

It seemed as if the earth
had tipped on its axis.
That the moor swung
teetering beneath me.
That if I didn't cling
to the grass banks,
I would fall into an abyss.