**The Workshop**

Days lengthening. The sun rising, its pearly bulb glowing in a paper lantern. Sky’s parchment stretched over the horizon’s long cheekbone. A skitter of jackdaw’s feet on the roof. That rasping of claws against slate. The pad, pad, pad of their slight weight, their hollow bones. They’re calculating days, calibrating the light. They’re hungry. A horse goes by in the street below the window, pauses then moves on, it’s hooves striking against tarmac. My grandmother’s father lying drunk in his cart as the horses took him home from Manchester to Royton. Inebriated in an old story, time moving slowly then, my great grandfather nodding over the reins. The smell of the horse’s flanks under a gloss of sweat.

The alarm goes on my phone and I grope for my glasses. I go downstairs to make tea, my feet tingling on the sisal matting. Ingleborough’s just appearing beyond the rowan in the garden. The tree bright with scarlet berries, the hill streaming silver clouds: a spectral dirigible, a whale rising from a sea of liquid hydrogen. There’s been a visitation in the night: two inches of fluffy white snow across winter grass, criss-crossed with the prints of thrushes and blackbirds. I drop a low dose aspirin into a whiskey glass, watch it tilt and spiral down through cloudy water, giving off a stream of white specks.

Seven-fifteen. Hands on the clock flick, rest, flick forwards. They’re caught in a web of action and consequence. The way we measure things. There’s a knock on the door, startling me. Three hard raps of the iron knocker, the way policemen knock in films. I fumble the lock and there’s a delivery guy there in a high-viz vest. He’s gesturing towards a van parked at the top of our street. Polish? Greek? His English is heavily accented. But so is mine. I can see his footprints running back to the vehicle, its hazard warning lights blinking on and off in bewilderment. *I’ve have a bed for you,* he says. *It need a lift*. He gestures raising his hands palms upwards as if the Resurrection is happening and we’re late for the show.

A bed? I’m remembering what was wrong with the old one. Not much after I’d driven in some screws with a power drill to steady it. *I’m coming*, I say, *two minutes.* I pull on some socks and find my hiking boots, following him up the street, the snow stained with horse shit. There’s a light left on outside the house opposite. It shines through our curtains all night to annoy us with its lack of dark. The guy in the van is drinking coffee from a silver thermos. He wipes a dribble from the luminous vest, his eyes red rimmed. He nods and presses a button. The van has a power ramp, which is good, but we struggle through the snow with an unwieldy flat pack. We have to stop and lift it up again, our hands scrabbling for purchase. My heart’s bouncing from my ribs like a squash ball. That woman crying out in surprise, her front teeth broken by a racquet tip as I watched. Liverpool? Chesterfield? The dangers of proximity. I sign the clipboard the driver hands me and he makes his way back up to the van, his feet catching and slipping in the snow, his hair straight and black.

Back in the front room I take a knife and slit the cardboard packaging, cutting and pulling at the nylon strapping. It’s a bed alright. A double bed made from French oak. I pull off polystyrene and a plastic sheath, stacking each section against the bookcase, noticing the edition of Pound’s Cantos that I bought when I was at school. Back then in that other time when the universe was expanding. I carry the oak sections upstairs to the empty bedroom we plan to move into. They’re reassuringly heavy.

You’re calling out from the pillows. *What is it? What is it?* And I’m muttering, stacking the oak frame. *It’s the bed. The bed.* The bed that worries me. Because I spent weeks in one last year. Because the ward was smoking, smouldering in a morphine haze, catching then blazing into pain. Because I couldn’t explain what it was about my heart that was so wounded. Apart from the obvious: the long scar and titanium wire and sutures and puncture wounds where the drains went in. I bring in your tea, thinking about the grain in the waxed oak. How it was laid down, season by season, How the tree held the pressure of water, dropping its leaves in autumn, budding in April, a green fool, a harp for the winds of Midi or Provence. *It’s the bed,* I say, putting down a cup of tea and pulling open the curtains. *There’s a bit of snow*. Then I go back to carry the last sections upstairs, remembering the aspirin milky on the window ledge. When I gulp it down I’m drinking bitter willow bark. I see the clouds lift an eyelid, letting out a brief wink of light. *Be careful*, you’re calling out, *I’ll help you.*

Timber is time laid down in contours like a map. Lumber is memory. Each season furled in grain, days of summer heat circling in rings that widen or shrink. According to what God brought those peasantslabouring in fields of wheat, dark oaks threshing at the edge like fevered minds. Drought. Famine. Crucifixion. The guillotine. In Nottingham that time we brought down a row of poplars with chainsaws. They said they still had musket balls in them from the Civil War. Slugs of lead deep in the sappy wood. If you press your head to a poplar you can hear the water seething, boiling from the earth. Yellow leaves falling, white wood spraying from the saw.

Colin’s brother, the tree surgeon, told me how a tree had grown around a rifle laid against it in a German forest. They found it a hundred years later, or more. Which reminds me of the lumber yard in Radcliffe, the band saw sparking through little snecks of stone stuck in the tar of railway sleepers we were sawing up to make pit props. The smell of pine and creosote: one of the first stories I ever wrote. Tapping it out on that little Olivetti we bought on Deansgate. Me and my dad. Whoever he was or seemed to be then.

We grow with trees and witness them. We die and they continue in their different dimension of space and time. Towering in both. Until the saw and the sawpit, the plane and bench, curls of wood springing from the blade, a man testing it with his thumb, spitting on the whetstone, guiding steel with his eye and hands. A man with children growing in streets of tight brick terraces and slate roofs, smoke smudging lines of sheets that droop in rain. The smell of scorched rubber twisting through the town, a goblin’s harsh breath. The first West Indians labouring under strip-lights as we gazed through a metal grille. Giants or gods. The lamp swaying, wood exfoliating, the plane a reassuring weight. The war behind him now, its displacements, his other self that we’ll trip over in our future lives. A foot scraper in the snow. Blood trickling down our shins, ladybirds crawling on rowan bark. The three of us: Ratty, Mole, Badger.

You work with wood, not against it. What it becomes is partly itself, partly the imagination we have for a new thing: a floor, a fence, roof joists, a chair, an inlaid box, a kitchen table hewn flat with an adze. A coffin standing empty in Faulkner’s novel or laid out in rows the way I’ve seen them in Wandegeya, the carpenter sitting cheerfully astride and calling to his friends. *How are you? Oli Otya? Obulamu? How is life?* Their warm Bugandan blood. Their history of killing and being killed still fresh on the page. Their tongues shaping the air for words to fly through. *I am not dead, not yet my friend, thank you, thank you*! Black kites turning, thunderheads huffing up behind the Asian shops, the bakery, the market where goats wander, eating plastic waste, udders swollen with polymers. Pigeon cote shanties where women sweep away dust in their *gomezis*. An endless task, brushing away East Africa from hot rooms. Roofs of corrugated iron, the red earth rutted and running with waste. A scent of burning charcoal, frying meat. Those women rolling *matoke* around aluminium cooking pots, right there in the dead centre of the market, in the communal kitchen. Kids playing on an old settee, torn open to its guts, though the colours of that Draylon could knock your eye out yet.

His workshop was built from planks and tarpaulin, a short step from our terraced house. There on the edge of the town. On the last ridge of the Irk valley where salmon and sea trout had once nosed up from the Irwell, the Mersey. A dead memory. Opposite were allotments and poultry runs. Beyond them, a field laid out with wooden barrels for the soft drinks factory. A tang of vinegar from the Coop works, the smell of sparged malt and hops blown from Lees’ brewery where my brother worked two summers and learned to drink like a drayman. To the west, open fields and stranded farms. In every other direction, mills and terraced housing, corner shops and pubs, their pianos working drunken nights of song. Then the bobbin works. The skip works. The welding shop. The garage built over an old pit, those shafts deep underground trickling with tar-black rain. A short family: stocky for loom, pit work or regiment. Ponies grazed the mosses between mills. Remnants of common land. Streams gullying clay, rabbits grazing. Gangs of lads with air rifles and .410s hunting for rats or ferreting with mongrel Jack Russells. Yellow fog in winter, a pelt of smoke, the smell of soot and sulphur. Kids praying for snow so we could sledge the embankment. Scavenging for blackberries in late summer. Scratching our arms on hedgerows and briars in lost country lanes. Damming the river to sail homemade boats. When it flooded, the lane was cut off and the hawthorns were hung with used condoms dangling above the filth flowing below, trophies of the town’s lust.

In the workshop, the smell of timber, sawn Formica and Evo-Stik A tool chest neatly arrayed: chisels, hammers, screwdrivers, tenon saws, drills. Years later, a circular saw appeared that my father had bought with a loan from the bank – *those skinflint bastards* – a ski slope of sawdust slipping from under it. A long workbench with two vices, a side room for painting kitchen units and shop fittings. Three rooms in all, my uncle helping to build the third that weekend with my dad. Bringing Senior Service cigarettes, his sudden snort of laughter from slightly flared nostrils. Blue overalls. His hair wavy and slick with Brylcreem.

The workshop floor littered with wood shavings. They crunch underfoot like dead beetles. My father had never worn clogs as a child. Shoes marked him out as special. Chosen. Now the scent of sweet pinewood, its blebs of amber resin. The sour smell of Brazilian mahogany or English Oak. There’s a cabinet for varnish, flakes of shellac, methylated spirits, turps and beeswax. The bees there in our garden, in poisonous foxgloves, finding the pixie’s slippers. If you pressed the white or purple bells they buzzed against your fingers, wanting to sting. There’s a tin of creosote and when you prize off the lid the brush is in there stiff with the smell.

Outside, a grass grown yard, an Anderson shelter used as a coke store. Inside the ramshackle garage a red Hillman Minx estate used to carry wardrobes, kitchen cupboards, shelving units. And children. My mother rapping us across the knees with her knitting needles on the way to North Wales if we distracted our dad who smoked Old Condor tobacco and made me car sick. Fish and chips at Caernarfon where the castle was. The smell of it the smell of elsewhere. Another language. A crate of lemonade in the boot he’d been given for a job at the pub, re-fitting the bar, though he didn’t drink beyond the odd Guinness. He’d seen enough of that. His father a dapper, piss-artist tenor, singing for the troops at Chadderton Hall in the first war before they went to slaughter. The Anderson shelter was painted over with tar to stop it rusting. We pissed on the coke and it burned pungently in the cast-iron stove.

Hold on, because, this *is* my method, the sideways approach, crabbing though history, scrumping, for windfalls. It doesn’t mean you’re in the wrong essay or that anything would have come of the right one. This is my fuckwitted way with words. After all, you got this far. Or you didn’t and I’m talking to myself. Hoping to make sense in the end. The way I tried to understand those raised voices – thrumming piano strings down there in the house – that taught me to pray so fervently. The weaponry of words.

Cleaning my shoes yesterday morning, I recognised the box I’d made as a teenager. I used to walk down to the local library, following the river into the town. Savouring the quiet of the bookshelves, learning to smoke. I’d designed the box with a false bottom so I could hide my Rizzla and a block of Golden Virginia. That secretive instinct. That urge to make something bigger than it seems. Infolded. A box within a box within a house within a town. Unlike the town – jerrybuilt, all shuttered takeaways and traffic roundabouts now – it was made to last. Still sturdy forty-odd years later. I wonder what’s under the false bottom, that sliver of the unknown, my former self.

It’s dark outside, the windows cobwebbed. A pressurised hurricane lamp hisses above the bench and the stove creaks and glows. There’s a wounded bird folded into a piece of lint in a wooden drawer nearby, its beak opening and closing silently. An old valve radio with the dial marked out in braille. I think of those blind people searching the airwaves for the right language to come in. Searching the world for words. My father is unshaven. He has the sour sweat of work on him. I have a piece of wood clamped in the vice. *Don’t force the saw,* my father is saying, *let it do the work*. As if the saw could work itself through the wood with just my guidance, my desire. I didn’t know what he was saying or what I was making except my own escape. Boats, rafts, go-carts, aeroplanes. The means to get out of there: ways of looking out, looking down, the way dreams floated me over the valley and the shoelace river and the shining iron railway lines and their white stone ballast that the moon glinted on.

I never quite understood what letting a tool do the work meant nor what working against the grain was. Until I began to work with words, that is. Until I made an accommodation with their imperfection and my own.

Part of my father’s business entailed writing out bills and receipts. In the house we had a folding desk in veneered oak, which had a pull down lid. As the lid came down, two arms emerged to support it. That was clever. Inside the smell of paperwork: bottles of ink, blotting paper, old dipper pens, nibs, broken pencils and fountain pens, sheaves of foolscap. He’d found an old leather office chair second-hand and we loved to swivel around in it as if we were at the barber’s shop. The barber swirling me round after short back and sides I hated, unlocking a cabinet at the back of the shop to get something for the weekend. The mill workers leaving, slinging their butty bags with this new booty, fingering itchy nape hair. Clumping home to slip their hands under their wives aprons, feel their bodies warm as the breasts of birds. Another Friday. The women standing at the sink or stove, laughing, fending the men off, their hair peroxide blond now in the ‘sixties.

At the back of the desk, a geometry set in a faux leather case with compasses and callipers and other instruments we didn’t know the use of. The case undid with two press- studs and was embossed in gold. It’s in front of me now, rescued from the desk when my father died. Intestate. A lack of closure that left him untroubled, immortal until the end. Trailing a catheter bag, but home, which was all that mattered. After he died we forgot to clear the other air raid shelter in the garden, the forks and spades and shears and the smell of earth and the wooden bunks where my grandparents had sheltered from the Manchester blitz. He was very small under the sheet, his forehead shiny and cold when I kissed it. He died fighting to the end. *Do not go gentle.* And he never did, never could.

I loved the black velvet plush and the little nickel canister that held spare leads for the two compass sets. Everything clamped together with little wheels; every piece of equipment smooth and heavy for its size. There was a piece of special paper impregnated with chemicals that stopped the instruments from tarnishing, though they have. It’s got my handwriting on it in red ink and smells of another time: of homework and coal fires, and damp wool. My mother working at the ironing board or dressing a piece of meat or working the black enamel Singer sewing machine with gold lettering that I’ve seen tailors in Kampala carry home through the dusk. I first heard Under Milk Wood like that, the sewing machine tacking away, the coal fire blazing and sinking back.

My mother worked in a shirt factory after leaving school and could make anything with a needle and thread. She became a nurse after that and looked after patients with tuberculosis. I read all her medical books, which had pictures of surgical instruments and photographs of First World War survivors with disfigured bodies and faces.When I asked her what she did on VE day, she said, *I laid out seven old men*. The irony of war, which never left me. She must have known my father by then, a nicely spoken private in the pay corps who played the piano and spent the nights on fire watch in Finchley Park, boarding with a Welsh corporal and a Geordie anti-aircraft gunner.

Drawing interlocking circles with the compass set, placing the needle point on the line of one circle to draw the next, then the next. We had no television, but could hear one blaring next door through the thin cavity walls where old Mrs Jacques lived. She’d worked with my grandfather, spinning Egyptian and Sea Island cotton. Her hands were blue with old rivers of blood, brown with liver spots. Two doors up, old Mrs McKintyre would pick an onion warm and raw from her garden and eat it. The compass glints and tilts as the circles form like petals. Tonight, my father’s home late from a job, twisting his key in the Yale, stamping rain from his shoes. Sometimes, when work is thin on the ground he helps a local removals man, Tommy Wallace, who has a purple birthmark across his face he was born with but we kids imagine was the result of some terrible fire. Those heavy steps now, my mother looking up to gauge his mood. Tension building and breaking in the house the way lightning sometimes plunges behind the line of moors. Tonight he’s happy because a fox stepped into the road to stare at him, *bold as brass*.

Then, from nowhere, from somewhere, maybe from a house clearance he did with Tommy, a black enamelled Underwood typewriter appears, huge and too heavy for the desk, which sags under it. I love the ring of the bell and the burr of the carriage return as a new line starts. It has its own thunder, too. The black and red ribbon jerks and the floorboards vibrate as my sister or me or my father pick away with two fingers, watching letters appear with astonishment. Watching words form and inch towards the margins that could be set with sliding clips. Edging across the snowfall of the page until the bell pinged and they were turned away into a new line. No one else we knew had a typewriter.

When my father’s aspirations turned to dust, the typewriter made its way to my bedroom that overlooked the last mills in the town and the fields with their wild hawthorn hedges. The river was invisible in the valley below, rank with pollution from the factories and dye mills and chemical works upstream. There was the pale face of Scowcroft Farm glowing in the dusk, stranded by the railway like a bride abandoned, the hawthorns mantled in cream lace. Through the railway tunnel was the canal with its black mirror of water and fishermen casting their floats, watching the fluorescent tip bob as perch and roach nudged their bait. They had canvas chairs and thermos flasks and boxes of maggots that writhed in sawdust. There were cattle grazing in the heart-shaped field below the farm. Then, if you raised your eyes, the moors rose beyond Bury and Shaw, where you could see white farmhouses and the glint of sun on car windscreens.

In summer the air filled with the spores of willow herb, like spores of cotton, as if the town was choking on its own history. In winter the letters on the mill chimney winked on and off and darkness sulked behind sodium streetlights. Steam trains went across the embankment in a blaze of sparks that lit the underbelly of their pennants of smoke and the house shook in a low vibration that reminded us of the pits underfoot, the chasms of darkness that lay under the town. By then the house was full of pianos my father had take to repairing instead of playing. The thrum of trains or the weight of footsteps or the timbre of raised voices caused a low booming in the bichords and trichords that my father tuned and tempered with a tuning fork. It sounded like a gnat whining. Middle C.

Writing remembers everything, shapes everything the way the grain runs, snagging on knots. The memories are in my hands – my father’s hands now – where I watch them move on the Mac keyboard, remember the smooth cold keys of the Underwood. When I was asked me to write an essay on my writing practice I didn’t expect this. I didn’t expect any of this to *happen*.

By the time I was 17, I was writing poems, testing the shapes of language against the space letters needed. No television, but I’d wired an old valve radio to a 12 inch speaker I’d found to let the world in: pirate radio stations, pop music, the Proms, Mike Raven’s Rhythm and Blues show, the Vietnam war, the Soviet crackdown in Czechoslovakia. All that mingled together to create what was other, what was elsewhere, what was beyond the town and its belt-cinched histories, tight as overlapping compass circles. The poems reached in and reached out, though I’d not yet learned to ground them in *things*: they reached for ideas and fell into their own rhetoric and pretension. What did that matter? How marvellous they were! Where there had been blank paper, there were these new things. If we needed something in our house we made it, or tried to. By now I was building my first electric guitar. I’ve still got the neck upstairs in the attic with its one crooked fret.

When my father died we divided up his things, my mother already long gone. I asked for his tools and tool chest. When I was made a professor at Lancaster University, I took them out again to build a fireplace in the house we’d just moved to. The house with a rowan tree and its 2view of Ingleborough, where I live now in North Yorkshire. The house with its whisper of snow laid overnight and the oak bed and snowdrops coming through chilled soil. Poems ran through my mind as I worked a fire-hardened piece of pitch pine with his plane and augur. I thought about my parents who left school at fourteen with few prospects except children and a lifetime of work. I talked to them, in the empty house, the echoing rooms we planned to move into, the year after I almost died.

A professor of Creative Writing? What could that be? *We’re feral creatures*, I used to say at English Department staff meetings, *brought in from the wild because you want our company and we need your scraps.* And we came warily, trying to gauge the new space. Ready to shy off. To bite the hand that fed us; to tear the hand that tried to slip a collar over our necks.

One day, as the fireplace was taking shape and I was lading the lime mortar I’d made – soft as sugar in butter when my mother made a Christmas cake, her wrists flicking the wooden spoon through it – I found a dark haired woman staring through the window at me. She had an Old English sheepdog and a small boy with her. I went to the door, wiping my hands. *I used to live here*, she said, *I’m Douggie’s daughter*. As if I should know. And I did. Douggie who was a builder and renovated the house with breezeblocks and railway sleepers. Douggie who’d died when he touched his aluminium ladder to the three phase overhead lines and was killed instantly. Whatever that means. His mind blown away by thirty thousand volts.

She tied the dog to the iron fence and we wandered the house. Ghosts in search of ghosts. She showed me Douggie’s drawings behind the peeling wallpaper: in the bedroom, dragons breathing fire over mountains; in the kitchen, instructions to make a cup of tea with illustrations. I never saw her again. As she walked away the dog bounded up against her and the little boy held her hand. The drawings are still there under the new wallpaper for someone else to find. I saw Douggie most days, short of stature, dark haired, smiling at my work. *A professor*? *What the fuck is that?* And he slaps a trowel of mortar against the wall where the stove is to go, smoothing it, shaking his head. His mother still passes most days, a stooped old lady with a shopping bag who stares back at the house.

Now the sun’s above that long horizon, shining into clouds on Ingleborough. I’ve got the bed frame up, tightening the bolts with a flat spanner. We heave the mattress into place, still warm, still carrying the print of our bodies. I remember last night I dreamed of my father playing cricket with us when we were kids, bowling a tennis ball, my brother hitting it into the swamp where I found a great crested newt once. There’s the ball turning in the air. My sister at mid-on. My brother steeping forward, the bat raised. A kestrel launches itself from the mill chimney, its wings flickering russet. I glance through the window and a heron collapses upwards from the garden pond. There’s Ingleborough, iced like my mother’s cake, banded with dark rock, a cloud-spectre under weak sun. Jackdaws hop across grass-spiked snow, their blue eyes measuring days to the solstice. When light lengthens, when life begins.

The last time I went back, the workshop had disappeared. Just a flat yard, overgrown with willow herb and brambles. A cockerel jumped up on the fence opposite and crowed three times, effortlessly.

**Abed**

When that oak bed arrived

I knew I’d die in it: lugging

it with a stranger, first-

footing dumb snow, his van

blinking at the road end, then

timbers shouldered to our

upstairs room, a Calvary

of stairs, a gloam of dawn.

I was a carpenter’s child:

shavings and pine tar my

playthings, the burr of the

saw its own language where

I fed ringlets to the coke

stove and a starling my father

nursed lay wimpled in lint.

A wood-chiseller’s child, I

say touching my chest where

surgeons put my heart back –

a golden fish gasping in its

raiment of blood – then

touching oak posts, slats, ribs

of oak ringed by sullen waters

where seasons widened then sank.

You’re asking me about the

starling as if its dying there so

many winters distant isn’t

through; dust specks tumbling

as you lay fresh sheets, flecked

oak under my fingers, grain furled

hymnal tight, the birds in

dark suits, in their hundreds

clearing their throats.

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