

This patch of land

Louisa Adjoa Parker

Meet me in the Holloways, where sunken lanes are worn into soft sandstone by cartwheels, hooves, rainwater spilling from the fields, the footsteps of our ancestors on their way to market. Akin to walking on a dried-up riverbed – an uneven carving out, a hollowing, littered with fallen twigs and stones. With walls held up by latticed roots, treetops with knitted branches that rear into the sky like hands that held each other so tightly they became one. Where smugglers hauled contraband from sea to shore and over land in the ink-hours of night. Where we might glimpse a rare spider, spinning webs from leaf to leaf, see wild garlic lining the stone walls. Even at midsummer, it's damp and cool in this green-gold world, where dappled sunlight filters in, a relic from the past, with nothing here to tell us *when* we are apart from a plastic ribbon, wrapped around a branch. And then, an opening out, as though we're being birthed onto a giant bowl of land, undulating hills, cake-topped with a copse of trees. And here: a slice of sapphire sea, the broad, bright glare of sky.



he catches ten crabs
in one go, a single, shining eel
his mother takes it, guides it
back through a gully
out to the sea



We're blessing the apple trees this winter, gathered in this orchard amongst the leafless trees and ghosts of fallen apples, fallen autumn leaves. We're wrapped up, drinking amber cider and warm apple juice from mismatched mugs we brought ourselves. There's food and fire: orange flames against a washed-out pewter sky. Burning meat, woodsmoke that clings to your hair and clothes for days. We bang pans, shake sticks, shout with our mouths open wide to scare orchard spirits away, pour drinks onto the roots of trees. Men leap and dance, shake ankles cuffed with cat-collar bells. It's all about the apple: from bitter pip to sapling, then gathering the blushing globes at harvest time before the birds and wasps get at them. Pressing into juice, fermenting into liquid gold. Some say the apples came from France, carried overseas by monks. Children clutching fistfuls of fiery straw, weave in and out of trees, away

from endless screens. Oh, the time depth we have here; doing what we've done for centuries.



as she's lowered into the earth
a sudden burst of birdsong
patchwork-feathered jays watch
from branches in the trees



It's a stone history; sixteen generations of men quarried here, pulled stone from the earth, father and son, father to son. It connects them to this land, one continuous industry, that deep time geology holds. The cliffs run North to South; the routes men walked to work are etched into the land. A man, his two sons, digging in the wet clay; a keyhole opening in the earth, a tiny wound. A capstan drum, a low-bellied donkey, coarse-haired, a length of rusty chain. Low-ceilinged quarries, water dripping from the mud-stone roof, just men and earth and dark and wet, a crowbar and a hammer, the rhythmic chink of metal striking stone. Some Purbeck marble stayed in churches here, the rest was shipped elsewhere. Now, it's cheaper to import, dug out from quarries by children wearing flip flops, brown limbs talcumed with powdered stone, dust flowering in their lungs.



it's other people's leisure park – to see
the wild, these days you often pay
at Dancing Ledge guided tours
edging locals out of their way



Yes, there are witches here. The last curer lived in a corrugated shed on the big hill, got her water from a well on another farmer's field. One day he stopped her coming; soon after that, his cows began to die. *You can get your water; I'm begging you to stop!* No more deaths, from then. If you do up an old farmhouse, you might find an ox's heart studded with nails inside the chimney breast, dried up and black – it's not just a Dorset thing – to ward off attacks by your enemies.

Sometimes a mummified cat has been bricked into the walls, dust-grey, legs bent as though trying to leap out, mouth frozen in a centuries-old miaow. On his deathbed, an old man made another burn his spell book listing all his cures, sat up in bed to watch it fold into the fire. Oh, we have white witches here, black ones across the valley. White ones, certain times of year, there's tinsel, silver in the trees, yellow corn dollies set upon the earth. They have bonfires on the hill. They're making spells to save the land. The others, well ...



in the singing barrows the faery folk
make music underground
at midnight or midday
some press their ear against the earth
but it's best to keep away



Once, a nearby farmer's cow was sick, and the vet rushed over to find the cow walking out of the kitchen. *Cows and kitchens, they don't mix*, he said. *Ah*, the farmer said, *'e's been on the phone, talking to the whisperer*. They still tie holly up in sheds to cure animals of ringworm. With the lure, you cut out the first turf the infected hoof stands on, hang it in the shed. When the grass dies on the turf, the lure is cured. There are the old ways and the new, things are different now. All the fields have names and histories. When he starts work in the Spring, it's like visiting old friends. Once he had to sell some fields, still dreams about them now. You find things in the earth, early Bronze Age, arrowheads and coins. He wouldn't change this for the world. There's sadness too – in the '60s his mates had these American-style cars. They'd drive the long square-jawed beasts down to the beach, race over the sand at night. The stench of petrol in the salt-air. So many young died here, drugs and accidents, pneumonia – which would never happen now. When they first lived here their house was falling down; plastic bags under the windows, the roof blew off in storms. Morning is the time they talk; they lie in bed and sip their tea, say how lucky they both are.



boatloads of people come over the water
to see orange-beaked puffins, witness their decline
tramping the cliffs at nesting season
why aren't there any signs?

I can't sit quietly at home; in the mornings when the sun's up, I want to go straight out. I don't like to be inside four walls; I need the countryside to breathe. You can walk out of your house, and someone says hello. It's a Roman town – there's so much history here. Iron Age forts, burial mounds, Maumbury Rings. I like going to the river – I can go on the river path with my wheelchair. I'd love to see nature have more places we can go. It's quiet at the river, you're off the road, there's no need to climb over gates or struggle through thick mud. I can be quiet outside, sat on a mossy bench, watching people move in the allotments, growing vegetables and fruit, the onyx river with its reflection of the sky, the families of ducks dipping oily heads in water, the overhang of trees. I can listen and be quiet, here. Breathe in the river air, damp earth, the history.



the pit of doom: skulls unearthed,
on the far side, headless skeletons
these Vikings, some mere boys
laid in the earth, a thousand years



As a boy, he'd help out on the farm; a gang of kids, bags slung across their bony frames, marching through a crop field, pulling up wild oats. He liked to see finches eat birdseed they'd scattered on the fence, watched his dad coppicing a tree, wait for those new shoots. He helped at lambing time – once they had a thousand ewes. Six people working on the farm then, now it's him and one. No animals, just crops – wheat, barley, oilseed rape. There's an old map of the farm, listing parcels of the land: arable, pasture, orchard, garden. He grew up with a house beside a church, those giant hills. His parents blew a horn at mealtimes, sometimes he'd come home when they called. He likes fishing for small, green-finned, speckled trout on the River Cerne which runs right through the farm. It's everything to him; this morning, on the hilltop he was laying a hedge he started in the Spring. A pink satin ribbon in the sky as the sun rose. Silhouetted trees. Cold morning air, a hint of woodsmoke. It's that space, the ability to open your arms out wide – *like this* – and watch. Each day he's out before breakfast, picks up a chainsaw, coppicing, hedge-laying, mending the odd gate. His dad was the same; in his last years he'd sit outside at dusk, wait to see if a fox was passing by. He was happy not to pull the trigger, to simply be there as the day began to die.



a lime kiln built into a bank, thick
with yellow flowers in early Spring, that insect buzz
a sweep of hills, through to the coast,
dips down into wet orange soil



We're at a farmhouse table: a young woman, fresh-faced with a spill of curls, her toddler son, ruddy-cheeked with sleep. Over lemon tea she tells me they've not been here a week. It was her parents' farm. The soil is mostly clay here, some lower parts descend into greensand around the waterways, it doesn't keep the water well, different minerals. Yes, it has a greenish hue. What they grow has to be suited to the soil. Everything's about the soil: building resilience, listening to the land. There's woodland here, a good amount of shade. They're high up, it can be windy and exposed. There's roe and fallow deer, badgers, foxes, rabbits, hares. West Dorset used to have wild boar that roamed the woods. There are yellow and pied wagtails, egrets, white-bellied buzzards. And mushrooms: white puffballs like designer lamps, brown field mushrooms, parasols with bark-like skin. There was a cheeky deer once, a buck, who'd come and say hello. It's hard to make a living off the farm, you have to choose it as a lifestyle, truly love the land. It's a small world, but her boy can run across the fields; she remembers playing in the streams, climbing trees, pet lambs following her around the farm, the sadness when they had to go. It's that knowing; we care for the animals, but they're here for us for food. Later, we walk through the farmyard, concrete floor slicked with rain, oil rainbows greasing puddles. Her son picks up a chicken: *Look how strong I am!* A farm cat sits atop a bale of yellow hay, watching us with serious eyes. A giant tractor, green and still inside a barn. Woodlands in the distance, fields, a muddy track, dead sunflowers. A low, dense mist shrouds everything. It's almost winter; I imagine it in Spring.



over the border, where people fight and dogs bark
outside the shop, where nearby a man
was killed, I see a green space from my window.
birds come. at times, a feral cat



The world I remember, long gone. Old Don, who used to milk the cows, he was a hard-living man. He had two chairs in his house, one for him, one for his dog. He never had her spayed – you won't like this – when she had puppies, he'd drown them. One day after he'd done the deed, he went out to milk the cows, came back to find his chair was nothing but a pile of splintered wood; this mother-dog, she'd eaten it. His favourite night was faggot night, January the twelfth – they'd tie sticks into a faggot with bands, like a witch's broom, push them into the fire for heating. Thirteen bands, each time you pushed one in you'd have a pint. One morning after faggot night I found him lying in the farm gateway, unconscious. I could see he'd been run over, so woke him, asked if I should I call an ambulance. He got up, dusted down his dew-damp clothes, went off to milk the cows.



they must have been important
for the ones they left behind
to grow a hill around their tombs
an everlasting, ridged green mound



Perhaps the sound of gulls harks back to my childhood on the South African coast. There's something comforting about the sea: the waves, the power of water humbles you. We go nature hunting; if children love a thing, they'll care for it. We search for waxcap mushrooms which tell us we're on ancient grassland. In summer we go to the ponds with our nets, search for dragonflies. Who'd think these pretty creatures, with two pairs of silvered wings are predators? Odonatas can be vicious when they're nymphs. We hunt for glowworms, walk along the cliffs at night. In Durlston once, we counted forty-two; tiny points of greenish light like stars shining in the grass. It's the virgin females; she puts so much effort in, her glowing call, because she needs a mate. We look up and see hundreds of stars, the Milky Way. It creeps up on you; you come home so complete in spite of being on your feet all day walking through the rain. Who doesn't love birdsong, a robin flitting by?



turn the corner and you'll see Corfe Castle
looming like a giant in the mist
this time of the year, the early nights
a castle ruin, draped in lights
it takes my breath away



I grew up in a run-down place. Dad took me on the back of his bike to see the pigs at the allotments. As soon as I was old enough, I wanted out. Lived in a council house, huge stretch of garden the council planned to build on. We had goats and chickens. We'd get in the car, drive around Cornwall, or Wales, look for somewhere to go. Didn't think about West Dorset until the swap came up. That little road between Beaminster and Bridport, where you hit the bends? When I got there, I thought wow. It was 1978; we got snowed in for a fortnight. I took the chickens with me. I was homeless for a while after my first marriage ended. Had to go back up country, took me a year to get back down. There were winter lets then, you'd buy the Western Gazette as soon as it came out. When the winter let ended, I'd stay in the odd place, a caravan, the boys went to their mates'. I stayed in a mate's lambing shed, once, for a long weekend. Eventually got another council house. I'd have ten quid a week for petrol; when it ran out it ran out. I'd walk to Beaminster to clean for one pound an hour. The boys would push the car to bump start it. I met my second husband in the pub. We shared a dream to own a farm. We had pigs, a breeding sow. I'd help with driving tractors, making hay. I had a nanny goat; everywhere I went, she came.



the family you grow up in
is like the waters you swim in
it all goes back to stone
extracted from the earth
like teeth pulled out of bone



Meet me on this patch of land. Let's go on a winter walk down to the thrashing sea, and on, along the coast, over sand or shingle, from clay to kaolin to stone, each place with its own history. We might hear the ghosts of laughter, children splashing in the tides, catch the faint scent of fish and chips, glimpse the ghosts of people who anchored on this shore. At night, we might look up into the blackest sky, lit by the stars or moon, suspended like a silver coin. When morning comes, we'll go back inland, over wetlands, chalklands, grasslands, climb hills with folk names gifted by our ancestors, the purpled heaths where Gypsies camped. We'll step into an open field, where cattle graze and wildflowers grow. Last summer, you might say, you found orchids here. We'll stand on the hilltop, where you can see for miles, across the rippling valleys and vales. We might see round barrows, ancient hill forts, the ghosts of wooden henges which sunk into the ground. We'll listen to the wood pigeons or crows or gulls who wake us every morning with their songs, hunt for rare birds or butterflies. If we return in summer, we might see a silvered butterfly feast on bramble blossom in the shade. We'll walk this patch of land, loved and lived and worked on, by young and old alike, its stories the fascia, its geology the bones. This green-gold land, which has been allowed to breathe, to stay connected to the wild. The more we learn, the more we can get under its skin. Maybe the land will love us back, if our feet trace the same steps each day. Although we wounded it, if we tread more lightly now, perhaps the land will let us stay.