

THE DEN 3

THE LEFT SIDE IS SCRIPT

ONE

The den, my burrow of holly, ivy,
soft earth and oak mutates as
lockdown and shielding are paused.
Its power and purpose dissolves,
and its boundaries become ragged
as people get nearer and I move further away.

The den feels the change
so we let each other be,
and I roam the parks and the
cemeteries like everybody else.

Collectively we trample through woods,
circling while the trees look on, bemused.
Heavy usage spawns new desire paths,
rat runs scored by overlapping trudges.

Paths get wider, muddier, more slippery,
so new diversions grow like
parentheses around the sides.
Routes mapping out our
repetitive movements, left as evidence.

We walk, joining autumn to winter.

Dens appear everywhere.
Handsome dens, practical dens,
broken furniture nestled in the corners,
half open to the elements.
Teenage enclaves, half shelters, huddles.
Beer cans and cartons of cranberry juice,
vodka bottles, tissues.
Blue masks caught in root mesh.

THE RIGHT SIDE IS SOUND

*wind in the trees sways from
side to side as the birds sing
the wind stops and leaves and
heavy rain starts to fall*

*a foot clomps on tarmac
children play in the distance
footsteps now walk through
dry leaves, traffic in the distance*

*louder footsteps through dry
crunchy leaves, twigs snapping*

*a second voice speaks over the
first, deeper echoes of leaves and
thicker twigs underfoot*

*the voice multiplies and overlaps
itself
hum of traffic in the distance*

*a bird squawks loudly
a plane flies overhead*

*a dog barks in the distance
birds sing loudly
a sweeping sound*

In the summer after dark
the wood transformed -
parties in outside rooms,
no-one to pick up the rubbish,
just party and move on.

The dens aren't made for play now
they're made for socialising.
But I don't want to party, I want to disappear.

Storms uproot trees and whip up the leaves,
the wood shakes and settles anew -
it is unfamiliar.

Patterns and trails are constantly in flux,
my old routes don't look the same.
I get lost, it is my fault,
my attention has waned.

In winter the trees are reduced to lines.
Bare branches mean transparency,
so sound and vision travels.
It is not as dense and secretive
as in the spring.

With less coverage I feel alienated,
hunted and haunted.
It is time to revisit the den.

Avoiding people, I avoid weekends.
I visit the wood after it rains,
the sun sparkling through the leaves,
whispering encouragement:
"everything in the world has changed
apart from you"

Slow down and listen to the trees.

Tune back in.

yells and calls of people and foxes

the deep boom of a distant stereo

*a bird caws, the bass stops with a
thud, gusts of wind travel through
the trees*

*leaves dropping
it starts raining heavily*

*the church bells ring
a preacher preaches in heavy rain*

voice doubles

the rain ceases

voice doubles

*voice echoes repeating each line.
sound of leaves dropping
through the trees intensifies*

I am branch, I am bird, I am leaf.
I am winter, I am summer,
I am autumn, I am spring.

strong birdsong

*faint sound of children playing
voice echo ends*

T W O

In the summer I took someone to see the den.

*footsteps scuff on gravel and
occasionally pause, birdsong
and traffic in the distance*

Climbing up the hill, I quickly spotted
a dark green plastic camping mattress
and some empty cans, not inside the den,
but in a pocket nestling at the
right of the entrance.

They had not entered, but respectfully
stayed just outside. I withdrew, recognising
that I could not go near, that for the time
being it was someone else's,
someone with more need than me.

If I take you to the den can you see it?

*voice doubles
footsteps stop*

I use the den as language,
a portal to be able to feel my feelings.
Translator, motif, protector and enabler.
I don't own the den,
but somehow I think it owns me.

*sweeping, metallic, synthetic,
slow, breath like sounds
a plane flies overhead*

Back in lockdown, I am once more
a shielder, but with less guidance:
"you're in it on your own now."

*voice doubles
footsteps hesitantly walk through
leaves*

The mattress has gone, it went a while ago.
The approach to the den looks bare,
some foliage has been cleared
around the site, replaced with dirty
plastic bouquet wrappers and used wet wipes.

I walk around the back of the den,
towards the fox hole, where it is thick
with holly, lively in the winter,
and there at the reverse of the oak tree
is the mattress! They have pushed their
way further inside, into the very back
of the den, making their own extension,
their body searching out a deeper cavity,
the need for safety as a 'hidden'
far more than mine.

The mattress is sodden and brown leaves
fill the creases in the material.
It hasn't been used in a while.
It is a thing of beauty, sunk down low
in the hollow of the holly bush -
although a crawl space, it looks safe
and inviting. I am not unnerved, instead
I feel a thrill that my den is secluded
enough to conceal and shelter another.

T H R E E

In the wood you are everything
and you are nothing.
I am accepted here as are all rejects,
outsiders, miscreants and defectives.
It provides refuge to the ones who
do not know what else to do.

And so with our backs against the corner,
brushing up against thin twigs with
new leaves, we withdraw.

Tuning in our ears as we close our eyes,
we seek nooks and crannies, spaces
open and closed at the same time.
Branchwork becoming second skin.
The space grows around us as an

*quick, high pitched sweeps of
scratches on a man made fabric
by sharp twigs and bramble, the
crunch, scrape and thud of a body
in a bush*

*leaves and rain falling in the wind
thuds and sounds of a body
as it maneuvers through
bramble, snapping some twigs*

*the rain stops
a bee buzzes
clear birdsong*

*shifting exhales, metallic breath
cuts in and around*

*second voice doubles to repeat as
an echo, pulses of metallic breaths
scrape and thud of footsteps*

quick high pitched squeaks

extension of our presence, cocooned,
away from man and city.

Only the creatures easily pass through,
the robin, persistently inspecting,
the fox, its own den a few meters
away down the hill. The bees, breezily
sailing through before nose diving
into their own holes in the earth.
Quivering and industrious
while we rest and observe.

“Entangled in the wood,
my limbs become branches,
my hands the shoots. My feet
as roots hear you approach.

I shall now take you inside.
The den is yours as much as mine.
I will show you how it feels.

Your eyes are closed,
I take your hand, and we step
over the pile of logs heading deeper
into the woodland and I gently guide you in.
I pull back the branch diagonally
obstructing the entrance and
part several vines of ivy.

I tell you to dip your head slightly.
You must carefully lift one foot
and then the other to step over
the branch threshold on the floor.

The ivy falls back dutifully,
partly concealing us from behind.
Once inside you can stand up,
but temper your movement or pricks
from holly sprigs will scratch your sides.

*the second voice begins to fade out
traffic becomes more present, a dog
barks, hesitant steps in dry leaves,
bees buzzing*

*a melodic bird call sounds like a
stringed instrument
a bird cackles
the voice becomes distant and
echoey*

mid tone feedback whine

the sound of footsteps in dry leaves

bramble scrapes on fabric

a bird cackles, leaves fall

twigs snap underfoot

I drop your hand and move to the
far side of the den.

Now you must feel alone.

With one or two steps the ground will
gently dip and your feet will disturb
piles of old dry leaves. If you reach out
your right arm you will feel the ancient
creviced trunk of an old oak tree.
Run your hand down to the base and
touch the exposed roots - they form a cradle.

leaves fall

Crouch down and sit with your back
at the base of the tree. Stretch out on
the earth and now, in place,
you can open your eyes.

shift of material against bark

Looking up, you see a channel to the sky.
Behind you, you see the mattress,
to your left, the entrance and the graveyard,
and to the right, clusters of barbed
holly leading to the fox hole.

strong birdsong

Surrounding you is a circle of carefully
arranged twigs jetting out from the
base of the tree.

a bee buzzes

You look slowly from left to right,
up above and behind, but I am not there.

You are alone."

mid tone feedback whine

Please use your eyes and ears for
anyone approaching, sink further
down into the soil, they will not see you
and you will not be disturbed.

*voice doubles sounding like a
service announcement*

FOUR

Trees understand crip time.
My kin, I want to slow down to your rate.
Human time is too fast for me.
I choose you. My imprint is slight,
but you have spoken to me
and I receive your messages.
I feel your age, your slow patience,
the flexibility of your strength,
from root through rings through
fluttering leaves, renew, rot, renew!

I am full of toxins, so full of toxins
and poisons from treatments that
my body is wilting. The den has
been my witness, it notes my chemicals,
my hormones, my changing cells.
My subtle transpirations enter the atmosphere,
sift in and around, and in the smallest sigh,
are welcomed into the trees.

It is strange and alarming to not realise
quite how fragile you really are.
When given the vaccine, instead of
opening up my world to a safer and
more 'normal' life, my body panicked
and overwhelmed, fizzed and folded inward.
Ancient viruses were reactivated,
and I was left half a person,
more limited than before, the fatigue of a
different quality: longer, weightier,
but more precarious and unpredictable.

I pivot to tree time, slowed down,
limbs wading through slurry-like air.
Rest, but the 'right' rest, being the
majority of my daily experience.

My cells are studied in great detail

*low ghostly synth sounds bump
and clunk, birdsong becomes
slower*

leaves fall

voice doubles

*sniffs and the low inhale/exhale
of a metallic ghostly sound*

a tangled metallic sound unravels

*bees buzzing transform into a
symphony of bees*

the low inhale/exhale returns

*a very low rumble comes, all
background noises cease just
leaving the low rumble which
sounds like a storm underground
sounds of tinder crackling in fire
twigs are breaking underfoot*

*busy electronic drips and drops,
patters and spatters*

and immune dysfunction is determined.
I microdose cytokines, hormones,
growth factors, nucleic acids.

The den doesn't need me there
but it accepts me. It is not indifferent,
and with repetitive visits, we become
companions, allies. We breathe each
other in and we breathe each other out,
with mouth, skin and leaves,
our leaky membranes mingle.
The den does not mind that I am
diseased and dysfunctional,
it gladly offers me what it can,
and in gratitude I offer it all that I can.

I perform my own protocol,
deeply inhaling phytoncides.
I am intoxicated by petrichor
and geosmin after the rain.
I dose bacteria from the soil -
I offer my cells and my expelled breath
and in return I absorb change.

Like a plant I embody fortitude.
Hope and optimism are ductile.
A ceaseless thread with indefatigable
tensile strength. "I don't know how you do it",
to which I answer; "I have no choice".

Like the tree, the soil, the fungi we press on,
reaching towards an uncertain future, bending,
adapting, and slowly, slowly, persisting.

FIVE

My cells have been gathering here,
slowly over time at each visit.

rain falls

*sound of quick, tuneless, synth like
exhales*

*the busy electronic spatters come
back in, faster*

*electronic spatters stop
low ghostly synth exhales*

wind in trees

woodpecker song

*distant birdsong
an active crackle of muffled
electronic fuzz, like mechanical*

I have been introducing myself to the den
and it now knows me in biochemical detail.
A witness to my microbial makeup.

To become still, rooted, means to
see in greater detail. It wasn't the wood
calling me, it was this humble spot,
the earth and its horizons.

Soil has memory, a body, it is fragile.
It holds our secrets and transforms them.

I am the earth and the earth is me.

I probe my fingers down into the damp earth,
rustling through the dry leaves.
I pick up a handful and cup it to my face.
I breathe in its hospitality, the microbes,
the decay. I whisper "make me feel better"
and it answers, "come here".

I dig a small hole in the earthy dip
and I place my face over it to inhale more fully.
I taste it and it fizzes in my mouth.
I close my eyes, "come here" it says
and I push my face further in,
I am up to my ears now, and the soil
begins to dull my hearing.
I use my hands gripping the sides
of the hole to reach in,
further propelling myself inside, "come here".

I am the earth and the earth is me.

I am the underneath. It is cool in here.
I am the rot and the shit of dirt.
I become both saprophytic, and a detritivore.
I am intern, guided by earth and its fungi.
I feast on rotten wood, I assist, I am useful.
I breathe through holes made by earthworms,

*vibrations with scrapes, thumps
and gentle thuds*

the whine of a distant train

*second voice doubles and slowly
repeats to fade, the electronic
crackles grow stronger and deeper
rustle of metallic sounding leaves*

mid tone feedback whine

*mid tone feedback whine comes
and goes
a very low, deep rumble of bass*

*second voice doubles
a bump, a thud
the voice sounds closer
a distant muffled bird call*

probing through, casting out.
I navigate threads of hyphae.
I am loaded, busy, purposeful.
I am blended, I am humus,
and I join its memory.

I matter as matter, localised, manageable.
Growth and decay will disguise my traces
over time and I will disappear,
absorbed into roots, soon to become leaves.

I will drop to the ground,
litter and decay, breath and heat,
feeding root to leaf to ground again,
an unbroken relentless cycle.
The poisons in my body neutralised,
the soil my benevolent healer.

Finally I am recognised,
finally I make sense.
I balance my debt, a fertile offering.
I have assimilated,
and the den passes on.

I am the den and the den is me.

bumps and nudges

*a bee buzzes
the low rumble slowly rises in pitch*

*the sound of birdsong becomes
clearer as the strange electronic
crackles start to rattle and
slowly fade out*

*all background noise ceases,
leaving only clear birdsong and
some gentle wind in the trees*

*voice repeats 'I am the den and the
den is me' and then slowly fades
out, the birds continue to sing*

[there are green shoots, there will always be green shoots]