

Your den

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Your Den

Your Den

My shorthand for the experience of shielding is "house arrest and solitary confinement". This simile lays it on thick though where the recipient has not experienced being housebound otherwise, nor a more generic avoidance of crowds, there is little else to which to refer; failure of language to explain this total compression. No perspective, no distance is the difficulty of the thing itself and moreover the difficulty in writing it, inextricably linked. And it's not so much the obvious distance of time, the time required to process any event. Rather the physical distance of space that is missing: the exact problem of any sprawling life suddenly compressed into a few square meters (that in turn collapses into the screen(s) that now mediates all of life).



S begins to tell me about their daily rendez-vous in the woods in the early morning and I share delight that such things are possible but also jealousy that I have not solved my similar puzzle. I hardly cross the threshold of my home for days, even weeks at a time. A small shy child hiding under my mother's skirt, I sought dens endlessly, promiscuous affiliations everywhere I could find them. Being somewhere that other people aren't even aware of, the joy of it emanates like a fundamental law of physics from these speckled memories. I know there are deep patterns of intuition that S and I share, and this one is a basic instinct. Yet, when I ask myself now where my den is, or just where I go to when I'm seeking solace, I feel mild panic and no answer, like a disconcerting truth a therapist has unclothed. If a den is a place of refuge, somewhere to escape and hide, it's hard to even imagine where to look now.

When a composer pal presents new work live online at dawn on a mid-May weekend² I take this as a cue to gingerly return to Hackney Marshes - a space barely ten minutes walk from my home that now feels like a foreign land, months since my last visit. My ears are baptised, first the compositions and then the incredible newness of this soundscape, now so thrillingly vast in contrast with the constant indoors. I take a mental note of every sonic event and then write this inventory on Instagram. It gets more 'likes' than anything I have ever posted, "5.30am is my new jam...". I boast. But I never manage to repeat my dawn rising so the marshes remain largely out-of-bounds (too busy at other times, the bridge over the canal that is my entrance has become a bottleneck).

In July I finally find it: what I need is answered in the cold, dark waters of an urban reservoir, West Reservoir, a place where people would previously have gone to learn to windsurf and other watersports, now transformed for outdoor swimming. It is not too far from home but far enough to finally have a *destination*, the simple concept that has been missing from my fearful nery circular forays outside the house. Here I swim in the open water, a half kilometer circuit, far enough away from others, orderly enough to feel just about safe, at least as safe as these other walks; and melting into the cold expanse, a complete bodily transformation. It took these broken awful months to remember that my adult spaces of refuge are ones of bathing: saunas, baths, ponds, sea, usually wet and with extremes of temperature; embodied states that are completely unavailable in the housebound compression before the advent of the unlikely reservoir. I love the ritual here, especially heightened by the COVID rules. Just as *The Den 1* is an instructional score, so I could share with you mine; though it is not poetic, gnomic, just a rigid set of actions that reliably propel me into a full-bodied escape. Other people seem to feel the same, it becomes almost devotional, especially as the Winter breaks and the *hard core* among us continue in our new wetsuits, a strange solidarity, together apart.

I can't tell myself
from a TV¹
Irene Revell

1. A line sung by Jenny Hoyston in the song 'How to tell yourself from a TV' by the band Erase Errata on the album *Other Animals* (2001).

2. James Bulley composed music for *DAWNS* (2020) available at dawns.live

My Den, My Rules

Sarah Porter

You know it's funny I did think about building a den
But then all the lights went out and doors shut around me
outside emptied out
and I was left
on my own
in silence
there didn't seem much point to a den, to be honest
not when there's no one about to hide from

But now the streets are full of plastic and piss
and people searching for normal
and I've become completely bloody invisible to spitty
sweaty runners
that don't seem at all bothered about my death
so it seems to me that overnight my streets
became
their streets
their rules

So I found myself wandering back to this den idea
I planned the first one meticulously so that it would be
safe enough
I drew up a checklist
a criteria
a cleaning rota, of one of course
People free, tick
Infection controlled, tick
Emptied of unwashed fruit and hands, tick, tick
able to take deliveries of food, medication, injections
tick, tick, tick
but that was home

So I changed tack and about turned
I planned another way to attack the problem
made a framework
a process
a spreadsheet
another list and a flow chart
it almost looked like I knew what I was doing
then I chucked it all out
and laughed at myself

So I scratched about for a new way to get started
before I realised I'd had it all along
the trick is to stop

everything just has to stop

muscle
mouth
mind
all of it
everything has to stop before you can start again
so here it is
this is my den
my rules

The path to my den is very important
You have to start at the apple tree
It's always heavy with apples but you can't stop to
pick them anymore
So by now the branches just about touch the ground
So when you walk behind it you'll disappear

You are now on the safest and saddest part of the path
You have to drag the sad stuff because by now it
weighs a ton
you don't realise it but you've been saving this stuff up
for a long time
It gets stuck on the ridges and bends in the path and a
bit ripped up as it goes
It can get caught up on those massive brambles as
well but don't let that worry you
You don't know this yet but you can just walk straight
through them
You won't dodge all the thorns though
it's just not that kind of path

Next you'll reach a swing
It's made from some old rope off a lorry
and wood that was part of a pallet of peaches (that fell
from the same lorry, of course)
And it's always October
so there are leaves around you everywhere

And that's where you have to leave the sad stuff
Pile it up neatly, cover it up properly with leaves
If you do it right, it'll rot away without making a sound
because sad stuff just isn't allowed in the den
Oh and it's not allowed to make a noise either
you can't leave anything messy or noisy in this place
It's my den
It's my rules

This one is a bit of a collage of crap
More makeshift ties than proper knots and dovetails
A bit like my tongue really
a memory muddle of things that I think string together
but not everyone does
Still, right now no one can hear the words falling out of
my mouth all over the place
and being able to say all the twists and turns that run
through my head without anyone listening
somehow, suddenly feels just a bit like flying

Anyway, I think I've really got the hang of this now
There's an old corrugated plastic roof that we took
down before it went brittle and fell to bits
Some bricks we nicked from the building site over the
road
when they were building the posh houses
Oh and I took some of those candy-stripe sheets from
the back of the airing cupboard, they smell a bit musty
but it doesn't matter does it?
It was getting a bit dark by the time I finished this one
so I brought the big torch down here just in case


But to be honest I always did fall in love with this kind
of darkness
You know, when the nights just begin to draw in
a bit like when you shut the curtains in the daytime
and they wash over that stubborn sunlight
so you don't really notice it leaving
not till it's really gone

On a makeshift shelf at the back you will see some old
biscuit tins
They're full of people
You won't know them all
But they are all loved

You never imagined this in a month of Sundays, right
but as you're sorting through them
You'll want to hold on to one or two of them for a
while
But you'll see one of them and you'll stop you dead in
your tracks
You'll carefully prise that one open
and you'll want to cling onto that one for dear life
and when you do
except for the sound of tins snapping shut
you'll hear nothing at all
not even the words in your head


You won't want to put that one back
Because it's made up of all everything that's missed
but you have to try
and when that tin lid snaps
out the thinnest air you'll snatch the sound of the bells
at the back door quietly turning
you'll freeze on the spot
so still you'll think your heart has stopped as you
listen
but now you'll know
you really can start from scratch
and you'll hear something you hadn't heard in a long
time
you'll finally be able to hear yourself

That's just how it works
It's my den
My rules



Ollie Simpson

Inside the long, ancient hedgerow we crouch, holding our breath each time someone passes by on the path next to us. Decades later, I will recognise the hedge's interior as a microcosmos that mirrors the surrounding meadows almost perfectly; the narrow, slow stream trickling through its centre channels the flow of the great river; the boundaries of the accessible space marked by a long, distorted grid of dense, tangled hawthorn. For now though, we are content each time we go unnoticed, and each passing dog walker or family or cyclist that remains unaware of the row of children huddled close to the ground marks another victory for the day.



I make dens almost every day, even if I start off rushing around by the evening I am usually swaddled in a blanket on my sofa. I call my bouts of depression "cocooning" and I think my cocooning process is similar to making a den, I always make sure there are books, snacks, my trusty Maleficent coffee mug and a water bottle nearby. All the fortifications I need for a long siege. It feels necessary to have some kind of blanket in the dens I make, there is a desire for softness and for cover. I'd like to think trees would be enough, but the reality is I am very attached to the false protections of fabric. I am literally materialistic.

I'd say the dens I make most consistently are dens in my mind - the sweet spot where I feel safe and unburdened to create or simply exist without any other weights pressing on me. It's quite a difficult headspace to get to. In order to feel at peace with resting and being in my den I have to persuade myself that it's ok for me to do the bare minimum. An alien notion under Capitalism. But once I get there, I'm there and never want to leave.

The den in my mind is full of ocean waves and storms. If I were to call it a "mind palace" it wouldn't really look like a palace but a cave. A perfect Hollywood type of cave where you somehow manage to see everything - it's clean and bright, heavily exposed to sunshine and sea air. My physical dens are about comfort and safety - I usually need a den when I am physically or mentally unwell. I can hide in plain sight with them, I make no demands on anyone and it's easier to pretend that I am well and just having a "duvet day" when I am in this state. It's a weird sort of camouflage. The reality is I den at least once a week for a few days, sometimes I manage to work sometimes not. Although I feel that most of the time the purpose and drive to make the den is to be restful.

Zuleika Lebow

A den is a bit like a womb within the world. I thought about the film version of *The Secret Garden*, and the way they each discover something new about themselves whilst they visit it. I wonder if we change a little because of being in the den or because we make the self-care decision to make it in the first place. It's a different kind of "showing up" for oneself but it's just as important as getting exercise or brushing teeth. We all need to know that we can carve out safe spaces for ourselves in whatever ways we have available and accessible to us. I need noise to be able to sleep, and I've begun listening to these sleep stories on Audible that have no real beginning or end and are super descriptive but also soothing. I feel like they allow me to make a small oasis where I can push back the raging quiet of "thinking" that happens when you have an active mind but an exhausted body. Listening to the piece, I kept thinking of that scene in *The Craft* where they play "light as a feather, stiff as a board". It feels like the work is like a spell or a chant. A portable den you can take with you wherever you are.

Truth and Death

Camille Francis Lerner

In early March I moved away from London in a panic. I needed to be with my partner and I needed us both to be safe. It took me a while to get my bearings in this new place. It is difficult to locate your body in relation to its surroundings when you believe that venturing outside, even for a few minutes, means certain death.

A couple months after moving I was crying over Zoom to my therapist because I was tired of being scared all the time and I desperately missed trees. She recommended looking at a map to see if there were any woods nearby. I noticed a small patch of green less than 5 minutes away and immediately headed out before the fear could catch up with me.

What I found was a small area of woodland (it takes about 10 minutes to walk around the whole thing). It was full of fascinating trash: a 00s computer monitor, an 80s vacuum cleaner, a burnt out car. There were lots of pungent flowers and trees thick with vibrant green leaves. Most importantly though, there was no one else around. To be outside, surrounded by plants and all alone was a magical feeling, I burst into tears with relief.

I walked through the woods many times as the seasons changed. I showed my partner all my favourite bits of trash, in the late summer we picked blackberries for a crumble and during autumn we marvelled at the flaming leaves. Now it is Winter, the air is thick and damp. The smell of decay has replaced the ripeness of Summer.



My body has been through a lot this year. In order to aid healing, once a week I cover my face, shoulders and surgery scars in clay. But today I keep applying it, smearing down my arms and across my stomach. I reach around to coat my back and stretch down to cover my legs. When I am satisfactorily encased, I inscribe $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha$ on my forehead, declaring myself a golem. I command myself to march down to the woods and my golem obliges.

The sky is grey and the paths in the woods are grey too. Everything is wet and sticky and sludgy and slippery. As I walk, I lose track of what is the clay of my golem's flesh and what is the mud of the woods'. I arrive at my destination, a mire, and direct myself to stop.

While gently caressing the forehead of my golem, the κ is removed. I am offering myself up to the cycle of ripening and decay, as truth is transformed to death. Gradually I melt down into the mud, reabsorbed into the earth. Liberated from physical form, I will remain here until Spring when I shall reemerge with the seedlings and bloom with the bluebells.

Nowhere above ground feels truly safe to me. Whenever I go to the beach I have a strong urge to bury myself under the sand. Burrows made by small animals make me wish I could shrink myself down and curl up inside. I want to feel the pressure of the earth all around me. I want it to be quiet and calm and still and for there to be no one else around.

Responses from chronically ill, shielding comrades to 'The Den 1', the first of a three part audio work. 'Your Den' was commissioned and supported by Artquest and Wellcome Collection. Risograph, February 2021.

Designed by E Sanglante and Sop. Illustrations and photographs by E, Sarah Porter and Sop.

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