

ESSENTIAL SIÂN BEVAN

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND: NEW WRITING 2020

Only go out for essentials

That was the advice.

There was a lot locked in to those five words.

As I sit in the kitchen and try to work out what is actually essential, I check with the version of me who tries to look after this one. The version of me who's prim and worried and who pinches my arm when we talk too loud, but who strokes my hair when my heart is sore. We write a list together, long and meandering, past ideas like 'love' and 'friendship' and power walking through 'goals' and 'ambitions.'

"These are just ideas. You can live without ideas." She's talking in that soothing voice which means I cross things off my to do list before I've done them so I can sleep better at night. She can feel me tense up and look at my empty hands and empty diary and sighs because she knows the conversation isn't over yet.

"I suppose, dear, it depends on how long we're talking about, doesn't it?"

And then we draw a house which we don't live in, nestled on a street which we've only seen in the movies, trying to imagine what the bare bones of a life could look like. The walls and foundations are made of things to keep us alive. "Food, water and shelter!" she trills. I argue for "justice" and we decide that's too complicated and leave it on the lawn, broken and dejected like a washing machine which shames this nice neighbourhood.

We grow a garden and debate about whether it's a space to share or a space for us and decide what we need is a path.

A clear,
 neat
 path and we
 will choose
 what comes down it,
 and what goes up to our
 nice
 new
 red
 door.

A shiny brass handle for essential opening and essential closing, essential confinement and essential time ticking by with a big clock in the hallway.

The living room will have fresh, flowery curtains and house our hopes and purpose and optimism and possibilities. “Hush now, don’t say them all out loud child,” she whispers, “you’ll break the magic if you tell too much.” It smells of a forest after rainfall in here. We gently close the door.

Across the hallway to a dining room, covered in sepia photos of stories and history, so we remember what came before, what built this street we’re trying to live on. It joins on to a kitchen. which always smells of nice food in the cupboards and the time to cook it.

Up

the

 stairs (“stairs indoors!” she laughs, “you wish”) and into the bedroom, soft and kind. Wardrobes full of love and curiosity, mirrors which smile back and a bed so soft it envelopes you, just for a second, and says that you’re ok. People could come in here to share the kindness. The bed can stretch to two but will wrap you up warm when you are holding your own hand in the long dark night and worrying if you’ll ever be loved again.

That leaves the spare room with the big, strong door. “Only you can carry the key to this place,” she smiles, pressing it into my hand. Slide the key into the lock and find filing cabinets and lists holding all the power you need to control your tiny bit of the world. She tells me to keep guard this place, retreat here if needed, turn the lights just how I like them and study hard on how to keep this kernel of yourself safe and in control so you’re strong enough to carry others when they need you. There are maps on the wall but I don’t recognise the place names.

She points out a hatch to a loft with no ladder.

“Keep the essential things which hold you together up there, hidden and safe. That’s where you can put the shame which makes you kind, the anger which makes you strong and the disappointment which means you know when to help. One day, when you can, visit this place with a torch and shine a light on each box, just to make sure the contents aren’t rotting and then walk away.”

I glance up, and go down the stairs, out of the red door and

back to my actual kitchen.

I show my small son the picture which I drew.

“Did you do this yourself?” he asks.

I look awkward and decide to nod.

"What’s it about?"

And I tell him that it’s about working out what’s really important. I ask if he wants to help and hand him a pen.

“Draw what you think you definitely need.”

He stares at the blank piece of paper, and then the pen and then me. When I can see the too big world reflected in his eyes, I try to tell him that sometimes you have to look to the smallest thing you can focus on, and then get bigger and bigger until you can get the whole picture. He can't do anything until I draw a small box in the corner of the paper and ask him to fill it.

He draws a big, wobbly heart, two sweeties and a coconut.

His picture would look so nice in the house we built.

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