

CONFLUENCE OF YEARS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND: NEW WRITING 2020

As I stand on the quay, I imagine you watching the ships loading and unloading, a carnival of shouting, horses pulling hoists, men lifting and shovelling. Work hurried on by the tide's certain turn.

You grew up in this North Devon town in the first two decades of the last century, and would have recognised your father's and grandfather's and uncle's ships. Your mother grabbed at a hand to keep you out of their way, no doubt. Perhaps you blew kisses to your brother as he cast off into adult life aboard the grand schooner, *Result*. Ships rode up a tidal creek from the estuary a mile away, bringing in lime or coal. Or they took away potatoes, pit-props to the mines in South Wales, carrots for the pit-ponies.

The tide is out this morning, and the few boats moored here these days lean towards an oozy floor. Hulks have been left to rot. Rather than their bows carving through salt waves, they rest on the banks in sprays of rosebay-willow-herb. A small boy stands beside his mother, throwing crusts to squabbling mallards. It's just them and me here now.

I walk on towards the estuary, following a flood bank. It's a spring morning and being far from home sharpens my senses, so I raise my face to the sun and drink the birdsong. Walking always pulses up in me a sort of bliss.

I'm wishing I'd listened better to you when I was young. You died thirty-six years ago so I lost the chance to ask. Middle-aged curiosity has already brought me here several times and I'd planned a return now to drift again on foot between family gravestones, glimpse the houses of sea-captains, aunts, farming cousins, and make sense of the photos I've inherited from you. But it's May 2020, and none of us can leave home. And so I closed my eyes and travelled 500 miles in the space of a few breaths to take, instead, a dream-walk.

Perhaps when you were 16, you'd take this path with school friends, your dark hair swinging around your hips. In a photo I have of you around that age, you're wearing a white, high-necked dress.

A cameo hangs from your neck; a white ribbon in your hair. Did you sometimes ‘accidentally’ run into the sweetheart you told me of – ‘Billy’, I think you said. Have I remembered right, that he didn’t return from the First War?

Now the path edges me along a triangle of reclaimed land known as Horsey Island, transforming to saltmarsh after the sea wall was breached by winter storms. There! Flashes of ibis and egret wing. Pools of reflected blue sky. According to climate-change forecasts, should I return in 50 years’ time, all of this land will lie underwater.

I cross a rise beside a solitary white house and quite suddenly I’ve reached the estuary. A few boats are pulled high on the bay’s shoreline. Tides suck saltwater in and out here with a height difference equivalent to a small house. It’s just a tight line of gleaming current half a mile away now. Under an enormous sky the bared seafloor, preserve of shipwrecks and birds, is veined by tiny, watery ravines. Above me a curlew pipes out its melancholy message.

Despite the uneasy feel of the human against the vast, I’m encouraged on by a distant walker, moving wispy-pale under the bank of dune and bramble. I follow, skirting the bay towards Crow Point, the gravel peninsula pointing into the estuary, where I know a Trinity House light is hoisted on a steel frame to fend off stray vessels. A breeze catches my hair, salt and blown-sand dashes my face, and finally I hear the roar of the Bideford Bar, the ferocious gateway at the estuary-mouth where waves catch on gravel banks and many ships have foundered.

At 16 you’d already lost your father and your uncle to the sea and must have lived amongst legions of women wearing black. You had an education under your belt. Black and white keys danced under your supple hands. They were gnarled with arthritis by the time they held mine. Sorrows, too, had furrowed the sweet face in that photograph. Who could have foreseen the sudden death of your husband in his 30s, on the eve of a second war you had to live through?

Two rivers, Taw and Torridge, meet just beyond Crow Point, mingling waters that arrive each by their own route and pace, with their particular tang of high moor or valley, granite or sandstone. After the confluence, the waters journey the last mile together over the Bar to the open sea.

I’m nearing Crow Point. In the strange way in which time can fold on a dream-walk, the steel-held light is absent from the Point. But towards the Bar, the red-striped tower of the older, long-gone, lighthouse dominates the shore.

A small figure stands beside it, looking out towards the horizon, surf rising from the Bar beyond. Nothing else of the human world.

The small figure wears a white dress.

With your back to the small town, did you breathe more freely here, and alone, glimpse a sea-road to elsewhere? You left as a young woman, but then spoke of this place endlessly when you were older. And I wonder if you passed on your longing, the wanderlust, to me.

My heart picks up pace with my feet. I find myself running towards your solitary back. The dark hair that streams behind you is just as you always told me: 'long enough to sit upon'.

I am 44 years older than you and surely cannot call out: 'Granny'. So, 'Dorothy!' I shout, laughing now. 'Dot!'

You look back, revealing a pale face, dark brows, strong jaw.

Of course, you cannot know me. Yet I think I see a puzzled recognition growing as I approach.

I shout again, my feet sluggish on slipping sands.

You turn fully towards me and a young, soft, hand rises in a wave.

'I'm coming,' I shout. 'I'm coming!'

I distinguish your eyes now, darker than when I knew their sea-clouded version. The lighthouse looms above us. Your hair lifts in the wind.

Panting, I slow to a walk to catch my breath.

I have so very many questions to ask you.

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