



THE SERPENT

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

We all see the serpent at least once.

Cathy says she saw it down the shops, the flick of a tail disappearing behind the celery, gliding onwards past the custard creams.

I first saw it in the river, its spined head dipping behind the headland as the last rays of sun slid off the bridge and the little sandy islands emerging from the tide.

I watched it move between sandpiper and curlew, oystercatcher and turnstone. Light and sinuous, but definitely there – the curved muscle of its body furrowing the damp sand, its broad, metallic nose dipping into the water's edge.

I watched it for what felt like hours, in what felt like silence, even though the roar of traffic swelled and ebbed behind me. I watched until at last its head rose and the length of it craned upwards to the concrete bow of the bridge where I stood.

I felt its gaze meet mine, and even though the day was grey and grim, and even though work had left me in tears again, I felt a thrill in my soul. Like water made electric. Like a song striking the bone.

I felt a thrill in my soul as it met my gaze, on the edge of the bridge, and I stepped back.

I've since found out, several months and too many microwave lasagnes later, that I'm just the latest to have seen the serpent move.

It's an odd crew we have, those who've been graced with a glimpse.

We find our way to each other and swap stories of our first sightings. Of all the places that lifting, vertiginous thrill has entered our lives:

My Uncle Dave saw it coiled in a crab shell going over the Minch. Near enough to where his brother drowned that a shiver ran the length of his spine.

Cassie saw it when they came out to their father, and he was already there, with a beautiful dress, and a half-smile hung on his face. At his back, asleep in front of the three-bar fire, the serpent.

Mairi found it chewing on the garden flowers where the dog is buried. Just lightly. Barely enough to bruise the stem.

Wherever it appears, we try to keep track of it, have tried for years. Since my grandfather's time, at least. We have a map, if you can believe it. It lives in my kitchen right now, half-drowned in post-it notes and push pins, the kids' permission slips and the shopping lists, chickpeas, tobacco, little gems, light bulbs.

We've never seen the full shape of it, although my Auntie Pat left some charcoal sketches, a glimpse of an eye, a twist of a needle-toothed jaw, sly.

She was a heck of an artist, Pat. The virus took her last winter, wicking the air from her lungs in the carehome on Magdalen Road.

I wonder if she saw the serpent again before she went. I wonder if it came to her window as she passed.

The map I have is Pat's work, passed down to me, because I'm the only one of us who's stayed put long enough to find a wall to hang it on.

Hang isn't quite the right word. What Pat made was part picture, part memorial, part map and legend. A careful accounting of every sighting of the serpent in our lives.

It might have begun life as an Ordnance Survey map, but over time, Pat's system of clippings and cuttings has turned it into something more. A collage of minor discoveries. A chart of unexpected respites. An evolving survey of joy.

Over time, she found she hadn't been the first to try this. She collected photos of those forebears and added them to the map, the fridge door sprouting a gallery of dour faces held in daguerreotype and calotype.

It seemed strange to me, when I was younger, that all this should fall to her. Pat, with her thick glasses and her thicker cardigans, with her patent leather shoes and her oblivious dog, who dodged misfortune every day as she stepped around its ragged little form, pinning photos to notes, and notes to places.

Looking back, it's no wonder that Pat became our chronicler, our cartographer, our sketcher of the barely seen. She was a history teacher in her heyday, in the girls' school down Blackness way.

I mind she said to me once, historians are people who keep the body alive.

That never made much sense to me at the time, but now, I think it does. There's something in the knowing of things that fills the soul, that makes moving through the world a bit easier. That places you at a point on an ever-extending thread.

If that's true, then it's the women in my family that keep our body alive. They're the keepers of memory, the knowers of names, the folk who can tell you who married your cousin after his first wife, the one who died, you know, the one who got the emphysema in the end, who married him, and what became of her, and what square patch of land she rests in now, covered over in daisies and thick, untended grass.

The serpent hunters.

Hard to put myself in Pat's patent shoes. Hard to string myself on that thread, even once Pat was gone and her sole gift to me was the map, carelessly bundled in an old carpet bag, unfolding into my kitchen like an accordion of arcana, stinking of fag smoke and dog hair.

I did what I could though. And I daresay I've done her proud.

It verged on an obsession for me, for a while. Something only shared between Pat's ghost and I. But that changed, the more I understood. The serpent is harder to hunt alone.

Bringing company is easier now I'm someone I can stand to be around. Now that I don't fear to see myself reflected in the faces of my kids.

We go hunting the serpent, however we may. Chasing feelings, sometimes. Otherwise poring over elevation charts and weather surveys.

Sometimes we're lucky, sometimes we're not. But the chase always yields more clues. Strange spoor scraped into door-sill paint. The refractive leap of scales in the setting sun. The faintest hiss of breath moving through long ribs under a harvest moon.

We're always tired after these excursions, always falling back into the car and into ourselves. Clutching chip butties, slurring our way home in the vinegared air, tanged with new discoveries.

We've not got it down to a science. I doubt we ever will. But every early morning service station with crows coughing over the road, every late-night trawl through half-lit towns, brings us one step closer.

In the interim, I've learnt some things.

I've learnt that the days will tick by whether you are happy or not.

I've learnt that love is an easy benediction for a heart that loves itself.

I've learnt that we are all charting routes from the day we are born.

We've all travelled with the people who brought us into this life, those that left us along the way, and the unseen promises of those yet to arrive.

We have all seen some strange things, and come out alive.

And if there is a trick to hunting the serpent, then I would think it is this.

It is easiest seen when it moves between us, and when we make space for it to move.

And when we are alone, the space it seeks only requires the briefest of kindnesses to flower.

A moment of quiet, a moment of grace, a moment of release.

The briefest guidances of pin-prick and string, maps to the silver fires that burn in the waiting hearth of our hearts.

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