

THE DEN 2

THE LEFT SIDE IS SCRIPT

ONE

Spring turns into Summer and the infection rate declines.

The den is still there but I visit it less and less.

In the cemetery the bins overflow.

Next to a bench overlooking the city, the letter 'b' from a plastic wreath has fallen off. I nickname the bench 'rother. I never allow myself to sit on it, but I pass by it quickly, on my way to the edges.

I scour the hill below me for movement - nothing.

The sun is beginning to rise, partly obscured by a strip of low grey cloud. One of the buildings in the city meets the sun and a pink, peach hue is reflected. It looks like a disco.

"Everything in the world has changed apart from you."

I check for new graves on the hill. Thousands are dying, but none arrive here. Death is closer than it has ever been. I have lived with illness for years but only now can I see it. I can see the shape of it.

THE RIGHT SIDE IS SOUND

distorted cooing bird like sounds and chirrups, a bee buzzes white noise, wind with birds singing

*wind sounds
slow, careful footsteps on gravelly tarmac*

footsteps hasten and crunch

*crackling interference like electricity
a very high pitched whine*

second voice doubles

a deep wind rolling, birds singing

*the rolls of the wind intensify
the birds leave*

It circles around me like changing air pressure.

*the wind sound peaks and turns
into a deep, low hum
strong birdsong
feet rustling in dry leaves*

Earth is turned over in existing graves,
the grass is cut, and the rubbish picked up.

I email the crematorium to enquire
about a plot, but they don't reply.

*a train can be heard very faintly
in the distance
crackling of twigs and rustling in
bramble, a quiet consistent buzz*

In the den, looking up, I can see less
of the sky. On the once bare branches
new leaves make new camouflage.
Security grows stronger above, but here,
down below I am becoming increasingly insecure.

clear birdsong

I lie down on the earth and watch the
sun rise through the leaves.

the buzz rises

My cheek meets the soil,
my ear muted against it.
But the ground is alive with current,
there is a buzzing deep below.

*a train in the distance gets slowly
louder*

Inches away I watch a bee climb out
of a small hole in the ground and fly away.
I have been sharing space with an earth hive.
I watch them entering one hole
and leaving from another.
They fly over and around me.
The den is alive, I am socialising!

*a bee buzzing
more bees buzzing*

And then one day I arrive and a pile
of forty dead bees are clustered neatly on
the far side of the den and the hive is empty.

a swooping sound descending down

T W O

Lockdown is eased and cleaves a gap
between shielder and non-shielder.

*squelchy, muddy, slow underwater
sound with a high wind whistle*

Where once we were the same, now we are not.

second voice doubles

Each relaxation of the rules increases the space between us, creating wide roads that I am not allowed to walk down.

a seesawing metallic element is added to the underwater sound, a pulsing squelch and a cooing bird

Differences assemble as a physical force, gathering to linger at my front door, pushing back at me to stay inside.

a second voice says 'advance, retreat' over and over

Every change destroys the things that I now know.

They shake me up and wipe me clean and it takes longer and longer to adjust.

Just retreat.

second voice doubles

I become fearful and hesitant.
The den is just five minutes from my house but now it feels like miles.
It stops feeling like my own and this hurts.

a cold and airy tone rising, swelling and hissing

I skip visits.

The cemetery is reopened to the public.
I don't visit the den
People are allowed out more than once a day.
I don't visit the den.
It is leaked that shielding will end soon.
I don't visit the den.

a second voice speaks over the first

the tone becomes choral

the tone becomes metallic

Days become weeks become a month.
I made excuses: It rains, I cannot go.
I am tired, I cannot go.
It is the weekend, I cannot go.
It is medication day, I cannot go.

I become more like the shielder
I am supposed to be.

second voice doubles

Being physically shielded means that
I am also visually shielded.
I don't see the odd new world,
the queues, the empty streets.
I'm asked "what local shops are near me?"
and I can't answer. Since I moved here
I only leave the house to visit the den,
turning right to the woods, never left.

I stay in bed and go for a walk on Google maps.

T H R E E

In the beginning, the government told
the public to look after us,
to protect the vulnerable.
No longer one of the ignored, disabled
and long term sick, but elevated overnight
to the most 'valuable' of society.

Suddenly noticed, they wanted us to live...
Well they didn't want us to die so conspicuously.

Rudely shoved into a spotlight:
You! Are! Extremely! Vulnerable!

It jarred and disorientated to be brought
so visibly to the public's attention.
I raged at the difference of yesterday's care
- the lack of it.
It felt uncomfortable and I was distrustful.

Before, I knew my lane,
that of the inconvenient sick,
hidden and out of view.
It wasn't right but I was used to it.
So I grieved retrospectively.

*the sing song sound of a dishwasher
with water falling*

*low hums of wind and the hiss
of a tape with nothing on it*

*the voice multiplies over itself
a deep bass sound like the playing
of a resonant string instrument with
choral overtones*

higher metallic notes sweep over

The attention is too late.
We have lost so many already.
Look at them. Just look at them!
But you can't... as they are shut inside.

*a low tone with the sound of a
storm surging from left to right*

My neighbour passes me a seedling
through the window and the tips
of our little fingers accidentally touch.

the storm passes

I think about it for hours.

*a musical slow seesawing creak,
a second voice repeats 'I am the wood
and the wood is me'*

F O U R

I need the wood. I want to consume it,
for it to leave its trace in me.
I pick nettles to eat later.
I gather logs, twigs and leaves.
I decorate my house, transcribing
the wood, bringing the den inside.

*the second voice stops
thin, high, metallic hissing layers*

At home, my brain stretches out in hundreds
of sinewy feelers trying to understand risk.
I sit at the safe centre of an
ever expanding web of danger.

*the sound of a group of people on the
hill in the woods outside*

The web stitches together people,
one person meets another,
that person has met ten people,
those ten people have met ten others.

the metallic hissing layers intensify

How to negotiate seeing one person when
it feels like they have contacted hundreds?

'Rheumatoid Arthritis, is a condition
that will be with you for the rest of your life,
interrupting the harmony and balance
in your immune system.'

second voice doubles

I am being told that I need to remember
that I am sick, and that I should not
stop taking my medication.

*scraping sounds, start, stop and stutter
in different tones and volumes,
alongside the high hiss*

The drugs I take, successfully propping
up my dysfunctional body, could now kill me.
They are a death sentence on pause,
a deal made in the time just before.

My choices tie my hands.
I cannot go back
(stop taking the drugs)
and I cannot move forward
(in case of catching the virus).

I am stalled.

Drugs change the message.
Medicine creates diversions.
Follow this muddy path, not that one.
Cells sleep, they rest, they are exhausted.

*layers of sweeping high metallic bird
like sounds
distorted bird calls echo*

And meanwhile I get better.
I am guided into near normal health.
The rest of my body celebrates,
I can walk again.

bird sounds screech

But I can't because I am not allowed to.

The drugs ensure a deeper level of shielding,
one that begins inside my body.
The first layer of restriction is my skin.
The second, the casing of the house around me.

The virus cannot enter, it cannot.

second voice doubles

I move from bed to sofa, sofa to bed.
I spend so little time standing up that
it starts to feel alien. My body is turning

into a circle, a loop following my curved spine.
I creak like old wood.

*a musical slow drawn out creaking
sound*

F I V E

The den is my holiday home,
my 'wellness' pod. No, it is my ctyo,
my container. I sit, hollowed in.

*short, sweeps, pulsing, the sound of
birds dipping in and out, reversing*

It is an extension of me, it is the
disease free, drug free, break away cell.
It is clean and clear, healthy and jubilant.
It's membrane unpenetrated until I enter.
And it stays intact, waiting for me.

clear birdsong

Every second week I inject methotrexate
into my left branch and humira into my right,
It temporarily slows me down.
I become inert as the drugs
assemble in my grain.

*harsh scraping stone sounds
stop start with a strong wind in
the background*

Cytokines hushed, traces of slow
movement diverted. Cells sent off with
new instructions. They become mixed
up with the ones from the government:

strong wind pulses in and out

Last in the queue we forgot about you.
But you can go out now! It's safe,
expose yourself! Trial and error!
It's a risk, it's a game!
Dodge the invisible threat! One size fits all!
You do not need to be educated,
trust us! Like you we know nothing!

second voice doubles

I stand at my bathroom window
and watch the wood.
It moves further and further away.

a high cold but soft metallic sound

For practical purposes I have cut my hair short, but I have left the back of the neck to grow out. As it gets longer I find my fingers frequently reaching up to find the lowest and longest sections.

*high metallic tones dance
without rhythm*

I twirl and twirl bringing the strands into tight loops, then pinch them between my fingers to feel the hard nub, like the knot on a twig.

twisty metallic sounds coil and dance

I do this repetitively, subconsciously. This new movement distresses as much as it soothes me. I forget to comb them out and I see myself in the mirror with twists like curled stems growing down my neck.

I am not brittle, I need growth. I flex towards plants, trees and the earth. I yearn for the wood, for the den. And my body, indoors, adapts.

The stems of my hair are sensitive, their desire to reach out and touch another becomes overwhelming. They corkscrew, encouraged by my fingers to form new growth patterns.

*a low, rumbling sound very slowly
increases*

They become tendrils looking for a host, curling to grip, to hold onto another. But there is only myself.

So I will grow and train my hair. It will pitch and helix until it can Reach out of the window into the wood and latch on.

twisty metallic sounds peak

Then I will have no choice but to follow.

I will have joined, a unity, an 'other',
finally something outside of myself.

I stand at the bathroom window and
watch the wood. Ripe pears swinging
high on a tree in the wind.

I stand very still and close my eyes.
The breeze from the open window
washes over me.

And all the while my hair grows,
coiling and probing outwards until
I can actually feel the branches in the distance.

*the rumbling sound becomes more
discernible, it is a chorus of melodic
pulses, rising and falling
the sound of a strong wind rumbles*

a cold high sound rising and falling

*the chorus of melody, continues
accompanied by swells of tonal
rumbling wind*

['there are green shoots of hope']