

‘An Expanse of Dark.’

A broken story about a post-apocalyptic world. Light has been withdrawn from everything below the cloud line. The sky densely smothered and the ground left with unlit street lights. Like sad veterans for a previous time they stand in the darkness, that strips the earth of its colours, so that all that is left are the sounds and a constant straining for sight. At the same time a slow remembering of growing life and renewal weaves through attempted boundaries. It seeps its way into the real or imagined, into what might be a hope, a grasp at something solid, a dream that is already forgotten.

The beginnings of a place

There was a small space behind a row of large evergreen trees, that smelt of the strong autumnal headiness of damp pine wood and wilting leaves. On the hotter days of summer the smell lowered. It grew and strengthened, warming the red ground and filling with scents of iron rich earth. Winter brought clarity to everything, allowing sharp pine scents and a visual understanding of placement within the forest, usually covered in deep, bulging, entangled growth.

just visible in winter thorough un-robed trees, this small opening in the woods was something like a portal or a gateway. An opportunity or a dream. It was always there but would only sometimes allow you to be there with it. And each year the challenge became more difficult or the opening would get smaller, whilst the dream grew larger.

A row of trees that used to line an edge, that marked a boundary from one to another. An area just big enough that maybe it once homed a small family. In a house with a low front door and a window to one side, maybe one above. Nine panes of glass per window in a crisscross pattern of small rectangles. With outside walls built in large lumps of granite, or out of cob and lime the paleness of sheep's wool in warm evening light. They might have been walls that sloped towards one end and made the house look lopsided, so the roof leant above like a hat at a jaunty angle. The door seeming to do a better job of holding the roofs weight, lifting it higher at that end.

Now this pause in the forest was marked only by the flatness of the ground. by the shallow foliage that had crept its way in, but was not so confident here as it was in the places it grows 5 foot high amongst the trees. Green carpeted where they had laid their foundations. Long limbs of strong and winding brambles trekked across the

surface for the sunlight and wove themselves dense. Then, as leaves fell and decay accumulated, small life made homes, seeds found fertile ground in the thickening – where mushrooms spawned before moss and grasses grew. The flatness persisted only due to the impenetrability of concrete. Where trees could not root themselves and so the clearing stayed stunted, short and exposed.

You could imagine the space of a house. The floor levelled and the forest moved aside. Making space for the comfort of some contented people. So that they could swing their long limbs or survey their space and possessions, unobstructed by grasses and branches and the living spaces of lives they thought to be different within the forest.

For this was the home of people. People who had separated themselves in stories of divinity and entitlement. People who found their saviour in their sociability, then their downfall. People who existed in the twinkle of time that gave them a gambled for comfort, oblivious to the uprising.

People, who always had their cupboards pulsing. Restocked and eaten and restocked and groaned over contentedly and complimented for their home cooked cosiness. People who hugged at the smallest sign of discomfort. whose children's toes were kissed in the bath, and stayed being children for 20 years. People who complained about the routine of their lives but who were secretly in love with this routine. As it felt like safety and understanding and being held.

This family, maybe, used the end of the house as stables, for a cow and chickens. Or not. maybe they lived in the whole thing. The parents working from their laptops, with no need to travel anywhere like a city.

Alongside the house, they had space for a small garden. With a lawn and beds of flowers, and a path lined by lavender, mint and rosemary. Showing the way to a small vegetable patch, enough space for root vegetables as additions to meals through the winter. This was mostly now gone, but despite the encroachment of the forest, it could still be made out by the potato, carrot and beetroot leaves amongst the thistles and bush. On two sides of the garden, a stone wall sheltered the planting from north wind whilst at the back the sheer denseness of the forest was thought to be enough. And on the last side they planted a row of trees to disguise their home from the road.

The road had gone now also, reintegrated with more vigour than the clearing.

It was a moorland road. few cars ever passed it on any one day and more often than not they turned out to be quad-bikes or Land Rovers, filled with patient sheepdogs. It had never been tarmacked, instead it was maintained with granite rubble by the farmer.

This road was therefore easier for the forest, it was swallowed back in something like two years - greenery dispersing the stones - as if it had never been there at all.

No longer there to show the way, the clearing was now only a small splotch in the forest, showing the signs of past settling, now sitting wiped of settlement or tall forest. A space that was once known and loved, or owned. That is becoming something else, or returning. A glimmer in the trees. It twinkles in this quiet moment of time, waiting. Just visible behind a neat and pleasant row of trees within the forest.

Tumbling across the roughness of the old concrete by the canal, Nadia's father's old suitcase dragged rather than rolled. It bounced heavily, hitting and falling over uneven

slaps as she attempted to keep up her pace. Each hit caught her in the chest, pulling at her exhaustion, and making the muscles in her left arm numb. Her shoulder had been made sacrifice to this pull, taking the most of the force and allowing her to carry on with the rest of her body.

Watching the pale stripe next to the dark canal ahead, she was uncomfortably aware of her instability by the water, feeling that she was taking a gamble in her vision. It was lucky, she knew, that the black and grey contrast of the canal and path was so evident without light. The canal being so flat and so smooth, it was an uninterrupted line of dark, setting itself apart from everything else and guiding her rushing.

Walls mirrored this same darkness to the other side of the path, or fragments of city morphed themselves into the paleness and collaged together a unfair mirage of pale path. They hit into her, tripped her up, forced her to re-orientate. Or they were imagined. A splotch in her vision.

Sometimes this uncertainty grew to encompass her, making darkness into light and light into dark. Making all things she thought were there, suddenly not.

As she continued her pace despite this, she let her thoughts sink into a thought of all her possessions in deep water. At any moment finding herself falling into the cold with her suitcase holding a metal handle hand out as she reached numb fingers in return. Her mind lingered with this picture and emotion ran chilly through her hot blood, numbing her skin. It took away her body and left her only descending or tumbling in the midst of the thought. The water consumed her, it pushed, pulled and held close. She felt the world pause and the dark folding in.

- no stopping. -

All she could do was wait out the pause. Nothing but to stay with the moment, in the silence of having fallen out of time.

She searched instead for the pale line in front of her. Hoping to find it still there, still with her feet swinging above it and her joints hurting, listening for that friendly voice of footsteps in the thick silence, she could do nothing more than wait for the stillness to decide to speak. Searching became waiting.

Then as a heat spreading though the ends of her body, she tingled and slowly returned. After a while, her fear heightened her senses. She made out the pale strip again and she recognized that she was still moving forward. Her heart still beating with determination. her legs still aching, like hard dead wooden stumps that thudded down in a persistent exhaustion, but that knew there was no question of stopping. Her case still dragging behind her and again dark and light made their contrast. Like, she thought, terror and life. Simplified in the dark.

With this thought Nadia let her mind wander. Feeling that there was no reason to think only of her exhaustion. Her thoughts didn't travel far, just backwards in time, considering a version of this place before she knew it.

A thought that had been with her all her life, that everyone thought, that was basically fact, just not out loud - that this city must have once been lighter. How else did huge crowds of people once use this path? Making their daily commute along that narrow canal path. Not constantly hitting into one another or falling in. Such a risk to take in darkness. People in unison walking to and from their work. day in day out doing that same march. day in day out making the same steps. Avoiding the same holes. Jumping the same steps. Filling the same tall buildings along with hundreds of other people just like them.

Or, maybe they could have done it in the dark?

The darkness and the water not making the slightest disturbance in their daily monotony. embarrassing only the newbies or outsiders. falling was a rookie error.

What a strange decision to put such a risk next to the path on purpose. - She had been told that the problem was the mass of humanity - If working was such a daily risk to life surely the rest of life carried this same risk. She considered this and thought it stupid. Therefore, like everyone, she concluded that the city must have been lighter.

A friend had once whispered to her that in a time years ago there had been a kind of human controlled light. A thing so abundant people assumed its presence eternal. that the government gave it out, putting it at the sides of roads for public convenience. Allowing sight where they wanted it. Even though, she was also told, people travelled in machines that carried their own source of this light, meaning that the roadside luminescence was a precaution or a luxury, something to do with making sure, to make certain of a never ending daytime.

Now - but not here, In other places - stars, our star and the moon still bring some light to the ground, but in The City the sky had been more like a ceiling a mile up for her whole life, either a warm grey day or absolute black night. On good days the ceiling lifts and lightens to a less grubby orange. On these days birds can be seen in the sky when their flight brings them down below the cloud line. On these days they are a flashing hope of something more. Hovering above the cloud line and hunting like pelicans the bugs that swarm beneath. Diving smoothly into the smog to swoop through crowds of mosquitoes that accumulate in the evening. Others, like Kingfishers, stay above to sense somehow for the things, flies or small rodents, that live beneath. One sharp dive then gone again, leaving only the space.

On other days the night never leaves. More pleasant days. The looming cloud line can be more oppressive than darkness. As in the mind's eye a dark wall can be turned into a whole, into space. She could stare up above her and picture all the space outside as if it was right there. Nothing between.

She didn't know how long ago the sky had closed over, or if someone had decided that all the light must go. but this empty city told the story of sight rather than sound. the tall bodies with empty heads that stood like proud veterans along the battered vacant roads cried for past enlightenment. and the only tale she could build to allow this history was one that ended with blindness and a self-administered memory loss. As a small child, her farther had told her that he had once seen one of those street lights still lit up. He would speak softly of it and always say something that felt embarrassingly pious.

In his story he had found it one night when he needed it. Sent out in the dark to find the bag of jarred foods he had absentmindedly left at the side of the road, distracted by other children.

Out in the night, he had become lost in a particularly dense and muffled darkness. His hearing deadened so that he couldn't place himself.

"A all over, whole body, cripplin' nothing was what I found myself in. A nothing like you never know. A silence or deafness of bein'. I could have been walking in meter wide circles n I wouldn't a had a way a knowin'. I almost hoped I was, because you know it felt safer to be staying where I was rather than going off t' who knows where."

"Then, all o a sudden, Down a street and, unbeknown to me, into a gated yard left unlocked, my eyes rested in orange."

It had appeared to his left. Growing until the street light formed into its self. A glow of hope and something unbelievable. Something that couldn't and wouldn't happen, but

did. And it had saved him from the night. This is when he would say "Its a thing that me mum would have said was a the grace of gods"

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The houses, built here, before this was a place to be weary of, once homed families and commuters . further back they still held their regularity and sharpness. Scratched and weather beaten, but otherwise the same as they always were. Possibly abandoned yesterday, if not for the degradation of all their soft furnishings. Exposing a story of abandoned love. curtain rails hung with only loose fibres clinging to their rails, Wooden floor boards and carpet now a dirty brown layer upon ever more concrete. Passing through, this place seemed made to be left quickly. nothing looked inviting or comfortable. The walkers only glanced and moved on, uninterested. They came with no thoughts of stopping, so this small observation was not so much as a flicker through the head of a daydreamer.

Walking outwards to meet the edge is a softening. the houses begin to hand over their harsh lines to the encroachment of green, yellow and brown. once people stopped owning the houses, specs of green to push a way back in. holes in the concrete where soil could find light allowed weeds to nudge their heads above the crust of city. tentatively at first, but once they knew that no one was around with enough of a care to cull them back, the next year they grew with more vigor. and year on year this accumulated, along the ring roads and industrial sites. layering the gaps and corners with a fog of wild flowers. red poppies once again marking a failed and unfriendly past. until finally it met with the houses. The first glimpse of green spaces after the infinity of the city.

It lulls a feeling of security as it presents this first idea of open green utopia, but in fact breads a type of danger only found in this kind of strange in-between like place. A danger aimed directly at those wishing to make the journey. Groups of sitters – a word given to those who chose not to live on the move – wait here like hyenas or humans, for exhaustion to find them their opportunity.

There are also settlements of fallen people in these places, lost from the fight for constant footfall. Families forced to make home, waiting for children to reach good walking age. Or couples given into lust, lying behind a hodgepodge privacy of roadside abandoned objects. Or elderly optimistic believers, without the fitness of youth that once pushed them to keep walking outwards. The gangs sit amongst these people. Often with families to pad out their harmless mirage. They prey on the goods on the backs of walkers. scavenging for food, heirlooms and first aid. The sitter gangs are drug cartels that operate fully on the riches they find at the edge. Therefore clever walkers hide their first aid anywhere they can. Braver still, some induce injury days before and let it linger untreated so that they look to be without anything that might be seen as interesting. To arrive in these places looking too healthy is a naivety that may end in death. These gangs are after medicine, needles, also bandages that can be used to strain, glasses to light fire or burn mixtures. anything they can mix up and sell on. illness therefore infuses the edge and addiction adds to the frantic undercurrents. Doctors are

needed badly by most, but don't come to these places.

- The fast talking sitter -

- Was a tall old talker with the straightest line Nadia had ever seen. His silhouette was so much like the disused street lights that she may never have noticed him had he not moved closer. He walked with bold movements, that came from long limbs. moving of their weight, his hands like paddles, pushing through the air with the heft of water but moving with the smooth grace of gliding atop the surface. Punctuated however, with stammering embarrassment, unsure of themselves, yet unable to help their swooping. He had taken three off beat steps towards her and sunk himself quickly into a squat by another tall concrete wall. Nadia hadn't planned on giving up any of her time to him, but his speaking to the air caught her and dragged her under.

- "Um, huh, umm, hey there, hey lady, hey, where yur going? Yur going like the other do. Another one, off yuh go, another one of yuh. Oofft yuh go. Go, go, go. Yur going, walking go go going, with that faith like, I teer up, really I do, yur so full a hope look at yuh. So fulla it. Brimmin'. Almost overflowin'. Your spillin' out. Spillin' g g g everywhere. It i a jolly mess. Go go go go go go go. All a you keeping on goin a somewhere. I know tho, y'know. I know, oh I know. I know I know I know. Tu tu tu tu tu. Yeahh do Knowwwww. Yud be better of to clean that up yuh. Yuh dun want to make such a mess as yuh are, where yur headed. I been there just the other day. I went so tidy. So so tidy. But I cant stay tidy, it a problem a mine. I can only hold it so long you see. But the tidy just builds and pucshes and turns in me until it just bursts and I gotta uhghhmmmmph.. or somein'. I jumped, you know, when I was there. Jumped around and around in circles. It was fun like. And oh my did it feel like a kinda heaven. But tha don like I like tha there. Or na actually tha like it toooo much, yeah that they do. Oh yeah you can trustee it to me they do. They like it so much they ready to geh ya for it. That ll geh a yuh so good for how much they pleased they heard yuh there. Gish yuh gunna need to b e tidy yuh know. Stop thumpin n thumpin like tha right there. Di no one ever teach yuh to walk pretty like. Yuh walk like yuh like the sound of yuh own feet. Hah ha . Haha. Yeah you do, like you like it real good. Like em all. They all get off on the sound of theyer own feet. Walkin un walking un walking un listin to ere feet like they the sweetest song they evr heard. Like t the love a thier life givin kisses each step. Mwa mwa mwa. Ha ha ha aha ha ha ha ha ha. You lota a funny lot yuh are. Like yuh hear me goin on n on, bu can you hear me tho? Can you. No cos your too buisy listening to me. I talk right over any hearing you gon a do. So you cant tell about me. All you lot think yuh got it right staying listening thinkin you hearing, yuh noh doin anything a the such. You just listening to wha yuh think yuh gonna hear. Yuh blind all a yuh. And ere I am tellin yuh by blinin yuh further. Holdin it in clear site like and yuh still just carry on an on an listen to me, ignor me, without ever hearin me. N that I what makes me dangerous ya see. Cos I know how to stop yuh from being able to hear me. Yuh so busy listenin yuh forgotten who I am. Yuh don know where I am yuh just listnin and listnin and yuh think you got it good but you don and suddenly poooooffttttttt ha ha ha ha poooooffttttt I gon. N you think like sheet I stright up disaperared. But na. I just been shinin a light in your eyes so ling like. Yuh cun see in the dark no more. Hahhahhahh. N there you are stampin along. Stamp stamp, thinkin yuh got it. Ha ah ah ha ha

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With all her long thoughts, Nadia had never expected to see this place before summer.

she had planned to at least have the middle of the day to walk with the security of further sight. Instead the winter meant a long nightfall that extends throughout the day and back again. Instead, she would now have to rely on her hearing more than she had hoped to need to. This wasn't really a problem as she was used to going on with daily activities in the darkness of the city. Any sound, even when she could see, registered a reaction of background thoughts that helped her to understand her surroundings. It was an ability that everyone she knew had. And it was something she assumed had always been a feature of human experience. So this darkness isn't so much a blindness as a reliance on interaction. If nothing happened she was safe but blind. If sound came she would have a picture to build, but that picture would most likely be of danger. Normally to walk with a heavy step would inform with pitch, volume and the presence or absence of echo. But the fast talking sitter had told her not to make sounds in these edge-land places. The it would be too much or them and that she would be swallowed up and stay forever. He had said that if he wanted to have any chance of passing through then she had to make sure that she was entirely unnoticed.

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Nadia would have to navigate her way in a kind of quiet she had experienced only a few times before. It was a quiet so dense it reminded her of the blank hush of coming out of a heavy dream. A dream already completely forgotten.

Keeping to shadows, stepping slow and smooth but moving quick. What she needed was to hover, to glide just above the surface, and to shrink her body. Nothing that she could actually do, but an imagining she knew she would somehow have to embody.

Noting that near to where weeds had pushed through, concrete was matted with small humps of cushion like, damp moss, she lifted a few mounds from the ground and placed two piles face down beside her feet. then untying her laces, put each shoe on top of a pile and tied the laces under the moss. with her feet back in the shoes she walked now with muffled steps. she had sacrificed some speed, as she could no longer bounce along as she would on a hard surface. but her body was thankful for the padding, loosening in the joints and releasing tension. For an hour she wove her way between dark houses. in short stop starts. paying attention to the silence and the sounds she could trust. Any new sound sending her swiftly to the floor, where she waited to determine direction, distance and potential source. Four an hour she couldn't be sure if she was still moving 'Out' or just moving. But to move in the maze was all that she could do to stay safe, so for an hour she did. Then, turning a corner, the world was suddenly ablaze. Pulsating with light that pulled at the backs of her eyes. it grew from white to red, throbbed, blocking all vision and sending her off balance. She fell to the ground with surprise and exhaustion, then waited out the attack.

in front of her was a fire with an abnormally bulky gathering of people. 'The fallen' she hoped, and tried to ignore a dread that whispered 'Sitters'. These people were clutching each other around the fire. Adolescent boys, strong women and young men lining the outside, trying to some how protect the community. Nadia tried to count, maybe 10 in total? Enough for three small families, or one with collected stragglers from the road.

One of the boys had seen her. Beady eyed as she fell. He was squatting, ready to react to her next move. He was holding his hand on the arm of the woman next to him, and slowly he pulled her attention to Nadia. Before Nadia could gather herself up to run off back into the shadows, all members on guard had seen her and now either watched her or looked about for more danger. Encase she bought with her some hidden company.

Nadia stared back at them, wide eyed and scared. They didn't appear to be a sitting gang, the small children and weak adults seemed to treasure the fire too tenderly. A gang would only flaunt their strength in the light of a fire without fear of being found. However this didn't mean that these people would be kind to her. They looked tired and hungry, they seemed desperate, which could mean desperate enough to steal and harm her in order to help themselves. She was entirely dependent on their mercy now however, she would never be able to run from them if they decided on harm. They were ready to pounce. She was still crumpled on the floor with legs that wanted only to be aloud to stop moving. Nadia stayed as still as she could muster, willing calm in her shaking muscles. She pulled her eyes to the shadowed side of the first boys face, so that she could keep an eye on other things happening in the shadows. Avoiding being deafened by the light.

Now that the last of the light was draining from the cloud cover, the night was growing into a damp kind of silent. all sudden noises fell dead in the air, stunted and softened. Made less by the heady wet heat that had swallowed the day and stayed trapped beneath the cloud. A deep thick suspension of oxygen, methane and carbon dioxide, turning liquid on the coolness of skin. Water and sweat layered her body and trickled down her face. It stung in her eyes forcing her into a squint that blurred further the round shapes of her surroundings. the close silence made everything else disappear.

Before her was an encroaching black expanse, with a burlled edge, backed by the scene of the only slightly less black sky. As Nadia walked, It's blur grew until she felt up against it, its deep and infinite body right in her face. She pulled her motion back and felt her heels rock into firm contact with the ground. Her tired body following the motion, swaying in disorientation.

Nadia's slowing had let pain catch up with her. Like heat rising, her legs remembered how long they had been walking. They told her that whatever happened, soon she would feel her knees refusing her weight and she would be forced to the floor. So she let go of her pull to carry on and as the walk left her, the earth pulled her to rest. Even her eye lids let themselves fall. Her eyes finally finding a pause in her constant blind straining.

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Somewhere far off into the dark she could hear a smooth trickling of running water. A light sound that made more of the silence around it. like tentative fingers tapping out a promise of life on a tired dying body, or a gentle reflection of light across a deep shadow. The darkness was a blind mystery that exposed only it's tempting quiet of water. A hidden promise of life, calling to a stop the constant stream of poor and tired foot walkers. A danger that also tempted the opportunity of seeking that trickling wet answer.

out here in the green, sound lost its self in the wet air so she assumed that they must cool the air enough for the trickle to carry its sound along its passages. whilst she was walking she had lost the sound of even her own movement. By the time any sound reached her ears her footsteps had sunk into nearly inaudible quiet. She had become used to being within this cushioned hush. But this high sound pierced the fog. It called to her and revealed an idea of change.

Drip Drip Drip