

Through A Glass by Michael Flavin

The woman waits for a train.

As a little girl she played a game in which she was Queen of England. She wore a net curtain as a robe. She raised her arm and watched the curtain glide away from her elbow and shoulder. The pattern on the curtain like the snowflakes they cut from paper at school. Watching the snow fall, curtain rippling like sand after tide. The feel of crenelated wet sand beneath the soles of her feet.

A short breeze worries a field like a sickle. A hill rises in the distance, cresting in a mound. There was a burial site here a few thousand years ago. She thinks about how recent that was, how England was swamp, battlefield, farm. How England made cloth, iron, concrete, data, money on a screen.

Some people travelled here to mourn. Others stood like she stands now, looking at the raised earth. Others traipsed across the hilltop, not thinking about the souls swathed or stomped into the earth.

A funeral party laying earth on top of the dead. Taciturn people, soil familiar to their hands. Cold clods laced with rain. Earth morphing to cloying fingers. People who tilled the land or herded sheep or made clothes to the clatter of hand looms. A bleat, a thrum of hooves on grass, the herd seeking safety, shoaling from the cliff's edge. People without ornament. People with homes where meals were made and clothes were sewn. Farmers nursing the earth, fearing the loss of tender plants, dreading hungry children with faces as empty as their plates. The daily fret for food, shelter, warmth. Safety eludes, like trying to catch your own shadow.

Her mother held her mittened hand on a sunny day and her father took photographs. The click of the camera, click and click again and again. A whirr rising in pitch and spiralling off into the sky, ghosts making their escape. Her father's thumb hurrying the spool along. 'Smile. Smile again. And again.'

She has one photo from that day. It shows her at the top of a hill, holding her mother's hand and looking back. They are both smiling. Her duffle coat envelops her, the hood a dark halo around her pale face. She is on top of a hill, she is on the top of the world on a clear, sunny day when the sky goes on forever. Her breath turning to steam, leaving her lips like the genie.

When the ghosts stopped whirring the little girl let go of her mother's hand and marched down the hill. Her mother looked at her and saw a hooded figure.

The train she waits for takes her to a small town on market day. People buy homemade preserves from stalls. They buy country wines. Some trawl their fingertips across the polished doors and panels of wooden furniture. They think about whether it will belong in their homes, fit with the colour scheme.

They do not think about their jobs: steel and glass offices, windows tinted slate grey and funeral black, or classrooms where the echoes shriek. They try not to think about their grown-up children and the excuses they give not to visit: 'We're all so busy, Mum. You know what it's like. I know you feel lonely but honestly, you must know what it's like.' Longer calls and more frequent visits are promised. Children shout in backgrounds. Phone calls end. Silences linger in halls and kitchens.

People arrive at the market. A mother with a young child. An old woman with a shopping trolley. Others leave, gripping car keys. Hands latch onto steering

wheels. Radios latch onto stations. Sounds brick up silences. Satnavs shepherd the herd home to graze.

The doors open to fading familiar homes. Heat swells in halls. Cats claw at cupboards cluttered with the skylines of tins. A plaintive monosyllabic miaow grazes the air and passes out of hearing.

The woman looks at antiques on stalls. She picks up lamps and copper kettles. She pauses under striped awning. She rubs her hand across the belly of a brass lamp. She waits for something to happen. The lamp looks back, its lips pursed like a baby's.

She climbs the hill to her mother's closed antique shop where the unwashed glass front looks like the colour of a wine bottle she drew at school, years ago. It was an empty bottle of white wine and she put a spray of charcoal dots to show the dust motes on the inside. The art teacher asked her how long it had taken her to do, but he already knew. The art teacher had sideburns and a faded corduroy jacket. He stood over her and showed her how to draw an ellipsis. He put his hand over hers. She remembers the hand was hot. She remembers waiting for him to take his hot hand away. She remembers glancing at the door of the classroom, at a small pane of glass in the door.

She takes a large key from her bag and opens the door of the shop. A bell tries to ring. She walks to the bay window and tugs a sheet down, protecting an oak table.

The woman wants her mother back. Wants her mother back inside the shop, wants the windows wiped down with checked cloths, wants the surfaces purged of dust, the sheet on the table pulled back with the panache of a conjuror.

She wants a vase placed in the centre of the table. A slim vase, tall and graduated like a vial. An early-twentieth century vase without a chip. She wants the vase to be untouched by anyone, without a fingerprint to blemish it. A vase drinking the sunlight down into itself, year after year.

She wants her mother not to be breathing her last, her bowel clogged with shit, the consultant reciting her condition in a monotone. She wants the consultant not to be saying, 'I'm sorry.' She wants her saturnine father not in tears, the skin of his face crept up behind his hands. The sound of him, choking. His hands shaking, black hair at the wrist, hairs overlapping, curling like speech marks. The watch with the strap that needs replacing.

The woman wants the shop to be alive again, wants to smell wood, wants to smell polish richer than incense, not the sting of hospital disinfectant catching at the back of her throat. She wants her feet to tread heavy wooden boards, not hospital tiles. She wants not to cry in front of a hole in the ground. She wants not to be the last one standing there, steered away by her father, his hand on her shoulder while her husband waits in the driver's seat of the silver Volvo, engine revving, checking messages on his phone. She wants the cemetery to not be in a valley.

When it rains the grave gets wet. A row of rain stammers down the black marble headstone like a line of tears in a child's drawing. Pools of brown water huddle over graves, the surfaces fretting in the breeze.

When she was Queen of England she had what she wanted. She cantered her toy pony up the hill of the sofa. She took the pony to the top. She raised the pony

on its hind legs. The plastic pony had a mane of hair. She stroked it with a brush. The brush was small and pink and belonged to a doll. She asked the doll and the doll said ok. The doll smiled placidly, her arms outstretched, her neat fingers moulded together, her lips pursed for the small, white, plastic bottle. The bottle that came in the box with the doll and got lost on a day trip to the seaside.

She wonders if the little bottle is still on the beach, swaddled in sand or trapped under a stone, listening to the fizz and hiss of the sea, cupped by the cliffs of the bay.

She sits on a wooden chair. The chair's legs are slim and cylindrical. She looks down and touches the softness of varnished wood.

She sits. She looks. Dust. She listens. A clock ticks on a mantelpiece. No one has been here to wind it. She feels a deafening silence that only happens when someone is there. Someone in the shadows, unable to speak.

She opens her mouth. She wants to drink the shop, draw in the dust, oak, brass and gold, feel the cold of gold on the inside of her lip.

She says, aloud, 'O rose thou art sick.' Stops. 'O,' she says, again.

She feels the heat of the still afternoon. She pictures a glass of water, pushing away the brandy they gave her after the funeral. The feeling of sickness. The catch at the back of the throat. The threat of vomit from the pit of her stomach.

The day ends. She steps from the chair. She walks out into summer's still air and the motionless sun.

An old woman with a shopping trolley stops her shuffle to look at the window. The woman wears a headscarf, peaking over her forehead. Its shadow shrouds her face. Her lips talk on their own.

‘Opening again?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Will you be opening again?’

‘Yes. I hope so.’ A pause. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Need to do these things, you know. You’ve got to keep going while you still can.’

The old woman grips the lapel of her white cardigan. The cardigan is rimmed with grey. The old woman looks down at her shopping trolley. She preens and presses its tartan lid. She moves on to the top of the hill and out of sight.

The woman closes and locks the shop. She glances up. She sees a shadow on the other side of the door. The shadow stands: with poise, ease. The woman raises her hand and the shadow raises its hand. The shadow presses its shadow hand against the glass. The hand pulls away. A small bouquet of prints fades on the glass. The woman reaches out her own hand but the fingerprints are gone before she gets there. Her hand touches only cold and resolute glass. The shadow hesitates, turns away slowly, begins to fold in on itself. The woman, too, turns away, hazards a glance back but the shadow is at the final edge of vision and is gone.

It is gone and the shop creates itself again around the shadow’s absence. There are only unwanted ornaments, unsold trinkets. Clutter and dust. Darkness where the spiders crouch.

A ghost has given up the ghost. The window is still there, a pane dividing the living from the dead.

The walk back down the hill. A thought of the train back home. A jar on the shelf in the kitchen where apricots doze in brandy. A treat for Christmas. Like Mum used to do, every year until the last.

The train arrives and slows to a halt in front of her. She sees a thin spray of dust all along the carriage. She reaches out her hand, pushes a button, a door trembles open. She steps aboard and finds a seat, enclosed in the train's shell. She has dust on her fingertips, the shadow of a bruise of soil, pollution and the skin cells of the dead.

A boy, sitting on the opposite seat, consoles a dog, a setter pricking its ears at the sound of train doors juddering shut. The dog's head twitches from left to right. It wants to be reassured and hushed. The boy strokes his hand along the dog's warm flank and says, 'It's ok. It's ok.' The woman wants to stroke the dog, too.

The boy and the dog get off at the first stop and the train is empty, heading to its certain destination on iron rails.

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