

Sing the North

by David Almond

I Garden

I write this in exile during lockdown days. Three hundred miles from Bamburgh Beach, where I wanted to start. I tried to set off writing as if we're free to wander as we were before. But we aren't free. And without mention of pandemic, there's no truth. All's illusion. The words are locked.

I'm in comfortable Bath, place of Roman villas and spas, so far in time and space and spirit from my home, the North, the place of Wall, of threat, of wilderness. To travel there in ancient days was a trek to the edge of civilisation. The traveller took his life in his hands. Now I must write myself there. Must write to the edge of the world, to the edge of myself.

I wander through hollow ways past small lush fields, with a notebook and pen in my hands. In the garden of St Mary's Church there's a holy well that's trickled through the ages. It's said that the water is good for the eyes. I splash it onto my face.

Let me see my North.

Nothing comes to my eyes, nothing to my pages.

I sit in warm sun on grass rich with buttercups, birdsfoot trefoil, speedwell, purple clover. I lie back, so comfortable.

Oh, what's the point of writing anything in days of so much dread, when sometimes all seems heading for the end?

Pandemic, the world ablaze, the warmongers, the billionaires, the governments of crooks and liars.

Water trickles over mossy stones into a hardly moving pool. I hear another trickle of another well. Before pandemic, I walked to a Northumbrian holy well with the singer Mike Tickell. We walked over rough fell to water that splattered from a dark rock with rushes and gorse around it.

"Listen close," Mike said. "There are poems and songs in the air around it."

He closed his eyes and listened, then sang as we stood there, his voice blending with the birds in the air and the breeze in the grass, and blending now with the sounds in this garden.

Are all holy wells linked in some way? Has the water in this well flowed also through that well? Are the songs in that air also in this air? Is it sound and song that will take me north? Birds sing and bees buzz and the leaves shift in the breeze. The sounds like water flow through me.

And high above this garden a skylark sings and sings, exultant as ever despite all troubles down below, and I'm lifted from this garden by its song.

II Wall

And hover high above the land, and there it is below, the North. Moorland and forest, rivers and streams, reservoirs and lakes. Cheviots and Pennines, the Simonside Hills. The North Tyne, the South Tyne, the Coquet. The battlefields and pilgrim ways. Glowing heather, shining gorse. The long line of the seashore, the broad pale beaches, the archipelago of the Farnes. The space, the great expanse of it, the wilderness. The Durham hills. The city, Newcastle and Gateshead, clustered on the Tyne's banks. The tender damaged beauty of it all, the childhood places, the places where I played and loved and walked, the places of memories, dreams and ghosts.

They tell us that we live on a tiny crowded island.

They try to tell us we are tiny within ourselves.

Tell them to come up here with the skylark, to forget what they think they know, and to look down upon the vastness of the North.

Tell them that this is where they might come, if they wish to be rewilded.

And now the skylark falls, still singing, and leaves me here on the Wall.

This is it, the edge, the frontier, my desk and chair, the place that I sit and write with the South behind, the North in front. Hard stone crag beneath me, a dizzying drop, then a dark lough, then boggy rushy fields, stone walls, a couple of farmhouses, spinneys, land mounting towards distant moors.

"Why do you write up there?" they ask. "What's to interest us up there?"

We stay and write for the freedom of being on this edge, this stepping place between the civilised and the wild, the real and the imagined, the body and the soul. This edge, where words can echo in the emptiness and call into eternity. What mystical nonsense!

Perhaps, but isn't it something to be in a place where such nonsense can be thought, and thought to make sense? Yell your words into the air. Let them mingle and flow with the sounds of the ages-long music of this place, with the fiddles and pipes and the yearning laments. Let them dance their rhythms on the earth. Sing them with the bards and balladeers who have gone before. Call them out through your open gob like

Cuthbert called his prayer to God, like Cædmon unleashed his spontaneous praise of all Creation. And, yes, with those eternal skylarks, singing then and now and ever more.

And try to make them soar like the buzzard above, that now spirals down and picks me up and carries me away.

III Rock

And now we're flying farther north

And deeper into space and time.

And forests shrink and grow again

And villages are gone.

The sound we hear is

chink chink tap tap chink chink tap tap

And inhalations, exhalations.

I'm dropped to an outcrop of rock

On a green fell
With a single girl crouched by it.
She wears a brown woollen shift
Her hair's tied back with a leather cord
Black spiral tattoo is on her arm.
Chink chink tap tap chink chink
A stone knife in her left hand
Small boulder in her right.
She taps the knife with the boulder
Guides it across the darker rock beneath.
Chink chink tap tap chink chink tap tap
Carved spirals already lie in the rock.
Deep in love and concentration
She guides her knife close by them
Chink chink tap tap chink chink
Leans back to see what she has done
And there it is, her spiral, curving
Into those that were made before.
She breathes, she sings, she smiles
And lifts from the grass a flute
A hollow bone formed from an eagle's wing
And stands above the rock
Plays music rough and sweet and strange.
She turns and meets my eye
And smiles across six thousand years
And plays again and plays again
And this is maybe the heart of it
Far north, far back, right now.

And I stand for a moment
And know that we in the North
Are her hollow bone
Her instrument, time's instrument.
Her music is pouring through us.
And we in the North are the rock she carves
And we are the marks she makes.
We are her works of art
Forged in the wilderness
Rough and sweet and strange.

And then a curlew cries and comes to me and I'm carried off again.
Eastwards, across the land of deer, red squirrel, adder and badger and fox, towards the
beach.

IV Beach

And oh and ouch the delight of the sea, so bitter bliddy cold. I'm in it in my bare feet. It's turning gently over me splish splash splish splash and over all is the deep and eternal roar of it. Just look at that horizon, so sharp and so distinct. There's Cuthbert's island not far off, black rock with the shining drifts of birdshite on it. That was where he went alone and dug his hermitage and yelled his prayers to God. And there, look, farther north, great Lindisfarne itself, where he was buried and brought up again as if he was just asleep. And where Eadfrith made the marks of ink on the skins of beasts to make our great Gospels.

Bamburgh Beach, the great pale stretch of it, black outcrops of the Whin Sill, the tender dunes behind, the astonishing castle against the sky. And the grey concrete tank traps, put here for the invasion that never came, each year a little deeper in the sand.

Terns dance and dive over the waves. Sanderlings skitter on the shore and take quick wing. The curlew leaves, calling as it flies away.

There are others on the beach. Couples hand in hand. A family picnicking at the edge of the dunes.

A boy runs with his dog yelling.

"Howay, Jackie. Howay, howay!"

Walkers keep their distance from each other.

One passes by, a few short yards away.

He lifts his homemade face mask aside.

He's my age, perhaps a little older.

"Grand day," he says.

"Aye."

"Aa'd offer ye a liquorice allsort, lad," he says. "But Aa'm not allowed te even diy that."

He laughs as he puts one into his mouth.

"Strange days," I say.

"As ever they were. These too will pass."

He pauses and looks up into the sky.

"The clouds," he says. "They look a bit unreal these days."

I look up and yes, there is something about them.

"Nae planes, nae vapour trails to mess them up," he says. "Mebbe this is the way they're meant to be. Drifting back into the past. Real and unreal aal at once. Come te think it, that's how most things seem these days."

He laughs at the thought, puts another sweet into his mouth.

He seems about to go, but then he says, "Aa niver understood why there was hardly ever anybody here. Like they didn't knaa it was here, or like they didn't want to knaa."

I smile. It's true. It mystifies.

"They'll knaa now, won't they?" he says. "And every bugger'll want to come."

"Will they?"

"Aye, once we're free. Once aal this is done. Who wouldn't want to be in such a place?"

He slips on his mask again.

"And welcome to them, I suppose," he says.

And wanders on, close by the yelling boy.

"Howay howay howaaaay!"

The lovely voice, the lovely words, the lovely language of the North.

We think the sea is blue, but look again. See how in the gentle coming-in of the water all colours shift and change. Pale violets, greens, pale pinks. See flashes of rainbow above the splashing white.

And yes, we know that all of this is beautiful. Such beauty could be anywhere, but could it be?

Look down.

There they are, a thousand thousand jet black fragments, like seeds scattered on pale sand around pale feet. They shift and shift beneath the shallow shifting sea.

Coal, the stuff that's come up from the North's dark heart.

Coal, the stuff that fired a revolution, that was dug up from here and carried away, and that blazed across the world. Coal dust in this gorgeous place. I reach down and pick it and let it lie there on my palm. It takes us deeper, deeper back through time, and down to the tunnels beneath much of this land, tunnels with bones in them, with the sun's locked brightness in them, with Death in them, to the tunnels within us all who know the North.

The patterns spiral and drift, form and reform, past and present intermingling, underground and overground.

Yes, this is the North – aching bright beauty with swirling drifts of darkness in it. Joy with pain in it. Love with loss.

I scatter the dust back to the sea. I dip in my hand, let the water wash it away. I picture patterns of coal dust on my pages, carved spirals on my pages, birds' footprints on my pages.

The page as a rock, a beach, a sky.

And the sun is falling down towards the dunes.

Now wait.

Time passes and light fades and here it comes, the deep dark Northern night. And now the stars and now the galaxies. See them stretch across the universe in whorls and spirals, again like scattered seed. Open your eyes and gaze in wonder. Open your mind and dare to listen for the music of the spheres. Up there is the blazing negative image of what lies at your feet. Each fragment of coal is partnered with a distant star. Each dot of darkness entangled with each bright. And at the heart of it is you, standing in this place, on what they tell us is a little crowded island, on this deserted beach, in this far-flung North, in touch with the depths of the earth and with the furthest galaxy, with the true glittering possibility of yourself.

V Bridge

The sun rises, red ball of fire over Inner Farne. The white kittiwakes come, a little flight of them with their kittiwake cries wheeling over the waves. Now southward, over the great beaches of Northumberland. Beadnell, Embleton, Craster, Alnmouth.

Dunstanburgh Castle in ruins on its rock. The old mining towns just inland. Ellington, Ashington, Cambois. Woodhorn Mining Museum, with the county's last winding gear still standing. Wind turbines massive in the sea. The twin piers at the mouth of the Tyne like welcoming arms. Follow the Tyne against its flow. Jarrow, Hebburn, Felling on Tyne.

This is home, where I was born and raised, where I wandered and played, the streets and parks and playing fields, the church in which I, the altar boy, chanted Geordie-accented Latin, the houses in which my sister died, my father died, my mother died. Where I first made marks on paper, learned to read, learned to write, where I grew to love my library, where I struggled to write my first fiction, where I came to discover, as Flannery O'Connor wrote, that I was "bound through the senses to a particular society and a particular history, to particular sounds and a particular idiom". Where I discovered that the imagination is not free, but is bound, a discovery that paradoxically brought liberation.

Write the North. Write it again. Write it better. Write it new.

Fly over it all with the kittiwakes. They too are heading home, to their nesting sites on the Tyne Bridge and the Baltic.

They leave me here on the Millennium Bridge.

It's hung like a lyre between Newcastle and Gateshead, the north and south banks. Beautiful city, bright early morning. Solid steel and stone. Walls and quays and passageways. The cities rising on either side. Bridges curve against the sky. Even in lockdown, the endless gentle hum of it all. Flowing water and clear air and kittiwakes calling.

Live Theatre, Baltic and Sage, places that have helped to make the city new. All empty, silent, poised to open again, to be filled with art again, to keep us moving forward. The whole city, poised to open again.

The sudden image of the city as it was not so long ago: packed streets, voices, people, traffic. When will it return?

All's so deserted in these lockdown days. A couple of early morning walkers on the quayside. A cyclist, another. A car on the Tyne Bridge.

When I was a boy the river below me was filth. Fall in and they'd need to pump your stomach at the RVI. Now seals swim in it. Cormorants dive. Salmon leap, in their journey back up to Northumberland. Swallows sweep over and under me.

All this wildness, come back into the city's heart.

I lean back and feel the bridge tremble in the breeze.

Yes, the bridge is a lyre.

There's music as it moves, as its walkways tremble and its cables vibrate.

It hums, it sings.

And we are lyres, each one of us, played by the breezes of space and time. Close your eyes and feel your own vibrations.

Be a lyre, be a bridge.

Two deer. Who'd believe it? They're on the pathway above the river on the Gateshead side. A doe and her fawn, untroubled, at ease. They walk below the Sage. They come to the end of the bridge and hesitate. The doe licks the fawn. She looks around, then steps up onto the walkway and the fawn follows. I stay dead still as they approach me. I hardly breathe. Don't turn back, please don't flee. They keep on coming, as if I'm not here at all. *Am* I here at all? They keep on coming. I hear the tiny tapping of their hooves on the steel. And then they're right in front of me. I could lean forward, reach out, touch. I smell them. The mother turns her eyes to me, her deep dark eyes shining into mine. The fawn leans close to her and looks too.

"Hello," I say softly.

“Hello, young’n,” I say softly.

We hold each other’s gaze for a second, then they flinch, and scamper off to the Newcastle side. At that end of the bridge they hesitate again. The mother looks back for a long moment. I wave at her, then on they walk, calmly heading up Broad Chare, past Live Theatre and Tesco, and are lost in the tangle of the streets.

Unreal city, dream-like city, city like no other, city that I love.

You will open again, rise again. Time and again we’ve been told you’re finished, you’re done, and like Orpheus you rise and sing, time and again.

Sing on, Newcastle, young and ancient, civilised and wild.

Now, more than ever, might be your time.

The cables vibrate.

A swallow swoops through them to take me away.

VI Marks

Here in the garden where it all began, sun still shines and water runs and skylark sings. Lie among the wildflowers with notebook and pen.

Make marks on the page, create the North.

Make marks like birdsong, flowing water, shifting coaldust, swirling stars. Use knife and boulder, Eadfrith’s ink. Catch Cuthbert’s prayer and Cædmon’s song, the wild noise of the hollow bone and vibrations of a bridge.

Be brave, don’t doubt. Don’t turn to the metropolis and wonder what it might want from you. Instead, wonder what it needs from you. Write this place, your place. Make this the middle of your world and not the fringe. Sing some necessary wildness, some mystical nonsense, into our tired, disjointed, corrupt civilisation.

Sing the North into the South and make it beautiful.

And let a boy keep running always through the marks.

Let him run with his dog on a Northern beach, yelling out to each of us,

“Howay! Howay! Howaaaaay!”

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