

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part seven : dust/descent

Dust

Scout is skittish as we head across the meadow towards the marsh, his twitching nose pointed firmly into the breeze. There are skeins of mist draped across the low ground in front of us and it reminds me of the cigarette smoke that hung thick in the air, back when pubs were full of old men smoking and drinking IPA. I can hear a tractor engine somewhere nearby and I call him to heel and slip his lead over his head, just in case. I am quietly pleased with the results of my training endeavours but a rabbit caught unawares is still just too tempting and we'd had an interesting stand-off with a fox some weeks back.

Striding over the ridge at the top of the meadow we are stopped in our tracks. Laying on its side, just inside the gate, there is a Friesian cow. Scout's hackles are immediately raised and he stands stock-still, ears cocked, looking at the huge animal. We slowly walk around it, keeping our distance. It is covered in mud, caked on and drying, and it is dead. Flies are already hovering in a cloud above it and I can detect the faint smell of flesh that is in the early stages of decomposition. No matter human or bovine, the process is the same. Muscle memory brings my hand up to my face before I realise there is no paper mask to adjust. It had felt like I was moving away from death, moving here, but of course, it is everywhere.

Looking through the open farm gate onto the marsh I can see a clear set of tyre tracks and a wide, erratic, drag mark. It looks like the dead animal has been hooked up to the tractor and towed across the marsh to the gate. The rest of the herd – weaners and a few adult chaperones – are huddled together near the tractor which is stationary, engine idling, near the wide central ditch. There are several drainage channels crisscrossing the land and this one is a deep gully, fringed with rushes and sedge. Throughout the winter this part of the marsh is completely waterlogged and only the most committed dog-walkers and ramblers attempt to cross it, wearing tall boots. It has been a dry spring though, and the water level is low, the ground either side is hard and cracked already.

Alan is standing, hands on hips peering into the ditch and as we walk across to him he acknowledges us with a glance and a nod.

‘What on earth happened?’ I ask as he shakes his head.

‘It’s a rum old do. Poor thing drowned. Must’ve slid down the bank trying to drink and not been able to get out. Reckon it was exhaustion did it, was probably trying to climb out for hours. Bet she made a right racket, surprised you didn’t hear her.’ He grimaces.

‘Oh Alan, how awful.’ I am a little lost for words, not sure quite what the etiquette might be in this situation. And now he’s mentioned it there had been some unusually strident howling the previous evening but I’d thought nothing of it.

‘Wife bought her for me for my birthday. My favourite one, she was.’ He sighs.

As I contemplate buying someone a cow for their birthday, he carries on.

‘It’s the bloody waste of it that gets to me. Completely avoidable. If the wardens had half a clue about land management this would never have happened. The water level in these ditches should be much higher, even when it’s been dry. Shut the sluice down a bit, that’s all they need to do. There’s no telling them though, they do it their way.’ He shakes his head. Now I’ve got a dead cow and a mountain of paperwork to deal with. The vet, Defra, it’ll be never ending.’

My professional interest is piqued. ‘How do you dispose of a cow carcass? Will there be a post-mortem?’

He gives me a slightly quizzical sideways glance. ‘No, no post-mortem. If she’d just dropped dead for no obvious reason Defra would want to test for BSE and a few other things, just in case, but there’s a pretty clear cause of death so I just need to arrange for an approved transporter to take her away and she’ll be incinerated. Shame.’

I picture the chimney rising above the hospital building that I’d spent so many years in. A listed landmark, of architectural significance, and of course stories were rife locally about

body disposal and all sorts but hospital incinerators only get rid of general clinical waste these days.

‘Can’t imagine PM-ing a cow, to be honest, but I guess it’s all the same once you get started.’

Alan gives me a wry smile. ‘What was it you did before? One of those *Silent Witness* types weren’t you, pathologist, en’t it?’

‘Oh, I was never as glamorous as Amanda Burton, or the other one – the blonde one. Just a mortuary technician, me. Morgue dogsbody, ‘scuse the pun.’ I wink at him and we share a smile. The business end of death is never far away from either of us it seems.

‘Back in the day, even an old beast like this that wasn’t fit for the table would have been stripped down for parts, like an old car. Meat for the hounds, then the rest’d be rendered for fertiliser; blood and bone meal, fish food, glue. Until the war, every village had an abattoir, behind the butcher’s shop. Once the carcass had been butchered, the knacker collected what was left and turned it into all sorts. These days, cases like this, the lot gets burned most of the time.’ He hitches his trousers up and looks down at Scout who is lying, nose between his paws, patiently waiting.

‘That’s a nice dog you got there, good shape, don’t let him run to fat, will you? Can’t bear to see a spoilt lab. Well, I’d better get on with shifting the old girl. Not allowed to be out in the open for long in case the buzzards and magpies find her; health risk apparently.’ His raised eyebrows speak volumes. ‘I’ll send the lads down with a trailer and get her shifted to the yard. She’ll be dust by this evening.’

~

Descent

That night he wakes in the pitch dark to the unmistakable sound of planes, low overhead. He starts, eyes suddenly wide open, heart thumping as the engines drone above, his top lip is beaded with sweat, he is rigid, unable to move. Momentarily he is back in London, waiting for the whistling screech of shells, the siren's wail. Then before he can properly comprehend what is happening, the noise fades and is gone, the quiet restored. He lays, still. He can feel a charge in the air, an energy that has been left in their wake. He lays like that until he can sense the sky lightening beyond his curtains and, eventually, an uneasy sleep descends. He is instantly immersed in a vivid dream, back in his London terrace, cowering in the space under the stairs, hugging the painting, hugging her. The air is thick with brick and plaster dust, the sky above him on fire. He can feel the canvas rending under the force of his grip but there is nothing he can do to loosen it. He is destroying her as the blast destroys him. He wakes again, bathed in sweat and shaking.

When he is calm enough to leave the bed, he moves quickly down the stairs to the sitting room and stands, in the pale light of the breaking day, staring at the serene face of Gabrielle Diot. He lifts her carefully down from the mantel shelf and takes her back up the stairs, placing her on the bed, before lying next to her. As the fear lessens he relaxes, drifting in and out of sleep and they lay together the whole day and again that night.

Time passes in a feverish daze until the milk is rancid, mould blooms on the heel of bread and he must leave the house. He covers her gently with the chenille bedspread, promises that he won't be long and heads out, across the marsh. There is news in the shop of two mortars exploding less than fifteen miles away, speculation that they were dumped by a plane on its way back to Germany. The locals are matter-of-fact, the encroachment of the war into their

rural lives inevitable. He feels the fear rising again until he can no longer speak and he leaves the shop amid curious glances. He thought they would be safe here, she would be safe here. He hurries home with a bottle of milk and his ration of bread and cheese. There is no bacon this week. Even here, surrounded by farms, food is scarce. Locals keep poultry, and he has heard talk of a Pig Club but he does not understand these people, nor they him, and he has not been invited to join.

Back home he returns her to the mantel, drinks tea and sits with his sketch pad. He has been making small studies of her face, trying to capture her nuanced expressions with his worn pencil but today his hands are unsteady, his grip on the pencil too tense and he abandons his attempt. She looks perturbed, unnerved by the unsettled nights. He can't explain to her the fear he feels, nor the threat of the planes. She won't understand. As the day draws to a close and the light gradually diminishes in the sitting room, he eats bread and drinks more tea and watches her fade into the gloom. He thinks about Rosenberg in New York; where there are no bombs. Maybe he should have stayed there but then what would happen to her? She'd still be in London, like Kitty Pomfret's nan.

He is startled from an uneasy, restless sleep again that night by the distant rumble, the pulsating whirl of engines, and he slides her hastily under the metal bed frame and then cowers on the bedroom floor, knees pressing into the wooden boards. He pulls the edge of the bedspread over himself, a canopy shielding them both from the flash of light that will precede the impact he is sure will come but doesn't.

The planes fly over, the noise lessens, the vibrations subside. Slowly he straightens his curved spine and lays flat on the floor. Twisting his head sideways he inches his way under the bed until he is next to her. He lays there, his ear flat against the floor, his right elbow bent so that his hand rests on the edge of the canvas. He is cold, the boards are uncomfortable, and

eventually, his limbs become numb until he can no longer feel his arms and legs and he is not sure he will ever be able to move again.

~