

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part three : new/smoke

New

The change is slight but I am aware of it nonetheless. I feel the house relax, sense the creak of the gate, the sigh of the timbers. We speak without tongues but we know, we can feel each other tilt and shift. The pressure rises and falls, the atmosphere alters and we settle again, back into our familiar selves. The patterns and routines are fluid, influenced by things I cannot know but I carry and shelter and hear and sometimes I am the catalyst for what comes next. Sometimes I am the thing that changes. No longer solid but shifting; giving and taking. Making the new.

Smoke

Owen can still smell London. Just a subtle shift in the air and he is overwhelmed by the sensation; coal smoke, gas from fractured pipes, burnt timber, plaster dust, the pungent aroma of boiling hops from the brewery underpinning it all. If he opened the worn, oak plank cottage door he was convinced he'd find the grey tarmac and soot-stained, buff yellow brick of Islington. There the rank air, a sulphurous miasma, had leached into everything. Days after a bombing raid, the fires extinguished, the dust settled, he would lift his hat and coat from the hook and it would envelop him.

He'd thought, as the train had shunted and shuffled away from London that it would dissipate, be replaced with something fresh and new, sweet even, but it had lingered. He could smell the soot from the train engine, tobacco from a pipe drifting through from the next carriage, the sickly tang of poultry manure when a group of farm labourers had entered the carriage just outside Colchester but beneath these, still, the smell of London persisted.

He felt like he might never rid himself of it. He'd glanced out of the sitting room window only this morning, seen clouds of smoke rising beyond the hedge and had been assaulted by such a pervasive smell of the city, that even when he'd realised that the smoke was straw dust rising from the barley harvest two fields over, he had not been able to rid his nostrils of the sensation.

He can still feel London in his shoes. As he eases his feet into them after breakfast the pavement is still there, pressing into the soles. They are ill-suited to the un-metalled, potholed lane that passes beyond the garden hedge. They are ill-suited to the tracks and paths that criss-cross the marsh, pocked by cattle hooves and either soft enough to sink ankle deep into, or baked dry into craters that send his feet veering suddenly off course.

He is not suited to this rural life but his days have settled into a kind of routine. He has his books, his sketch pad and charcoals. He walks the tracks and paths each morning, stopping to sketch what he sees; the plants and the buildings; tumbledown sheds, and ears of barley and wheat. All the land around his house would once have been grazing for cattle but there are fewer animals now, they are too needy, require too much feed, growing cereal crops for flour and malt takes priority. The adjacent cowshed is empty, aside from an old stone trough and a couple of ratty hay nets. He'd ventured in there not long after moving into the old farmhouse and the soft earth floor had thrown up a cloud of choking dust as his feet had disturbed it. It was a low-roofed, dark, space, but not dank, the vestiges of hay bales collected in the corners still giving off a musty, sweet aroma, and as he'd ducked to avoid the cobwebs festooned from the broad oak rafters he was suddenly back in the air raid shelter on Hemingford Road, the familiar panic fluttering in his chest. He'd fumbled his way back out into the light and had not been back in since.

As far removed as he feels from north London there are daily reminders of it here. Before he'd left Islington, he had wandered the streets around his house in a daze, looking at the

devastation, planning his departure. The bomb-damaged houses, piles of rubble left in-situ, had been colonised by ragwort and rosebay willow herb, the swathes of pink and yellow mocking him with their frivolous colour. They are prolific weeds here too, left to go to seed in the overlooked field margins and ramshackle yards, as farm-labourers sweat to get the harvest in.

He squints at a caterpillar feeding on a ragwort leaf in the mid-morning sun, its yellow and black stripes coated with fine hairs; he watches it move slowly along a stalk, systematically devouring the green leaf as it does. Its body hunches and stretches, hunches and stretches, and its methodical movement transfixes him. He imagines it eating its final meal, spinning a cocoon around its sated body, and burying itself in the dark soil beneath the plant. It will stay there, in the cool earth; concealed, hidden, asleep, all winter. It might not wake up. It might be eaten by a mole, unearthed by a scratching hen, but if it does survive, if a black and red-winged cinnabar moth emerges from the earth-sheltered cocoon in May and returns to the ragwort to lay its eggs, what will it find? What will remain?