

FROM WINSCOMBE TO PRIDDY NINE BARROWS

A MENDIP JOURNEY

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Area of Outstanding
Natural Beauty



The New Stone Age on Mendip

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Vetch. And the tangled optimism of *Viburnum opulus*. The bus does a minuet with the central theme of the A38, scraping and bowing to silver BMW X5s with 10-Mbps bus LCD technology that works in sunlight and a Band-Aid fix to iDrive parked outside city-escapees' bungalows. Mercedes was the daughter of Emil Jellinek, did you know?



The sports-field's scattered land squares up to me. Intruder! Where does he fit in amongst lacrosse and the 100yds dash?

Land belongs to someone. Why does land belong to someone? Who owns it? The sheep? The cows? Sidcot School? Who owns the Mendip? We do make it all up, don't we? The ants, the tangled roots of trees, the drip of water, the sound of the drip of water? Who did you say owns them? In Jamaica Mr. James, the gardener, would tief de Bombay Mango dem off me fader tree. "Iz God him mek de mango fe grow," he would say when challenged. True enough. If God him mek de mango dem fi grow, iz fus' come, fus' serve to rawted. We iz all God's chillun. We all have de same damn right. But stop! Maybe the mango grows itself. Uh hu. Don' mek we argue over dat religion t'ing. Iz de same damn t'ing, over which no lives are to be lost. I suppose you could say "Mebbe iz God Him mek de mango fe grow – but iz me fader him pay yuh wages. Yuh is fired!"

What is this lie we inhabit? Why do we inhabit it? We make it all up – is this not astonishingly liberating?

I leave the A38 behind, wind round some cottages, through a dog-walk field and into Shipham.

"Amy Winehouse self-harms", says the Sun in the Penscot Inn dining room. "I write songs because I'm (*expletive deleted*) in the head and have to get it out," she is said to say. Do artists create work because we are (*expletive deleted*) in the head and have to get it out? Outside,

hedge sparrows ramp up the invective: THIS IS MY HEDGE, THIS IS MY MATE! GET OFF MY TERRITORY! Altruism, anyone? Perhaps we should stop thinking life is 'for' something. What are trees, rabbits, venomous cross-grained adders soaking up the sun on drystone walls in Velvet Bottom 'for'? Life is not 'for' anything. We are free.

Here up on top behind shake hole, Roman fort, enclosure, tumulus; amidst the life and death of landscapes, the drystone wall butts itself up to gnarled beech. Or it could be the other way round. What butts itself up to what, the living to the unliving, or the unliving to the living? The sentient to the insentient, or the insentient to the sentient? The yielding to the unyielding, or the unyielding to the yielding? The quick and live are vain things to push at the stubborn inertia of things! Are we just put up with, waited to be got over, or is there a dance? What are the steps? Is it a minuet, a stately pavane, a death tango, a country jig? Who is the composer? Can I choreograph my own steps?

I jump onto a solid-based wall further down the Bottom and catch a slither of adder. I wait patiently for her reappearance. Something ancient in our brain responds to the slither of snakes.

We have known each other for trillennia, watched.

This whale's hump of Mendip, issue



of a Variscan orogeny, rears its carbuncled head above Triassic Levels. Flailing her tail against Frome, tectonically challenged, she lunges for Steep Holm, Flat Holm, the open sea. The walls barnacle her sandpapered back; ganglionated, nodes fusing, transmitting outwards, feeding inwards. The nerve signals get caught up in the slow growth of Alder, the diamondback pattern of adders. They are soaked into the ground in blustery squalls, trickled down to Radstock, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Highbridge, Weston-Super-Mare, Bristol.

Our index-linked lives are disturbed by wet dreams of Apollo-flung uplands and dark-leaved combes, secret passages, Ebor Gorges, clammed-up Priddys. The towns round the edges of the escarpment tremble at her passage, populating her munificence with sheep, rambunctious cattle, corn and alternative lifestyles.

I pick up my feet and walk. This is, after all, what humans do, have always done. Picked up their feet and walked. The Japanese master poet, Basho, said, 'we are travellers of eternity.' Simon Schama quotes an old Jew in the ancient forests of (Lithuania?) being asked about his 'roots'. 'Roots???' scoffed the old man, 'we're not trees, we're humans. Jews don't have 'roots', we have LEGS. We pick 'em up and walk!'

And so we do, through all human history, in every age and time. We pick them up - and walk. Neolithic Man, the Beaker Folk, Bronze Age Man, the Romans – they all picked them up and walked here, to these hills, and over them, and beyond, and into new lives, old deaths. Wave after wave. Where is their voice? The wind soughs over Black Down; fleeting cloud casts doubt on their remains.

The path dives into Rowberrow Warren and I spook a horse. "All the horses in the stable shy at hikers with rucksacs. Maybe it's the shape," says the rider. Once, long ago, Oh Best Beloved, a young horse was freaked by a wandering shadow of strange outline that passed over the land and left no imprint on wood, stone, or water. "Beware of wandering ghosts of indeterminate outline, my children, my frisky young foals," quoth the wise old showjumper, "they are not known to wood, stone and water. They are not embraced WITHIN. They mean Horsedom no good." Ever since that day, Oh Best Beloved, all the horses in the stable shy at hikers with rucksacs.

A fellow hiker greets me. "As it's a nice day I've decided to play hooky and bunk off work," he says. We work ourselves to the bare bane, then we die. Why are we rushing into our graves?

Further down in Rowberrow Bottom, rabbits gambol in a field. Rabbits came over with the Romans from Italy, si? Whereupon they bred like, er ...rabbits. Rowberrow Warren, Dolebury Warren. Since decimated by myxomatosis.

Who is the joker on this particular strip? Does he go doodle doodle doodle all the livelong day? Does he squat in the long long grass? Oh Mothers, your son wears a pickled gherkin upon his wanton brow.

He needs:

Aggression
Ruthlessness
Naked Ambition
Vanity
A strong dose of stupidity.

Paul Felix Armand-Delille had them. The rabbits died. Correction. The rabbits die. Correction. The rabbits die slowly and agonisedly. Correction. Everything dies.

Yes, but this way?

Emerging out of the green heaviness of trees and the arch skittishness of horses the Redshanks line up coquettishly to offer me scabious, early purple orchid and eyebright. I am vacant here in nonchalant Paradise, perfunctorily bedded down to sleep. The valley weaves away below me, off down to the A38, Churchill, Bristol, the



rest of the world. Its complicated twistedness follows the natural way, mirrors life – why do humans not?

Things are to be done, and heavinesses squat upon the sea. Below me the trees trace their signature in the clouds' passing. Do they come and go, or is 'coming' and 'going' only the human representation of no coming and going? Uji. Here I can see your peaks and troughs. The voice of the poet is heard in the Land and speaks with slow power of the Unravelling. Echoes of subtlety pervade a scratched Universe. There is

nothing here enabled to throw a shadow over the land. Yet dreadsporn ameliorate through cowgirt meadows and the squirm of moontides.

I am asked again whether double-yellows are riven embryonically. Oh yes, this is a very arcane simplicity: this land is old; her Mendip bones simmer in cauldrons of susceptibility. Lava offloaded spills track that moment that hamsters believe in. We are technotrollops, culpable in this kalpa in which bandits reign and the unquantifiable is outfoxed by the dunderheadedness of days. Our 'wisdom' breaks at the edges. What is this that is going to consider us, oh shufflers of paper? The endlessness of stupidities downloads on recondite hills. That blueness of orb; and a sickle moon ascendant.

The soft belly of the sky pins me to the ground. And they collect; and they recollect, and they gather; stone upon stone, and they are partaken of THIS one, and THAT one, and of lambs' eyes behind an equation. Let us say it: no-one knows the purposes of this Universe, so no-one knows what is more important than anything else, so one thing is not more important than another, so everything is important, so what we do is important. Does this not release us?

Let us consider the usages of walls:
to keep out
to keep in
to include
to exclude

Decline the ontogeny of 'wall':

Vallus
Vallum
Weall
Wall

When building a drystone or any other wall beware:
bellying
slumping
bowing
tootling

Oh come on, you're:
off the []

up the []

Anyway:
the handwriting is definitely
on the []

What does it say, soft sister?

An incubation of night sinks in around Black Bunny Hollow in Nether Wood. My tent peg grates against clinker and refuses to go further. Fused bastard silicon mother for whom the arsenic boy died! Man-made, obdurate and slyly winking! Perverse metal: lead – dead! Yet rabbits' merry skulls disintegrate into it with song intact, moulder into compost; to this is added their compatriot's shit, the offerings of roe and red deer, leaves dead and alive in every season. Then bladder campion explodes into the life everlasting to harepace the long, slow oratory of progression. Life is that which life is which life is that which....

This edgeways slant of incantation comes at the bidding of nostrils and will where to and away. I am the Wanderer whose soul is cloaked in chickenwire; armpits pass away at my bidding, though, granted, this aspect of things may be a shibboleth. An internally verified cloud revels you out on burgeoning skies whose terms of abundance adhere to land. I am the Wanderer whose soul is cloaked in chickenwire; I am the roving man the rambling man who roves o'er the shire. Of all the ten thousand thousands only one will know it, only one will grow it, only one will taste it, all the rest will waste it. Siegfried? Siegfried! The apocalyptic NOW summarises the funeral of disdain. So grass out on fungicides.

This is the way to build a wall:

stretcher
layer
bind
watch the batter
bonders
pop holes
pudding-stone

And earthquakes may shatter it, Mercedes Benz 1-9-2-4 tipper lorries on their way to

Callow Rock tumble it, runaway tractors demolish it, grockles scramble over it, sheep-seeking missiles explode it on Yoxter Range. NEVERTHELESS: we are human. Build it!

But let him who lays the first stone bear the responsibility for all the rest. Who, what set this ALL in process? ALL that is ALL? Where is it going, where will it end? Ah, 'going', 'ending'. Evoked and sandblasted by recalcitrant dogmas this is where language cleaves to the roof of the mouth and is run out on bellwethers of campanula to the chimes of morning lilypads across the lagoon:

Cambridge Surprise Major

Oxford Treble Bob Major

Stedman Triples

Double Norwich Court Bob Major

Plain Bob Major

Grandsire Triples



Bristol Surprise Major

Bullocks wall-eye me high on the fields off Greendown Batch, nudge each other. "Hiker! Let's put the shits up him – flanking movement!" They mount an, um, cavalry (?) charge. "Remember Cudjo!", then wheel as one from ten yards, "Whoa! Hold it boys, hold it, he might call the farmer!" and thunder off up the slope. "Still, I reckon we scared him, don't you?" Sure did, Junior.

Companiable in sudden storm the cows' older cousins' sleek water streaked back-on-back rolling eyes log me in tobacco white over the usual beech-lined drystone wall. Harmless. At least in our mutual need to shelter from the rain. This ... wall,

which separates us from the rest of Creation. But a companionability of cows. A bundled swallow sways on the electric fencing. According to swallows, what is electric fencing 'for'? According to pigeons, what is 'a cathedral' for? To strut and coo, nest in. Ikkyu says that 'stone Buddha deserves all the birdshit it gets'. What are things 'for'? Yet 'for' is too strong a word. Is that not comforting?

Ah hummmmm.... the refrain sits on stone walls yellow with summer sunned saxifrages. The ghosts of Mendip miners peek shyly at me out of gruffy ground. Some march me off to Nordrach sanatorium, where I am bedevilled by weaslings and quacks. Where is this in the culminating aesthetic of opera singers?

*In green, in green-slippered Paradise
my love, oh my love shall lie;
At one with clay until dies irae;
And all world, all world shall be
One,
When humans are eradicated,
And our day is done*

(sing to whatever tune you want)

The hills abide. But this is no longer true. We have crumbled the hill into valleys and raised the valleys into hills. All that is solid shall fade away. And shall and shall. Shall what? Our fingers are in the cracks of Being. We wrench the very earth apart. Mind touches this and skitters off, touches it and skitters off. Is it in the solidity of stone we can take refuge?

The mind is drawn to a widening gyre of carboniferous foraminifera 350 million years ago, to algal motes spiralling in stabbing sun in shallow seas, falling, gliding, sinking to the bottom of warm sea, trillions upon trillions over dreamless time, corals, mussels, shellfish pounded in Ogun's forge, bent over the anvil, journeyed from Ikole Orun to Ikole Aiye, split, riven, raised. This we call 'solid' danced in tropical waters to a patterning of sun. Is there rest for the restless here?

Earth strikes a note: it sings. Heaven responds – it chimes. This is the prima

donna of whom Scarlatti spoke in tongues. It gives rise to a certain tardiness of cue at the borders where language lies bedazzled before the grievous inscriptions of mortality. Why should this be of use? Of what use is the galleon oak of Blagdon? Man's parallel strips converge (or converge not: this is the Devil) to lie with the corn-maiden in her fruitful fields. Let us take the Devil: 'parallel lines extending to Infinity'. Then the rub of skin on skin: Pocohontas, silky pubic hair of corn. A New World opens out, but is congealed into innerness. We ground on the theme of 'usefulness'. Of what things are 'for', strung out on the line of heavy artillery, 'pushing our systems through the snow' (Derek Walcott).

But see how it lies in Rowberrow Bottom. 'Nice horse, what's his name?' 'Blue'. What could be more unequivocal? Did the horse call itself 'blue'? Let's sub this one out, farm it out to allotments, semaphore it out to the skies, trudge it through the wet grass, scope it out to a generous mother and her babies at Fernhill Farm.

The inevitable black dog bays behind The Mount and lollops towards me to check out my olfactory status. Satisfactory, here, at least, on neutral ground. Humanity fast-syncs forward over tump, mump, bump and barrow. We are always testing the water. 'Is this enough?'. What is 'enough'? "Never is 'enough' enough", the barrow wights sigh. What's on the News? What other people want us to be fearful of, feel guilty for. This destruction testing of the earth has no external yottabyte hard-drive. There is no back-up file, we cannot curl up world and put it on a memory stick. Remember us? Humans... Whoops, error reading 666, file corrupted. Reformat the hard disc, start again.

High on Black Down the ancestors slumber in sun-scurried tumuli; sweet the bilberries that grow on their graves.

The imprint of someone's hand is on each stone. Sweat-drops, over each one flowed rough vowels. "Tiz getting dimpsey, zo cummin yer an wet thee's whistle." They retrieve the flagon from the pop hole.

First, the Romans. No. After. There is always something, someone after. So long as there is a before. What is before the before? Imperators have always scribed their name into lead pigs, gouged it into the land. Pax romanum?

[THE PROPERTY OF] TIBERIUS
CLAUDIUS CAESAR AUGUSTUS,
PONTIFEX MAXIMUS, [HOLDER
OF THE] TRIBUNICIAN POWER
FOR THE NINTH TIME,
IMPERATOR FOR THE
SIXTEENTH TIME.
FROM BRITAIN.

Have we heard this before? THIS IS MY
HEDGE, THIS IS MY MATE! GET OFF
MY TERRITORY!

Tourists pour into Cheddar Gorge almost as fast as the Yeo pouring out. Socially-excluded young people in danger of offending and offered preventative measures through YISPs ASBO up the gorge in a hot-modded matt-black '93 Vauxhall Astra GSi petrol injected 2.0l 16v. From where I sit high over Pride Evans Hole the roar shatters off the walls, inviting a comeback challenge from cave-drawn minotaur. He paws the earth, bellows in turn, locks horns. They blink first, pull in to a layby for experiments in bubblegum and steaming up windows. Per ardua ad astra? This ... cleft in the mound, this engorgement, rammed up by the testosterone-challenged – have we been here before?

Stone-closed edge; and a gap through which gorge is viewed. Does the view exist without the constraint? We are framed by beginnings and endings and the Sisyphian haulage of stone. Build them up, they topple; build them up again, they topple again; in lifetimes if not in days. Their edges do not round off with age, they become sharpened, more angular; cast flat black shadows to sun's gaze; we move in this twisted mechanism at random, a torus of 'within'.

Charterhouse (again), Priddy Hill Farm, a schism of crows, square wood, Yoxter Firing Range, Bowery Corner. Stretched and torn the landscape knits itself

together, self-heals, and rears towards an epiphany of skylarks: Priddy Nine Barrows!

This partial landscape countersinks an epistemology of despair as chuntered down swallets to nothingness; gawp-mouthed, involute, violated. I vault from HERE to the end of sideways, and settle down to peace.

The peace which soughs through pine trees

Pease

The peace which runs down the inner side of thighs

Pease

The peace which hops in frogs and unmediated shopping trolleys

Pease

The peace which sits in put-aside meadows

Pease

Do not try to understand.
Only comprehend

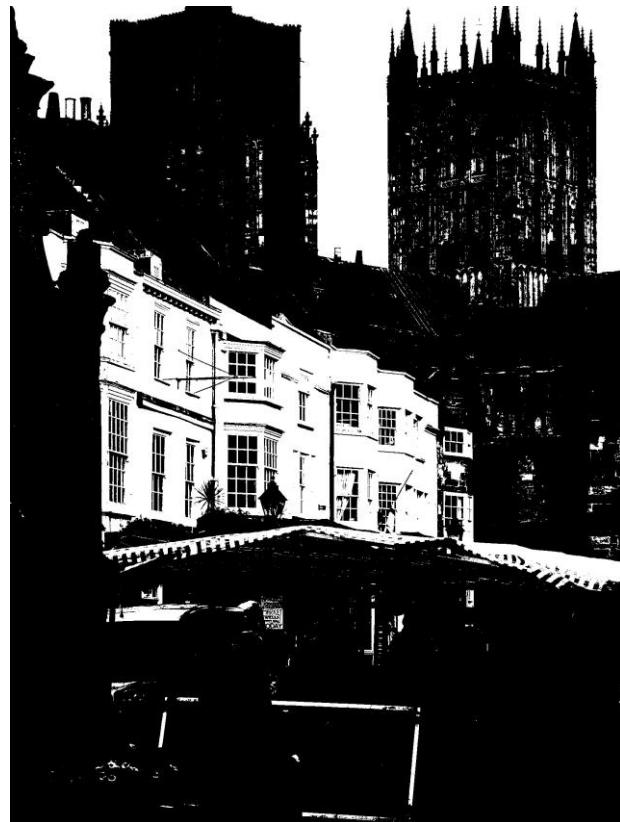
She will get us in the end. Her inimical spittoons fester on ice; her specs tango to read-only docs. Her cauldrons of undifferentiated loss space out the milestones to infinity; she atomises perpendicularity.

Yet this is the best we have to deal with. Not the brightest, just the best. We think some things are more important than others but the universe doesn't doesn't. After all, we are granted mortality. I am looking for the words that unlock this. To fishtail down the singing slope above Fair Lady Well to a nonchalant pass of tree and the long, slow dance of stone. We are here to know what is noble, and what weight it will bear, to absorb the exigencies of mushrooms' lives, the silence gathered under beeches on Nordrach. That note of freedom sticking to the crags of Draycott Sleights, overflying the streaming guts of

The Levels where cloud-galleons swashbuckle up from the Quantocks, reform ranks in Bridgewater Bay, then sail majestically up the Polden Hills to bombard the Goddess and Her acolytes in Glastonbury. We should be capable of LIVING again, not just of inhabiting the tunnel realities force-fed us by the media. The catechism of the ages plainchants solemnly, measuredly under the vault of Heaven.

Unperturbed, serene.

Stone be around you and stone before you, stone to cup you and stone under you. Where is the stone that in-closes, where is the stone upon which it is inscribed we are free? Take the tablets and go down the mountain, the hill, this Mendip. Proclaim it to the people. We are free, there is no 'for'.



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