

# *HOMEKEEPING*

WHEN I FIRST WAKE, the darkness has only just lifted.

I close my eyes and wonder whether they were really open  
to begin with.

The flat is coming to dawn. The wall, whose voices slipped  
back to a whisper in the cold hours, warms itself to a hum,  
faltering a little as it wakes like the tuning of a radio.  
The bookshelves grow amber and the chest of drawers picks up  
its dusty scent. Essences arrange themselves.

I feel something in the room shift. There is a stirring of sorts. It is hard to say which sense feels this, but I am aware it is happening. The sense of it wakes me up. Without opening my eyes fully I rise into my body. The walls lean back to accommodate.





I ENTER THE KITCHEN earlier than usual, and circle around the armchair and counters slowly and thoughtfully. The laptop takes a long while to warm up but it flickers to light eventually. I sit and wait with the armchair.

*Understand*: to comprehend or grasp the idea of. Literally, it is to stand in the midst of. The “under” does not mean beneath. It is an Old English “under”, meaning between or among.

I think first of the nettles. *Urtica dioica*. In a scrap of land behind the building they stand tall in the midst of everything. I can't see the scrap of land from any of these windows.

I picture their criss-cross of rhizome, stem and stolon,  
hidden from view by earth, rubbish and dense packing.

They rise in a steady army, preparing themselves to stand  
between cemented walls, chipped bricks, cans of coke and  
abandoned car parts from the garage.





I TRY TO SPEND the daytimes in the kitchen. It helps break the day from the night.

In bed I am hardly hungry, but when I am awake for longer it is my stomach that shapes the day. I potter with increasing urgency, making laps of the kitchen to retrieve ingredients, lay them out on the side and sit back down again. And then again, up to the side to pick up a piece of cheese, round to the fridge to deposit it, and over to sit back down cheese in hand.

The movement feels good; I am wary of keeping too sedentary. Sometimes my circles of food retrieval are intersected by laps of surface cleaning. Over to the sink to

pick up the sponge, push on the tap to dampen, and then round methodically, surface-by-surface, sponging crumbs into my hand.

I imagine someone above plotting my movements on a graph. There may well be a peephole in my ceiling. I have never trusted the upstairs neighbours. Though now I am starting to doubt whether they are there at all. It strikes me that it may be an altogether different kind of life, watching, noting, plotting – as I have plotted the movements of other, slower things.

There is a thought experiment, where fast-moving aliens come to earth and think humans to be so slow they are lifeless.

But what if it's the other way. What if we are deemed too fast to be alive? Simply light, sound, an electrical current. Racing, frantic, with no apparent meaning, no obvious desire. I wonder if it is not the walls themselves that watch me.



THE CONTENTS OF THE FLAT have become increasingly like playmates. I have begun to learn their rhythms. In the morning everything recedes entirely, allows projection, the impression of a clean slate.

In the afternoon the walls plump with their own stories. In whispers, *I'm here I'm here I'm here*. The cracks sneak up into the centre, contours smirking in the light.

Sometimes the kitchen is possessed by a yellow shimmer. Playing back the shuddering tree in repeated phrases through the muslin on the window, across the wall, over the table. Their sound track is Steve Reich. Steve, the table and the walls bask in their glory.

By evening the lively congregation has occupied the space entirely. If I turn off all the lights I can still hear them breathing. If I sit to read I am sitting alongside a crowd. I have no choice but to sink in; to be a passenger, a component, a shadow beam, a brush of blue paint on the wall. Like a swimmer I must give over to the sea, and ride the tides until the day makes everything scuttle back and recede once more.





*INANIMATE*: WITHOUT VITAL FORCE, having lost life.

“Vital force”, “life”: this is where the dictionary goes round in circles. I have done it before. *Vitality* relates to the force present in “living” things. *Life* is the condition of being “living”, as opposed to death or “inanimate” existence. *Living* is to possess life, and to be capable of “vital” functions. And it all ceases to mean very much at all given that these “inanimate” pages are robbed of their “vital” power.

“Inanimate creatures, as Trees, and the like”, writes the exemplar J. Steer in 1643.

A *creature* comes from the Old French, “created being; all creation”. But an “inanimate” creature: what a sad thing. Something created, which has lost life. Made and unmade; begot and destroyed; brought forth and withheld. Pinocchio gone backwards (no sign of Geppetto).

*Anima* is life, breath. Who gives breath to the breathless? Frankenstein's creature, the nutcracker, Galatea.

Except, J., I am sure that “Inanimate creatures, as Trees, and the like” have a breath, a breath that gives breath to our breath.





SLEEP OFTEN COMES SLOW to me these days. I try to hold still. I lay and listen to the hum of everything, and bathe myself in the darkness. It is the closest I get to understanding.



TIME IS ALREADY doing strange things. I find myself beginning to lose my ability to differentiate myself from it, or move independently within it.

The life of the flat gives me some contours. When I wake I stand stark against it all. In the face of the morning silence, my consciousness arrives suddenly, in a loud whisper, right in the ear. *You're here you're here you're here.*

I lay and listen to my own twitchings. For the time being I am unable to hear anything outside of me. The blood is rushing through my legs to the sound of a fierce stream, and my eyes are noisily awake behind their lids. I hold still and let it all bubble up.

Once I am awake I sit awhile. There is a pot of soil to the right of my bed. It is dry to the bone, and as far as I can see occupied only by a few dead roots. I unintentionally killed and disposed of the original inhabitant. There is a stick propped into its earth, slightly off centre, holding up who knows what.





I DELAY THE POINT of getting up to the last possible moment. The sun starts its day in the bedroom, and it is sometimes a shock to be met by the kitchen's cold edges if I am not entirely awake and ready for them.

In the kitchen I go straight for the coffee percolator. I bring the coffee jar down from its shelf and lay everything out before me on the side. Unscrew, remove, tap on, zhhhhh, tap off, return, unscrew, spoon, spoon, smooth, screw, light, pop, gas on, reduce, place, step back. The ceremony is soothing.

I stand by the hob for the duration of the percolator's silence. Listening is good for the body.

I start up the computer and let it hum.





THE WALLS' MORNING RECESSIONS are lessening. I notice it as I pour the coffee into its moss green cup. The light's movement is freeing. Sounds have dislodged themselves from their sources. I suppose we are all getting used to one another.

I sit. There is a metal creaking sound. It is familiar; I am sure it occurs a few times a day. It has a sharp high-ish pitch, and a scoop up and a scoop down. I had always thought that it comes from our gate. From my seat though I see that our gate is vacant. Next door is gateless. I try to let go of the idea of its having an origin.

At mating season, the orchid *Ophrys apifera* dresses up as the female of a certain *Eucera longicornis* bee in order to ensure pollination by scamming the bee into copulation. The orchids are, briefly, a bee.





I SPEND MOST OF THE DAY moving back and forth from the computer to the armchair.

The etymological dictionary is a heavy grey volume. It sits over the armchair on a shelf just above shoulder level. I am uncertain if it gets me any closer.

*Connect*: to join, bind or fasten together. It is from the Latin; *com* is “together” and *nectere* “to bind or tie”.

I play with the word in my mind. Connecting is a lot more violent than standing beside. A fastening. I imagine it like

sewing; it needs a prick. I look down at the heavy volume lying open in my lap and wonder if connection is always a struggle.

There is one recorded human death by nettles. A man who died five hours after walking unprotected through a dense patch of *Urtica ferox* in New Zealand. *Urtica ferox*, tree nettle, or ongaonga in Māori. I try the word; onga-onga. It means ferocious stinger.





IN THE MORNING I WAKE damp and numb. It takes me a while to come to and spot the hypo. I am quick to forget the diabetes.

It is a new component to my make up and I have not yet worked out how to address it. "I have diabetes" feels quite foreign. Besides, it seems quite strange to me to think of *having* when it is a lack that one has.

"I have cancer", my mother avoided saying some years ago. Cancer, however, is not a lack. It is an addition to the makeup. A swelling. But do we possess something just because it is inside of us. If anything it is the growth that possesses and takes hold, not the host. I suppose she knew this.

Either way, I do not *have* diabetes.





THE VERB *HAVE* COMES from the Old English *habban*, which is “to own, possess; be subject to, experience”. The Proto-Indo-European root is \*kap-, “to grasp.”

My eye flicks back and forth across the two senses. Do I “own” or am I “subject to”. Is it possible to do one without doing the other? How to own without also being subject to; to possess without experiencing? I can feel the two opposites grasping together across the semi-colon. Their meanings are sticky.

The dictionary goes on. “The sense of *possess, have at one's disposal* (I have a book) is a shift from older languages, where the thing possessed was made the subject

and the possessor took the dative case (as in Latin *est mihi liber* *I have a book*, literally *there is to me a book*)."

So it is laziness that has stuck one meaning to its opposite, awkwardly tugging it both ways. Perhaps this sticking and pulling is what possession is.

Galium aparine, stickyweed, cleavers, goosegrass, the velcro plant, clings as a form of travel. Hold me, I need to go where you are going. Stick with me, I'll take you somewhere.





THEY TESTED THE STOMACH contents of the Iron Age man found in bog at Tollund in Denmark. His last meal was *Hordeum vulgare*, *Camelina linicola*, *Polygonum lapathifolium*. Barley, flax, and knotweed. A kind of weed porridge.

I make a soup for lunch. Lay out vegetables, one by one, and chop them, steadily and methodically. They unfurl an earthy scent.

I eat the soup in the late afternoon. It is a pale brown colour; it must be the mushrooms. The bowl strikes me as sad somehow.



I WAKE BEFORE DAWN. My stomach is unsettled; it gurgles to me. I try folding over to my right, clasping my knees up towards me, swaddling my insides in layers of limbs.

In the purple darkness, the chest of drawers appears towering. Shadows of knobs fall across the dark swirls of wood, playing peekaboo with their coils. My stomach addresses the hidden shapes.

Above the swirls, the pot of soil rises up, its stick triumphant, casting a long shadow that spills onto the floor. From my curled up spot beneath it I can't see its contents but I am sure I can smell them: warm, dusty, slightly acidic.

There is a slow deep creaking from outside and the shadows scarper for a moment, and then return, slowly bending back into place.

My thoughts bend with the shadow. The room is cold and bare and I wonder how the walls like the cold. I feel it spreading through the mortar, lacing the clay and soil with damp cold.

My mind arrives back at the pot of soil with its long shadow. I feel the rocky grains moving slowly. The sand and clay call out to the walls. And what else besides? I shut my eyes. In the purple light of sleep, some tiny seed, or

small fragment of rhizome, is gradually righting and  
steading itself for the push upwards.



WHEN MY EYES OPEN on the yellowed room, there is no more gurgling. I get right up, pushing off the crumpled duvet, to stand by the pot. Dry, clumped, mostly dark with a few white specs. In my just-waking state it is hard to tell much more than that.

There's a wicker bin beside my bed. I reach to find the remains of the original plant: stem, a few small curled leaves, and a small clump of root. It is long and straggly and has dried into thin, bone-coloured wisps. I pull them out and hold the plant beside the pot of soil.

The frail skeleton is silent. They don't quite fit together anymore, the pot and it, like two pieces of skin that have

healed apart from one another. The leaves have begun to recoil and the roots are soft and hanging. They look quite helpless. I lay them back down on the chest.





IN THE KITCHEN I am a little restless.

I look up that *succulent* may be cognate with Old English *socian* "to soak," *sucan* "to suck".

I wonder a moment if it is *socian* or *sucan*, soak or suck, acting them out in my mind to render the dead plant first passive and then vampiric. It is difficult to see the difference. The morality of feeding is almost definitely a human projection.

I slide the pages back to the familiar *connect*, “to bind or fasten”. I notice a sort of restlessness, a slight edge in my breath. I wonder if it is the *déjà vu* of it all. I fold away the dictionary.

Climbing out of the armchair, I circle the room. It does not share my restlessness. I retrieve a long needle and a spool of thread and return to the bedroom.

I stand hovering over the plant remains, lift it up in my hand. I drive the needle through the flesh at the leaf's centre. To my surprise it pools with water. Like a young child with a magnifying glass and a stream of ants I recoil,

shocked that it has spoken back. It had looked so dry.

I pull at the thread.

The first stitch tears right through. The thread slips clear of the leaf and disappears into the wetlands that formed the pool. It leaves a thin slither of droplets.

I push the needle in and out of the earth. The soil is dry and it clumps and scatters, leaving a thin uneven trench.

The thread remains unattached. I lay it down beside the scattered soil and punctured leaf and abandon the carnage.



I FEEL QUITE BRUISED by the morning, as if I have overstepped the mark. I make tea instead of coffee, peeling the bag open so that the leaves float up around my lip.

*Explain:* to explain, make clear, make plain, literally make level, flatten. *Ex* "out", *planus* "flat".

I climb into the armchair with my knees up by my cheeks.

In the seventeenth century, it was sometimes used more literally for "the unfolding of material things". *Evelyn has buds that "explain into leaves"*.

The plant lies lamely beside the pot. The torn leaf's curl is limp and flattened. I hold still and wait for it to explain.





IN THE NIGHT I WAKE SUDDENLY with a vague sweaty  
memory of remembering. I turn to one side, wrapping fresh  
cold sheets under my thigh. My heartbeat is still loud in my  
breath.

I pull up onto my elbow and unzip the blood sugar  
monitor. My fingers blindly go through the motions.

When I release the spring of the spike, the flesh resists the  
red drop. The skin is stitched over from pricking. I flick  
my fingers and squeeze hard to get the little bead. I feed it  
to the machine.

When I pricked the leaf and it pooled with water. I cannot shake this image. It was so entirely unsuspecting.

The number is high. I furrow my brows, struggling to remember if I did my nighttime injection. Doubtfully I reach for the insulin. Reach, rummage, grasp, one, two, pull, in, screw, pull, discard, more gently pull, balance, twist, press, droplet, twist, one, two, three, f-f-six, s-eight, n-te-eleven, yes. Stab, push, w-t-th-f-f-s-s-e-n-te-eleven, hold, hold, hold. Pull, return, return, unscrew, lid, return, zip drop, lay. Breathe. Wait. Lay.





WHEN I WAKE, the sun has spread right across the  
bedsheets. I sit up and check my blood; fine. I take myself  
to the kitchen; make the coffee and fire up the laptop.

Everything is already quite awake. It all seems somehow  
expectant, objects poised for me as if they know my  
actions before I do. I pour the coffee, retrieve a slice of  
toast from the toaster and lay the insulin down beside the  
cooling percolator. The blue light is bright by the time I  
return to the computer, toast and coffee cup in hand.

They inject trees directly with pesticides. They do this with  
either a drill bit or a double edged blade, into the xylem

vascular tissue. It is, apparently, the most efficient protection against Sudden Oak Death.

Insects can also inject plants, with salivary fluids. According to the only websites I find on the subject, this is entirely detrimental. The plant dies, outright, or is injured slowly by the galls this injection paves the way for. The websites lay these facts out smoothly, sliding them towards a recommendation of sponsored pesticides. It is hard to say what deals have been made between the plants and their injectors.

There is some research, I remember, into the relative effectiveness of chemotherapy when the recipient

affectively opens up to receive it. *Healing, healing, healing,* my mother used to chant under her breath as her blood was flooded with a neurotoxic taxane made from the bark of the Pacific Yew tree.



THE AFTERNOON PASSES without much notice of me.

I spend a long time watching videos of tree injections. It is a laborious process, involving big hands and plastic syringes.

I read that Sudden Oak Death is caused by the pathogen *Phytophthora ramorum*. Sudden Larch Death is related; Sudden Adult Death and Sudden Infant Death unrelated. *P. ramorum* lost status as a fungi, and is now classified as a fungal-like oomycete, a water mould. I like the taste of it in my mouth: oomycete. I repeat it to the room as I look at the strange sperm-like diagrams, half expecting them to grow out from the screen at my incantations.

Sudden Oak Death, it turns out, is not all that sudden. This oomycete sets in motion a year long death story, involving various beetles and a fungus. I try to picture the death spectre, this onsetter of Sudden Death. But *oomycete* is hardly a malicious word, and in my mind it morphs into something quite different. *P. ramorum* the curator, arranging spaces for exhibitors, one after the other: *Monarthrum scutellare*, *Monarthrum Dentiger*, *Pseudopityophthorus pubipennis*, *Hypoxyton*. They leave behind a display of fine, coloured boring dust and domes of fruiting bodies in their wake.

It is dark by the time I look up from the blue. The ignored room is in a strange silence. I cannot tell if it is hurt or has forgotten me.





AFTER SLEEP the room and I enter a quiet harmony. I sit up against the headboard as the sunlight paws at the far wall. It is a small, flickering performance. I smile back.

The sewing kit is still beside my bed and I pick out a green thread. I play a little, sewing small, even circles into my nightie. The sun and wall go on fluttering in the background like music.

Small beads of green grow along the rim of the white cotton, spreading like moss at my thighs.

I close my eyes in the sunlight and listen for the tiny voices  
of this moss to the soil.





NEEDLEPOINT is the counting and working of a needle over the threads of a canvas or mesh. I scroll through images of renaissance paintings. Women sat at right angles, heads down, canvas close. Somehow aware and unaware, together and solitary.

*Point*, initially “a small hole made by pricking”, soon extended to anything that looked like one. It became a dot, the smallest amount, a single item in an extended hole.

*What's the point?* The point snuck in through this small hole. I picture all its meanings slipping through. The point is twofold, threefold; a single item in an expanding whole.

I get up from the armchair and stand at the bedroom door. I look down at the plant and pot, at the needle by their side. I am sure it is there. Something intangible, something these endless things can slip through. A temporary meaning, like the concentric circles of George Eliot's villagers. It appears and disappears at a moment's notice, a slip of the eye.





I THINK ABOUT THE NETTLES. I picture them rising up out of their abandoned walls. I picture the green Heineken and red Coca Cola they shelter.

I wonder where they are going. They move so steadily that they must know. But perhaps they too have forgotten the point. Or perhaps they never knew how to ask what the point was to begin with. I wonder if it is possible to learn this forgetting.

When they excavated a Bronze Age burial cist in Dartmoor, they found a nettle sash beside meadow grasses

all pointing in the same direction. The presence of pollen from meadowsweet flowers suggests *filipendula* and *molinia*.





THERE IS AN "INSULIN PLANT". *Costus igneus*. Its leaves contain corosolic acid.

Nettles have also been used as an insulin secretagogue.

*Secretagogue*: a substance that promotes secretion. The etymological dictionary doesn't know it. But *synagogue* tells me *agogue* is from *agein* "put in motion, move." The root is \*ag-, "to drive, draw out or forth, move." I'll write my own.

*Secretagogue*: driving out a secret.



I HAVE LOST what time of day it is, or when I last slept. I go to the kitchen for coffee. Tip out the dark condensed cast with a knock.

The room is in uncertain twilight, bright and hazy. I stand a while by the armchair. I cannot tell if I am awake or asleep. The floor too is pulsing in the blue, tiny particles pattering wildly inside it.

I go to the bedroom. I want to do something; or to undo something.

I tug at the plant. I pull it upwards, unrolling the stems,  
explaining the leaves. One stem snaps with a pale crack. It  
hangs looping. It is just as careful, just as careless.

I inject the soil with nighttime insulin. Ten clicks. What are  
you now? Are we any closer? We share this composite,  
share this nighttime.

I shuffle a finger beneath the soil and squeeze the limp  
plant with it. The plant sags with its own weight and the  
weight of my eyes. I stand back and wait. Just as careful.  
Just as careless.





THE WALLS ARE QUIET. It is quite dark. I feel a soft  
sadness. As if again I have gone too far, said too much. I  
push shut the computer.



*LISTEN*: FROM THE OLD ENGLISH *HLYSNAN*, “to listen, hear; attend to, obey”.

It used to be transitive. *Lystyn my wordes*. I suppose we have lost the art of listening without distance. Listening to commune, to become.

I close my eyes.

*Become* comes from *becuman*. It is to happen, come about, befall, and also to meet with, fall in with; arrive, approach, enter.

I resist the urge to finish.



