

Cosmic Walker

Georgina Parke

An intimate walk in the dark along the chalkland coast from Birling Gap towards Beachy Head carries the listener into other worlds.

As I grow in confidence on my morning walks throughout the seasons from Birling Gap towards Beachy Head, beyond a visitor but a welcome and essential part of the landscape, I long to know this place more.

I take the middle paths through the bramble thickets, to brace the ice winds in February, Burt's Bees balm pasted over my cheeks and lips, magenta fleece headband, sipping cinnamon and clove tea by the old hawthorn imprinted over the decades by cows nestling.

In early summer, I take off my shoes. Whilst I can't avoid crushing some of the wild thyme underfoot, releasing herby fragrances, my toes snuffle

through the powdery ground as I learn to tread lightly, to avoid crushing the many types of low-level working bees. A small lid and sugar syrup are my preparations here, as I stop to refresh many an exhausted bee I encounter. I didn't realise how many live alone, a bit like me – I thought they all lived in hives. All the more reason to show them care.

Spring brings crows nesting in the copse in the Horseshoe Plantation. I leave them a few eggs and heap of mealworms along my way to Belle Tout. They don't like being watched, I gather from the blatant silence as I walk beneath their nesting trees. They prefer being the watchers. Perhaps they aren't used to being watched. Why watch them when there are Warblers, Finches and Blackcaps to spot? People mainly come to welcome the migrant birds. Nationless, they arrive in peace and privacy without border control, a need for passports or economic status, to live quite modestly with the native species. The landscape, generous and bountiful, offers everything they need to thrive.

I learn to honour this place as a day-walker, pour a libation to the spirits of place, plants and stone. I begin to feel a connection beyond the consumption of a beautiful view, the off-loading of anfractuous thoughts, notions of 'going' somewhere, 'getting' something, 'taking' things, to one of companionship – as a daughter, a descendant, an ancestor. In the day,

these polarities I live by are reflected in my ways within the landscape. I recognise my yin and yang in my acts of nurturance and protection.

I wonder though, who I would be in this landscape in the dark? Would fear and a sense of dislocation be aroused in me? Would I be terrified as a brown bodied woman shuffling along the roadside, but hiding from the cars 'just in case'? Or jumping out of my skin at every rustle I heard in the thickets? Would the ground betray me, leaving me vulnerable to mis-steps, stumbling down holes, over edges perhaps? Am I safe here? Or will a sense of malevolence push me back to the day?

Autumn offers opportunities for dark discourses, as the clocks move back, tugging the day along. I sit in the middle way up from Shooter's Bottom. The air is still. The sun disappears just short of the lighthouse, in a shimmer of colours: greens, golds, pinks, violets and greys. Slowly the night draws in, weaving an inky veil across my familiar horizon. The flowers seem to leave first, perhaps to recover from their crushing underfoot and the gaze of the sun, becoming indistinguishable from the grassland. Then, the bone paths. The Gulls and Terns stop flying. Where I live in central Brighton, the night sky is brightly lit with red crane lights, white solar panel markers, amber street lights and the Gulls fly and squawk irritably through the night. Here though, they tuck in under the

cliff, and the Phalaropes and the Warblers become the brambles and hawthorns, and the Larks hide under thick grasses.

My shadow returns to me. My caramel-coloured face dissolves into the night. First, the furrows of my brow and all the ways I worry myself in the world: bills, relationships, children, purpose. Then, my mouth, how I look for acceptance and approval – no placating smiles necessary now. My eyes nestle into the back of their sockets. My ears and nostrils widen to take in the novel and the dangerous. My gender leaves; my hair tucked under hat, bosom pressed in jacket.

Now I am a shadow-walker, beyond station, nation, gender, racial recognition. No longer do I busy myself with acts of the day. No. This nightscape is not in need of simple acts of nurturance or protection. A reconfiguration is taking place as I walk, I notice in me, and of this place. No more stories now of how looking at chalk edges, frayed, yielding to the sea, remind me of my own fragilities, or the erosion of the 'British Empire'. No, the edge is smooth, hemmed up, and softened and plaited into the sea and sky. Darkness shortens everything: the ever-present drop and even the distance between this named rock, Great Britain, and its Mesolithic split from Europe half a million years ago. Here, close to Beachy Head, I look across the sky, the folded, plaited land and sea. Just

a few more plaits to France, a few more to Portugal where my youngest son, from whom I am estranged, now lives, and a few more to Ghana, my ancestral homeland. Travelling a thread of indigo, I'm so much closer to all that seems so far away. This brings me comfort.

For some of my ancestors, chalkscapes are also part of ceremonial life. Although I haven't been formally initiated into those ancient practices, such being lost along the Middle Passage journey, or disbanded with the Christianisation of the Caribbean and denigration of African Traditional Practices, in the darkness outside, I sense the vividness of ceremony in my cells now awakening. Now, I can make a new face that lumens by moonlight. Using the chalk cobbles, I draw, intuiting two thick chalk lines from eye corners to edge of mouth, to remind me of the connection of sight to sound, to visibility. A central line from forehead over lips and heart. Chalk dots to frame my face, reminding me of the stars.

The stars convene in powdery plumes above, knitting the Karman Line, that 'province of all mankind' into the grasslands. I am no longer in 'the Great British Countryside'. I am in space, a cosmic walker now. New invitations are shared between this clifftop, some 500 metres above sea level, and the stars. Other places beckon, although there are no signs or place names to indicate this stop. If you try to see with your eyes only, it is

possible to be here but not notice the magical, because the visible sublime landscape is so figural. Releasing those aspects so commonly felt and experienced as Self, and opening to instinctual sensing, acts of faith in the fecundity of the unknown, lingering with mystery, reveals something of the cosmic.

I feel a connection to this ancientness as a cellular memory. One that invites me to mark my face and palms in this darkness, with star maps to unknown destinations. I feel the folding of reality. The dimensional aspects of the landscape merge and shorten, creating passages, portals to other realms. The band of stars above are no more real than their liquid reflections on the sea or their shimmer on my skin. This isn't the dreamscape of my indigenous brothers and sisters of Australia, although dreaming is possible. No. It is journeys by starlight to extra-terrestrial cities, like Xoharalis, where chalk isn't solid, it's rolling gases, silvery pillars of light, crystalline turrets, where roads are rivers of stars that you step onto and immediately arrive where you wanted to go, even though you didn't know where you wanted to go. Or Jjhannostria, where figures of generativity and fecundity have no gender or racialised constructs, and a common thought language unites plants, animals, birds and peoples. The winged beings are renowned architects of intricate sky cities, the Cephalopods maintainers of great underwater libraries and schools. For

the weary-hearted, Aquilium may invite you, sending a large nautilus shell of iridescent purples and blues. As you walk inside, following the pale, pink light, through every chamber you increasingly understand everything about yourself so completely that you have nothing to say. You simply smile. When you look at yourself, you're not in the same clothes even though you didn't get changed. Some chambers hold rows of delicious dishes of unknown foods that are so light, yet satiate. In the central chamber, you descend into a swirl of the softest sea – silk-woven turquoise blankets – and drift into a serene sleep. When you come out, your face is brighter. Years might have passed, or just a few seconds. Animals, Service-trees, birds, fish, all may be invited here.

I am invigorated and inspired to bring back new ways of being, understanding, gathering stories of hope, wonderment, practicality and absurdity, queerness as casual, non-binary as usual.

So, for tonight, I listen.

Sometimes, an act of surrendering the familiar – every contextual solidity and polarity - is necessary to traverse a void of separation. Sometimes, it takes an act of surrendering to darkness to return, to remember all that seems so very far is not lost and is so much closer than believed.

In this darkscape, I am remembering the ways of the wise old ones. I am a vessel through which the chalk layers of coccoliths and foraminifera echo throughout their spiral chambers.

'Don't be afraid of the dark!'

Georgina Parke

Georgina Parke is a community writer, lawyer and psychotherapist of dual Jamaican and British heritage. She grew up by the Lincolnshire coast and has lived in Sussex for over 20 years. Her work fits untidily in the *psycho-socio-geographic* genre. She was commissioned by the National Ambulance BME Conference and Forum to talk and read her poetry on intersectionality and identity; was invited by the University of Sussex to speak on Writing Race, Gender and the Social. She was published in *Hidden Sussex: a new anthology for Sussex* (2019) and commissioned to write poetry for a sound audio installation, *Tenebrae, 2020: Lessons Learnt in Darkness* for Brighton Festival (2021). She is currently finishing a collection of short stories and poetry, *The Doves of Moulsecoomb*. Georgina is also a Changing Chalk Associate Artist for Writing Our Legacy/The National Trust.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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