

Somewhere Else

Sue Leather

It was a small view I had of the world, observed through the little window of the bedroom I shared with my sister. We lived on a cul de sac and my view was of a strip of garden below, a wooden fence, the garden gate, the tall green streetlight, the end of the avenue. Across the way was a low brick wall with a gap in it where you could walk down to an air raid shelter, still standing since the war. Beyond was the mill lodge where we fished for sticklebacks, the mill and The World.

Much of my time in my bedroom was taken up with reading or thinking of my father, who was of The World. He worked abroad a lot when I was a child, in places with exotic names: Sudan, Iran, Italy. Places I had never been. My life then was distilled into moments suffused with intense feelings. I'd sit and close my eyes tight, trying hard to remember what he looked like. I often stared at the little blue globe on my bookcase and tried to imagine the place where he was. I'd mouth the cities... Khartoum, Tehran, Milan, and marvel at their sounds. It was then perhaps that I cultivated my ability to be here and Somewhere Else at the same time.

The time when he was away was colourless, a long winter. Then suddenly, there was a luxurious taxi ride to Manchester Airport with my mum and sister, a glimpse of an enormous plane and gifts of dolls in national dress. The world became vibrant again in an instant. Light flooded into the house, and I felt the heady allure of other places. It was all blue silk pyjamas from Hong Kong, 120 degrees in the shade and Boeing 707s. Being Somewhere Else was obviously a wondrous thing, and I wanted it, oh how I wanted it.

The feeling deepened one Christmas morning when the little blue globe and the bookcase appeared in my life. From then on, the world opened up like a kaleidoscope. I became familiar with the exotic names of the cities of Central Asia and the mangrove swamps of the Caribbean. I read any book I could get hold of, from Dickens to Jack London, and put all the books on display in the bookcase dad had painted for me. The names Timbuktu and Tashkent, Zanzibar and Zaire became my friends. I dreamt of a world where people lived on sampans and in huts, wore kimonos and saris. I stared at the globe and imagined the world beyond my little room, in that little house, in that corner of an avenue somewhere in a little town in the north of England.

I was born in a mill town in Lancashire, in what seemed the most prosaic place in the world. Royton is an industrial settlement in the conurbation of Manchester. It was the place where the first powered cotton mill was built, part of the industrial revolution that emanated from the north of England. In its pomp, the town had forty cotton mills, employing eighty percent of the population, much of my family among them. It's a hardworking, plain-speaking place populated by straightforward working folk. Over time, Royton came to be defined by its principal industry, and its dark stone and the broad local accent echo a no-nonsense approach to life. It was in this place, nestled in the moorland of the South Pennines, that I grew up.

When you are surrounded by prose of the duller variety, you yearn for poetry. I was constantly trying to escape the mundanity of my life. Fortunately, I had a vivid imagination, and was able to turn places that were part of my routine life into retreats from it. My bedroom, the house where we lived, the back garden with its laburnum, catmint and tool shed came first. Later came the town, school and church. I moved between reality and fantasy at will, a rocket waiting for a match.

When my father was away, my world became my mother, my sister, three years younger than me, and, above all, my grandma, the calm centre of it all. My grandma's domain was the house, and I almost never saw her out of it. She was well into her seventies when I was small, and always wore a pinny. She spoke Lancashire dialect and called us childer. She kept a tiny leather clog belonging to one of her dead children. She drank what seemed like huge amounts of strong tea, and the odd snifter of brandy. She used snuff. Along with her pinny, she always wore heavy brown stockings and beddies. At the rare family weddings, she wore her one pair of best shoes, which I can see now, black flat leather with a strap. She gave me bowls for my sticklebacks and watched me on our garden swing. She had a lovely, lined face and kind watery eyes, and was the person who was always there when I came home from school.

My grandma was an undisputed authority on the Queen and Winston Churchill. Our teacher at St. Anne's Church of England Primary School asked us to bring new words to school. I remember my word of the day was pneumonia and I spelt it correctly in my words book. My grandma had told me the Queen had pneumonia and had shown me the word in the Oldham Chronicle, the only newspaper she ever read. Mrs. Cheetham said it wasn't true that the Queen had pneumonia, but I said it was because my grandma said so, so there.

School came with a smell of school dinners in the corridors, a heavy odour of mashed potatoes and Savoy cabbage. There were milk crates full of tiny bottles of milk at playtime and the stone-cold flagstones of the playground where we played hopscotch and skipped. There was the Wendy house and the sandpit.

The church was an ever-present part of life at primary school, and it taught me early to rebel. One day we were taken to the church attached to our school for some festival or other. It was dark and cold inside. I cried in fear when I saw a wooden door in the corner of the unlit church because our teacher had told us that Jesus lived there, and I thought he might just appear through that door. Though he was supposed to be kind and gentle, pictures I'd seen of him like *The Light of the World* were dark and creepy. I was quite sure I didn't want to meet him.

I danced round the maypole in the playground on May Day and did folk dances in the hall all year round. There was a boy called Baden Powell in our class; he had clammy hands and strange eyes and I hoped I wouldn't have to dance with him. I remember singing English folk songs, like Bobby Shafto and Early One Morning. And then there was home time, that delicious moment when we packed our satchels and ran outside. Back safe in our house, there was tea, and a fire, with grandma and her *The Oldham Chronicle*.

When I progressed to St. Paul's Junior School, the world opened out. In the spring, we would sometimes walk to school the 'country way.' This involved going through the housing estate where we lived, across the main road and onto another estate. There, next to a very ordinary-looking house, there was a pathway that went down a hillside and ended at a country lane next to a brook. Of a sudden, we were in another world, a world disconnected from everything I knew. It was the kind of lyrical escape I had been looking for.

It was cool and dark down there, and quite delicious and mysterious to me. Wearing our green gymslips and green and yellow striped ties, we would walk, my friend and me, with our respective mothers, along the unpaved lane past small farmhouses with milk pails outside. The elm trees that lined the path cut out the light and made the air dank and ominous. Time seemed to stop, and I was aware of my own heartbeat. Further along, there were some ruins we called the Roman baths, which spoke of a history that no-one was completely sure of. The feeling of the place, the deep quiet of

it, with the sound of the odd song thrush and the scuffle of a rabbit or a squirrel in the hedgerow, enthralled me. It was so different from the streets, the bus, the town, the bustle of life in our urban community, that it seemed otherworldly.

Now, I had not long before blindfolded the little boy who lived close by and taken him into the low wall in our garden, telling him that there was a kind of train in there which would transport us into another world. I made him go with me through the fictional door in the wall and sit with me on the train. Then I explained to him with a flourish all the things I was seeing. He was three years younger than me, and I wanted to find out how persuasive my storytelling could be. I thought it was quite a good story, but, sadly, I couldn't entirely fool either of us.

Yet here, on our morning walk, was a place that really did exist, a threshold leading to something that I could only faintly perceive. The quiet of the place, the liminality of it, made me start to dream of imagined futures and as-yet unformed creations. How could such a world exist, suspended here between my house and St. Paul's junior school?

Our lives were marked by church festivals, Royton wakes in June, and other festivities. At Whitsuntide, we'd have new clothes to wear, matching outfits for me and my sister. On Whit Sunday, we'd start with a visit to our relatives who would give us money for our new dresses. Then it was time to go to Sunday School and join the other children to walk in the church parade through the streets of the town, accompanied by banners and a brass band.

In the Autumn, there was always Bonfire Night. When I was very young, we'd have a bonfire in our back garden. Our grandma would make black peas, parkin and sugar toffee. When I was older, we'd collect wood from packing cases at the nearby cotton mills and make a great stock pile on the waste ground near where we lived. All our spare time after school and at the weekends was taken up with looking for stock. It was a serious enterprise. Rival groups of kids would often raid it and steal our wood. We'd sometimes leave someone there to guard it. We made a 'guy' out of old clothes and stuff and trail him around trying to get 'a penny for the guy.'

Then, sometime in the next few days came that blissful moment when Dad would take us to the shop in town to buy fireworks. I still remember the smell of them in the room over the top of the newsagents. We'd come home with boxes of magical Catherine wheels and sparklers, rockets and even a couple of bangers.

At last came the night itself, cold and clear if we were lucky. Standing round the fire, wrapped up against the freezing air, eating my grandma's sugar toffee, we were mad with happiness. We'd stay up late, watch Guy Fawkes burn, the fireworks, wait til the flames of the bonfire became embers and the embers became ash. I always willed the fire to stay longer, just a little longer, to be outside against the black sky with the smell of gunpowder and burning wood. To be free.

I loved the feeling of being an outlaw, collecting wood, being outside, repelling raiders, burning our guy. There was something wild and free and pagan about it, brought into our back garden and shoved against the humdrum safety of my life, with my grandma and her black peas and school tomorrow.

.....

Increasingly, I ventured to escape from the dullness of home. Tandle Hills was our country playground, our break from home and school. We went there to pick bluebells in the spring, to 'sledge' in the winter and to go on adventures in the summer. We went birds nesting along its hedgerows. Looking out over the Manchester Plain and the Pennines, and within walking distance from where we lived, the 'Tangs', as we called it, was the scene of many an escapade. One time, I was in charge of my kid sister, who must have been about five or six. Together with some other children, we were walking home after a long walk in the woods, when we came upon a brook with mud around its edges. We tried to navigate it as best we could. Somehow during the crossing my sister lost a shoe in the mud and, strangely, it completely disappeared. Though I searched and searched, the shoe escaped me. When I got home with my hobbling sister I was grounded for a week.

It was Tandle Hills I was bound for with my sister when I convinced her that we should leave home. All went well at first, with me making a strong case for the vagabond life, and my sister tagging dutifully along. We didn't get that far, though, making it just to the grassy hills below a nearby mill before she started to question whether the bottle of water and biscuits I'd brought would sustain us forever.

.....

At St. Paul's, I longed to be good, and nurtured an angelic look, which would come in handy when the time came for choosing angels for the school nativity. I wasn't always able to live up to it, though. We were allowed out of the school grounds at dinner time as we called it and would wander freely around the town and beyond. Sometimes I would go with a friend to the little toffee shop nearby and buy kali, a kind of

sherbet, into which we would dip 'spanish', our name for liquorice. If we didn't go out, we stayed around the playground of our school. There we would play 'British Bulldog', boys and girls together. This was a kind of tig, which, on the stone slabs of the nineteenth century school building, could get rough.

My hair was blonde, and from the outside, I may have seemed angelic, but I could never be quite as good as my outward appearance seemed to promise. I was still at a church school, though, and there was Sunday School and all the rest of it to contend with. There were parts of it that I loved, especially at Christmas: the story of the birth of the baby Jesus, singing carols in the choir, the tree, the advent calendar, the crib in the corner of the church. I loved the mystery at the heart of it. I tried to connect the oranges in our stockings and Father Christmas to the birth of the baby in a manger, but the fact that the connection was elusive just excited me more. The truth was that I adored stories, and for any lover of the narrative arc, the story of Christmas is a jewel.

Still, I wavered dangerously between loving the stories I heard at church and Sunday School and not wanting to be taken for a fool. Despite the efforts of my teachers, I was beginning to read books with ideas in them. Things eventually came to a head. In the church nativity play when I was ten or eleven, I was chosen to play the Angel Gabriel, the one who from heaven came. It was one of my best roles, if I say so myself. I kept my winged arms up for the whole play. That was what Gabriel would have done, I felt. When we went outside after the play, a woman approached me and my mother and gave me a bar of chocolate for being such a good angel. For weeks afterwards, I tried to live up to the part, but the memory faded quickly. It was soon after that that I announced at Sunday School that I didn't believe in God and that I was reading Mao Tse Tung.

Now I can close my eyes and smell the toffee apples at Royton wakes and the catmint in our garden, feel the hard ice of the slides we made on the pavements of the avenue, the untrodden grass of Tandle Hills on my legs as we ran through fields, and the whoosh of air as I flew way up into the sparkling air on our little metal swing. The taste of jam butties, parkin and rag puddings and the smell of the coal that the coalman brought in big cloth bags. I see the steps of St. Paul's church. I see my grandma sitting in her armchair, drinking tea, the sticklebacks swimming around one of my mother's best bowls, and the exact colour of the laburnum in the garden.

Life is a moving away, a distancing, a search for Somewhere Else. But it's also a yearning to go back, back to the place that you hated, loved, rebelled against; back to the place that made you. The world has opened out immeasurably since my days

growing up in that mill town. Now and again, though, I remember the time when that little corner, seen from my bedroom window, was my whole world, my universe, everything I knew. When it pressed around me and made its mark, deep and indelible, a mark that goes with me everywhere. In some way perhaps, in some small place inside, in the deepest part of myself, that first world seems always to be my destination. A world that I long for but that is always beyond reach.