

Sky

“The air was very pure and the sky was a faded blue with shining white clouds arranged like flights of angels. Towards evening, when the sun began to set the clear turquoise of the sky was beyond all imagined beauty.” *Diary of Dr. Katherine Heanley, Sept. 27th 1914, Manea*

On Bun's first day at school, before he had even passed through the arch over which the word BOYS was embossed in brick, The Headmaster caned him on his right hand for being his cousin Cyril's cousin. Later that day he was caned on his left hand for being left-handed. On his last day, aged fourteen, Bun kicked The Headmaster, lit a cigarette, got on his bike and joined his brothers and father on Flint's farm at Fridaybridge. He had always been happiest helping out after school, at weekends, during the holidays and those odd weeks each year when school closed for potato picking, haymaking or harvest; or when he just didn't feel like school. Even at seven or eight young Bun would make himself useful on a ratting night, taking tea and ginger beer out to the barns. Now, with so many men abroad, and the Ministry men calling round every few weeks to check the yields, there was no shortage of work and no further reason to bike the three miles each day to school.

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In my father's land the only landmark is the sky. If there were but one sign to pilot by, it would be a small shape, a ship-shaped silhouette, cut from an edge of sky where it meets the horizon. This Ship of the Fens, or The Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Ely, has been the south pole of a hemisphere of cloud, water and soot-black soil these past fifty generations.

Here it is the sky that governs the mood of the ground beneath, and calibrates your sense of scale. You might stand under a bright cumulus-laden sky, and it feels as though you are watching yourself from a great distance, standing at the horizon, The Ship of the Fens at your shoulder. Under a slate sky, in a spotlight, ringed by the flat horizon, you are at the anonymous centre of all things.

Into this sky I watched a strange bird rise, only to plummet back into the field with a sound like a balsa-wood plane.

Out of this sky, into this same field, a German plane fell one day. It was May 1941. Bun heard about it as he was riding home from school, and by the time he'd pedalled to Welney anything removable had been taken by the local boys. Almost thirty years later, all traces were long gone; but across a dull, smeared sky this strange balsa-bird arc'd over us both. We had gone into the field to find lapwing nests; not, as Bun would have done at my age, to harvest eggs, but just to look.

Neither my father nor I knew straight away what this bird was. I had never seen such a disproportionate beak before, and the sound it made was the strangest I had encountered in all nature. The Observer's Book suggested woodcock, or maybe snipe, but S. Vere Benson's descriptions of the calls seemed to rule them both out. In the evening, in my room at The Crown at Outwell, I leafed diligently through the little book. The various sandpipers and shanks didn't look quite right, and no sound ascribed to them came close to that flat airborne bleat. I checked the snipe again, more thoroughly. This bleating, it turned out, was no cry from within, but a play of wind on tail-feather, a reed-instrument that rose from the reeds to deliver its vibrations across far meadows and wide open sky.

Over those water-fields and into a sky stiff with rain I watched a cloud of wigeon rise from under a peregrine's wing-beat. That was another year.

Now a solitary fifteen year-old, on pilgrimage from Kent by way of Liverpool Street, Cambridge, Ely; the final leg ended at Manea halt, a request stop. I always stayed at Mr. and Mrs. McCleod's in the High Street; for them, my routine was a simple one. I left after a specially-arranged early breakfast, and if they were awake, they would hear my key turn in the lock at eleven forty-five that night. For me, the only routine was the two mile walk to the Washes at Purl's Bridge, and the two miles back from The Ship at the end of the day. This was another Ship of the fens, the front room of Will Kent's house in Purl's Bridge where I would sip my pint, write my notes and watch dominoes, and Will Kent would sip tea and chat, using few words. He would occasionally stand, a grey, muscular hulk in a room built for smaller men, collect a glass or two and disappear from the room, returning unbidden with fresh beer. There was still a pub there, all gingham and horse brass, when last I looked.

I would enter The Ship from under a sky the colour of the fenland soil. Dusk will have fallen as I walked below the flood bank that described a line, ruled with Dutch precision, between Denver Sluice and Earith. I would have spent an hour or so walking in the dark, or sitting in the RSPB hide on top of the bank, listening for silence.

On a winter visit, the quiet would drop like a mallard as the sky itself fell drear, the better to reveal lonely lights in distant houses unnoticed by day. Wigeon, siffling and back-biting only minutes earlier would repose themselves; flights of lapwing chose their spot and settled. In the osiers below the bank blackbirds clucked and then didn't. For a while, a brief fermata, nothing stirred. Then the nocturne, a delicate chorus of small sounds would start to sound from across vast acres. First might be a gentle, nasal skirl from the midst of a small flock of lapwing. From afar, a drake wigeon might siffle or his mate yap. A distant dog, or door-jamb, or other commonplace unnoticed in the light of day, would lend its voice and shorten the span of any silence.

In spring I would hear this sparse sonata only after I had left The Ship. Walking back to Manea under a brighter darkness I would hear none of the wigeon of winter; the lapwings' squealings would as often as not come from above, in a night-flight illuminated by faint pearl-shimmer on damp grass. And higher still, and farther off, a dive-bombing snipe on a night raid would leave its tail-flaps open, and bleat like a child playing front-gunner, to land unseen while its feather-cry hangs in the clean air. Thus might end a day spent - so it seemed - walking endlessly between horizons.

The Ouse Washes are an artifice in which a microcosm of old fenland is preserved. The chronicles of Bede record how in 673 Etheldreda founded a monastery severed from the pleasures of the world by the isolation of Ely. Abbeys and monasteries ringed the ancient marshes and imposed order on a tribal economy sustained by fish, fowl and fodder.

To peer over the bank is to get some sense of a once limitless waterscape inhabited by the fishers and lesch-men of the monastic estates and by Hereward's rebels. There can be no plough-land among these meadows, flooded in winter, wet in the best of times. Look north east or south west and the silver fields stretch to infinity. Yet the fallacy is ever apparent: look across from the bank, toward the distant Cathedral, and another bank, only half a mile away, obscures the vastness of the flatlands beyond. Thus, to mark the final victory of Earls and dykemen over once-invincible Nature, the lands surrounding the Isle of Ely have become a sea of wheat, and the Ouse Washes a 20-mile long shuttle-shaped island of wetness.

Yet out of one historic landscape, another has been shaped; for this crafted one is itself centuries old. From Roman times until the drainage schemes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century no-one lived over the peat, the undisputed realm of waterfowl migrating to fill the landscape in unimaginable abundance. In 1249 the priors of Ely were asked to supply swans, herons, cranes and bitterns for King Henry's table, so famed was the bountifulness of the marshlands. Now every winter since 1656 the birds have descended only into the narrow waterlands that were created for another purpose. Ultimately untameable, fen water can be merely corralled between earth banks if the land either side is to remain drained.

Walking alongside endless reedy ditches you try to imagine a time before, when the harvests were of eels in such abundance that they served as currency on the Isle whose name they share.

I tried to imagine what augury might have been at work at the sight of a rainbow such as one I saw, on a long walk back to Purl's Bridge one afternoon. They are common enough in the fens, so vast is the sky that it accommodates rain and sun together with ease. But this arc reached across a lilac-tinted slate grey sky like a neon embrace under whose care grazed sixteen Bewick's swans. In the distance their whiteness pierced the black soil. And when, unsignalled, they lifted, in an instant their light extinguished that of the rainbow. Years later, I was to read these words of Sibelius, painter of landscapes in sound: "Today, at ten to eleven, I saw sixteen swans; one of my greatest experiences. Lord God what beauty! They circled over me for a long time, then disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming silver ribbon."

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Earth Music, St. Georges Bristol, November 2011