

## Memories of Nowhere

*'If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating back far in time while others have been torn down, cleaned up, and rebuilt, and with suburbs reaching further and further into the surrounding country, then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl any more, no longer knows what a bus stop is for, or what a back yard is... I could not even understand what I myself had written in the past – perhaps that least of all.'*

WG Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Looking at the photographs in this book has led me to think again about the landscape of my past. Certain places, forcefully present yet as indistinct and essentially featureless as those in the images, have re-surfaced along with feelings of a similar opacity. Though I find it difficult to account for their importance, these places and the spreading emotions associated with them, all seem in some way magical. I know now that the places have appeared consistently in my dreams, and still do. So much so that it is difficult to untangle what might be fact from fantasy, experience from imagination. Although I don't remember the places as deserted, as un-peopled as they are in the following short recollections, I am remembering them in this way now because of Edgar Martins's photographs; I am re-staging my memories in relation to his powerfully evocative and atmospheric renderings of place.

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During the first nineteen years of my life I lived on the outer fringes of South West London. A place where, at that time, the city slowed down into a kind of fractured inertia; a place where the power of the city to sustain itself became exhausted as it spread outwards and where the binding together of one built-up area after another gradually fell apart, melting into pockets of semi-rural hinterland. For so long, however, this place seemed impenetrable and incomprehensible to me, it appeared simply as a dense, unimaginably complicated network of roads and housing estates. A great fear of mine, as a young child, was that I would never learn how to find my way through this maze and out into the wider world. How could anyone know and remember how to get from one place to another? It seemed like an impossible thing to fathom.

And yet my memories of growing up in this place are dominated by the increasingly urgent sense of being pulled, physically and psychologically, away into this wider world,

and most forcefully in two opposite directions, each with its own sense of mystery. As they appear to me now both were, in different ways, escape routes. In one direction lay the city, vast and unknowable, with its equal promises of excitement and anonymity. For a young romantic the city came in complete pictures; it was a spectacle of imagined pleasures, a place of perpetual darkness and illumination where light seemed synonymous with experience itself.

Away from the city, in the other direction, space spread out and took on a more complex and indeterminate character. Here, in this more fragmented landscape, glimpses of a horizon would begin to appear, sunlight found new and lower trajectories through the day, and built structures became more isolated and so took on a note of specificity: a row of new red brick houses alone beside the road, corrugated steel warehouses bordered by fields, the majestic sweep of a flyover against an unsettled sky. Whereas the city would claim you, draw you into the depths of its own archaeology, here on its edges, in these sub-urban spaces, there was movement and a new open balance to things. It was a world being invented.

The housing estate where I lived was in every way unremarkable and characterless. Built in the immediate post-war era on semi-industrial open land, a site that had earlier still been a farm, the houses were a new generation of council-owned homes that took a pre-war ideal of suburban living and revised it along more utilitarian lines. Living here was not to be oppressed by space itself, for the planners had been reasonably generous in this respect, but by a certain sense of formlessness. There was no community to speak of; no public events marked the calendar. This was a place in between, a place so lacking in identity and purpose that the outline of its own dismal future appeared drawn over the present. Even the local playing fields, a communal centre of sorts, remained deserted most of the time and shrouded by the shadows of disused factory buildings. Behind tall barbed-wire fencing, black guard dogs roamed free through these buildings, protecting them, or so it seemed, from the ghosts of their former workers.

And yet life moved through this place. At night, as a child, I would listen to the traffic on the nearby trunk road that lead directly to London less than five miles away. Looking out across the shadowy estate from my bedroom window I could make out a rising aura of light from the road, and its sound, the faint echoing whine of passing cars, came to induce in me an odd but powerful sense of longing. Sealed off from the estate by a chain link fence, which seemed like the border between one world and another, the road offered something strangely exotic in the pervading drabness. It was new, modern and

well maintained. I remember its black surface as exceptionally smooth, trailing off into the distance with a kind of brutal certainty. As I grew older I began spending time there during the evenings, crawling under a hole in the fence, to sit and watch the traffic speed by with all its incredible sense of knowing and its sense of leaving.

But then on one night, having wandered once again towards the dual carriageway, I came upon an unusual silence. On this particular night, clear and sharp with the first chill of autumn, no cars were passing; there was nothing on the road. This strangely intoxicating place of noise and speed, normally so dangerously unsuitable for idling and introspection, had been transformed into an empty stage, ominous and uncanny under a hard yellow light so strong that it warmed the air directly underneath it. I became aware that the apparent silence was in fact a cushion for other low-level sounds. I could hear a faint rustle from the leaves of dwarfed bushes on the central reservation, and the wings of landlocked seagulls pulsing overhead. Then, every few minutes, the drone engines of a plane climbing out of Heathrow would bear down on the scene.

I found out later that the road had been sealed off a few miles away for maintenance, but for me the scene was unsettling in its emptiness. The road had become now quite accessible; it seemed to invite me onto its surface, as a kind of tarmac promenade in the night. But I did not choose to divert from my usual spot and instead just sat there staring out into the road, which now appeared as a void. And gradually, as I looked intently into this space as if at a fixed image, a strange and irrational sense of dread began to invade my consciousness. I imagined that the entire history of the world might be erased and forgotten then and there, that this hard and empty road and the force of its presence could supersede all knowledge and render worthless the long history of human endeavour and suffering. And, I began to imagine that the extent of this blank erasure was endless, that the road stretched in each direction to infinity. After some time, through which these thoughts began to clarify and weigh more heavily on my innocence, I had to pull myself away, and it took all my resolve and mental will to break the trance and walk back, stooping again to crawl through the fence and into the housing estate and unsteadily head for home.

I had always carried two images of the estate in my mind. One was the actual place of streets, houses and gardens, forms and surfaces so familiar that my senses allowed me to walk with what seemed to be no conscious effort. The other was the image of the place that often appeared in my dreams, which, whilst similar in most respects, was subtly altered. Streets joined at different angles, some houses appeared larger, gardens

more lush with plants spilling over walls and across the paths. And in this more tropical dimension the air itself was at times infused with a sweet perfume. On this particular night, unnerved by the experience of the ghostly road, this exotic dream version of the place I had grown up in, seemed to be encroaching into reality, and, for a while I walked aimlessly, unable to get my bearings.

Although most journeys, day in day out, took me away from the London road, and were mired in the numbing monotony of areas identical to my own, one stood out as an exception and constituted my other escape route, more real this time than imagined. The memory of my daily seven-mile cycle ride to school is to this day associated in my mind with a heady sense of freedom, expectation and discovery. Cycling away from the clogged arteries of the housing estate on to smaller back roads – muddier in winter, dustier in summer – was to experience, in a very tangible way, both the power and inertia of the city evaporating into space and into new kinds of energy. One point on this journey marked this transition more than any other and is the site of a particular experience that has always seemed to me intimately linked with that of the empty road.

After about a mile or so the school road arrived in a wide-open landscape, where, on either side, un-farmed meadows stretched into the distance. This open space, like a golden bowl of light and air, seemed very much a place apart, a place where atmospheric inflections could be felt, and where I often battled against elemental extremes of wind, rain and scorching sun. On one side of the road, to my left as I rode to school every morning, the meadow ended abruptly several hundred yards from the road in the concrete wall of a huge reservoir. This low, broad monolithic structure extended across the horizon obscuring any view of the water that I had been told many times lay beyond it but which I had never seen and never fully believed to be there. It caught my attention each day, one more shape in a journey of familiar shapes and details, but although the place seemed charmed in some way I had never ventured to stop here and explore further. Then on one particular morning in the early summer of 1967, I happened to be extremely late for school as I rode along the meadow road. The air on this day seemed especially pure and intoxicating, but, although the sun had begun to burn through, a low fine mist still settled over the land reducing the view and this time veiling the reservoir wall.

For some reason that I cannot now remember, but perhaps drawn by a feeling of heightened presence in the place, I stopped, and padlocking my bike to the wooden fence at the roadside, climbed over into the meadow beyond. The mist that hung over

the field, grew much thicker in patches here, and as I walked, my shoes now soaked by morning dew, I temporarily lost all sense of direction and in those brief moments the grass and wild flowers seemed cloying and sinister to me. Soon, however, the wall of the reservoir came into sight, rising from a steep bank of grass like some modern, prefabricated fortress, now patched with lichen and in places roughly daubed with illegible inscriptions – the moderate, unmannered graffiti of the time. As I approached more closely I noticed a vertical rusting metal ladder leading up the sheer wall to the right, which I climbed, pulling myself on to a concrete platform at the top from where I could, at last, gaze out over what appeared to be a vast expanse of water. The mist lay even thicker here and at first I could see only the first fifty yards or so of that artificial sea. But the stillness was complete, and apart from birdsong no sound broke into the spell that soon enveloped me. The road I had come from now seemed lost somewhere back in the past as I sat with my legs hanging over the reservoir's concrete bank, my feet no more than an inch or two above the water. Time was measured by the gradually receding mist, which over the next few hours seemed to fold under itself and drift up into the glorious morning.

And yet, in time and out of this reverie, I began to imagine a scene of overwhelming melancholy in the uncovering of the water. The image that formed in my mind (not necessarily disturbing but intense and unshakeable) was that of the reservoir as an appalling battlefield, whose corpses were now submerged, hidden in the deathly quiet. These were soldiers I thought, who had died far from home, in an unknown and alien landscape, and for no good reason that they could understand; their families and loved ones still unaware of and distant from their fate.

I sat for the entire morning lost in these sombre thoughts. Afterwards, climbing down into what was by now the radiant meadow, I ambled back towards the road. As I did so I gathered handfuls of wild flowers, which I managed to wedge into the wooden fence in celebration of the summer and in memorial to those imaginary lost souls. Later that day, cycling back along the meadow road I noticed the flowers had gone and looking over towards the reservoir, for what felt suddenly as though it might be the last time, I saw the dark silhouettes of men, heads bowed, walking to and fro along the top of the wall.

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