ONE

I had to move and move quickly
I am not allowed to explore my new surroundings as I am not allowed to leave the house.
I have a new name now,
I’m a shielder. People, surfaces and the air have become dangerous to me.
I am safe in my new home but I can’t sleep, so I leave the house before dawn to explore the wood.

The wood has been calling me.
It wanted me to move here and it did everything in its power to draw me here.
Things which shouldn’t have slotted into place aligned quickly.
Its branches beckoned me and so I pay it attention, I respond to its call.

I visit the wood everyday before dawn.
Day after day I see no one.
I move hastily but carefully, suspiciously, danger seeping through my veins, on edge, spikey, sensitive.
I step onto it as a current and ride it. It lifts me up and drives me on.

Soon I abandon the tarmacked paths for the spidergram of earthy trails cutting up the inside of the wood, leading me deeper and deeper towards solitude.
I become familiar with sections.  
I prefer the dense deep ones.  
Over time the bramble is unable to contain itself, threading over and under, always reaching up.

I retrace paths.  
footsteps become erratic and pause
I notice oddments left by visitors:  
a dog lead, a drinks can,  
used toilet roll covered in shit,  
a condom packet.

I listen for twigs being broken underfoot.  
I learn the secrets. My face breaking spiders webs means I am the first in the day to pass through.  
When I startle birds, I know that it is me to startle them, not another.  
flapping of bird’s wings

Ears uncovered eyes uncovering all,  
birdsong  
they have never been so powerful.  
My senses are sharpened, carved to a point. It is not relaxing, but I am so alive, moved by threat, fear and adrenaline I move through, through and on, always in the direction of the rising sun.

Sometimes someone is there.  
Sometimes someone is there.  
When I catch a glimpse of them I freeze.  
But they are not looking out for me as I am for them. They walk past me, less than a meter sometimes, but they never see me.  
Act as if you are not man owning the space but act as a branch, as a bird, as a leaf and you can disappear in plain sight.

I have assimilated.
I am the wood and the wood is me.

The bushes and trees have messages for you, they observe you as they have observed us for centuries.
We come and go, the trees remain.
They offer comfort and guidance to those seeking reassurance.

The trunks of the trees are the same size, give or take, as a person.
I wrap my arms around them and lay my cheek on their bark.
I am the wood and the wood is me.
They shield the shielder and I imagine their wooden arms wrapping back around me.

After a while it comes back to me, the instinct to hide, to burrow, to find a hollow, a dip, a bush, a cavity.
I have used dens before to hide and avoid, to step outside of society and create a space to check out.
To catch your breath, to be encased.
To try to erase human interaction for a time and talk to nature instead.

A blank space, a niche offered:
Come inside
Refresh
Revive
Hide
Pause
I'll keep you a secret

I am the wood and the wood is me.

a second voice echoes the first
birdsong becomes louder
rustling in undergrowth becomes louder

woodpecker song

sound of train in distance
footsteps on dry ground become hesitant, pausing

second voice drops out
birdsong becomes stronger
tentative footsteps continue

second voice repeats ‘I am the wood and the wood is me’, slowly getting louder

the second voice multiplies, falling over itself

feet scrape on crunchy sounding ground, breaking twigs

second voice ends
TWO

I have made dens behind garages, on flat roofs, in the depths of ferns, in the hollow of a school field, in hedges surrounding everywhere I have lived.

But I will tell you about my best den, my favourite den, the one that I never showed anyone and I that never shared.

As far as I know it is still waiting for me. Perhaps overgrown, but inside, deep at its core it is still there in some form perhaps thinking about me decades later.

I did not enjoy school. I did not enjoy being in places that I did not choose to be in, sat for hours in chairs that I did not want to sit in.

So I decided to make a space for myself within the school, somewhere to go and miss the double lessons of classes which I found the most uncomfortable.

Opposite one of the school buildings was the perimeter chain link fence of the school, and next to it inside the boundary was a swathe of bramble and bushes.

On a lunchtime one day I snuck off to explore, I looked around and then slipped in, squeezing up against the fence.

I travelled about six meters, maybe more, itching and scratching between fence and undergrowth until a natural cavity presented itself. It was low but I could get my body inside. I tore and pushed back twigs, leaves and bramble to make space.
I spent a lot of time in there in that summer term, smoking cigarettes and listening to my walkman. Happiness and peace knowing that I was fully obscured.

Out of all my memories from school this is the one most imprinted in my mind. I can travel there now, can you? I am happy to share.

How to make a den.

It will help if you have an idea of the purpose of the den. Firstly you need to decide from what or whom you are hiding from. This may, but not always, help you choose the purpose and location of your den.

Dens made in the open are for play, a few branches clustered together, a quick sketch of a den, your imagination filling in the rest.

But here we are seeking time away, a place to retreat into hidden and obscured. Most dens by their nature are transient, temporary, a stopping place for a particular time, for breath, for contemplation, for quiet.

To hide from someone may mean they are located quite near. That is okay, it need not be very far away. The most useful dens are close enough
to reach quickly, to dive into, just under people’s noses.

Dens can also exist inside of course, in places unused or places that someone would not consider climbing into: a wardrobe, a cupboard, under the bed, behind furniture, a corner, a construction of blankets, even just underneath your duvet. The same principle applies, visually hidden, sonically subdued, unexpected and out of sight.

You need not even have a physical place, just close your eyes now and imagine where you would like to go, pull the covers up over your head, sink deep into the bath, you can travel anywhere, no one will find you. Faith and belief in your den is of primary importance in the dens of your mind.

But I will tell you how to make a den outside in public, in a garden, a field, a verge, woods or a park.

You start with the eye.

As you walk, stop and scan the area, or slow your walk down and speed up your eyes so as to not attract attention.

Look for areas which go unnoticed. The unused, bypassed or forgotten. Bushes next to roads, the undergrowth, dead spaces, forgotten areas, just to the side, no through tracks, the corners, edges, forgotten, without purpose.

The eye is trained, as landscape is moulded by man, to look for the view,
the path, the space ahead of you, to advance with purpose, to get to the destination as quickly and efficiently as possible. Consider then, what catches the human eye and discard it.

You will look to the periphery at the uncultivated, unattractive, spaces in-between, spaces of no use, looked over, perhaps next to the place where some production takes place, some task, taking the attention, leaving the outskirts unkept and unkempt.

Spaces just close enough to the path, to the building, to the road, but they have had no purpose until now. Soon they will protect you, offer you shelter, you and you alone. These are now your places. Reject spaces that someone has used before, avoid pre trodden paths, any break in brambles. If fresh litter is found in the perfect spot, then move on. It is better to make a new den, it will be more unexpected and safer.

Once you have found your location test out the area by walking past it a few times looking at it directly, and casually scanning. You are testing the eyes of the ones you are hiding from. They are unlikely to look directly at this forgotten place. Try to unfocus your eyes and sweep them back and forth, nothing should attract them to the chosen spot.

You can make adjustments, but the base needs to accommodate you, sitting or lying down. At its core it needs
to be comfortable. Ideally it will have the
bare bones of some sort of structure to build
upon. If you can see it at a distance with a
cursory glance then you will need to camouflage.

That’s okay, most dens need a bit of work
and modification. Look around for material
that matches your den - twigs, leaves, branches.
If it is part of a building then maybe a sheet
of plastic or wood, something that looks
like it lives there already,
what looks like rubbish to others.
Consider what catches the human eye
and what the onlooker would pass over.

Branches and twigs with leaves mirroring
the ones already there are best,
build up the coverage in a haphazard way,
no straight lines - you are not building a fence.
We are taught to try and recognise patterns,
order in nature, let your den be
wild, criss cross and crazy.

At each stage retreat to the pedestrian viewer,
pass the eye over to see what needs amending.
You do not need full coverage, in fact it is useful
to be able to see out of the den a little
to watch for anyone approaching.
Remember that people are not expecting
to see you there.
Only other den hunters will find you,
or those wishing to relieve themselves.

You may have to visit the den a few times,
each time on approach try to look at it with
fresh eyes and build as necessary.
Once established, don’t get lazy.
Consider wearing clothes to blend
into your surroundings and upon exit

rustles become louder
birdsong becomes clearer
breaking twigs
second voice doubles

loud footsteps on broken wood and
bark

footsteps on leaves become erratic
rustle in bushes
second voice stops
and entry always stop and use your eyes
and ears, and if able move quickly.

F O U R

Thirty years later and I am making a new den.
I am sightseeing in a new city, a new country
- the wood

I am both old and young, I am in Devon,
in Kent and I’m here in London.
The micro is macro, time has proven to be a
construct and now so is geography.
My body transcends and is ageless,
it is just me and the wood, the leaves,
the mud, the trees and the birds.

I sneak through the wood and through
the railings into the cemetery.
I place myself on the logs overlooking the city,
the smoke and the gravestones.
The graves on the extreme of the hill
where I sit are without stones,
just churned and turned earth,
they are new and still settling.

I silently greet my new companions,
knowing that they are not bone and dust yet,
they are very much still here.
But they are safe and I am safe from them.

I see the rising sun.
It is peeking through the trees on the right.
It is bright orange and the edge of the light
blurs around the gap it is appearing through.
A tiny burning orange fire surrounded by
branches and leaves which have turned
black against the light.
I do not need to see the entire sphere,
the small spot is enough for me and it excites
me to see its power through the trees.
Light and sun burns on, it is not over yet.

‘everything in the world has changed
apart from you’

I try to relax but keep opening my eyes to
scan the hill for visitors.
I want to lie down, to be safe.
The ground is dry with no dew or frost
and to the right of me where the sun hits
is a dip under a tree with the ground
covered in ivy and old dry oak leaves.
I move inside and sit myself down
at the bottom of an old bare tree.
It is comfortable and I am surrounded by holly leaves.

I am finally able to relax.
I listen to the birds.
Amongst ones I do not recognise
I hear a crow and a woodpecker.
I have heard the woodpecker for a few days
but I wasn’t sure. It sounded like an old tree
trunk creaking, but yes it is, it’s a woodpecker!

I sit for a while, quietly. This place feels safe,
safer than the woods where I need to keep moving.
I am camouflaged. I close my eyes and breathe.
I like it here with the holly leaves and my quiet companions.
I absorb all the sounds around me.
In the distance I can hear a car stereo.
But traffic has mostly ceased, it is lockdown.

The bird song has taken the place of the cars.
I can only hear the sound of bins being collected.
I meditate, sinking deep into the tree and the earth. The wood tells me to slow down, I acquiesce. I know this is right for me, there is no rush, I can take my time, observe, rest, think and listen to the lessons the wood has for me.

bee buzzing

I can take my time, observe, rest, think and listen to the lessons the wood has for me.

bee buzzing

Trust in the wood.

Become nature.

There is a fluttering in the holly bushes above me, it is two sparrows. I am so still that the birds can come close. They notice me and make more noise but they do not move away.

bee buzzing, fluttering birds

[there is hope]