Downland Ballad I :Photo-disintegration

by Shaun Belcher

Fully five acres further east
and fifty years on from Harwell's neutron beam photo-disintegration
a clump of Queen Anne's Lace(1) wavers like a bridesmaid's posy
above the quarried chalk and flint of this erased line.
The track that gravelled and iron girded once
carried trundling freight to Southampton docks and salt air.
Like a distant memory of past expectations
I wander through past journeys, delineations
chew on the fresh air like a discontented Wordsworth
now free, free to roam where I will
But nothing is moving here these days, no air pulses
through the gilded corn, american maize is rigid

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All rhythm, rhyme and reason curtailed
but for the hover of Kite and wizz of combustion engines
I'm left standing in a shower of butterflies,
climate driven, wheeling
baffling the constant walkers and their dogs with
showers of atoms, as they spin into extinction.
The land is porous, half soaked with the elixir
and charms of the abandoned plastic barrels concoctions.
A squadron of crows bank and wheel in tight formation
land and beaks probe at all the matter before them.
Beady eyed they cannot count the consequences
of all that steel now disappearing from the horizon.
In a damp corner of a thatched cottage
an artist(2) peels Queen Anne's Lace from the paper
Dips it gently into a brimming tray of liquid
and the fusion of paper and molecules of silver re-arranging
maps a negative of stalk, leaf and stamen.
Up north the furnaces fizzle and peak for the century.
Sheffield steel, Welsh coal, Cornish tin, the land exhausted
potmarked and reclaimed in a thousand regeneration schemes,
The process of covering the tracks of a century of production
is taken up by rose bay willow herb, buddleia and oxford ragwort,
each seeking to mask the brick and fence beneath it.
In the laboratory the encased hand holding the uranium phial quivers
as an owl is lit by a police cars headlights on the perimeter.
Its flash of white against a wilderness of dark downland
like that brief explosion, that jolt of life in a vacuum.
The century starts to implode
draws itself as a negative image, trickles, spits and fuses
the image of a landscape removed becomes these islands.
The bromide stains her fingers, the plant collapses into stalk and seed
as she raises its negative to the kitchen window.
She stands looking at it again in the porchlight amidst the blackout

realising that all this movement above and below, these planes, these tanks
hurtling towards the coast and far fields of France are dying already
A moth singes against the candle flame, erupts into vapour, darkness.

1. local Oxfordshire name for Cow Parsley which it resembles

2. Eilleen Sherwood-Moore artist of Blewbury, Berkshire (1909-1998) experimented with photograms

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