

From Langport to Muchelney: Midsummer

Here you go, over the singles only footbridge,
past sighs of nettles and a river so greedy
it sucks up blue to last through the emptiest winter.

A heron, indignant at being disturbed, white clover
like cotton balls, cows under a tree, hogweed, sweet camomile,
marguerites, water-lilies the colour of saffron.

And you remember the time you walked here
when you were married: the same sky of blue and white
scumbled streaks, flights of swifts, birdsong.

So many years since then, and still you can't quite
get used to walking alone. Wind rustles the rushes,
damsel flies draw you to the water's edge, fish stay hidden.

The gate creaks by the inlet sluice, and when you reach the bridge
at Muchelney, you see that what you thought was scaffolding
over the church is a yew tree stretching sideways.

Bincombe Farm, a stuffed straw horse, foxgloves,
roses, gravel. Tourists fanning themselves on the Abbey ruins,
another monument to Henry VIII's vandals.

Monks lived here once, fasted, prayed. Sometimes
you too dream of a simple cell, with a table, a view,
poems that flood the room till they reach the ceiling.

Here's the roof inside the church, angels with cheeks
puffed out, as if they would blow the world faster.
Some have wings but no bodies, and hang there like bats,

painted by some sweating Tudor artist on a day as hot as this,
when he would rather be walking the levels with his sweetheart,
picking elderflower, making babies. You crick your neck -

'All ye nations of the world, com up hether. Flye to mercy.

From the rising of the sun to the setting of the same'.

And in the Bible on the lectern, by faded yellow carnations,

'Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire.' When you walk out, there's a dazzle of sun on parked cars and your head swims. Iridescent beetles shine on the path like tiny turquoise beads. You're thinking

of your husband still, his flesh long since retired, wanting to believe you will see him again, floating down the River Parrett in a bath tub, his knees white and defiant in the no-ghosts-here sunshine.

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