

Above

Air

by Sarah Peacock

Part Two of a quartet based on Air, Earth, Fire and Water

Nothing can be heard over the incessant hum of the engine. He knew there'd be some discomfort, perhaps even sickness, but this is different. Something is troubling him and he doesn't know what it is. The earth has veered away, and for a moment, he remembers something he once read; how travelling at the speed of light, a man inside an imaginary rocket would think it was the earth that moved at high velocity. For that man, there would be a sense of stasis. Time would stand still.

Panicked, he checks his watch. He is relieved to discover that time indeed, has passed; all of ten minutes since the battered old Cessna struggled up from the runway and somehow, miraculously, became air-born. The pilot chatted for the first few minutes of their climb into the greyed out sky but Elliott tuned out. He could hardly hear a word the man said anyway, obscured as it was by the static crackle of the headphones. He had fixed his eyes on the tableaux of muted colours below them, already running through the list of tasks for today's job. As the sun set beyond the hills to the west, casting the valley's curves in bronze, there would be a neat series of photographs, high contrast images of the land beneath them, burned into the memory of his camera. A memory of a memory, a keepsake of what once was there. A landscape of ghosts.

"Lower?" The pilot is asking him a question, he realises. He picks up the camera, squinting through the viewfinder. The light is good. It throws the unseen scars that time leaves in its wake into relief. He must work quickly, this is a brief window of time.

"No. This is just fine" He shakes his head, knowing the pilot cannot see him.

Below is a series of lines that criss-cross the modern landscape irreverently. Gouges that won't be erased. He knows that really, if you walked across these fields, you wouldn't know they were there. You would feel the rise and fall of ditches and banks, the change in terrain beneath your feet, but you wouldn't know that each uneven footstep marked out the lives of others, of those that

went before, cloaked beneath the debris of time as life rambled on. Sheer metres beneath your feet could be the charred remains of a long-cooled hearth, the food spoils and broken earthen ware still laying in situ from where the woman who had cooked the meal two thousand years before had wept, knowing that her family would not survive the harsh winter. All those little lives now a whisper beneath the earth.

He clicks away, capturing image after image, focused and intense in his work. He knows that something still troubles him. It would be nice, he thinks, sometime, to come up here and revel in the detachment it provides. Space to think. To rise above the white noise of humanity, the babble of life that weaves its way untidily across the earth. It's been six months now, he thinks. He should be over it. Friends have started to drift, their attention tested. They insinuate that it's now time to get on with living but he's tried. He feels like the paradoxical twin in the rocket, the one for whom time has frozen, the one for whom everything seems to reel away at high speed.

It had always been a possibility they had said. Fate, with its lip curled behind a poker faced stare, had held its cards close, knowing the outcome already, while he wallowed in happiness, in ignorance, in the smugness of love. Somewhere beneath lies a too small rectangle of earth, the unbroken turf waiting for her but it's not time yet, he thinks. Not yet.

When they get to three thousand feet, the pilot cuts the engine and he is met by an intensity of silence; a stillness that buffets him like an invisible gust of air. The headphones lie abandoned by his feet, the static now fizzled out, the waves of sound flattened as they take in the space below. From up here, everything takes on a childlike, slightly unreal quality. He feels he ought to be able to make sense from up here, join the dots somehow.

The engine stutters to life briefly. If only he could do the same with his life. Work is the only thing that gives him some appearance of momentum. Back in the cramped basement that serves as a makeshift office, the strip lighting making his eyes raw, he pores over the photographs. Each is a

high resolution still, contrast turned up full to pick out the features of the landscape that would otherwise be missed. He laboriously pieces together the past, the secret song lines of the long dead. After each image is analysed, recorded in black and white and digitised, it is wilfully forgotten; bagged and filed away in the endless rows of neat draws that line the basement. Nothing can touch them here. No human hand, no air, no microbes which would age and tarnish them, provoking the cycle of inevitable decay.

The plane banks sharply over the river below. It is swollen; billowing and curled about itself like a child's lost ribbon. The rain has been unseasonably heavy this year and this, compounded by local drainage problems, has meant that there have been floods. At times, he was confined to the office, unable to do anything apart from stare at the black and white images layered upon his desk.

He snaps away with the camera, his finger hovering over the button expertly. Soon, it becomes automatic. He no longer sees the earth below as others see it. It becomes merely a set of contrasted shapes, convex and concave, obscure and meaningless. His mind is elsewhere, outside of this space, this time. He thinks of her, preserved, her skin encased in a thin layer of plastic. He pictures the curves of her body, how the light and shadow works to create the most beautiful set of images he's ever seen.

When he first saw her, after washing and easing her body so carefully into the special airtight bags he had taken from the office, he had cried. All the years of working, of surveying the landscape through his camera, had trained his eye in such a way that he no longer saw the world as others did. Where others saw colour and movement, faces, social cues, he saw only the simplest contrasts. One could translate that, as the camera did into black and white but he understood it differently, on a deeper level. There was here and not here. Presence and absence. Light and dark. Beauty and decay.

In life her body had been too animated for him to fully appreciate. Of course, like any man, he knew she was conventionally attractive, but in the dervishes whirl of life he hadn't the time to see what was really there, a beauty beyond simple translation, something that spoke of the unquiet movement below her skin. Each furrow of her epidermis marked a passage of time, a memory, a scrap of life and he would sit for hours, just staring, awed by the images before him.

In the time that it has taken them to cross the Somerset landscape, north to south, the sun has slipped a little against the worn linen sky. The shadows have grown a little longer, the dark sliding into the recesses of the land below. Through the viewfinder he can make out the scars more clearly, the shadows picking out the landscapes hidden features and he snaps away, capturing wave after wave of image, burning them into the camera's internal memory, but in his haste he inadvertently catches the skewed shadow of the Cessna upon the hills below and it throws him. He lets the camera drop to his knees, the unexpected sight of his own presence alarming him. The mark of his own passing is there, his own trajectory cast in negative and he finds himself thinking of her again.

At first he'd panicked, reacted as social norms dictated, snatching the phone from it's place on the sideboard, fingers seeking out the numbers for an emergency. He had tried not to see her, lying on the wooden floor, head at an odd angle, eyes open but unfocused but as the operator spoke firmly to him, requesting his address and the nature of his call a kind of calm had settled over him. He saw with detachment the way the shafts of light pierced the room's blinds, illuminating the slow drift of dust that came to rest upon her hair and clothes. He breathed slowly, observing the scene before him, the little moment of grief, as a kind of tableau; the hand thrown out across the varnished wood, the vermillion nail polish chipped at the edges, one shoe lying on it's side, marooned amidst a sea of contents from her bag. There were the pathetic totems of her lifet; rail card, hair brush,

broken lighter, cigarettes surrounding her body like cheap grave goods. His mind slowed, cut away the clutter, focusing on the surface of her skin, the flesh just visible above her shirt. These were the images he'd spent his life seeking, the folds and warps of her skin more beautiful than any landscape. He'd lay the receiver down and pulled the angle poise lamp he used for his work over to her body instead. He spent some time angling it this way and that until he found just the right contrast. This was what he'd been seeking. All these long years while they'd sat opposite him, amidst the sterility of the office cubicles, eyes scurrying to him like rats when they thought he didn't see, whispering, spreading their poison, he'd prayed for this moment.

The one perfect landscape.

Her skin stretched out before him, light seeking out it's secrets. Of course, he'd pretended at normal, acted as he should have, the fool in a mummer's play, the one to laugh and curse at. He'd courted her, brought her flowers; followed the customs that would attract her as a mate while all the while he dreamt of her skin, the lines and delicate creases. And he'd waited. When he found out about the aneurysm, the mass lodged in her brain that could bleed at any time, he reacted as he should. He wept, put his arm around her, pretended at comfort, but all the time he was counting the days until he could claim that landscape as his own; bag her, preserve her and document every inch.

It's been a number of weeks now. The sun is lower in the sky, the shadows on the hills longer. This makes for better photographs but soon it will be too cold, too dark. It will mean returning to the office, that bleak, cramped basement. Too many hours spent away from her. Fretting, worrying over the state of her skin, praying that the plastic can hold a little longer, hold back the inevitable decay. And each day he spends in that office he can feel their rat eyes scurry over his shoulder with guilt, tongues wagging, useless white noise. Yes, he can tell by their eyes, their animal mistrust. The herd fears him. They can never understand him, be his friend, appreciate

beauty as he does. Their world's are poorly rendered carbon copies, ineffectual, limp. They've taken to drinking their coffees, cigarettes clutched behind confidants hands, in the far corner of the mess room now. He can hear the mutterings. It means nothing. Flotsam washed upon an empty shore. He smiles, not long until he can watch her again.

The Cessna banks and turns, making for the return journey back to the lonely stretch of asphalt. The shadows have gone now, the secrets smothered below a heavy layer of darkness, the sun retired. It's as if the land holds it's breath, waiting for day break, waiting to feel the sun's hard gaze again, the heat sear it's dewy surface. The ground comes closer now, time moves once more and he can see them. Lines of blue upon the landing strip, matching blue light flashing. So, they've come for him. He cradles the camera tight, wishing he could see the images once more before they inevitably take them away, 'for evidence'. Too late now. This is the last sunset.