

T H E

LOOK AWAY

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XYLEM BOOKS

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xyoi The Look Away (2018)

*The Look Away*

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I

I am north of where I was. Go north. That was the imperative. Always north. Although the why of it is no longer clear. Follow the needle. He leadeth me in the paths.

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The old prayers, unsaid for decades, come back unbidden. Ghosts. Empty conjurings. Dry on the tongue.

+

In a rocky hollow you will find an old shieling. I'll lay me here a while. Safe in the middle of hills. Surely.

You didn't give her your name, did you? Here's all I have, I said, giving her the money. The sum total of a life. Are you come here to die? she said, like she meant it. I don't remember. Leave a list in this bag and hang it by the field-gate, once a week. You'll get you what you need. She seemed to understand it better than I did myself. Done this before? I asked. She didn't reply.

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Near darkness. A steep climb. A field-gate.  
A rough track through the field, still climbing.  
And then a low stone hut. Thickset walls.  
Built, surely, to keep out something other than  
weather. Goodness and mercy. You could bury  
a body in there. Lengthways.

+

Are you come here to die? She must have seen  
the blood. I tried to walk straight but her eyes  
said it. You look in bad shape, boy.

+

And now I drift in and out. In and out. This cannot be good. I gave her all the money. The sum total. Who is that, there? My heart. Hello?

+

There is nothing for it. I'll lay me here. Nothing to be done. How to fill the black hours? Voices. At the threshold of hearing. Flashlights? I cannot tell.

+

Three cramped rooms and no running water.  
A well in the yard. No toilet but a stone  
outhouse. A hearth but no heat. Even if there  
was wood to burn I will not risk a fire. I will  
not give a sign to be found. I will be ready.

+

You didn't give her your name, did you? Be still.  
The pain is unbearable at times. To move is  
agony.

+



Each day the rain, ceaseless. The sound like  
nothing I can tell.

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What made people climb up into these hills,  
centuries ago? To a place where even water  
does not stay, but runs, as fast as it can, to lower  
ground? What had they done, that they would  
hide up here? Is it safe?

+

Bed down there. Out of sight. Prepare yourself.  
They will come. Think on that.

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Some bearings. Whitewashed walls. Clean enough, but there is mould in the air. In the largest room a wooden table. A chair. A chest, empty, except for some blankets and a handful of candles. A washstand and basin. A large horseshoe nailed to one of the roof-beams. On the wall a pendulum clock, still ticking. A large map over the mantelpiece. Near the door a small cold-room. In the other room a narrow bed. A bed-stand. Another smaller horseshoe. Only one door to the front of the building. Windows the only other means of escape. When my strength returns I will move the bed into the corner of the main room. I will face the door even in sleep.

+

Who is that? Who is there? I know there is  
someone but I do not see you.

+

I will not give a sign. Touch the horseshoes.  
Cross yourself. Say His name if you think it will  
help. He leadeth me in the paths. I will dwell in  
the house—

+

I remember almost nothing of the journey.  
A flight in the dark and I was only half-  
conscious. Hovering on a threshold. Sluggish  
with analgesics. The pain receding to a dull ache.  
Lulled by the motion of the car. Its low engine  
murmur. The blur of passing headlights.  
How did I drive the thing so bloody?

+

I can still hear the strain of the engine climbing  
those last miles. Can feel the sting of the cold,  
damp air as I stowed the car in the wood. Out  
of sight.

+

Goodness and mercy. I try to remember more  
but it escapes me. Perhaps I have a fever. Am I  
where I should be? Go north. He leadeth me in  
the paths. To the limits of the map. The nameless  
country. The empty page. You didn't give her  
your name, did you?

+

Bread, butter and cheese. A jar of bitter damson jam and some slices of cured ham wrapped in waxed paper. In the little time that I have been here, these things have become the centre of my world. I arrange them on the shelves of the cold-room obsessively. It has the look of a shrine. Meagre offerings to a departed god.

+

All impossibly tangled. I see everything but  
what I want to see. Disconnected images. Havoc.  
Disorder. Something has broken loose. Up there.  
I shudder at the thought.

+

The interior of the car. Moving at great speed.  
In the windshield a bright, indistinct blur, lit by  
headlights in the night's darkness. Taking on  
form. You didn't, did you?

+

A figure, arms outstretched, waving pathetically,  
mouth opening and closing, undoubtedly  
emitting a panicked cry, unheard, drowned  
out by traffic. You didn't?

+

And then gone. Swallowed by the distance.  
Down the road's long, dark throat.



Each time, in the dead of night, I awaken. Dry mouth. Chest tight. Struggling for breath. The pain flaring. That contorted afterimage filling the room as my hands flail. Feeling for light.

But there are no lights here. Nothing except an intermittent, white glow at the periphery of my vision. Swirling patterns of blue and green. Pinpoints of red. It is as if my eyes are filling in for the darkness, which is not merely a lack of light, but its utter negation.

And so I sit the whole night through. Hunched in the corner. Back against the wall. The pain and the dark show.

+

You look in bad shape, boy. Bed down there.  
Rest a while. You'll get used to it. You could bury  
a body in there. Whitewashed walls. The sum  
total of a life.

+

*I see fields and meadows. An old, winding country lane. Low hills hazed in the distance. A family, walking. The boy trails slightly behind the others.*

*At a bend in the lane his eye is caught by something in the hedgerow. A bird's nest, with the mother crouched down, brooding. She returns his gaze, sidelong, unblinking. Her large, dark eye bright with fear. Just one, the boy sings to her, gently, just this once.*

Meagre, grey dawns. Rain after rain. I haven't  
left the shieling in a week. Not that I would. I  
will lie low. Swirling patterns. Bread and butter.  
My cup runneth—

+

The pain subsides if I lie perfectly still. But even then I feel movement. Not the dull workings of my own body, but something greater. It is another body, massive and restless, shifting beneath me. Rising and falling. My mind drifts, and although I cannot hear it, I feel the progress of the stream that runs close by. Its thousand veins meeting other tracts of water, seen and unseen. The hills' open pores, fractures and fault lines, flooded with dark liquid. And so my body, filled with blood, water, mucus.

+

Do not stray too far. Stay close to the edge. The waters run deep.

+

I try the windows but they will not move.  
Probably swollen shut for years. Caked in mould.  
This place begins to feel like a cage. Or a trap.

+

The rain ceased a few days ago, only to be replaced by mist. I miss the sound of it. More than that. I long for the din of humanity, machinery, life. A soft bed of noise on which to rest the ears. Anything but this hard silence. This unnatural quiet. I hear only the muted ticking of the clock and the muffled, uneven workings of my own body. Both plague me with their insistence.

+

The pain seems to increase, not diminish. I dress  
and undress the wound obsessively.

+



Blood, water, mucus. Something has broken  
loose. Taking on form. I know it.

+

I day-dream of analgesia. A child's sleep. A rest  
that is the gift of innocence.

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