

Notes on the West Barrow Poems

These four poems are inspired by the countryside around Brockworth in Gloucestershire where I spent much of my childhood. The West Barrow is located in the beech woods between Cooper's Hill and Birdlip Hill. When it was excavated in the nineteenth century, it was found to contain two dozen male skeletons and the body of a woman and child.

Droy's Court Farm looks down on Witcombe Reservoir and is located between the Cooper's Hill Woods and Witcombe Roman Villa; below it lies cattle fields containing old chestnut and oak trees. One field is surrounded by the woods and was always filled with wild flowers when I visited it in the '70s. There is also a brook completely hidden by overgrown hedgerows.

There is a continuity of habitation on Cooper's hill: The Hill itself was an ancient hill fort of the Dobunni, the Roman villa is first century AD, and the woods contain Saxon dykes and walls. Droys Court is an eighteenth or nineteenth century building but the farm has existed at least since medieval times when Llanthony Priory held the land.

In my late teens/early twenties I would walk most nights the three or four miles to the Black horse in Cranham; the lanes lead through the woods which are full of wildlife. Sometimes I would walk home following the Cotswold Way through the woods on Cooper's Hill.

Oliver Smith 2008

West Barrow

Part 1

Long ago amber hair flowed through her comb,
thick and slow as honey.
She caught rain, sun, and fallen stars
reflected in the Severn's mirror bright waters.
Copper tresses wound along these mould-scented avenues,
Where once she listened to memories of antediluvian seas
Ossified in ammonite shells. The songs of strange bats flapping
In the ivy-rope rigged trees.
She became the acorn crowned figurehead,
beached on the broad estuaries boundary.
Beeches overflowing the woods cauldron brim
where moss and weed cover the ancient ossuary.
Through the secret field her foot-printed trail; serpentine
among cowslip, blue scabious and celandine.
Her gown of willow roots grown down into the barrow
through two thousand years. Her flesh and marrow, merged
With the verdigris rust of amnesiac-sleep.
Worshipped in the mound above the rivers eel-haunted deeps.
Her dreams are amber threads
wound around the trees, growing as corn in the long-cultivated fields

and running through the whitethorn hedge

Part 2—Droy's Court Farm

The returning Traveller worn thin by time's abrasive flow.
As a ghost he passes through ghosts
of the Saxon's golden corn,
growing taller than his withered bramble crown.
Still, the sacred labyrinth of the West Barrow remains;
the paths unchanged in his two thousand years of sleep.
Scent-sweetened air filled with the dream-fat songs of the wild bee,
suckled on the dog-roses run wild beneath
the creaking half-sleep of the antique beech.

Whitethorn and willow have woven a barrier
around the brook's grey banks of saltlick clay.
The slow square Frisians call in low cow song,
as they suck down the earth-cooled water.
The long legged Aurochs are ages gone;
bred away into placid dairy daughters

Crayfish hide in the soft shade of the stream; betrayed
by their blue black armour's bassinet gleam,
in sunlight refracted by the whirlpool ripples.
Caught in cyclic time;
spreading its spindle roots, the narrow ash tree is dropping keys
to the gnomic locks hidden in frost-cracked lime.

The source overgrown in green fern fronds.
Iron tainted waters spring from forgotten karsts,
seeping among rust painted fossils of warm seas;
shells grown in torrid reefs, before the northern storms
of raw Wurm and Dryas
were born from the frost-pale eye of cold Polaris

Now the summer's white-star ramson blooms
under boughs brittle as old bone.
Corpses of thirty year—dead elms endure barkless and silver,
remembered by the thousand years shadow reflected in the shallows.
Stained in sunlight the ancient traveller is coming to the home
his ancestors made in the glacier's surrender

Part 3—Roman Villa

The living skin of moss and clover cleaned away
by antiquarian spade and trowel. Foundation walls laid bare
as yellow stone upon the green. Where cattle chew the cud,
there were once jewelled floors;
where citizens late of Rome stood drinking Tyrrhenian wine;
Looking down on the Severn's broad flood

and sheltering from grey British skies,
which they had learnt to call their own.

The dead roman raises his head, wreathed
in a triumph of living ivy...
and a wig of limp green weeds,
hung to hide his balding skull.
He calls to the travellers ghost "Sit down old one.
Set your flint and fur on this much conquered soil.
Passing seasons piled fathom thick the mud since you last left
your footprint on this hill.
Once wiping your mouth, you cast aside
the elk you hunted across the land's cold bones
of winter rime-frost and snow;
they are now rotted in the midden and clover-grown"

He addresses a Saxon farmer,
whose loud snores echo through the fields,
sleeping interred in a long vanished mound
devoured by the chestnut's roots

"Time to rise new neighbour, your wood-
Built home is eaten. The walls and roof bitten
by the broken teeth of the English weather.
This land has chewed your long-shed to mould and mud.
The last descendants of your pigs are fed
to some Norman lord who died fat and far away and
In his bed"

"And it serves you right!"
The Roman moans
"Those fine stones from my house,
the Saxon took to build pigpens
up stream of the ford. His dry walls are falling too,
overrun by the tide of beeches.
I hear the wallowing of those fine plump swine;
unquiet still;
their spirits bouncing down the valley.
He fed them above me,
disturbing four hundred years of quiet sleep
in the woodland sod.
I found my fine tiled mosaic floor buried beneath the loam;
my pet pigeons grown wild in the woods and my slaves long fled"

Part 4—The Winter Moon

The Moon is back again; Walking her endless
path through wood and field. Weaving her lacy dress
on a loom of chestnut leaves and shadow.
Tying white ribbons on the clay-splattered hides
of some ragged, wild creature;
who fed on the sly raw rooted plants

grown through a stratigraphy;
laid down as he rested beneath a northern birch
and drew down frost-heavy lids;
consumed by her unchanging white eye.
Waking now, more ancient
even than the hog-back tomb

Patient in blaze and freeze
from Lamas to Beltane.
The moon is back again; the first ghost to haunt the hill;
where the Woodwoose and his huntsmen in green
chase the milk skinned doe.
Above them, she shakes her ice-encrusted bow.
She follows dripping her tears of white flame,
and chanting verse written by some strange attraction.
She becomes the hare, then moth, then silence and death:
digging her razor claws into swollen fingered branches

The moon is back again.
Pale plants bloom in the white winter night
on the barrow, raising
its bone stuffed belly from a mossy bed.
As the oak-housed owl flies; hunger incarnate,
and the corn's frost-brittle stubble is renewed,
in the sacrifice of bat, field-mouse and shrew