

*The Land of
Decoration*

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The Empty Room

In the beginning there was an empty room, a little bit of space, a little bit of light, a little bit of time.

I said: 'I am going to make fields,' and I made them from table mats, carpet, brown corduroy and felt. Then I made rivers from crêpe paper, cling film and shiny tinfoil and mountains from papier mâché and bark. And I looked at the fields and I looked at the rivers and I looked at the mountains and I saw they were good.

I said: 'Now for some light,' and I made a sun from a wire metal cage strung with beads that hung down from above, I made a sliver of moon and luminous stars, and at the edge of the world I made a sea from a mirror, reflecting the sky and the boats and the birds, and the land (where it touched). And I looked at the sun and I looked at the moon and I looked at the sea and I saw they were good.

I said: 'What about homes?' And I made one from a ball of dry grass and one from a hollow tree stump and one from a barrel that toffees came in and I gave it a fishing line and sail and made space for a blanket and toothbrush and cup, and a stove, and put a gull high on the mast (which was really a broom handle) and launched it out on the sea (which was really a mirror).

I made houses from chocolate-dip cartons: the plastic scoop where the chocolate was, that was the bedroom and the round room below where the biscuits had been, that was the living room. I made houses from a matchbox and a bird's nest and a pea pod and shell. And I looked at the houses and saw they were good.

I said: 'Now we need animals,' and I made paper birds and wool rabbits and felt cats and dogs. I made furry bears, striped leopards and fire-breathing, scale-crusted dragons. I made glittering fish and cockle-shell crabs and birds on very thin wires.

Last I said: 'We need people,' and I modelled faces and hands, lips, teeth and tongues. I dressed them and wigged them and breathed into their lungs.

And I looked at the people and I looked at the animals and I looked at the land. And I saw they were good.

The Ground from the Air

If you look at the earth from the ground it seems very big. Stand in a playground and bend down and put your face to the ground as if you were looking for something small and it seems bigger still. There are miles of concrete going outwards and miles of sky going upwards and miles of nothing going nowhere in between. Boys playing football are giants, the ball is a planet, girls skipping are trees uprooting themselves, and with each turn of the rope the ground trembles. But if you look down from the sky the boys and the girls and the ball and the rope seem smaller than flies.

I watch the boys and girls. I know their names but I don't speak to them. When they notice me I look away. I pick up a sweet wrapper next to my shoe. I will make it into flowers or a rainbow or maybe a crown. I put the wrapper inside a bag and walk on.

Through the concrete weeds are growing. At the corners of buildings they are pushing through, whittling their way to the light. I wiggle some loose and settle them with soil in a tiny tin cup that held chocolate and a tube that held sweets. They will be planted again and then they will be oaks and pampas and beeches and palms. I pick up a shoelace lying in a puddle. 'This will be a hose,' I say. 'Or a stream. Or a python. Or maybe a creeper.' And I am happy because in just a few hours I will be back in my room making things.

Then suddenly I am falling, the ground rushes up to meet me and gravel is biting my knees. A boy is standing over me. He is tall. He has a thick neck. He has blue eyes and freckles

and white skin and a nose like a pig. He has yellow hair and pale lashes and a cowlick. Though I don't think anyone would want to lick him, not even cows, who lick their own noses. Two boys are with him. One takes the bag I am holding. He tips it up and wrappers and laces and can tops blow away.

The yellow-haired boy pulls me up. He says: 'What shall we do with her?'

'Hang her on the railings.'

'Pull down her pants.'

But the boy with yellow hair smiles. He says: 'Have you ever seen the inside of a toilet, freak?'

A bell rings and all across the playground groups of children run to line up at the double doors. The yellow-haired boy says: 'Shit.' To me he says: 'Wait till Monday,' pushes me backwards and runs off with the others.

When they are a little way off he turns round. He has a sleepy look in his eyes, as if he is dreaming, and enjoying the dream. He draws his finger across his throat then takes off laughing.

I close my eyes and lean against the dustbins. When I open my eyes I pick the gravel out of my knees and spit on them. I hold them hard at the edges to make them stop stinging. Then I begin walking to the school building. I am sad because I will not be able to make flowers or a stream or an oak tree after all. But what is worse is that on Monday Neil Lewis will put my head down the toilet and if I die who will make *me* again?

The bell has stopped ringing now and the playground is empty. The sky is lowering. It looks like rain. Then from nowhere a gust of wind rises. It whips my hair and balloons my coat and carries me forward. And tumbling and flapping and fluttering around me go wrappers and papers and laces and tops.

Holding My Breath

My name is Judith McPherson. I am ten years old. On Monday a miracle happened. That is what I'm going to call it. And I did it all. It was because of what Neil Lewis said about putting my head down the toilet. It was because I was frightened. But it was also because I had faith.

It all began on Friday night. Father and I were eating lamb and bitter greens in the kitchen. Lamb and bitter greens are Necessary Things. Our lives are full of Necessary Things because we are living in the Last Days, but Necessary Things are often difficult, like preaching. Preaching is necessary because Armageddon is near, but most people don't want to be preached to and sometimes they shout at us.

Lamb represents the firstborns God killed in Egypt and Christ who died for mankind. Bitter greens reminded the Israelites of the bitterness of slavery and how good it was to be in the Promised Land. Father says they are full of iron. But I like to think of lambs in a field, not on my plate and when I try to swallow bitter greens my throat closes up. I was having more trouble eating than usual that Friday night on account of what Neil Lewis said. After a while I gave up and put down my fork. I said: 'What's dying like?'

Father had his overalls on from the factory. The kitchen light made hollows around his eyes. He said: 'What?'

'What's dying like?'

'What sort of question is that?'

'I just wondered.'

His face was dark. 'Eat up.'

I loaded my fork with bitter greens and closed my eyes. I would have held my nose but Father would have seen. I counted, then swallowed. After a while I said: 'How long could someone survive if their head was held underwater?'

'What?'

'How long could someone survive underwater?' I said. 'I mean, I expect they'd last longer if they were used to it. At least until someone found them. But if it was their first time. If the person holding them down wanted them to die – which they would – I mean, if their head was held down.'

Father said: 'What *are* you talking about?'

I looked down. 'How long someone could survive underwater?'

He said: 'I have no idea!'

I swallowed the rest of the bitter greens without chewing then Father took away the plates and got the Bibles out.

We read the Bible every day and then we ponder what we have read. Reading the Bible and pondering are also Necessary Things. Pondering is necessary because it is the only way we can find out what we think about God. But God's ways are unsearchable. This means you could ponder forever and still not know what to think. When I try to ponder my mind slips to other things, like how I could make a swimming pool and steps from an embroidery loop for the model world in my room or how many pear drops I can buy with my pocket money or how much more pondering there is still left to do. But afterwards we always talk about what we have pondered so there's no way you can pretend you have been pondering when you haven't.

It was getting dark outside the window. I could hear boys riding their bikes in the back lane. They were going up a ramp and every time they came down it the board clanked. I looked at Father. I could tell by the way his eyebrows jutted that I must pay attention. I could tell by the way his glasses glittered that he must not be interrupted. I looked down, took a deep breath, and held it.

'In the ninth year, in the tenth month on the tenth day, the voice of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, remember this date, this very day, because the king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem . . ."'

At twenty-five seconds the room began to pulse and my breath escaped in little puffs. I waited a minute then took another.

A dog barked. A dustbin lid clattered. Seconds dripped from the clock on the mantelpiece. At twenty-five seconds the room began to pulse again and I had to let my breath out again. I must have done it quite suddenly because Father looked up and said: 'Are you all right?'

I opened my eyes wide and nodded.

'Are you following?'

I nodded again and opened my eyes even wider. He looked at me from under his eyebrows then began to read again.

"Now your impurity is badness. Because I tried to save you but you would not be saved, and you will not be saved again until my wrath against you has subsided. I the Lord have spoken."

I waited two whole minutes then I took another breath.

I held it. And held it.

I said: 'I am going to do this. I am *not* going to drown.'

I hung onto the arms of the chair. I pushed my feet into the floor. I pressed my bottom to the seat. I got to twenty-four seconds when Father said: 'What are you doing?'

'Pondering!' I said and my breath came out in a rush.

A vein in Father's temple flickered. 'You're very red.'

'It's hard work,' I said.

'This isn't a game.'

'I know.'

'Are you following?'

'Yes!'

Father blew a little air out of his nose then began to read again.

I waited three whole minutes. Then I took another breath.

I filled each bit of my body with air: my stomach, my lungs,

my arms and my legs. My chest hurt. My head pounded. My legs jumped up and down.

I didn't notice that Father had stopped reading. I didn't see him looking at me till he said: *'What's going on?'*

'I don't feel well.'

He put down his Bible. *'Let's get something straight. I am not reading this for your entertainment. I am not reading this for the benefit of my health. I'm reading this because it will save your life. So sit up, stop fidgeting and start paying attention!'*

'OK,' I said.

He waited a minute then began to read again. *"The time has come. I will not hold back; I will not have compassion, nor will I relent. You will be judged according to your actions," declares the Sovereign Lord.'*

I tried to follow but all I could think about was the toilet bowl, all I could hear was the cistern flushing, all I could feel were hands pushing me down.

'Then the people asked me, "Tell us, what do these things have to do with us?" And I said to them, "The voice of the Lord came to me saying: Say to the house of Israel, 'Judith!'"'

Father read it just like that, without stopping and without looking up.

'What?' My heart snagged on my cardigan.

'Carry on reading please.'

'Oh.'

I looked but the page teemed with ants. I turned and my face got hot. I turned back and my face got hotter.

Father closed his Bible. He said: *'Go to your room.'*

'I can do it!' I said.

'No, you obviously have better things to do.'

'I was listening!'

Father said: *'Judith.'*

I stood up.

My head felt very hot, as if there were too many things going on in it. It was jumbled too, as if someone had shaken it up. I

went to the door. I put my hand on the handle and I said: 'It's not fair.'

Father looked up. 'What was that?'

'Nothing.'

His eyes glittered. 'It better be.'

What is Dying Like?

There is a world in my room. It is made from things no one else wanted and it is made with things that were my mother's, that she left to me, and it has taken most of my life to make.

The world stretches from the second floorboard by the door to the radiator underneath the window. There are mountains by the wall, where the room is darkest, and great cliffs and caves. There are rivers running down from the mountains to hills and pastures and here is where there are the first houses. Then there is the valley and the fields and the town, and after the town there are some more farms and then there is the beach and the beach road and a forest of pine trees and a bay and a pier, and finally, right by the radiator under the window, there is the sea, with a few rocks and a lighthouse, and some boats and sea creatures. Strung from the ceiling on short strings there are planets and stars, from longer strings there is the sun and the moon, and from the longest strings of all, clouds, aeroplanes and the light shade is a paper hot-air balloon.

The world is called the Land of Decoration. In the Book of Ezekiel it says God swore to bring the Israelites out of captivity to a wonderful country. It was flowing with milk and honey. It lacked nothing, it was a miracle, a paradise. It was so different to everything around it that it stood out like a jewel and it was called 'the decoration of all the lands'. When I close the door of my room the walls fold back and there are planets and rainbows and suns. The floor rolls up and there are fields and roads at my feet and hundreds of small people. If I stretch out my hand I can touch the top of a mountain, if I blow I can ripple

the sea. I lift my head and look right into the sun. I feel happy when I go into my room. But that Friday night I didn't notice any of those things.

I closed the door and leaned against it. I wondered if I should go back down and tell Father why I had been holding my breath. But if I did he would only say: 'Have you told the teacher?' and I would say: 'Yes,' and Mr Davies had said: 'No one is going to put anyone's head down the toilet,' and Father would say: 'Well then.' But I knew that Neil would just the same. And I wondered why Father never believed me.

I sat down on the floor. A woodlouse was crawling out from underneath my knees, flicking its antennae and strumming its feet. It looked like a tiny armadillo. I watched it climb the sand dunes in the Land of Decoration and wondered if it would ever find its way out again. We did an experiment with woodlice in school. We built a plasticine maze and counted the number of times they turned left or right. They nearly always turned left. This is because they cannot think for themselves. I wondered if this meant the woodlouse would come out eventually or would just keep going round in circles until it died in a little crusty ball.

Darkness was closing the valley up like a book between black covers. It was sifting down over the broken-backed streets, over roofs and over aials, back lanes, shops, dustbins and street lights, the railway and great chimneys of the factory. Soon the darkness would blot out the lights. For a while they would glow all the more brightly but eventually they too would be eaten up. If you looked into the sky you would see their glow for a little while. Then nothing. I wondered what it would be like to die. Was it like going to sleep or like waking up? Was there no more time? Or did time go on forever?

Perhaps everything I thought was real would turn out not to have been and everything that wasn't real was. I don't know why but I looked for the woodlouse. It suddenly seemed very important to find it, but I couldn't, even though only a few

seconds ago it had been there, and there was not enough air in the room and it was like someone had struck a match and it was burning up all the oxygen.

I sat back against the wall and my heart began to beat hard. Something was coming towards me, unfurling like a cloud low down on the horizon. The cloud gathered. It filled my mouth and my eyes and suddenly there was roaring and things happening very quickly and all at the same time, and then I was sitting back against the wall and sweat was running down from underneath my hair and I felt stranger than I had ever felt in my life.

And if I had to say how I felt I would say like a box that had been turned upside down. And the box was surprised by just how empty it was.