

THE QUARRY

Ode to Phineas Bunting

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I can picture my hometown, Morwenstow, as it used to be.

Green hills surrounded us all around, untouched, at the time, by the rapacious hand of human ambition.

The ocean, glistening, as it caught the last rays of light, blue as a field of delphinium.

The flurry of wings as birds took flight, variegated streaks of colour flashing through the everglades.

The papery sound of leaves brushing together as possums scurried from tree to tree.

Sights and sounds, pure and simple, that have since been dimmed by the growing cloud of industrialisation.

A pall of smoke and dust from which the stain of human development can never be wholly erased.

My story begins seventy years ago, in the year 1885, when I met a woman who lived in an isolated part of town, at the bottom of Marsland Valley. I didn't know it then, but this meeting was to leave a lasting impression on me as years went by. I was just sixteen years old then, and in my first week of school after summer vacation. Despite my lower-class status, I was fortunate enough to have the privilege of attending one of the finest schools in England, Denvershire Boys, a school critically acclaimed for its academic success. All seemed to be going well for me at the time—that is, until I got into a fight with a boy called Tommy Pritchard, on my second day. From that moment on, I frequently found myself at the mercy of the teacher's cane and, in time, I came to experience an ever-growing disenchantment with the place. A disenchantment similar in nature to the vines that crept along the walls of the older school buildings like many blind, grasping fingers trying to pry through its brittle defences, to its core. In a similar vein I felt myself being taken apart, bit by bit, by the callous industriousness of our time. Many factors combined to achieve this effect. The austere teaching staff, their strict adherence to punishment. The grey stone walls, devoid of feeling, formal and dignified and as unlovely as the smoking factories increasing dramatically in number as the years went by. In short, the memory of that place is one I would care very much to forget, except for one thing, it was the first time I met Phineas Bunting.

I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but as I was making my way home that day along a familiar route down Georges Street, I somehow lost my way. The sun had nearly completed its full arc, and by the time I found myself in the forest, it was almost night. A troubled mind must have been the cause of it, or I wouldn't have lost my way. Fortunately for me, I had the luck of spotting a three-storey house, just through the trees, minutes later. The house was a greyish facade overlaid with vines, encircled by a plot of land that was likely a garden at one time, judging by the weeds sprawling through the dirt. Given its condition, I wasn't expecting anyone to answer, so I was surprised when an old woman greeted me. She had kind blue eyes and was wearing a gown of homespun cotton. To all appearances, she seemed friendly enough, and I had few qualms about approaching her. If the woman had any remarkable feature, it must have been her complexion; it was so pale and thin, it reminded me of papyrus scrolls, barely preserved against time and hardly fit to withstand the subtlest atmospheric alterations.

The woman was evidently stunned by my appearance. ‘What are you doing here?’ she exclaimed. I was chilled to the bone and unsure how to answer, so I said nothing. ‘Come.’, she said, ushering me in, ‘this is no time for a boy to be roaming about!’ She gazed at the thick conglomeration of storm clouds and dust in the sky. ‘Indeed,’ she muttered, ‘this is no place for either of us.’

The house was surprisingly well furnished and revealed an appreciation for fine arts and embroidery. The dining table was made of good quality pine and was laden with silver candlesticks and china plates; in the end, I admit, my impression of the place was quite favourable. A fire flickered in the hearth and a russet mat was strewn invitingly across the floor. I was about to make my way towards it, grateful for a little warmth after the cold and damp, when I heard a low, beating sound in the attic, followed by a low, cooing sound. The old woman followed my questioning gaze.

‘Would you like to see them?’ She asked in a husky voice that called to mind the sound of embers crackling. I suppose curiosity won over against better judgement in that moment, for the woman motioned for me to follow and, quietly, I obeyed.

The sole source of light was the flicker of her candle. Our forms cast long shadows across the walls as we made our way up. The noise upstairs had receded, and it was grimly silent, giving the place an almost unearthly stillness. I cannot quite describe it, at least not clearly, but the house had a strange aura about it, a hush and solemnity unruffled by the chaos of the outside world. Almost as if it stood apart from reality, suspended along a different time slot, a different frequency as it were. The door opened a crack and I could just make out the restless forms within.

The woman placed a finger silently to her lips. ‘They’re unused to strangers; you must be very quiet.’

The attic was larger than I’d expected and was home to various species of bluebirds, numbering the hundreds. How a modest three storey building could house such an enormous room was quite beyond me.

‘Lovely, aren’t they?’ The woman remarked as a bird, slightly larger than a pigeon, perched on her shoulder. It had the most extraordinary coat. A colour which could best be described as a mixture of perennial lupine combined with the delicate blue green of boracite, a combination in close likeness to the chrysocolla mineral found near the outskirts of Cornwall. I traced my finger along its feathers and was surprised by the cool, airy quality—like a mist through which my fingers dissolved.

‘What kind of bird is it?’ I asked.

‘It’s a Phineas Bunting, a rare species of bluebird sometimes found in the wilderness of Hubei. They can travel great distances, at great speeds—in the harshest of climates, over mountain ranges, and sea, into unexplored territory.’

‘I’ve never heard of it.’ I stated matter-of-factly.

‘Of course, you haven’t. They’re incredibly rare, and sightings have been few. They can camouflage themselves, making their capture near impossible. And when they die, their bodies transpose and a new bunting is born.’ She brushed her finger under the talons of a wizened bird with rheumy eyes and set it on the table. ‘Watch,’ she said, ‘I’ve seen this so many times, I can almost pick the precise moment.’

Minutes passed and then the bird let out an odd choking sound like the exhaust of an engine. I watched, astonished, as its feathers dissolved into a shimmery blue-green liquid. The process reminded me of the perfusion of water colours bleeding across the page to form some strange hybrid solution. The solution bubbled and gurgled and fizzled into a fine vapour until the bunting was no more than a translucent thread between my fingers. Seconds later, a blue-green bird the size of my thumb emerged. I gasped. I had heard of asexual reproduction before; certain species of ants were capable of this, but never had I known a bird to be capable of the reproduction I had just witnessed.

The woman laughed. ‘You look startled; it’s not the first time Phineas has evoked that reaction.’ ‘Come,’ she said, coaxing me into a chair. ‘Sit.’ I did so without a word. The woman took the newborn bird and placed him on my shoulder. Phineas Bunting regarded me curiously before closing its eyes. I felt the cool airiness of its feathers as it sunk into my shoulder.

Some time passed before I made my way downstairs and took a seat by the fire. I stared vacantly at the flames as I contemplated the strangeness of that place, so oddly situated. Why did the woman keep so many birds? Was she lonely? Eccentric, perhaps? I felt mystified by the ethereal quality of the house, almost as if it were attached to the earth by the most delicate of threads. The way the bird dissolved into mist...

I was dimly aware of the kettle bubbling in the next room and shortly after, the woman returned holding two cups. She rocked back and forth in her chair, regarding me between sips.

‘It’s not often people chance by this house,’ she remarked. ‘Tell me, what brings you here?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said after a moment’s reflection. ‘I was making my way home and not long after, I found myself here.’

‘Indeed,’ she replied, a note of curiosity colouring her tone. ‘I suppose you’ve been wondering why I keep so many birds.’

I nodded. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask—If you don’t mind.’ I felt slightly nervous under her gaze; those shrewd old eyes stared at me with such intent, they seemed capable of seeing beyond my physical essence into the more intimate recesses of my mind. The fire dimmed to a flicker and only a portion of the woman’s face was illumed in the fading light, creating an effect similar to the chiaroscuro style in Rembrandt paintings. After a time, the woman’s lips moved, almost imperceptibly, in reply, as she whispered a single word. ‘Enchantment.’ Her eyes glowed with an intensity unnerving to me, and I was under the impression for the second time that day that I was suspended somewhere between reality and the more elusive realm of the imagination.

‘Come, ‘let me show you something,’ she said, extracting a flutelike instrument from her pocket. She blew it, but it made no sound. I was aware of a slight rustling upstairs though, which soon grew to a restless flurry as she continued to play. The woman ceased after a time, and I assume the invisible sound ceased with her, for the commotion upstairs came to a still. I found this quite puzzling.

‘What’s it all about,’ I queried, the subtle tides of curiosity emboldening me to be forthright.

‘This,’ she stated, ‘is an infrasonic amplifier.’ ‘We can’t hear it, but they,’ she motioned upstairs, ‘can.’ The Phineas Bunting is an ingenious creature, attuned to the subtlest sounds—soundwaves from the ocean, from earthquakes, and storms. It helps them find their way back, to safety.’

‘I don’t understand. ‘How can a person create an instrument they can’t hear?’ The woman was thoughtful. ‘Would you believe me if I said I had the ability to contain the soundwaves of an earthquake, or an avalanche, vibrations that shock the core of those nearby, within a single contraption?’

I shook my head. I wasn’t about to be taken in by the sensational stories grown-ups tell children. ‘But I liked your story,’ I added to be polite.

The woman laughed. ‘Of course, you did.’ ‘Come, I have yet to show you the Phineas Bunting in its natural surrounds.’

The birds were roosting peacefully when we re-entered. The woman opened the

window and blew the instrument and, immediately, the birds took flight, a flurry of blue and green swooping the air in one fine stroke of colour. It was then that I recalled their ability to camouflage. I watched as the buntings dissolved into the trees and then, one by one, into the sky. So many organic shaped jigsaw pieces locking themselves in place. The clear blue expanse stretching before us in all its infinitude and the buntings melting into it like a fine thread. At a single protracted point, which lasted, perhaps, only a second, I was stunned by the image before me; I wasn't sure if the sky was undergoing a curious metamorphosis of colour and form or whether the image was unfolding in reverse. The effect was of an illusion that now calls to mind the works of M.C. Escher, particularly one titled, *Day and Night*ⁱ, where one imagines seeing double until one is not so sure of what they see: if the birds are flying into darkness or light, if the figures are moving up or down the stairs, or if one is looking at birds in flight or fish in full stream. The woman glowed; her face was radiant with an inner light before she ceased playing. By some strange instinct, or perhaps, it was practise, the buntings flew inside, seeming to sense that the room offered them respite from the outside world.

Moments after its passing, the image receded to memory, as the colour and intensity of all things must fade with the passing of time, with only the faint outlines of impression still remaining. The woman's smile faded as she stared vacantly ahead; after a time, she stirred from her thoughts and turned to me.

'People are ambitious creatures,' she remarked, without feeling. 'We're after money, status, success.' 'But in our feverish pursuit of these things, we risk unravelling the very fabric of what is beautiful in this world.'

She gazed out the window as wisps of smoke collected in the sky, growing rapidly in mass and volume as they drew near; at length, she snapped the curtain shut and turned her gaze to me.

'The Phineas Bunting is a remarkable creature. 'It can navigate through storm, earthquake, even smog. The toxins in the smoke trigger a faster homeward flight.' Her words certainly made an impression on me; however, it was her last words that resonated with me most.

'The coexistence of nature and humanity is on the brink of dissolution, and in its absence, there will be nothing but concrete slabs, steel furnaces, and smoking factories.'

Something stirred inside of me then like the eddying of waves as they leave faint

imprints on the shore. The glow left her eyes and a pang of emotion foreign to me pervaded in the silence. Even then, I think I understood something of the loss she was conveying.

I didn't realise it of course, but this was to be one of our last conversations; changes in circumstance forced me and my family to relocate soon after. Many years later, following a period turning iron at a steelworks in France, I decided to visit her again, only to find the house gone. The strange thing was, there was nothing left, no remnant of a portrait, no fragment of wood. I did, however, manage to unearth a certain handkerchief—the initials, C.M, matched hers, and lying next to it, a blue-green feather. I took the feather up and felt the light, wispy texture of it. And I knew. I was once again astonished by what I saw; the forest bleak after a sodden day, was suddenly aglow. The trees shone golden green in the sun. The garden, once overgrown with weeds, was overlaid with plants; bright specks of colour splayed across the forest, so gloriously laid out, it could have been designed by a botanist. The transformation took place the precise moment I touched the feather. And I knew then that my old friend, Phineas Bunting, was enchanted. But as fate would have it, I wasn't to relish in the revelation for long. A chill wind swept by, whisking the feather from my grasp and, moments later, the forest returned to its former bleak state, devoid of colour. I was filled with the same disenchantment I had once felt as the feather drifted from me till it was nothing more than a speck in the sky. The image reminded me of an ode I once heard about a fish swimming upstream, only to be swept into the engine of a steamboat. The two images conjoined as I watched the feather drift from sight, into the torrent of dark matter ahead, toxic waste and carbon monoxide, a myriad of spores sailing through the ether, to be claimed by the all-pervasive pall through which the delicate thread of nature disintegrates.

Endnotes

i See M.C Esher's, *Day and Night*, February 1938, woodcut print, for a visual overview.