

## **WORLD OF DUST**

# World of Dust

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Too lazy to be ambitious,  
I gradually left it all up to fate.  
In the sack, three handfuls of rice.  
By the stove, one bundle of firewood.  
Who cares about delusion and enlightenment?  
What use is fame and wealth in the world of dust?  
Inside my hut, the evening rain on the thatch,  
Both legs stretched out in idleness.

– Ryokan

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WHEN I went to London to go to university I took myself away from my first eighteen years in Wolverhampton like a small mammal gnawing its leg off in a steel trap. I could not wait to leave, to get away from this town in which I'd walked the same streets for what was then my entire life, where nothing happened but a Pope in a Pope-mobile. I walked away from the largely bemused crowd yet another one of my childhood ambitions fulfilled. At last I had seen bullet-proof glass. Just looked like ordinary glass, yet it seemed worth the bus fare. By this time I had grown out of quarries and canal banks and mostly conformed to my parent's lack of adventure, save for the salvation that would come at the end of A-levels, when I would be away. Half-friends became quarter-friends and most days in the summer I rode my bike out to sit under a tree in what passed for countryside. The countryside

was an area of nature preserved against the encroach of houses by small farms selling sacks of King Edwards and horse manure by the side of the road, and old railway lines fallen into disuse, and abandoned quarries and mine workings, while people were thinking about what to do with this land it fell into ruin and nature took over, an industrial countryside where on roadside verges you would come across torn-up pornography and young boys would eagerly stuff cocks and cunts and tits into the pockets of their short trousers. And they'd dig out and reassemble the pieces in their bedrooms at night by torchlight, turning over an arse to find a great big slug sucking on pocket fluff and they'd go uuurh and they couldn't prise the slug off the arse it clung to with all their might levering with a biro and they'd chuck it out the window still sucking the cellulose of the paper and next morning they'd look out the window and there would be an arse on a piece of paper lying on top of the stormporch the slug long gone and the arse would get pasted down onto the roofing felt like a brown maple leaf that will not let go of the pavement stretches its arms out and says I'll sink into this pavement and it's still there when the hoarfrost comes it's like a trilobite become part of the granite and the arse clings to the top of the stormporch through rain and shower and you try to drop a piece of damp newspaper on it but

it just flops down at the side and another and before you know it the flopped-over bits of damp newspaper are drawing attention to the arse sticking up from the stormporch roof and you pray for an almighty wind to come and tear it away but out the window there's a tattered plastic bag that's been tugging and tugging to get away from the telegraph pole for months now and you think it's only a matter of time before the arse on the stormporch is noticed right under your window and will they think it just blew there from down the street.

There was a time when I sat on the edge of my bed and thought of the future, what it would bring, how my drive in the present would unfold into a fulfilment of desires. Now, grey-haired, I sit on the edge of my bed and cannot think of anything I desire, of a desire I can sustain. I am on the brink of departure, everything that was has to be left behind, everything that is, and the destination is uncertain, a void, a blank, but so too is everything that was and everything that is a blank, just a persistence of vision . . . a boy banging a metal plate sitting in the rubble of a demolished house, the banging of the metal plate calls to me from some lost ledge of memory. It was a house on the corner, it was a

small shop I bought sweets in where Mrs Smith smiled at me, it was her shop and her house, and I played in the rubble of it and found a large oval plate for putting a turkey on and it only had a little chip in it, I found it in the rubble and I dragged it out and took it back to mum look what I found mum is it any good to you and she was delighted I can put the turkey on that at Christmas. The infant school on the corner across the road was demolished too and I played in the rubble there as well. It was a childhood of sitting in demolished houses, thinking of what had been there and how it was now all pulled down and broken to bits and the dry dust rose in the long summer months as I shuffled my little feet about on cracked concrete foundations and peered down into holes in the ground and I sat in the ruins all afternoon day after day this was where I went to school this was where I bought liquorice sherbet fountains and jubbies this was where I won a glider for having the cleanest fingernails in school and I was embarrassed in assembly when mum told the school I had thrown a fork at nan and I sat there listening to the headmistress talk about one little boy sitting here today, who she did not mention by name but I knew and she knew it was me, who threw a fork at his grandma and no-one ever said anything to me directly and it was on this shiny wooden floor sitting cross-legged with all the other little boys

and girls that I heard myself singled out and shamed this shiny wooden floor where I now sit on collapsed walls in the dust and stray mongrel dogs trot in and out all day long sniffing around and dashing off as if they had other business to attend to but in and out all day they would come but they would never come near me they would look at me in a mixture of a suppressed snarl and a look of meekness as if kicked and told to go and lie in their own piss as if they remembered days when they were not as free to come and go as they were now these mangy mongrels trotting fast everywhere they went as if they needed to avoid dogcatchers or expected a brick to be thrown at them at any moment and everywhere I liked to go these stray dogs would be trotting in and out of all day keeping their distance, across what used to be the playground and for me still was and all the better for there being no other boys and girls around I had it all to myself and I would sit there in the dust on sunny afternoons in the holidays watching big black beetles and staring up at the sun shielding my eyes I was a survivor in the desert the sun beating down. Though I could see the infant school from my bedroom window I have no recollection of seeing them tear it down, I don't remember the bulldozers going in, just one day the school was pulled down it probably happened while I was at the junior school they did most of it in a single day

just smashed it all down and I ventured into the rubble through a hole in the wall and smelt the brick dust thick in the air still it was the height of summer there had been no rain to wash it into the earth and already the stray dogs were in and out but I think I was the first boy to explore the ruins I was surprised there were no things just bricks and dust there were no schoolbooks or toys no paperclips no spinning tops just rubble rubble was good enough rubble and damp dog-piss patches and sprayed-on remnants of walls. I thought only of finding places to sit and be alone and not be observed by my house. All around the edges of the demolition not on the corner to the street nettles grew and you could with luck find thin careful paths through them pulling up your long socks until they almost reached the bottoms of your short trousers and with your arms raised high in the air you could make it through with only risk to your knees and the backs of your knees, which you could tie your handkerchiefs round if you had two handkerchiefs, and the nettles smelt nettly that old not-nettled-someone-for-ages smell that nettles get when they grow gnarly and vicious and their leaves are coated with dust and dirt in the high sun and their tongues are hanging out for water their tips curling over like catkins but their stingers like steel bastards and convolvulus vines hard and brittle and forgotten

tripwire across the path and want to make you fall and rub your face into a good palmful of stings like a flannel and you can hear pigeons cooing in an old broken-down coop at the bottom of a garden where the dock leaves grow if you need them to rub on a sting and there's the garden where the old man dumps his Corona pop bottles not taking them back to the shop to get the money back on the empties and you can sneak down and drag them under the wire-net fencing and take them to the shop and get the pennies back on them. It was a childhood agenda for the day, wander in the demolished school brave the sea of nettles and go and get the Corona bottles. How full it was, a day created from scratch from what was there. Now these places are crammed with new houses every scrap of land that had something abandoned or forgotten or grown over or pulled down has been built up with brand new houses that always have flashing lights draped over them at Christmas that always have two or three cars parked in the drive. I hardly ever went in a car as a child, my experience of cars was lying in the dark watching their headlights at night following the same route up my bedroom wall and sweeping the ceiling up the wall and sweeping the ceiling up the wall and sweeping the ceiling and when it was raining you could hear the splashing of puddles in the gutter in time with the sweeping of the headlamps

up the wall and across the ceiling a rhythmic lullaby of an entire childhood they're coming round the bend by the demolished school they're passing the telegraph pole they're going past the house now you could tell where they were by the lights going up the wall and across the ceiling.

I spent a lot of time as a boy standing at the top of the stairs listening to dad slagging me off to mum in the living room. Sometimes I would creep down trying not to tread on the creaky step and listen outside the door. When I listened at the top of the stairs I knew what he was saying even though I couldn't hear all the words, although perhaps he wasn't always talking about me when I thought he was. There was a noise to it I hated, a rhythm in the words, a violence held back, an elastic band that snaps and whipcracks your hand, a grumbling tone like a swarm of angry wasps trapped under a bucket, resonating. I'd listen to it from the top step and fill in the words, sounds ingrained in me . . .

'I'll swing for him yow see if I doe, he'd try the patience of a saint he would. He'll get the back of my hand before the day's out. Screamin the house down, chargin up an down the stairs, he knows I'm on nights. He knows I

cor get back to slape if he weks me up. Bouncin his ball against the wall. Day yow tell him I was aslape Marge? Course yow did, yow'm always tellin him, he doe listen that's his trouble, he wants it all his own way, he ay appy if he ay meckin someone's life a misery, raisin merry hell all over the shop. Cor tek him anywhere, he's a liability. One of these days I'll knock him into the middle of next week and they'll come for me and cart me off. If I've said it once I've said it hundred times. I'll swing for him yow see if I doe.'

If a ball came over the fence from next door and broke one of dad's chrysanths he'd come into the house fuming and say, 'They ay gettin that ball back, they can fuckin wait till hell freezes over before they get that ball back. Bost my best blummin chrysanth! They can kiss that ball goodbye.' Then next day he'd be out in the garden and Mrs Singh would come out with little Sanjay and ask everso nicely if she could have the ball back and sorry about the plant and dad'd smile the sweetest smile and hand them the ball back over the fence and then later on he'd cut them a big bunch of sweet peas for their front window and take it round and Mrs Singh would be overjoyed and next day she'd bring some fresh curry and rice round in Tupperware and mum would take it at the front door all smiles and then the curry would sit on the table till dad got

back from work and saw it and mum'd say, 'I ay eatin that muck, it can go in the bin, yow doe want any of it do ya?' and dad'd say 'Yow berra put it in two plastic bags Marge else it'll stink the bin out.' And the next day mum would collect two pounds of blackcurrants from the garden and take them round to Mrs Singh and Mrs Singh would be overjoyed and say, 'I'll make some jam, I'll bring a jar round for you' and mum'd say 'That's very kind of you but don't go to any bother on our account, you have it yourself we ay struck on jam, Ken comes out in blotches.'

Whenever them next door cooked spicy food and the cooking smells wafted into the house, mum'd say, 'Ay fishunchips good enough for em?'

Dad didn't mind anyone borrowing his ladder but afterwards he'd say, 'Why cor he buy his own bloody ladder?' and he'd count the days before it was back in place behind the house. It took me years before I realised my parents were robots using stock phrases and reacting to every event in predictable and programmed ways. There was an odd man who lived a few houses down the road named Mr Witherington who let his grass grow long in the front garden and dad'd say every summer, 'Ay he gunna cut that grass?' and he'd stew about it like it was something that mattered, and mum'd chip in, 'He always speaks to you, never speaks to me' and dad'd

say 'Doe worry about it Marge, he doe have anything to say' and mum'd add, 'Well yow spend long enough talkin to him, this feller who doe have nuthin to say.'

'Oh it's only football.'

Then there would be a passage of time in which all you could hear was the many clocks all telling different times on the mantelpiece tick-tock tock-tick then dad'd look out the window and say, 'Ay he gunna cut that grass?'

There was a man with slicked-back brilliantined hair who wore a drapcoat with drainpipe trousers and green fluorescent socks who could always be seen walking his clodhopper walk in black-and-white brothel creepers up to the betting shop just before the first race of the afternoon all the kids from the infant school out throwing stones at him and calling him names and dad'd call mum over to the window and say, 'There he goes Marge, that ruddy nutcase, yow can set your watch by him. Day he ever learn how to walk? I've sid him in town, like a little kid on the escalators cor get his first step on and jumps up and down in a tizzy. He must think he's a Teddy Boy dressed like that but Teddy Boys day wear stripy jumpers in my day. Day he have a fit in Woolies?'

And then there would be a long time in which nothing happened but a dog yapped in the street and wouldn't

shut up and the sun would quickly decide it was time to quit on this day that had been so long and sunny and I'd be up in my bedroom looking out the window and see the man with the green fluorescent socks walking back down the road from the betting shop lifting his knees up to his belly walking down the road with his wonky walk and I'd feel a little guilty suppressing a laugh and then I'd hear downstairs mum calling dad, 'Ken, clodhopper's back' and dad'd roar with laughter and say, 'Doe yer just pity the afflicted?'

Childhood is one long hallucination. People are known to each other by bloodline, but apart from that there appears to be little discernible reason they are together. The beauty is that one does not question it, at the time. Thoughts return to me of childhood, as if I am far enough away now to appreciate it. It was then I forged a sense of purpose, but even that seems something from the womb and before in one long unbroken line extending back into some mist that repels all investigation like oil water. There is a luminous clarity *somewhere*, like eating something for the first time, or disturbing a pile of old clothes and a moth flutters out of them. The fading light of the first day . . . will I ever remember that? The

stretched-out eternity of that first day, tucked up in blankets and woollens, buzzed by a bluebottle for half an hour.

That first sky pretending to die.

Tense, the long haul suddenly over, what had I been dreaming about? For the first five years or more I would return to the womb in the cot at night, pulling the covers over me. When I had a torch I would take it under the bedclothes and turn it on and move it until the light was dulled and indirect and reminded me of a familiar comfort. Looking back, it seems I wanted to preserve some memory of the womb for as long as possible, only too aware it was slipping away and I would have to find a home in this new world that required things of me. But I don't know whether I have ever truly felt *here*. Perhaps with girlfriends entwined in their arms in bodily embrace, perhaps then I have been fully here, yet often it is just for moments, not long before I am thinking is this one *the* one, or is *the one* all women in a moment I sink into the warmth of and forget comparison.

The past can hit you sometimes like the sun glinting on a suddenly opened window and you fall down into shapes of pleasures rediscovered, thought lost for ever, found again, forced upon you like a familiar face passing in a crowded street. All we have ever accomplished,

looked at and thought about, come back to us dead slow but poised to speed off and separate from its shadow, leaving us with a few seconds of understanding clotted and coagulated out of the meaninglessness, something rubbed off like moth dust. Some bloom come off to the touch. The damp grass tramped down. A family photograph album, no-one left to identify the people in faded scenes. I was forty-six before I thought to ask my mother, 'Who is this man?'

'My father's father,' she said.

My great-grandfather. He looked a dignified man. High collar, waistcoat, watch fob and chain. A signals inspector on the railway. There is a mystery in the past that the present doesn't know, its shadow races away from us like the path of totality of a solar eclipse, you could not catch it even in a train thundering along with a full head of steam. Yet other times it's as simple as something buried in a back garden, undisturbed for decades, dug up by chance one day. A dropped locket. Smudge away the dirt with a thumb to reveal a photograph of a lady in Victorian lace hair in a bun. The past calls out to us like a muted echo. It begins to recede as soon as noticed, the noises of people in a bygone street fade to a present bewilderment, a hospital ward in every story, flying soaring floating, neat little breasts covered by her elbows, drifting in and out of memories on the

top deck of a bus or marooned in a dream, a stranger on the other side of these doors, unseen creator of sleep. Braced against waking, there is a glow on the horizon, but he wants to remain under closed eyelids, a place to think. There is something draped over the evening, the shops are shutting, the street lights are flickering on. A night-light lit to provide comfort in the dark casts looming ominous shadows on the walls. Waking up thinking you are somewhere else and the accustomed wall is not there, as long as it takes to open a purse and take out a couple of coins the familiar as-it-is settles fast and people that were moments ago alive are now dead but it's okay they've been dead for years.

Slow and then fast memories reappear not so much of things and people and places but of one leg after the other out of bed into slippers. Net curtains hung from nails a crucified ghost.

Some days I hardly trouble to remember my name or language, as if they were a card with an address and telephone number pinned to a child's lapel by a mother anxious in case her boy wanders off down an alleyway in the far-flung port. And my dreams are the dreams of anyone. I dreamt I was pursued by a komodo dragon in a lecture hall. Its eyes were fixed upon me, it had singled me out, and I knew this, and the calls of its keeper that it had already been fed today and presented

no danger were the words of a fool who knew nothing of the unbreakable bond formed between the eyes of the attacker and the attacked.

So I wake up and the komodo dragon is gone, as I was gone in sleep. How can I mourn my loss when I am just a construction of thoughts reassembled each day on waking from a wardrobe store of familiars? Take away these few rooms in a blast of cobalt blue and leave me standing in the bare landscape, the houses whisked away like a magician's tablecloth from under wineglasses, and then what will I construct my identity from?

As it becomes less important to me to identify my time, my place, my name from a bundle handed to me anonymously the moment I awake, I drift for longer and longer periods just eyes open on the world standing behind my presence in it.

Faraway days lost in the blueness of the sky, a buzz saw from the gardens. And then, on top of everything, another day cast adrift in this life that is similar every day and every night, and you take hold of the reins while people in the street are stepping out of white vans and trimming hedges and geese fly over, their world even more the same every day and so this is the yardstick by which to judge it as okay, as natural, multitudinous dimensional travel a thing of dreams and daydreams. And in this day, alone, and staring into space without

looking at anything in particular, come feelings of being excluded exchanged for mad wanderings in the imagination, suppressed only to attend to a knock at the door or a pang of hunger or to pick up and bin the dead leaves on noticing the first crocuses peeking through. This is how it had to be, and before long the people walking up the road in the morning are walking down the road in the late afternoon and the sun is setting on another wild day tapering to a close.

Behind him, a growing unease, he began to alight upon exact sounds, an old nursery rhyme, splashing about in water, the sound of feet on gravel became faster, a piece of grit gets in his shoe he has to take it off and empty it out. Sitting now under the spreading arms of a big tree. Then walking, noticing his shadow and trying to walk away from it – fleeting impressions of a wall, a high barricade, can see the upper windows of a forgotten old house, such a contrast to the modern prefabs and uniform red brick semi-detached houses. A house that was here before, so few of them around here, a house that has watched horse-drawn carriages from its high windows and blinkered Dobbin milk floats dairy fresh, family huddled around a radio still