

The Sealed Instrument

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV34

This is not a diary. I did not keep one. The trust had other instruments: baptismal entries, school registers, council files, statements taken from children grown old, and the inactive notes of a steward who saw me and chose silence. What follows is the shape those records make when arranged around the signal I carried.

My eye has always been the wrong colour on the left side. Not the whole iris—just a wedge of it, a section that goes from the brown of the rest to something lighter, a hazel that catches the light differently depending on the weather and the angle and whether I have been crying, which I try not to do where anyone can see. The optician in Bridgend noted it when I was fourteen and said it was called sectoral heterochromia, which is a long phrase for a small thing, and that it was harmless, and that it ran in families. My mother said her uncle had it. Her uncle's wife said his mother had it. Beyond that, no one remembered, or no one thought it worth remembering, because in a valleys town in the nineteen-twenties there were things more pressing than the colour of a girl's eye.

I learned to angle my head so the light did not catch it. This was not vanity. This was management. People who noticed the eye would look at it too long, and the looking had a quality I could not name but could feel—an attention that went past the iris and into something behind it, as though

the eye were a window and the person looking was trying to see what was on the other side of the glass. I did not like being looked through. I angled my head, and the wedge of hazel disappeared into shadow, and people looked at my face instead of through it, and that was better.

I was born in nineteen-eleven in Carmarthenshire, but I do not remember Carmarthenshire. My parents moved to Bridgend when I was three, following work, following the logic of families that move when the work moves and do not ask whether the new town will feel like the old one. Bridgend did not feel like anything to me because I had nothing to compare it to. It was the town. The shops on Dunraven Place. The river. The hills beyond the river, which were green in ways that seemed excessive, as though the green were trying too hard, as though the colour were not in the grass but in whatever the grass was growing from.

That is a strange thing to notice about hills, and I knew it was strange even when I was young, and I did not mention it to anyone.

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I married Huw Phelps in nineteen thirty-four. He was a clerk at the council offices, which meant he wore a collar and tie five days a week and came home smelling of ink and paper and the particular institutional warmth of rooms that are heated by radiators and occupied by men who sit. He was kind. He was consistent. He came home at the same time each day and hung his coat on the same hook and sat in the same chair and asked what was for tea in the same voice, and the sameness was not dull. It was the structure of a life. Some women wanted romance. I wanted structure, because without it the days had a quality of drift that I found difficult to manage—a looseness in time that made mornings feel like

afternoons and Tuesdays feel like Saturdays and the hours between waking and sleeping feel like a single uninterrupted surface without landmarks.

Huw was a landmark. The coat on the hook. The chair. The question about tea. I built my days around his schedule the way a builder builds around a foundation, and the house we kept on Merthyr Mawr Road was solid and clean and painted every third year and entirely adequate for the life we were making.

He did not mention the eye. He had seen it, of course—he had looked at my face long enough during courtship that he must have noticed the wedge of hazel—but he did not mention it, and I understood this as tact, and I was grateful for the tact, and it was only much later, after the children, that I wondered whether he had seen it at all. Some people look at a face and see the face. Some people look at a face and see what is behind it. Huw saw the face. The face was enough for him.

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The children came in the order children come: suddenly and completely and with a reorganisation of every room in the house and every hour in the day.

Gareth was born in nineteen thirty-six. He was the eldest and the quietest and the one who knew things before they happened. Not important things. Not prophecy. He knew when someone was coming to the house. He would stop what he was doing—playing with blocks, later reading, later still sitting in the garden doing nothing visible—and turn his head toward the front door, and within two minutes the bell would ring or the knocker would sound or a neighbour would appear at the gate. I timed it once, because I am the

kind of woman who times things. Two minutes. Sometimes three. Never more than five. He turned his head, and someone came.

I asked him about it when he was seven. He said he could feel them. I asked what he meant. He said it was like the house getting heavier. When someone was coming, the house gained weight—not in the floors or the walls, but in the air, in the specific quality of attention that the rooms paid to the door. The house knew, and Gareth could feel the house knowing.

I did not tell Huw. What would I have said? Our son feels the house gain weight before visitors arrive. Huw would have smiled the way he smiled at things that did not fit his understanding—a kind smile, a deflecting smile, the smile of a man whose world was built on council minutes and filing systems and the assumption that everything worth knowing could be written down.

I did not tell anyone. I filed it.

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Mair was born in nineteen thirty-nine, the week the war started, which meant she arrived in the same atmosphere of emergency that the country arrived in, and she never entirely left it. She was the middle child and the loudest and the one who drew.

She drew the hill.

There is a hill north of Bridgend—beyond the river, past the allotments, up through a field of sheep that part for you like water if you walk slowly enough. The hill has no particular name that I know of. It is on the Ordnance Survey map as a contour line among other contour lines, and the farmers call

it various things depending on which field borders it, and the town does not think about it because the town does not think about hills. Hills are the furniture of the valleys. They are there. You walk up them. You walk down them. You do not wonder about them.

Mair drew this hill from every angle. From the south, where it rises above the allotments in a curve that she rendered with a crayon in a single unbroken stroke. From the east, where it presents a steeper face and the sheep tracks make parallel lines across the grass like the staves of sheet music. From the north, which I have never walked to but which Mair drew from imagination—or from whatever is not imagination but feels like it, a knowledge of a place you have not visited that arrives in the hand rather than the eye.

She drew it in rain. She drew it in the orange light of summer evenings when the bracken on the slope turned the colour of rust. She drew it in snow, which in Bridgend falls rarely and melts fast, so that the drawing was always of a hill losing its whiteness, the green showing through in patches like an old map losing its ink.

When she was nine, I took her to the hill. We walked up together in the late afternoon. The sheep parted. The bracken was knee-high and wet and smelled of the particular vegetable sharpness that bracken produces when it is crushed underfoot. We reached the top, and Mair stood there with her drawing pad and her crayons, and she did not draw.

I asked why not.

“I don’t need to draw it from here,” she said. “From here I can feel it.”

I could feel it too. Standing on the top of that unnamed hill north of Bridgend, I could feel something beneath my feet that was not soil and not stone and not the ordinary geological fact of a hill in South Wales. A weight. A warmth, though the evening was cool. A quality of presence, as though the hill were occupied by something that was not alive and not dead but simply there, simply present, simply the hill being more than a hill in a way that I could feel through the soles of my shoes and the arches of my feet and the bones of my ankles.

I felt it, and I did not mention it, and we walked home, and Mair never drew the hill again. She did not need to. She had arrived at the original. The drawings had been a navigation system, each sketch a bearing, and the bearings had converged on the hilltop where her mother stood and felt something she would never discuss over tea.

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Rhodri was born in nineteen forty-three, during the war, when Huw was on reserve duty and the house was mine alone for weeks at a time. He was the youngest and the most difficult and the one who could not sleep when the weather changed.

Not because of noise. Not because of wind or rain or the particular violence of a South Wales storm coming off the Bristol Channel. Because of the pressure. Rhodri could feel barometric pressure the way other children could feel temperature—as a physical sensation, a weight on the skin, a compression that he described, when he was old enough to describe it, as the sky sitting on him.

When a front moved in—when the pressure dropped and the clouds came from the southwest and the air acquired the

metallic taste that precedes rain—Rhodri would sit up in his bed and press his hands against the wall above the headboard. Not in distress. Not in fear. In concentration. As though the wall were telling him something and he needed both hands flat against the plaster to receive the transmission.

I sat with him on those nights. This is what a mother does. She does not understand the child's experience. She does not need to understand it. She sits with him. She makes her body available as a landmark in the drift, the way Huw's coat on the hook is a landmark, the way the question about tea is a landmark. I sat on the edge of Rhodri's bed and put my hand on his back and felt, through the cotton of his pyjamas, through the skin and the ribs and the small architecture of a child's body, a vibration.

Not a tremor. Not a shiver. A vibration, low and steady, like the hum of an electrical transformer heard from a distance, felt rather than heard, present in the bones before the ears register it. My son was vibrating with the weather. The pressure system was moving through him, and his body was conducting it, and the wall he pressed his hands against was receiving what his body transmitted, and I sat beside him and felt the vibration pass through my palm and up my arm and into my chest, where it settled against my sternum like a second heartbeat.

I sat with him until the front passed and the pressure stabilised and the vibration stopped and Rhodri slept. I went back to my own bed. Huw was snoring. The house was quiet. The vibration was gone from my chest, but the memory of it—the physical memory, the sensation retained in the bone—lasted until morning.

I did not mention it.

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There are things a mother notices that she does not discuss. This is not secrecy. This is maintenance. The house runs because certain observations are filed and not spoken. The filing is the care. The silence is the structure.

I noticed that my three children, when they were all in the same room, produced a quality of attention that the room did not contain when they were apart. Not noise. Not energy. Attention. The room became more present when all three of them were in it, as though the walls were listening, as though the floor were registering the combined weight of three bodies that individually weighed what children weigh but together weighed something additional.

I noticed that Gareth's knowing, Mair's drawing, and Rhodri's pressure-sense were not three separate things. They were the same thing expressed through three different instruments. Gareth felt the house. Mair felt the hill. Rhodri felt the weather. House, hill, weather—three scales of the same environment, three registers of the same attention, three children who did not know they were listening to the same signal.

I noticed because I was their mother and because a mother's job is to notice.

I did not notice—I could not have noticed—that the signal was mine. It passed through me. The wedge of hazel was not a curiosity but a receiver, and the receiver had been sealed. What it received I could not process. What it transmitted, my children expressed.

I was a relay. The signal entered through the eye, passed through the ordinary machinery of marriage, pregnancy,

and housework, and exited through the children at low volume. Gareth felt the house. Mair felt the hill. Rhodri felt the weather. The same signal, three instruments, none of us naming it.

But I did not know this. I knew that my children were unusual. I knew that the hill north of Bridgend felt like more than a hill. I knew that the house gained weight before visitors arrived and that the weather passed through my youngest son like electricity through wire. I knew these things the way a woman knows things in a valleys town in the middle of the twentieth century: privately, precisely, and without a framework.

I saw a painting of myself once. This requires explanation because I did not sit for a portrait and did not commission one and did not, to my knowledge, know anyone who painted.

It was in a house in Carmarthenshire. A relative's house—a cousin of my mother's, the kind of distant connection that the valleys maintain through obligation rather than affection. Huw and I visited in the summer of nineteen fifty-two. The house was old and the rooms were dark and the walls were hung with the kind of things that accumulate in old Welsh houses: photographs of men in chapel clothes, watercolours of the Towy Valley, a barometer that no longer worked, and, in the hallway between the kitchen and the stairs, a portrait.

It was me. Or it was a woman who looked like me—the same face, the same set of the jaw, the same angle of the head that I used to keep the left eye in shadow. She wore clothes from an earlier century, but the face was mine with the certainty of a mirror. I stood in the hallway and looked at

the portrait and the portrait looked back at me, and both eyes were the same colour.

Both eyes brown. No wedge of hazel. No heterochromia. The painter had rendered the face with a precision that captured every other detail—the jaw, the hairline, the particular way the lips rested when the mouth was closed—but the eyes were matched. Identical. The painter had looked at this woman and painted her sealed.

I stood in the hallway for a long time. Huw walked past on his way to the kitchen and did not notice me standing there, because Huw saw faces and not what was behind them. I looked at the portrait and felt something I would describe, if I were the kind of woman who described feelings, as relief. The woman in the painting was complete in a way I was not. Her eyes matched. Her face was whole. Whatever the wedge of hazel signified—whatever the optician's long Latin phrase meant in the language that was not Latin, that was not medical, that was older than either—the painter had removed it. The painting showed what I would look like without the mark, and without the mark I looked finished.

The relief lasted until I turned away. Then it became something else. Not grief exactly. A feeling adjacent to grief—the feeling of recognising that a version of yourself exists that is simpler and more complete and permanently inaccessible. The painting was not a portrait of me without the mark. It was a portrait of me with the mark removed. These are different things. One is a person who never carried the signal. The other is a person from whom the signal was taken.

I did not ask the cousin whose portrait it was. I did not ask the painter's name or the century or the provenance. I walked to the kitchen and sat with Huw and drank tea and

looked out at the Carmarthenshire hills, which were green in the same excessive way that the Bridgend hills were green, as though the green were not in the grass but in whatever the grass was growing from.

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Huw died in nineteen sixty-eight. Heart. Quick. The coat on the hook, the chair, the question about tea—all of it gone in the time it takes a heart to stop and not restart. The structure of my days collapsed in the way that structures collapse when the foundation is removed: not gradually but completely, every surface finding its own level, the rooms of the house rearranging themselves around an absence.

The children were grown by then. Gareth was in Bristol, working for an insurance company, where his ability to know things before they happened expressed itself as an uncanny talent for risk assessment that his employers attributed to analytical skill and his wife attributed to luck. Mair was in London, teaching art at a comprehensive school in Lewisham, where she no longer drew the hill but drew other things—buildings, streets, the geometry of the city—with the same compulsive precision she had brought to the slope north of Bridgend. Rhodri was in Swansea, the Welsh Swansea, working on the docks in a capacity that I understood to involve weather monitoring, though the details he provided were always vague in a way that suggested the details were not vague at all but classified at a level he could not discuss with his mother.

They came home for the funeral. All three in the same room for the first time in years. The house on Merthyr Mawr Road gained the weight it had always gained when all three were present, and I stood in the kitchen making tea for neighbours and felt the combined signal of my three

children pressing against the walls like a change in atmospheric pressure, and I understood—without language, without framework, without any theory more sophisticated than a mother’s accumulated observation—that whatever they carried, whatever the signal was, it was stronger when they were together. Not louder. Stronger. The way three compass bearings are stronger than one, not because any individual bearing is more accurate but because the convergence of three bearings produces a fix that one bearing cannot.

They stayed three days. They left. The house returned to its ordinary weight. I lived in it alone for six more years.

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I died in nineteen seventy-four. I state this as plainly as I state everything because plainness is the only style I have. I died in Bridgend, in the bedroom I had shared with Huw, and the cause was a stroke: a clinical word for a blood vessel in the brain that fails, and for the quick end of a life built around noticing what could not be said.

I died believing that my eye was a curiosity. I died believing that my children were unusual in the way mothers are allowed to believe their children unusual. I died having walked the hill north of Bridgend approximately four hundred times over forty years, feeling each time the weight and warmth beneath the soil, and I never named it because naming is for people who expect the name to be received.

The record knows more than I did. It knows that a man in Carmarthenshire identified me in the trust papers when I was a girl and decided not to contact me. It knows that the eye was a receiver, and that the receiver was sealed. It

knows that the portrait in the hallway was not an error but an instruction: this one is not to be opened.

I did not know any of that. I knew what I knew: the eye, the children, the hill, the weight of rooms, the vibration in Rhodri's ribs, the portrait with the matched eyes, the green of hills that was not in the grass. The rest belonged to the file arranged around me.

I knew it the way a woman in a valleys town in the twentieth century knows things. I knew it privately. I knew it precisely. I carried it without understanding it, and I transmitted it without intending to, and I died without anyone telling me what I was. The not-telling was itself a decision. The decision was made by someone I never met, in a house I visited once and do not remember visiting.

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My children carried the signal into the next generation. Gareth's daughter can feel buildings the way Gareth felt the house. Mair's son draws things he has not seen. Rhodri's children sleep poorly when the weather changes, all three of them, in three different cities, waking at the same hour when the same front passes over.

The signal is quieter in them than it was in my children. Quieter in my children than it was in me, though I did not know the signal was in me. The programme did not invest in me. The century was not ready. The decision was made. The signal passed through me and out the other side, quieter, and it may pass through them quieter still, until it is indistinguishable from ordinary attention: precision, unease, the habit of noticing that a room is not quite right.

Or the signal will do what signals do in the hills above Bridgend, when weather comes from the southwest and fronts compress against the slopes and pressure builds until the air cannot hold it. Not in my line, perhaps. But somewhere, in some branch of whatever family I belonged to without knowing it, the receiver will not be sealed. It will open, and the transmission will be loud enough to hear without pressing your hands against the wall.

I was not there for that. I died in nineteen seventy-four in a house in Bridgend, and the last thing I felt was the weight of the house around me: the structure I had built with Huw, maintained alone, and filled with the signal I did not know I carried. The weight was warm. It was the warmth of rooms lived in for forty years by a woman who noticed everything and understood little and carried all of it without complaint to the end.

The eye was the wrong colour on the left side. The optician said it was harmless. My mother said it ran in the family.

It does. It runs further than any of us knew, and it runs to a place I cannot see. The running is the signal. The signal is what I carried. The carrying was my life.

It was enough.