



By Sarah Lewis and Diana Sanders

Connections

Sarah Lewis and Diana Sanders

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Raven calls Geoffrey a. Keller and Michael J.
Anderson/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

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Connections is a collection of poems and music written over the period of a year about two very different Welsh valleys. The Alun valley in Flintshire is Sarah's home and the Alwen in the Conwy hills is Diana's. Diana and Sarah met through poetry and found a further connection through a love and respect for nature and landscape. Visiting each other's homes, they discovered that their valleys share not only the way they have been shaped by man but also how the creatures within them have endured or returned.

This collection celebrates the connections between landscapes, nature and people.

A third of the sales of this pamphlet will go to SHARE – Supporting Homeless and Refugees Everywhere - a charity based in Chester.

Rhydymwyn lies in the Alun valley. The river springs from the moors, high above Llangollen and winds its way down through the softer land, cutting through the limestone, and scooping out the valley on its way to join the Dee. The limestone and the river shaped the industry that grew in the valley around Rhydymwyn and the remains of lead mines, mills and leetes can all be found by the sharp-eyed wanderer. The presence of the river also influenced the sighting of a secret weapons factory during WW2. The site, owned by DEFRA, is now a managed nature reserve and accessible to the public through membership of one of the local groups. The camouflaged buildings, anti-spark paths, huge hangers and crumbling walls covered in old calculations and formulae, tell us of its history. But gradually nature is reclaiming her space. There are otters in the river, great-crested newts in the ponds, horseshoe bats in the tunnels, ravens in the woods, swallows in the hangers, grass snakes coiled under old rubble and a blissful peace that baffles and calms those who know of its turbulent past.

SL

The second valley is that of the river Alwen and the village of Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr which was the inspiration behind William Wordsworth's poem *Vale of Meditation*. It lies 350 metres above sea level, on the edge of the Hiraethog Moors. It is the home of otters, dippers, trout and salmon. On the hilltops, overlooking the river, the landscape appears to be empty but that would not be the truth. There are brown hares in the sheep fields. Foxes use the single-track lanes as their own highways. There are raptors and song birds and the occasional shy woodcock. It is a landscape filled with streams, glacial lakes and reservoirs. It is a land overflowing with history. Old farmhouses lie in the bottom of reservoirs, drowned to provide water for the people of the Wirral. Old roads can be seen disappearing into the water. Medieval sheep enclosures make rectangular patterns in the grass and bronze age burial mounds crown hilltops. The weather in Hiraethog can be wild, with winds that shake buildings and bring down trees. Horizontal rain leaves sheep hunched and us miserable and yet there is something about this valley that gets under your skin and gives meaning to the word Hiraeth – the welsh for yearning for home.

DS

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Part 1

Rhydymwyn and Alun Valley

Secret Valley

Deliberately left off maps -
where Churchill's *odious weapons*
were assembled by hair-netted women.

Careless talk costs lives

deadly calculations scratched on walls,
silent steps on the anti-spark paths
between buildings invisible
from the air.

From the air
the mew of buzzards,
the croak of ravens,
the pic-pic-pic of woodpeckers.

In the mud around the River Alun,
imprisoned in its culvert
are otter prints and spraint.

Under old concrete, a grass snake
is coiled, smooth and neat like
Myfanwy's netted hair.

SL

Silent Chemist

She's mixing up sunlight
with carbon dioxide and water,
dispensing oxygen for us to breathe.

She lingers and goldfinches spark up
from teasels, willow-herb flames light
up the places where buildings once stood.

She's stirring up enzymes in the born-again wood,
dissolving the limbs of willow and ash
to nourish anemones, bluebells and beetles.

Inside a bat-filled ruin, she's covering
the walls of faded formulae,
silencing the ghosts of war-time chemists.

She's taking back her valley. SL

*Workers at the 'secret' chemical weapons factory in
Rhydymwyn valley
were not allowed paper so they scribbled the chemical
formulae on the walls.
Some of it can still be seen in certain buildings.
The site is now a nature reserve.*

Unstoppable

I am the Afon Alun
not a mighty river
but I have my moments
I rise
on a windy moor
seep
through oily peat
trickle
through ling and molinia
stream
past strutting black grouse
catch
the shadows of hovering kestrels
quench
the thirst of the red fox.
slice
through soft limestone
to
the valleys
where I'm needed
by
miners
farmers
chemists
brewers
paddlers
poets.

SL

Night Fever

He's the John Travolta of the wildlife pond,
crest combed until it stands erect,
silver tail streak gleaming.
After a winter of skulking under roots and rocks
jumping out on slugs and beetles,
he's ready to make a splash.

He moves out of the shadows cast by pond skaters
to hang out with sparkling water fleas until
she swims onto his moonlit dance floor,

with a flick of his tail he's there,
dragon-crest rippling
and from the way she stays,
mesmerised by his thrashing tale,
he knows, she's his.

SL

Origami

They come to my pond to sit and gaze,
I hear their muffled voices speak
of mindfulness and being in the moment.

I know about being in the moment.

I lay three hundred eggs
onto the leaves of water mint
using my back legs,

that concentrates the mind.

I wrap each one like a precious parcel,
folding and sticking
with Zen-like concentration.

Half of them are infertile and will never
become great-crested newts,

I'm very mindful of that.

SL

Staying Power

The Chiffchaffs are first to arrive,
calling their names from pussy-willow branches,
then come the willow warblers,
with their tumble-down-the-scales song,
we smile and squeeze hands
on our early morning walk.

And suddenly the Welsh woods swell
with flycatchers, wood warblers and redstarts,
all the tiny back-from-Africa birds
that are heard but not often seen.

Swallows swoop, martins gurgle and burp,
swifts scream down market town high streets,
causing Saturday shoppers to stop and look up.

And the ones who never left,
the sparrows and wrens,
chaffinches, blackbirds and robins,
the blue tits and great tits and starlings wonder
what in the woods all the fuss is about.

SL

Rhydymwyn

Old buildings in camouflage paint
cluster in a welsh valley where
women used to make bombs.

The dust covered years are quiet
but walls exhume formulae,
calculations and scribbled chemistry.

Atomic secrets linger,
with hibernating bats,
in tunnels that pierce cliffs.

Our laughter darts,
like swallows, from wall
to wall in cavernous hangers

and mingles with
chit-chatting echoes
of ghosts in grey overalls.

DS

freedom

out of stone the voices come
mute for so long
joy in shouting
somersaulting in wild air

mute for so long
wrapped in shadow
somersaulting in wild air
agile as birdsong

wrapped in shadow
sloughing skin
agile as birdsong
laughing and laughing

sloughing skin
shackles gone
laughing and laughing
freedom

shackles gone
joy in shouting
freedom
out of stone the voices come

DS

Ghosts

In a window of blue
surrounded by rain.

A quiet spectre circles
between post and pond.

Twilight's shadow
anoints white feathers.

Keen eyes watch
for reed twitches.

Small hearts drum
on grass and branch.

A dive and a crunch.
Blood runs to ground.

Shrieks break the silence.
I run along the flooded lane.

Fear, joy and water
in my boots.

DS

Harvest mouse nest survey – January 2014

Wading into *reed canary grass*
shoulder high and winter wet,
pushing off from the field edge
backs bent, heads down
we breast-stroke through
waves of mouse gold reeds.
Sleet swirls like ticker tape,
a raven's heavy *kronk*
falls from the sky,
is swallowed up by the swish-
swash of swimmers searching for nests.

SL

Passage

The reed bed calls
beckoning only the pure souls.

When I stand before The Guards,
will I glide to the sacred rushes

or plop like a water rat
into the soft, enclosing mud?

SL

(In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, when a person died they went before a panel of judges to account for their actions in life. If they passed, they would enter a paradise known as 'The field of Reeds').

Haiku

Musical notes
written on telegraph wires
linnets sing themselves.

Squeak of raven's wings
creak of powder snow,
silence softly broken.

Ten goldfinches bounce
across a water-wash sky,
tinkling ice chimes.

SL

Part 2

Hiraethog Moors and River Alwen



Birth

A trespasser slips under the fence
leaving streaks of green in dew cobwebbed
grass. She comes with the dawn in a tangle
of smoking breath, shadow boxing
with birch shadows. A russet and black
apparition whose eyes glitter and flame
with Betelgeuse. New life knocks at her belly,
impatient for the taste of fresh grass. I watch
her from the window as she races the merlin
over the meadow leaving two bleary eyed
leverets under the rosemary bush.

DS

All Souls

i

Starlings blacken the morning;
dark clouds constantly moving.
Wren mute with their bantering.

I breathe and think of friends
who walk softly beside me
even though they are dead.

ii

Your light kindles my light
and my light kindles another
and suddenly the darkness

is ablaze with lamps of gold.

DS

Present

If I could sit still enough and really listen,
I would hear a breath rising through centuries,
exhaling in this moment.

There is memory in these walls.

Poetry nestling in the pinpricks of space
between past and future.

DS

**You can take the river out of the moors
but you can't take the moors out of the river**

Zooming past black bogs
fizzing over weedy rocks
cavorting with dippers and dragonfly nymph

until - stopped short and lost
in a vast black lake,
imprisoned with slow moving fish
and clinging brown algae.

until - forced into a great black pipe
hurtled across the black moor
spat out in dingy houses
on black city streets.

Still - the molecules of hydrogen and oxygen
contain the memory of zooming,
of mimicking the curlew's call,
tumbling with the lapwing,
chasing the merlin and the quick, brown Hare.

SL

Llyn Brenig

Wind

creates shapes.

Waves curl and swarm

into a walk-on-water heron

which trembles into wood smoke

and a girl skimming stones across

the river. River, hidden under the lake.

Full of memories and dreams and windows.

Bryn Hir, farmhouse, where wood is popping

in the hearth and flames warm chilled fingers.

Winter holds fast and the shepherd curls into his

sheep's wool bed. He dreams of waves

breaking in through thatch and door.

The land is sighing out an ache.

Hiraeth, home lost to flood,

Valley lane, moss soft.

Tarmac rippled.

Falling into

water.

DS

Her Song

The curlew's song is hers again
when she leaves the purple moor
and glides down to the winter shore

Her bubbling song is hers again
and not for a speckled mate
or the fox's pouncing gait

Her rippling song is hers again
and not for the buzzard's shadow
or a lost chick in the meadow.

Her liquid song is hers again
and for the turning tide
and the harvest moon
and the phosphorescent waves.

SL

Remote

I scan for your black-tipped ears
above the purple moor grass,
search out your amber eyes in the bracken
and just when I think I see you,
the golden plover sentry
whistles a warning and you leap
on long legs towards
the scarlet rowans.

SL

Wind

*This house has been far out at sea all night,
The wood crashing through darkness, the booming
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet*

Ted Hughes

The moon shudders and folds inwards.
Pinhole stopped down pulls in the sky.
Clouds are shadow puppets that rear and buck
and I am like the swallow, shaken
and raw, diving into holes of wind.
A refuge away from the flight
of shrieking tree boughs and debris.
A quiet place in this topsy-turvy rumble
but even the eaves tremble as the wind bites.
This house has been far out at sea all night.

The noise of the night has silenced the frogs;
quiet now under crusts of water. They wait
for beams of light to burn holes in the cold.
Only then will they resume their singing.
Inside I listen to the deranged musician
who pounds the roof with fiendish drumming.
He is the drummer, the horn blower.
Calling the revenants. They swarm in the wood
and come. I cry at the hurtling:
The wood crashing through darkness, the booming.

The storm brings flashes of light.
Ravens harassing birth-bloody lambs.
Their eyes sparking forks and black beaks delving.
Craven thieves stealing sight from the new born.
There is no mercy just throats that gobble.
Out of sight, a hare lies under a scarecrow,
playing dead under the swaying straw man.
If he ran they could not catch him. He is
faster than flying geese and the raging
winds stampeding the fields under the window.

The rain pounds. Glass is a river, grass
is a river. Wind and water is all there is.
I shut the curtains and push back the night,
turning inward like a dormouse. Warmth spreads
outwards from orange-gold hazel. Hands
and feet, a flickering yellow duet.
Light turns out shadow, flashing on stone
and through stone, like a daffodil growing
out of rock. A stalwart beauty and yet
floundering black astride and blinding wet.

DS

Halloween

Rain taps its fingers,
prying at window panes.

Wind whips around edges,
leaving frayed and beaten trails.

Unnoticed souls
slip between raindrops
and go gale riding.

Twisting, laughing.

Lights shine out in the darkness.
Flickering beacons welcome
unlooked for guests.

Careless, breathless.

They knock in the night.
Leaves shudder in their wake.

Wisps of wind
heave a last breath
and are silent.

DS

music

i

there is rhythm in this water

raindrops tap and paradiddle

beech and oak leaves sizzle

nascent voices

summer downpour

wets whale skin rock

chuckle

crones throw off red beads

and spatter moss pools

argue

rocks bash and clatter

take slivers out of each other

banter

chest thumping bass

white noise roar

silence

in-between

dippers slice

gold cloud mirror

*Woodsman, oak of a man, sings in the woods;
a voice which vibrates in log piles, agitates spiders
and makes his mother weep. His cottage,
more outdoors than indoors, welcomes
woodlice and beetles which patter across
slate floors. By the hearth, the dog,
seal grey and smiling, grunts out of time.*

*Pheasant, in copper glory, peeps out from willow roost.
He sees a chain sawing man clatter through the wood
and squawks loudly at this invasion. The man is deaf
to the protest so pheasant marches in and pecks
a muddy boot. Pecks again, ignores the menace
of the saw and ceremoniously fluffs up feathers. Peck.
Peck him on his rotund bottom. That'll see him off.*

*The gander, who takes chunks
out of the postman, eats from
Eirwen's hand. Her laughter rings
in the valley she loves, until she meets
a pack of rats in the byre, then she
and the gander run full pelt down
the meadow in a bevy of shrieks.*

*Trebor sobs in the ravine.
Snow has fallen too deeply.
Sixty sheep lie buried and his
brother hangs from a noose.*

*Fiddler by the stream. Bow slicing
faster than falling water. Woman, thin
as a willow. Face sculpted like river-worn
rock. Melodies as fleeting and beautiful
as the zig-zagging demoiselle.*

My skirt swooshes through nettles that line the path.
The sound of it reminds me of moths' wings
and how small sounds make you listen harder
like the fall of a leaf or a flower opening
or the whisper in your eyes which reveal a hurt
you can't speak of but which leads back to a scream.
But there is balm where the trees are alive with music,
peace in the enduring chuckle of a mountain stream.

And there will come a day when you *can* speak of it
and I will hold your hand and listen without interrupting.
Your grief will lift with the thermals and return
transformed with the soft beat of rain. Unclouded light
will crackle through you, sparking and arcing
and I'll hear you unwind like a spring-fresh fern. DS

Like a Raven

(after Michael Ondaatje)

Your voice is like a carpenter striking Iroko with a wooden
mallet
like Angus, the first great storm of the winter
like a diamond being wrenched from the earth
and chipped into the shape of your tail
like someone gargling with salt water
after a multiple tooth extraction
like the hollow ringing of the church bell
in an old spaghetti western.

When you gather to roost in the twisted pines
your voices are like a classroom of children
learning to play the xylophone
an orchestra of Puerto Rican guiros
a congregation of African agogo bells
a village of women scraping shirts over washboards
the laughter of wise old people
rusty mattress springs
the bubbling of hot mud in Yellowstone Park
the echoes of Huginn and Muninn
whispering secrets to the Norse god Odin.

SL

(NB: Huginn and Muninn were Odin's ravens who he sent out each day to circle the earth and come back with news).

Sight

The sun is an old coin
falling into peat.

An aureole sneaks
around hare's ears.

She lowers them
and folds into grass

but lifts her nose
to the quiet light.

His eyes burn with
after images of gold.

The farmer turns
his gun away.

DS

Horse dreams of freedom

Shire sleeps under
a false moon.

He rests his heaviness
on cobbled ground.

His ears twitch like the bats
that scoot in and out.

He dreams of raven skies
pierced with stars
and breaking tethers
that keep him in shadow.

Turf under hoof
wild garlic, bluebell.
Heron snoozing in its roost.

Red dawn.
Clouds of mistletoe
in the hoary morning.

A limitless horizon.

DS

Haiku

Prints in powder snow
blackbird, badger, rabbit, fox
yours, mine - heading home.

Lapwings blowing
swanee whistles tumble
like circus clowns.

Like a Buddha
the heron motionless
wrapped in a soft grey cloak.

Dull brown sparrow -
where it bathed in snow,
a tiny angel shape.

SL

Sarah Lewis

I've lived on a boat in Greece, seen the top of Everest, smelled the breath of a whale and moved around the country working for the RSPB but I continue to have the most amazing adventures right on my own doorstep.

Although I've lived in the village of Rhydymwyn for 35 years, I'm still getting to know it.

Birds are part of my life, like breathing is part of my life. I'm never (well, hardly ever) without – my notebook, pen and a pair of binoculars.

Diana Sanders

I am a musician, composer, teacher and poet. I live on the edge of the Hiraethog Moors and am captivated daily by the landscape and its wildlife. I try to tread lightly in this incredible place.

Words and music are part of me, like a limb.

The connections between all things fascinate me – the way bird song entwines on a spring morning, the way you can have the same thought at the same time as a friend and how we are all intrinsically connected. We come from stardust and are only custodians of our atoms.

