

# *Blue Sky Thinking*

by Arlene Jackson

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The window is large by their standards, a luxury I don't deserve. The outside world is tightly framed, vignettes of life callously edited.

Blue sky. White clouds.

I can see a reasonable area of sky from this position, enough to understand the vast disparity between the effortless achievements of nature and the forced monuments to mankind's existence. That plane, for example, climbing up, through and into the blue. It would terrify me if I were standing beneath it on a shimmering airport tarmac, senses fuelled. But from here, it is no more than a tiny, elongated streak of white which I could flick from my visual field with one fingernail.

To the left of this animated snapshot stands a barricade of trees. Although skeletal during this season, they remain tall and commanding. Towering up, possibly from a park. Representative of an outdoor play space, a place of innocent freedom. Sitting low beneath these elder statesmen is a crescent of white-washed houses. They partially block my view of the great trees and their connection to the earth. I focus on what I *can* see, choosing to believe that the branches, which wave to the rhythm of the wind, are reaching up and out to provide me with a lifeline. There *is* an oasis to search for and to be found. Eventually.

Hours and hours of stagnant sky.

It may not be a crescent. Between here and the trees the houses sweep out then vanish: as a rainbow evaporates into the ether. But I close my eyes and trace the curve, offsetting the linear landscape and series of

boxes which I inhabit. This Mind's Eye, saviour of my sanity, routinely and reassuringly enables me to tread along the arc of what must surely be a crescent.

This is a deliberate daydream, a celebratory lap of honour which will be taken when I am released. My arms will be upstretched with joy and pride at making it to the end of this gruelling experience. I dream it over and over, determined that when I get there, upright, running and free, I will have remained reminiscent of myself.

Sky tinged with a grey, sickening pallor. A swipe of cobweb clouds.

This time capsule of penance, from which I watch the world move on, is mathematical in its alignment, its contents as organised and oppressive as religion. I too have been reduced to a number, a forensic exhibit. I remain achingly aware that no one will search for the encapsulated contents of this life. The days that fill it are not a mosaic of vibrantly coloured, vivid interludes. No archaeologist would trace a finger in wonder over this template of time.

Darkening, ominous sky. A spectre of steely clouds.

I am alerted by voices seeping through the door of steel. Impenetrable to me. All too accessible to others.

There is no knock or pardon: their fogged ignorance prevents the reassurance of propriety. The door opens. It is the social worker, creeping in like Fagin to review the situation. She is twice my age, half my height and so anxious to disguise her discomfort that her thin fingers tremble as she touches, then clutches at the one chair in the room. She grasps its hard corners and sits down. She has the power to do so without asking.

I sense her embarrassment as I watch her head bend lower than is necessary to retrieve a rustle of documents from her bag.

Viridian sky blighted by vapourish cloud.

Her questions are brief, equal to the succinct response required. However, the sight of this woman, the sudden comfort of another human presence, initiates a relapse of my social sobriety. I waffle, ramble and digress. Her flat expression is no deterrent to my increasingly animated response and flailing attempt at day-to-day dialogue.

This room has no clocks, a concession that is comforting. No immediate reminder of what is so much time to pass. Nature, itself incarcerated on the outside of the window, orientates me to time. It is the social worker who has an obsession with her watch. She belittles and berates me with each glance towards it. When I am mid-sentence she rises. She voices the time spent and my ability to talk. My stomach shrinks as she stealthily slips from view, having pickpocketed my self-esteem.

Seconds after her departure, I hear faster footsteps approach. A flustered face appears at the door. The social worker had arrived late and left early, just as the carer likes to do. I immediately register the anger tightening her lips and hardening her expression.

The carer does not offer any civil questioning. There is no, "How did it go?" She is well-aware of my verbal diarrhoea and has no wish to be swamped in the deluge. She saves herself by throwing the shit back at me: a recitation of things undone in her allocated time. She recedes from the room. Her long sigh of relief communicates her luck to be leaving the stench of a wasted body and the diversion of an active mind.

She is light on the stairs and swiftly out the front door. I can hear several frenetic attempts before her fingers, fused with frustration, finally turn the key in the lock. The outside handle is tested to ensure it is secure. Fleet-footed she flees into her car and away. Self-satisfied: job done, forgotten now that I am safely locked in my own house.

Black, shadowless sky. An amber radiance illuminates the crescent.

Silence looms. I remain flat on the bed.

I've found that I do not cry when alone. Expressing emotion requires company. After months of tests which had confirmed that I was no more than biology gone wrong, I had recalled the fact that humans are ninety percent water and ten percent who knows what. That ninety percent had long been expelled. It was impossible for anyone to cry as much as I had since the diagnosis. Today, I had been made to feel even less of the ten percent that remains. But without the presence or the sound of a voice down the line, someone who had known me when I was whole, my eyes remain dry.

I catch my reflection in the mirrored doors of the wardrobe. Inside hangs a history: shamefully short shorts, funky wellies and mad hats, all collated from free and breezy festivals. Rainbow harem pants and tie-dye tops from my travels. Doc Martins and ironic T-shirts from my protesting adolescence.

Here on the bed is an immobile mannequin, awkwardly dressed by a third party. Part of the job, to make it fit for display. Childish leggings for comfort and ease. A loose T-shirt under a baggy fleece for warmth and convenience. Bed socks, hand-knitted granny bed socks.

I see a pale face, darkened by charcoal shadows deepening the hollows of the eyes. Hair scraped back to detract from the fact it has not been cut in seven years.

It can't be me. I turn my head towards the window.

Cars containing families pull into the crescent. As their evening begins mine must end. The days are long enough.

The wasted legs offer eight steps. Two to the commode and two back. I save two for the journey back to the bed and take two to the window to pull down the blind.

No sky. No clouds. No crescent.

My mind's eye opens.