

IN THE FOG

Working on 'White Open Spaces' (Pentabus/BBC)

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Of course, I'd been in the countryside before – on the train, in the car – but only ever passing through, from city to city. The countryside was somewhere pretty but unwelcoming to me, as a British Asian woman. I saw some of the other writers and an actor travelling to Clun, on the platform at Shrewsbury. I'd never met any of them before, but felt confident enough to approach them. We were the only non-white people on the platform after all, so it was a safe bet they were involved in the project.

Staying at the Arvon Centre was my first real experience of the British countryside. The centre is housed in the former residence of John Osborne in Shropshire, and was donated to the Arvon Foundation by his estate. It's a beautiful building that sits in the deepest, darkest countryside, miles away from the nearest village of Clun.

The other writers were white English, Chinese, Romany, African-Caribbean, Asian, and the atmosphere throughout the week was one of honesty and frankness about our expectations, fears and experiences. Pentabus organised a series of field trips to help fuel our imaginations. Mine involved visiting a pagan high-priestess who ran a



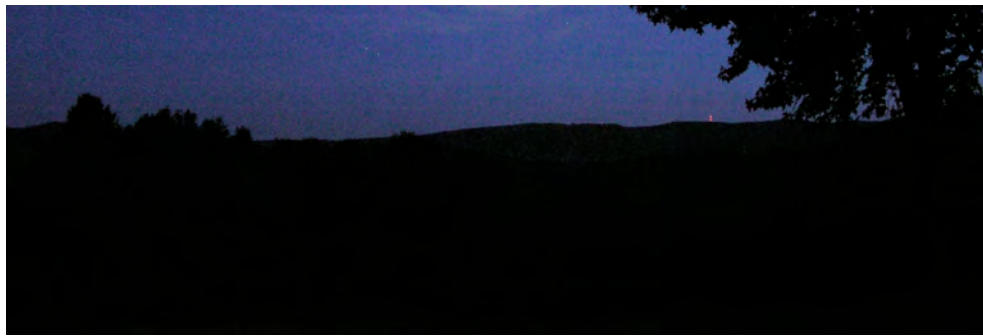
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new age shop with a temple in the backroom, and the wife of a young farmer who'd set up a holiday cottage to rent on the farm's land.

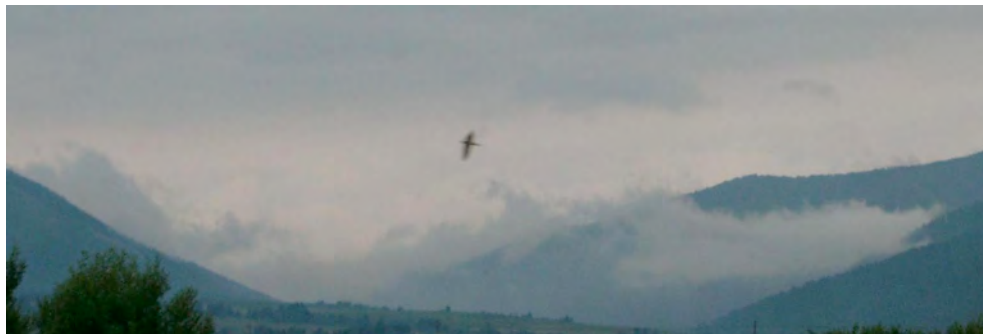
Surprisingly, it was the farmer's wife, and her relationship with her husband, that most intrigued me. She had an open, restless energy, so it was particularly intriguing when she spoke about her husband, who sounded like an old man in a young man's body. They seemed like such an odd couple. She spoke about his routine, and how he liked things to be 'just so.' She believed gender roles were necessarily more rigid in the countryside – the laborious and long working hours her husband faced every day meant if she didn't have his dinner on the table in time, he'd be too tired to work, and the whole family would suffer. We glimpsed him from the window, passing by in his tractor, and their little girl ran to the window to 'see daddy'. I was struck by the idea of the country defining his masculinity.



That night, after we'd talked about our respective adventures in the main house, I made my way outside and across to the building I was sleeping in. The biggest shock about the country, to a city-dweller like me, is how dark it gets at night. I became disorientated and ended up on the path towards Clun, where I got my foot stuck in a pothole, and fell over in the pitch black. My torch went rolling off, and I felt like I was in a horror film. No one could hear me, and there was no mobile phone reception, so it was an enormous relief when I was able to pick myself up and limp back to the centre.

'Two Men in the Fog', the monologue I wrote for 'White Open Spaces', was inspired by this sense of fear and disorientation, and by the elusive character of the young farmer. I imagined a young British Asian man coming to the country, seeking the solace of isolation, and instead finding it amplifying his anger and frustration. Eventually, however, the environment leads to a moment of self-realisation. I wanted to encapsulate the combination of possibility and vulnerability that the countryside made me feel – I loved the feeling of space and freedom, but this was tempered with a sense that this space didn't belong to me.

Working on 'White Open Spaces' has affected the way I view the countryside. Speaking to people living and working in and around Clun made me appreciate their very different way of life, which in some cases was far harder than I imagined. Despite this, I believe that it's a way of life that should be protected, and in part, this could be achieved through a greater understanding of it outside of rural areas. The arts offer a fantastic way of opening up the world of rural Britain to urban dwellers like me, and might even encourage people to visit for the first time, leading to a greater sense of ownership of the countryside for more diverse communities.

**Author's note**

In 2005, I was invited to take part in a co-project between the Pentabus Theatre Company, BBC Radio Drama Birmingham, and the Arvon Writing Foundation, in November that year, I joined eight other writers, and several directors and actors, for a glorious week at the Arvon Centre near Clun, in Shropshire. Our brief was to write a monologue based on our experience of the rural, from the perspective of our predominantly urban backgrounds. These monologues eventually led to the stage play 'White Open Spaces', which played at the Edinburgh Festival in the summer of 2006, before transferring to the Soho Theatre in London in October 2006. It was nominated for a South Bank Show award earlier this year, and there are plans for it to tour rural venues during winter 2007.