Controlled Ruination
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Poem written at Orford Ness with Mendham Writers
Rachel Kellett
October 2012
Nesting birds and unexploded bombs: Beware
Take care, to keep to the tracks. Do not
Deviate. We are the National Trust in us
To keep, preserve this heritage of ours
Which in this case is all to do with LAND
This Ness or Nose, this vegetative spit of land
A piece of peeling skin from island body
That once was joined to that which, sea divided,
Threatens, so chosen as a vantage facing east.
The threat that never came. This flat land
Became the place where bombs were tested,
Trajectories into single sand, all photographed
At shutter speeds in high up bunkers. A Chinese wall,
Built by prisoners of another war. And later still
A research station for atomic weapons.
And Cobra Mist - a distant stark rectangular block
Without a window to look out or in. Where Roger,
With us now, came then in ‘68,
And was paid 160 quid a day
For January labouring. No union or questions asked.
A boat away, we landed on the shore, where
In a surprising Scandinavian voice we hear:
‘And if you like the lighthouse, like I do
You’ll make your way there first, and don’t forget
To hug it. It it won’t be long before the mercury
Is taken out. It will be left to fall. The sea is close’.
An egret white on murky mud flat, took flight.
Shutting back its neck, it flew to where
I could not go, landing on a porcelain toilet,
Disjointed and incongruous, in a marsh
Of ripe reddening samphire fingers.
The stuff of boffins who worked here then, are left
Littered in the land, together with their tools of war:
Blown out shells, and twisted wire, arching
Like the blackberry bowers, with fruit so sweet
Not spat on by the devil, on this benign October day,
(Although we wondered about radioactivity).
All juxta pose and jar our tourist eyes.
A warden on a bicycle shouts out to lovers
Walking on a ridge of swales ‘They’re centuries old!
Keep off’, A sign: ‘Eleven Thousand Volts,
Danger! MOD’ is necklaced with a
Briar that homes a caterpillar’s winter comb.
Beyond, still on the distant flat land, a string
Of stick thin dancers, antenna masts soar
High to mist. As recent as last year used
To transmit waves of voices from the BBC
To the World. Now cut back, stand silent still.
Sea poppy with interwoven loops of stems
A criss crossed veil, protecting hub.
No brazen hard rectangular wall of front, but
An effective mesh to greet the sea sharp wind and rain,
That deviates the blow, and breaks the energy.
These plants know how to survive what man
Or nature give. Unlike the cracking concrete path
On which we must tread.
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October 2012, Orford Ness with Tamar and Rochelle and Mendham Writers

Made on a Mac