**Scarletts**

You were once my mind

Were once almost all my mind

Not just once but many times

Mindful of that memory

I will recall with love and wood

Stars and night

Of walking, crawling, floating

And sometimes

nothing more than staring

at the sky with dewgrass

beneath me.

**Approaching from the sea.**

Along the sea wall or through the private gate; all wood houses built by my friend's grandfather. The wood was floated down from London on a Thames sailing barge. Oxblood sails, turgid speed, and could be turned and moved by a single Admiralty anchor. In daylight put the sea behind you and walk slowly past the wood houses, each a different type, I suppose, to suit different families. The sound of the sea will slowly decrease. There were about six houses, but the one I want to tell you about was on the left approached from the sea in daylight. I will tell you of other approaches later.

And always wood, white painted frame, the rest stained with creosote. Two tiny seats athwart the entrance. You could sit there with breakfast tight as a drum. The lobby waxed floors and dusty, some trace of the wood carried in. Sometimes the damp smell of the wood and the smell of last week's log fire, in the winter damp with the smell of resin. The need to heat or air the house made it breathe with the seasons. The tiled floor always colder than the rest. Always spider webs in summer; always damp in winter. Off the kitchen a tiny bathroom ever cold. Water for the bath something for the next day. The window was just a square of garden.

Vast logs in a pile: once, all the firs had to come down – sorrow for the living wood but heat for the logs – quite a cycle for such a small patch. The lawn a square patch of grass. I had thought of acquiring an old convertible and sinking into the earth to be viewed from the first floor.

The lobby downstairs a side table, a jug, a bowl. We would always fill it with cow parsley in summer; it would drop and fall away with the delicacy of a still life. Not flowers, just the evidence of the hedgerow outside. Pick something and transform the interior.

Upstairs the room on the left was usually mine. Sort out some damp sheets, a sleeping bag in winter. At the rear a balcony all along the first floor. We always thought it would collapse.

**The black van and the holy barn**

I remember when the black van was free, people away, the weekend ahead. Supplies would be at hand, the route known, certain stops on the way. Some kit, some food. Remember the availability of alcohol and food. Which albums and which tapes, sometimes the need to construct whole menus; sometimes, more importantly, some kit for the boat. Late Friday arrived and unpack.

The fire first, constructed with precision; all the materials stored and dried from the last visit; coats would stay on, the release of the place and the stillness of the house imbue calm. Next the amplifiers and speakers from the hiding place. Check for leaks and any attempted break-ins. For tomorrow, faxes about the weather, tide tables, sea area reports.

As they came down the coast, wait for Humber, Thames. That was us. The estuary faces east, a blow in with the tide, and we could get to Maldon but check the tides. Here be mud at Maldon. If the weather was neutral go for Osea Island with the flow, back on the ebb; park on the beach and beer and sandwiches not wine, always save the wine for the evenings.

Remember: to get the Finn off the beach was a sweat; difficult at high awful at low. Saturday night: lose the wellies for the pub, although not grand, at least it was in a good position on the sea wall. The thing is not to show you are a yachtie, the powerboaters hated us, they would cut us up for fun, zip up close then squirt the Yamaha to port and watch the wash knock you sideways.

Once we had the house for the whole week. Ham, turkey, a case of white, a case of red, logs by the load. We travelled to the barn that was holy. Just wooden driftwood cross. An empty place but somewhere to throw your ashes. The wild shore with mud and constant rivulets going back to the sea. The long tide. Always search along the tidemark for driftwood, always find something. Once a Gordon’s gin bottle, encrusted with barnacles. I kept that for years. Heart shaped pebbles and ties of rope or fishing net later to make ornaments or a pattern on the garden wall, once a small amber, always wood, some deformed plastic, a brush head without bristles, a surreal statement; holes empty.

Collected, these were jewels nothing; flotsam and jetsam on the floor for your delectation. I once found a fish tray on the beach, a length of twine, holy rocks. Twine tied to the tray, I trailed to the shore; back to the five-year-old child I used to be and to still yearn for.

**Night revision**

Across the river a light blinked. It was probably a moored yacht. The light oscillated, the boat moored on the ebb tide, straining at the anchor. Walking back to the house, the preferred way, along the sea wall. No tracks just night sense. Remove light and the eye adjusts; night vision. The technique, leave the pub then squat down looking out to the estuary. A slight glow from the coast opposite, the shape of the boat being just visible.

Avoid any points of light. At sea we put on the riding lights as late as we could because night vision was a new sense; an obscure one in the city because there was never real dark, the eye was never stretched. Along the sea wall we crept. To the left the few weekend boats, to the right the estuary. A porch light, now screen it off with your hand and navigate with the glow outlining the path of the sea wall. As the light peters out that night light returns. You would see the stars for the first time, just like the first time sailing the channel at night. I had not had the faintest on star maps, but I could see patterns, signposted travel. We crept along the wall now there is a group of trees that signalled the estate. The sea wall curved round, now the estuary reflected the stars overhead.

He does tell you I once saw the moon rising over water at night? A white light a blob growing bigger. A silent explosion? Not navigation lights, just a white glow then a half round, then a globe, a white sun at night a phenomenon as yet unseen by me, sunsets yes; moonrise never. The sea has its own optics, its own owner.

Star patterns over tall trees east generally, stumble over stones, still head east. Now the sea wall gate, over that and the house was ahead. No light but it was 90° to port so we segmented the star maps and took a new one. The house was the fourth one, I had named the first one on the left the salt box, and the second one on the right the Nob’s house never been invited there, good. Past the third a tad to the right, the shed we used as a boathouse inside the near abstract of paints tests and globs of varnish and the spiders that would die on the setting varnish that we would apply each Easter. The house, Scarletts, came to view, now a difficult 90° left again remember the cow parsley on the right that was the ditch. Squeeze past the black van, we should have left a light on but the voyage was worth it.

RICHARD COWARD January 1999