

HARROW & VINE

THE LONG FIELD

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THE LONG FIELD.

essays on staying put

by
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*For my mother, who planted things she did not
expect to see grown.*

*The land is not a background. It is
the other party to the argument.*

Attributed to a Fenland drainage commissioner, 1878

acknowledgements

These essays were argued over, at length, by people who had every right to be doing something else: the Thursday reading group at the Norwich library, who heard the first three and said so; Adaeze, who read the fourth and asked the question that made it the sixth; and the tenant farmers of the Long Field, who corrected my drainage history and declined to be named for it.

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1 The Long Field

The field behind the house is eleven acres and has been called the Long Field since at least 1802, when a tithe map recorded it under that name without explanation. It is not especially long. It is longer than it is wide, which in a parish of small irregular closes was apparently enough.

I have walked its edge most days for nine years. For the first two I was looking for something: a subject, I suppose, or evidence that I had been right to come. I found neither, and kept walking, and somewhere in the third year the walking stopped being a search.

A place you cannot leave is a prison; a place you will not leave is a practice. The difference is not in the walls but in whether the staying is chosen again each morning. I do choose it, most mornings. On the others I walk anyway, which I have decided counts.

What changed was not my understanding of the field. The field did not need me to understand it in order to keep me. What changed was the unit of attention. In the first year I saw a field. By the fourth I saw the wet corner that floods in February, the ridge where the plough turns, the hedge that someone laid badly in the 1970s and which has been slowly correcting itself since.¹

None of this is knowledge that travels. It cannot be carried to another field and applied. That is the objection people raise, gently, when they ask whether I miss things, and it is a fair one. I have simply stopped believing that portability is the highest quality a piece of knowing can have.

¹A laid hedge is cut most of the way through and bent over, so that it continues to grow horizontally and thickens into a stock-proof barrier. Done badly it dies back in patches, and the gaps take thirty years to close.

2 The argument for staying

The case against staying put is usually made on behalf of the person staying, which is what makes it difficult to answer. It is not that you are doing something wrong. It is that you are, they suspect, missing something, and the missing is invisible to you precisely because you are missing it.

I want to take the objection seriously before I disagree with it.

2.1 What movement is actually for

Movement does three things that staying does not. It breaks habit, which is the only reliable way to see a habit at all. It supplies comparison, without which every local arrangement looks like the natural order. And it removes you from the people who have already decided what you are, which for some people is the difference between a life and a sentence.

These are real. I have used all three. The essays in this book exist because I left somewhere else first.

2.2 What it costs

But movement also resets the clock on a particular kind of noticing, and that kind is not recoverable by effort. You cannot arrive somewhere and work harder at knowing it. The knowing accrues at its own rate, mostly while you are doing something else, and it is destroyed by departure in a way that other knowledge is not.

A person who has lived in six places for four years each has, in a sense, lived nowhere for twenty-four. That is too harsh and I withdraw it. But something in the neighbourhood of it is true, and I have not found a formulation that keeps the truth and loses the cruelty.

2.3 The honest version

The honest version is that staying is not better. It is a different bet, made against a different risk. The mover risks shallowness. The stayer risks provincialism, and the particular smallness that comes of never being contradicted by a stranger.

I have taken the second bet. I do not recommend it. I only object to being told that I have not made a choice.

Also by Perpetua Adeyemi

- *Standing Water* (2021), essays on the Fenland drainage schemes and the communities they displaced.
- *A Short Account of the Commons* (2023), with Ibrahim Sowande.

About the author

Perpetua Adeyemi was born in Lagos and has lived in Norfolk since 2016. She writes about land use, inheritance, and the politics of drainage, and has contributed to regional journals on the history of the Fens. This is her second collection.