

Nine Things To Do On Holiday

Susan Shaw

Inhabit

Make yourself at home. Put your toothbrush in the turquoise tumbler and fold fresh towels over the radiator. Someone has left a bar of apricot-coloured soap behind. You don't use it, but you can't quite discard it either. It smells like your grandmother's bathroom. Or Russia before the revolution.

Invade

(i) The spider on the stripy rug is huge. The biggest you have ever seen. Enormous. You search for something large enough to catch it in. The diameter of a hand-thrown jug looks inadequate; spider legs would be snapped under its rim. But this course of action is hypothetical, because you are unable to move from your position by the dressing table. Your problem is clear: if you shout for help, will help arrive before the spider disappears behind the wardrobe?

(ii) For I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own King. Or words to that effect. You are the invaders, interrupting my usual journey from one district to another; causing fires and floods and displacement. I know every inch along the borders and I've mapped my territory with military precision. I can keep a low profile, safe in my darkest, most secret hiding places. I can wait for as long as it takes, because I'll still be King long after you've taken your baggage and binoculars to another country.

Cook

Explore the kitchen. It will be like playing house. Remember Goldilocks before the three bears came home? Hidden saucepans stack inside a corner cupboard. An overspill of glasses jostles with mismatched mugs and novelty egg cups. A silverfish scuttles as you open the cutlery drawer. There's a smell of other people's roast dinners as the oven bakes your jacket potato. Skerricks of salt, pepper, cumin and vinegar have been left behind. A souvenir teatowel, sponge and dishcloth wait neatly on the worktop. Soon, the food you make will become less familiar. Not quite what you usually eat. You haven't reached the era of microwaved laziness, but have started to forget exactly what you cook for dinner from day to day.

Discover

Go find a garden. A garden with high, sun-soaked walls surrounding its inner sanctuary, keeping out trees, deer and all but the most intrepid explorers. Push open the wooden gate and pause in wonder, step inside and lock out the world behind you. Take in vermilion against burgundy, heavily-honeyed scents and butterfly-laden blooms; the loudness of glasshouse geraniums and the last fragile flowers of an ancient wisteria. Sit and be still. Inhabit a cloistered space. Listen to the wind in the oaks, pines and beeches beyond the wall.

The sky is scudding over with clouds again. Enough blue patches for a sailor's trousers are disappearing as you fumble for your camera and zoom up close to a tiger lily. Perhaps rain will only fall outside the garden, leaving you dry and warm within. Quickly, you capture delphinium spires that are no other type of blue except blue. The first spots of rain dapple your hand. When you open the garden gate, the trail of breadcrumbs through the forest has disappeared.

Look

You crunch on cones and lichen. A squirrel skeeters across the path. Standing still for the first time, you can smell resin dripping through the trees. You turn slowly. The squirrel pauses. As you move in closer, its head angles towards you, ears pricked. You remember the moment like a photograph and carry it home.

Experimental Writing Prize - Shortlisted

Head Judge:
Clare Fisher

***The University of Sheffield's
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Burn

(i) Burn something that annoys you. Start with a magazine from the stack piled up by the people before. Rip out the pages. Put all the things you don't need to read about to good use. Follow your grandfather's big, skilful hands making rolled up paper columns as you begin to build the foundations of your fire.

(ii) Burn something that isn't wood or paper or coal. Watch a small part of yourself go up in smoke. Place your parcel in the embers with care. Avoid the instant gratification of feeding it to the greedy flames. Be patient. Watch your bundle blacken and smoulder, forcing out grey-green plumes as it unfurls and splits open. Your mother always asked if you had anything else to burn when your father built a bonfire at the bottom of the garden. You dived into your wardrobe, surfaced with a brown paper bag and walked slowly towards him. He was using a rake to lift the burning branches and feed more oxygen to the flames. You left the parcel by a pile of privet clippings; knew better than to throw it to the fire out of turn.

Adjust

A crane fly drowns in your cup. You fish it out and sip tepid tea. Spiders have encased the ivy at your patio elbow and wasps are probing tablecloth spills. Windfallen apples bruise and burst beneath the trees. Maybe, if you can peel them in a single strip and carve out enough good flesh, you will stew some and make a jug of custard. Maybe leave them to the blackbirds. Meanwhile, the borrowed garden unfurls gently, spreading itself all around you. Freed from shears, spades and secateurs, you close your eyes.

Return

What is different about the beach? What has changed since yesterday?

You notice the lamp black and Payne's grey of the sky as it curtains the abrupt hills. The sea is darker and more distant, drawing a graphite line along the horizon. The beach is damper and studded intermittently with cockle shells. Some are outer side up and suctioned to the sand, some are inside up and deeply embedded. Yesterday, these details escaped you. Today, you are slowed by the task of gathering along the tidewrack; absorbed by the search for wood for the fire. Everything else has slipped away. You wonder how your life would be if you could feel like this all of the time.

Pack Your Bags

You wrap limpets, razor shells, a mermaid's purse, pine cones, driftwood, sea glass, crow feathers, coral bones and a rabbit skull inside your used up underwear, before shoehorning them into your suitcase. Once home, these treasures will turn your beloved mantelpiece into something rich and strange; nudging you back towards your holiday.



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