

JAY MASON-BURNS

Round the Outside

*“Buffalo gals go around the outside, ‘round the outside,
‘round the outside,
Buffalo gals go around the outside and dosie-doe your partners”*

‘Buffalo Girls’ by Malcolm McLaren and the World’s Famous Supreme Team, 1982.

Bartley Reservoir is in Bartley Green, about 10 kilometres south west of Birmingham City Centre. Constructed between 1928 and 1930 by damming the valley of Senneleys Brook, the reservoir is 18 metres deep (or 60 feet in old money) and contains approximately 2.4 million cubic litres of water. Its purpose is to provide a backup supply of drinking water for the City in case of drought or damage to the pipeline from the Elan Valley reservoirs in North Wales, from where the water is piped through a gravity-fed system for over a hundred kilometres.

The Rezza, as we locals call it, is one of my happy places. It’s a place I go to walk, to experience nature and enjoy the simple freedom of being outdoors. It became especially important to me during the Covid pandemic because it was one of the few places I could legitimately escape too for exercise walks that was close to my home, but removed from the socially distanced weirdness that I’d see in my local park. The Rezza is wide and beautiful, walking around there I rarely see people, so I can lose myself in the morning mists that rise from the waters or drift across old farm fields, now left fallow for livestock.

There is one big caveat though, that I’m forever at odds with. The Rezza is strictly off-limits to the public (although, I will come back to that statement later). The waters and shoreline of the Reservoir have long been fenced off, a ring of steel around the entire perimeter from one end of the dam to the other (which is where my photos begin and end). Locals do regularly make illicit inroads to these shores, mostly for fishing, cutting through soft spots in the membrane, to camp almost invisible amidst the trees. Severn Trent Water, who own the site, militantly enforce this protectorate of theirs, CCTV modules dot the perimeter and any damage to the fence line doesn’t last long (the damaged fence in one of my photos was patched and strengthened with a halo of razor wire within 24 hours of me capturing that image).

It wasn’t always this way. When the Rezza was built the area it was still a part of rural Warwickshire and there were no council estates or blocks of flats crowded up against its

shores. Indeed, the shoreline of the Rezza remained walkable for the public until the late 20th century. Sadly the world has changed a lot over the last thirty years or so. Fresh water is an increasingly precious commodity and post 9/11 the rationale of successive governments has been to secure and protect the most important parts of our national infrastructure.

I visit the Rezza to relax and unwind, a short interlude of urban walking brings me there, along Long Nuke Road, straight as an arrow from my house to the southern end of the dam on Genner's Lane. Apparently, Long Nuke is a corruption of 'Long Nook' which refers to the secluded tree lined valley where Senneleys Brook once flowed, but those waters go no further than the Rezza now. A clockwise route from the southern end of the dam, takes me through an area of scrub and grassland, Genner's Field, running parallel to the southern shoreline of the Rezza, it's my usual route. Genner's Field is remnant, leftover from Genner's Farm, which was swallowed up by the reservoir.

I like to take my time crossing here, it feels the most 'natural' part of this entirely man-made landscape. There's an abundance of life here, attracted by the Rezza's expanse. I regularly see deer, pheasants, foxes and buzzards, although this close to the water the air gets stuffy with flying-wotsit-fings during the summer months. Trees are few and far between, mostly oak, wild cherry or rowan, in the evenings the branches come alive with chattering starlings before they depart to roost. At dawn or dusk the air above whirls and dances with tens of thousands of capering water birds.

I'm never far from the shoreline, but I can't really see it, banks of blackberry, bracken and blackthorn gather up in a tide of impenetrable foliage amassed against the steel fencing. The fuzzy haloes of razor wire add to the general feeling that 'You shall not Pass' and that my presence on the shoreline beyond is definitely not welcome. I am using my Infrared converted Fuji camera, set to shoot black and white. I really enjoy how infrared picks out and emphasizes the difference between man-made and natural elements in a scene. The foliage of plants in particular look amazing, coming out a glowing white whilst the hard edges of walls and fences are very dark in contrast, so I'm hoping that my camera choice works well. I walk south-west toward Frankley Lane, where the land dips down to the shore, my path is muddied by the wash of recent rain. Nettles and brambles make grabs at my heels and lunge for my eye, it's easy to slip over down here. Such is the unkempt nature of public footpaths.

Genner's Field gives way to arable land, the footpath a muddy ribbon squeezed between land and water. I used to walk along Frankley Lane here, about 50 metres uphill, which affords some pleasantly rustic views across hedgerows and fields toward Egghill and of course, across the Rezza. However, the much disputed public footpath has been reinstated now, so it is much pleasanter to enjoy this path (muddy though it may be) rather than risking the blind corners of

Frankley Lane. The land rises up a good metre or two as I walk, offering a lovely and tangibly close view across the Rezza to its northern shore and the picnic site on Scotland Lane. Here, teetering on the Rezza's edge, it remains obstinately unattainable, look but don't touch, the Rezza is a pipe dream, an aesthetic vision of water in which no earthly dweller may partake...

Well, yes, for mere mortals like me. But pay your dues (250 squids for an adult per annum) at the local sailing club and you can have ready access to the Reservoir, 5 days a week, for most of the year, but please don't pee in the water. Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticising the Sailing club, they do lots of good work locally and is staffed by enthusiastic volunteers. But it still remains, to experience and enjoy the Rezza, you have to pay for the privilege.

The path narrows and dwindles into muddy, slippery undergrowth as nettles, brambles and bracken rise up all about me. The air is rich with scents of wet loam, honeysuckle and animal smells. The leavings of humanity are common too, don't touch those bottles of apple cider, it ain't cider! It's not easy or particularly pleasant walking through here, but the reward is you come out at the corner of the Rezza near the end of Scotland Lane. I often stop to look through the fencing here, I'm just a couple of metres from the water's edge, which is long and straight but softened by trees and grass, and I think it looks amazing rendered on my infrared camera, the dark waters in stark contrast to the soft white foliage above. This edge is echoed on the other side by Scotland Lane itself, on the western shoreline it runs for about 300 metres in a dead straight line before dog-legging uphill along the northern shore. Again the contrast between the black tarmac of the road and the glowing white foliage of the trees really emphasizes this man-made edge, and I feel suddenly confident that I've made the right choice.

Over the years this end of the lane has become sadly synonymous with humanity's dissolute side. Road racing, fly tipping, vehicles trashed and set on fire, it's easy to misbehave in the places where you can't be seen. There's no street lighting down here, no nosy neighbours twitching their curtains, just open fields and the Rezza, so it's easy to imagine how attractive this place is after dark. It makes me sad because people, like me, love and value this place, despite the lack of amenities or access to the Rezza. Local Friends groups have fought long and hard for better facilities, more deterrents against fly tipping and more access to the Reservoir, with limited success. As I walk along Scotland Lane, going north, a car pulls in behind me, engine idling as the boot pops up and an old man throws three bulky bags of refuse into the bushes that cover the Rezza's fence line. As I call out to him he tells me to fuck off and then speeds his car perilously close to my position, honking his horn at me angrily, as if I'm the one in the wrong...

The nettles lining this side of the road get me as I dive out the way of the car, the skin on my left arm bubbling with annoyance. It makes me wonder and I shiver at the thought of what

people could dump in the Rezza if the fences weren't there..... I stand to catch my breath beneath the twisted boughs of an old oak that leans over the road from the fields on the opposite side to the Rezza. I can see all the way across the waters from here, to the black line of the Dam. Beyond, between distant silhouettes of trees and houses, I can see the highest reaches of the Post Office Tower, ten kilometres away. Reaching out to brush my fingers across the Oak's gnarly trunk, I wonder what other events this old fellow has loomed over throughout its long life.

Disheartened but undeterred, I walk onwards, passing the halfway point of my familiar circuit, heading up Scotland Lane back toward Bartley Green. The road dog-legs to the right, up the hill as the surroundings suddenly close in dramatically. The shoreline to my left thickens with trees and densely packed bracken, whilst to the right looms the semi-ancient woodland of Bromwich Wood which, to their immense credit, the local Friends group have done amazing work upon cleaning it up and restoring. Many decades of neglect and fly tipping had marred this beautiful spot. The opening up of the tree canopy and gentle management of the woodland floor has allowed native bluebells and wood anemones to flourish again in the springtime.

I head away from the road here, crossing a managed area of grassland on the Rezza's northern shore. It's a popular place in the summertime to picnic and enjoy the view, a sudden shaft of sunlight sparkles on the waves. But I don't particularly like this side, too many dog turds left unscooped along here, too many used needles in the long grass. As I take a couple more images that really highlight the contrast between the man-made fence line and the trees that populate the shore, I notice there's another gap in the fence here, big enough for me to ease myself through. I stop to look, for longer than perhaps necessary, oh I could go through, just for a minute, dip my toes in the water or scoop up a handful to pour over my face and anoint my weary soul. It would so easy. I hear a whirring noise, electro-metallic sounding, there's CCTV close-by to be sure, I can't see it but it can surely see me. My knees crackle and pop like rice krispies as I stand up.

It's an easy walk now, along the edge but never on the edge, of the Rezza. The land rises up gently on this side leaning away from the shore to the road and the estate beyond it. I hear the hooter from the Sailing Club, on your marks, get set. Triangles wobble urgently over the water, rigid canvases full of wind toing and froing, they race so quickly it's a marvel to see. The fence line veers away uphill from the shore to envelope the yards surrounding the sailing club, equally hostile to outsiders. I peer through an assembly of masts to see the concrete edge of the Dam, nearby. I snap some more images and then I'm nearly done.

Through a damp and leaden meadow the track brings me back to the road, Genner's Lane once again, full circle. The campus of Newman University is across from me, but there's rain

in the air and still some photos to take, so I don't linger. The Dam squats across the water ahead of me, resolute and razor sharp, it glowers back at the water. Dark, almost black from a distance, up close the Dam is light grey in colour, a concrete bulwark stretched for almost half a kilometre across the water. Looking through the viewfinder of my camera I'm captivated by the contrast between the saturnine dam and the rough waters.

Despite the dark walls that top the dam, another fence sits on concrete steps, down along the water's edge. You shall not pass, reaffirmed, Balrogs be gone, whilst the waves crash through oblivious. People obviously get down there, discarded things litter the steps, a dismal record of passers-by. A viewing point juts out of the concrete, a third of the way across, the welcome bench there is thankfully unoccupied. Time to put my camera away methinks. And so I sit, watching the waters, rippling and dancing constantly in the breeze, I am mesmerised, dazzled by this ordinary everyday marvel. Across the Rezza, disparate bands of birds are coming together to roost upon its sheltered waters. Beyond, atop distant Egghill, the Frankley beeches are quietly turning bronze. I shall sit here awhile longer, gazing.

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