

# Flotsam and Jetsam

*The Sunken Land Begins to Rise*, M. John Harrison (Gollancz)

"Am I going to stay much longer? I'm not sure. It's so dark lately, and the house is so damp."

This quote from page 203 of M. John Harrison's new novel is as good as any a summary of this elusive novel. Set in West and South West London, and also in Shropshire, the author and his characters Victoria and Shaw drift through life around the Thames and Severn rivers, avoiding disclosure or conversation. They act upon the suggestions of strangers, caught in the ebb and flow of society's backwaters, adrift and all washed up.

Overheard voices through bedsit walls in shared houses, crowded cafes with steamed-up windows, riverside pubs, abandoned docks with decaying barges settled in the mud. Swollen wooden doors and sash windows, damp cellars, mysterious pools under electricity pylons in muddy fields on the edge of town. Condensation, mist, low cloud, misheard and misconstrued conversations. These are what make up Harrison's novel.

It is an exhibition of out-of-focus polaroids with extensive captions. The colours and shapes are often intriguing and seductive, but the images don't seem to relate to one another. Subtext is everything here, plot and meaning are always left off the page, asides to be considered and constructed later. Except that it is impossible to do so. Enigmatic is not the half of it.

It is a book of dream songs, rain songs, misty blurred scenes and lo-fi podcasts, all emanating from damp suburbs and forgotten industrial towns. Harrison writes in an urgent elliptical shorthand, which only adds to the intensity he cannot sustain. Each and every scene and chapter fades out, the book becomes a series of urban portraits, sad lives written out on damp pages. Everything is dull and tarnished, faded and foxed.

I am no lover of straightforward novels, have no wish for overlong description or explanations, but *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* promises so much and delivers so little. It is a book built of mood and implication and little else. Think too hard and the whole thing crumbles and becomes something slightly unpleasant, something moist and sticky that oozes out of the walls. I needed to wash my hands each time I stopped reading.

Rupert Loydell