'Aphasia' began as a single poem, a meditation upon the phenomenon of colony collapse amongst bee populations: a theme that became haunted by a history of lost species, lost languages. After the first poem, connections began to proliferate. I had previously adapted Maurice Maeterlink’s extraordinary book The Life of the Bee for BBC radio, whilst the geographical and historical setting of my poem was also generating considerable personal resonance. The associations of memory and the dynamics of language in both the theme and writing process led me on. The single poem grew into a sequence; a first draft took shape. I thought it was ready for publication, but the first version of ‘Aphasia’ was rejected by this magazine. And that felt right. I’d been struggling to control the material, to find pace, texture, silence. I split some poems into smaller units, re-sequenced, revised, added a new opening poem to contextualise. When the sequence was finally accepted it was suggested that I drop this introductory poem. That felt right, too: it had served its purpose as scaffolding for the sequence. In recognizing that, I accepted something that the young poet who sets out in the poem might have found hard: that sometimes one flounders myopically in one’s own work, that cutting invigorates a text by opening up imaginative space. Less is invariably more as the old – apposite, but hard to learn – cliché has it. Though not in the case of bees, where less may prove, sooner or later, to be apocalyptic.

**aphasia**

Exodus

Schooled, freed, leaving the city
for that line of hills, for lime-white
scars, taking the road north. That
bright-edged air was light

and light was future time, its
flux, its superfluity. I felt I owned
those fells quartered in stone, or
they owned me before I came

through history: such déjà vu, that
mind-made familiarity. I woke to
shorn meadows, each with its
own hay barn; flour-nosed sheep,
hills’ canticles of rain spewing
speech from flooded workings,
venting peat-rich vowels,
guttural, ancestral, already

deep in my way of saying
things.

Toponymy

Muker is Norse: Keld, Gunnerside,
Thwaite, Swale, Grinton, Reeth –
all migrant-named, the tongue rolling
in foreign grit.

Noon heat climbs as stratus in sky’s
china blue, spreading a mycelium
spawn. Turned headstones pave
graveyards, face-down

on their holy texts, pressing dates
that open and close centuries – wild
flowers in a stone book – recording
each life’s shrunken

sentience. Field gates sprung
with steel where a nailed boot-sole
served once, slapping timber against
hewn uprights that

thud, shudder, loosen. Clog irons
struck out this way, wore grooves
in dirt paths before those synoptic
gospels were laid:

lead miners trudging from unholy
dreams to labour, pick and shovel heads hushing each pent gill.
That lode’s all spent:

galena smelted, wrought to
musket balls, rifle rounds, pipe-
work, pewter, solder, guttering,
earthenware glaze and

church roofs. Now spoil-heaps
that seized crusher left, wrecked
washways, rusted gears, smashed
timber, trolleys, roofless
shacks, sodden stone-lined shafts
boring into hills to drain moss
of rain that slants, smokes,
fumes into a new century.

Leadwork

Cheap imports bled out the trade, prices
falling fast as shucked slag. They left in flocks,
in droves: America, Australia, Canada, the
New World mineral-rich to miners skilled
as fairytale dwarfs, taking out their gnarled
Yorkshire speech then losing it. Trade wars,
then the real thing – Spion Kop, Mons,
Paschaendale – emptying these valleys like
a churn. Leaving for steady rations, England’s
soiled glory and shilling, for the liberties of a
slipshod imagining. Crushed into troopships,
the dale’s clay, dust and mud under their
fingernails

and, still to come, their toil in Picardy: pick
and shovel work, walling with sandbags, sagging
corpses, sleeping in a drowned sap or shelled
church, remembering the Swale’s chill against

their hands where they took a girl to ford
shallows after Sunday chapel’s gleeless drone
to see her shriek and hop from rock to rock,
her skirts pulled high above neat ankle bones.

Legacy

Fern and harts tongue rife,
another season dead in the
fire hole, grass burying the
flue where flame ran, where

smoke fumed to arsenic
crystals. This furnace burned
lurid as a sacking against the
dark of day and night, as if

the longboats were back.
Whinberries, bracken, black-
mouthed shooting butts, fell-
sides patched pale with turf
cuttings, the burned heather
bleached, the peat store’s Inca
ruin sunk. Here a bankrupt
gentry disinherit labour’s

legacy. Range Rovers bring
them to pony treks, the shoot –
grouse coveys break with
choked cries, the guns’
hammers cracking wild air,
wind carrying their calls
away, the holy ghost of
drizzle haunting daylight:

Surrender Moss, Healaugh Crag,
Barras Top, North Rake, Hanging
Stone, Wetshaw; Old Gang Beck,
Flincher Gill, Reeth High Moor.
Reliquary

The railway station’s iron
lines lead nowhere now:
a museum, its reliquary of
pails and butter churns,
its nostalgia nagging us
with caried teeth. Rust
pitting rails, cast wheels
fettled in rank grease,
grainy images of haytime
and village shows. Two farm
women rope a prize cow,
dragging it from that long
gone August day pixilating
from silver emulsion that
might have purified from
seams of lead. No memory
there of the Swale path, the
corpse road, melding tongues
with earth and bone – worn
by water, by boots: dumb
face-downward stone.

Visitation

When we came here I thought I’d
brought you home with me, back
to the source, back to the split stone
of our destiny: dark haired, dark-eyed
letting go your old faith to live in stark
uncertainties. We stayed in that cottage
by the church where an old man in
tooled boots and a Stetson knocked
one day, his vowels mined from England’s
North, flown back from Texas to the green
Norse fields he couldn’t forget. Nineteen-
thirteen: he’d stayed here then, snared rabbits
on the river flats for the farmer’s wife
to skin into a pie, then sailed far west
to find another life leaving his friends
to fall to Europe’s febrile maw. We
brought him inside and he cried the
way a child sobs for some unnamed
thing, inconsolably old, come home to
die at last. He thanked us with blue veined
hands and when he left we made love
in that bedroom with its croaking boards
and whitewashed walls, its crooked
sashes and thinning glass, knowing our
haptic touch was all there was to
say: our bodies tangled in cool sheets,
your cream-skim skin under my
tongue; wild rose aureoles, sun’s
glittering wedge of dust, the cast
petticoats of thorn trees on the fell.
Colony Collapse

This ether of honey is clover, bistort, cranesbill, creeping buttercup, the pale frocks of fool’s parsley, thistle heads that goldfinches squabble at.

Not one butterfly alights or honey bee thrums in foxgloves, bumbling from purple bells, pockets crammed with pollen.

Their colonies fail – even pheromones fade there – the language for each flower lost at the hive’s finger-tight entry.

Those sentries have found the sleep of lost vigilance, its fading drone of wings: incalculable, everlasting dark.

Funerary

The Swale is quick here. Once I scrambled out on wet stones to let my parents slip away: peat-brown water, a long soft syllable of ash. Curlews liquefy damp air, the plaster-lath gable of the farm I dreamed I slept under in some former life, burst to a buttress of spilled rubble, distempered walls, a century’s filth.

At the old workings we watch a dipper feed one fat chick, its screams teetering on the cusp of hunger and self-love; the chant of water going on, its untranslatable plainsong slaking a day’s sweet spaciousness.
Quotidian

Riverside sward stinks of death’s rust: shot rabbits’ eye holes accusing light of entry. Now a wagtail sulphur-breasted, lambs, panting in thorn roots; a day so hot it twists iron trunks, the chink of oystercatchers telling coin, a sandpiper shy at its breeding ground. Now a buzzard’s Calvary of blazing air, bullocks at the water’s edge mooning, white-eyed, a small boy bending over tadpoles in a pool hermeneutic to their scrambled writ. A warbler darts into the sedge, cow dung daubs a claggy memory, its recollection reaching before words, rich in every thing felt, everything unspoken. The day pours heat at the valley head, ascending as ribbed ice above the track where I’ve seen sparrowhawks court at dusk, that memory singing here again, the path spurning the gill, climbing its own mirage: pale sand sifting the hours, a white swarm rising.

Reprise

The city turns – daylight to nightglow – horizons backlit by its prophecy. Vowels purr through airwaves jammed with ghosts, each jostling voice a new embodiment – foreign blood mixed with local grit to better the aggregate of its long telling. Here, in this valley’s parched throat, struck stone smells of war; those grave slabs face down make pathways of lost bible lore; these flower heads white as palsied washdays, the bees’ semiotic fugue quaint as lost madrigals. All moment and memory lofted here: summer hawks courting as self-shadows, twin consequence, fledged passions of air. Blossom laces blackthorn, its lingering scent of loss, the Swale quick as tanned muscle, bee foragers wayward as words, gathering quintessence only to fade, to fail us. The freight of tongues scribed under flat stone, unredeemed, the means of remembrance forgetting itself: face-down, text-down, everlastingly laid down. And the city turning still, its epic yarn spinning a shroud of silence: Earth’s dimming ember sucking at reservoirs of coal, oil, shale, at the atom’s spilled seed, its bright, blind, brief occluded eye looming in space, fading as stretching waves of light – what was becoming what is, will be.