**Reclaimed**

Nowadays, we often think of nature as a fragile thing, something, perhaps, as delicate as porcelain. Once smashed by the brute touch of human bulls it lies shattered without a hope of being pieced back together as we move on, without a backward glance, to yet another china shop to stampede through. And, of course, there is plenty of evidence to show that this view of nature is correct and particularly for any animals or plants that happen to have the misfortune of being edible and directly in our way. No return for the Passenger Pigeon, once the most common bird in North America but hunted to extinction, nor for Steller’s Sea Cow, again hunted to extinction by both Russian Sailor’s and aboriginal hunters. Not just animals and plants either but the land itself can be blasted free of any life but our own. I have clear memories of travelling by train as a little boy and the railway line passing by the side of a chemical factory and amongst the unnaturally coloured pools of water and abandoned gigantic glass vessels it seemed as if life here had been obliterated utterly, not just for the present but for all time, for what could possibly return to live in such a toxic wilderness?

And yet it isn’t always like that. Once left by us, nature has an extraordinary ability to take the shattered pieces of porcelain and reform them into something altogether new and beautiful and without a single crack or join to show that this new form was once something else entirely. Take the clay pits near where I live in St Austell and the great white slag heaps of mica and quartz and the deep abysses that were left behind, ironically in the light of what I am writing, from extracting clay for the making of fine porcelain. Often characterised as being like a lunar landscape or a desert one of them was used to build the Eden Project within, which swiftly became Cornwall’s leading tourist attraction with its reason to be to act as a warning against the perils of ecological destruction. But you don’t have to go too far to find other clay pits but ones that once unworked have been simply left. So what could possibly live within these abandoned pits and aren’t they their own sterile warning against ecological destruction? Well the answer to these two questions is surprisingly lots and no. The pyramids of mica and quartz are colonised by marram grass and gorse and of course the flowering gorse attracts pollinating insects and pollinating insects attract birds and small mammals to feed upon them, the grass, also, attracts rabbits and their droppings fertilise the seemingly infertile sand and they in turn will attract the wheeling buzzards that cry like lost children above and the foxes below. The deep abysses fill with water and through their depth they lack nutrients and in one of the great ironies of nature, nutrient lacking lakes support a wider diversity of living things than the high nutrient algal swamps that support very little. The sheer volume of water acts as a break on temperature changes so they rarely freeze over in the winter nor become too hot in the summer. The land around these great pools does not adjoin farm lands and so is not drained to extend farmer’s fields but instead supports acres of marshland and all the rich and unusual life that lives within it. Even the ugly, functional concrete buildings provide a habitat for what difference is there between these and to a network of caves for a horseshoed bat?

Each of the photographs on this page is an example of the extraordinary ability of nature to stealthily recolonize and to remake the world again in a new form. From the silver birch at Tilburstow Hill that have taken the place of the chestnut trees uprooted in the Great Storm of 1987 to the Lanhydrock Lido, once plaything of the wealthy Robartes Family that now in Spring teams with amphibians in myriad forms.