



## Hushing

By Jay Tan

1986.

We are in England overlooking a quarry. More sheep than people.

As a result of Thatcher's 1984 "Weapons and Munitions Purge" and her landmark restructuring of British Aerospace Plc in the early 1980s, British primary industries and manufacturing have entered their "Sensible Phase".

Fire-setting, Hushing and other hydraulic methods have been reintroduced as primary mining techniques, now that explosives are rare. Leats, fleams and other artificial waterways are no longer quaint archaeological treasures. And few hike exclusively for pleasure.

*Their profiles meet in the middle. Serge, Matti and Min: Three thirds of a face  
pie. Six lips meet and part, three tongues investigate two others. They think  
and don't think about the thousands of*

*buds that make up wet, soft, undulating, roughness. Take turns at being probe, or flaccid or rippling muscle. Matti pulls back, "time's up", he breathes and passes the notebook to Min. She fields their observations and adds her own.*

**We travel to study the character of natural resources in noted regions—there aren't really tourists anymore. Some think of themselves as pilgrims, sure. But not many would ever be so crude as to articulate this.**

**Eight to a room in high season. But it's never high season. Shared bathrooms on each floor. Bunk beds. Cooked English breakfasts and strong cups of tea are included in the cost of the bed. Think Antarctic science stations, but on rugged moorland. A damper cold. A breathier wind.**

**Remote, meaningful production.**

*They turned the bottom bunk into a lair, their hidden lab, by tucking the long edge of Min's unzipped sleeping bag under the mattress on the top bunk and arranging all the equipment in rows where the pillow usually is. Serge completes the inventory: 3 jam jars, alum, talc, toothbrush, lighter, a flask of hot water, sandwich box, pipe cleaners, cable ties, exercise book and pencil, sewing needles, slate tile, Indian ink, acetone, cotton buds, sherbet, shampoo, pumice, 3 wax candles, 2 dandelion heads, a teaspoon of salt, Matti's belt, his cabiner and the bungee cords they pinched from the back of the minibus.*

**Most notions of work being separate from leisure have been long lost. Turns of phrase such as "life-work-balance" and "weekend warrior" will not come into parlance. Stresses and lifestyle dichotomies are metaphysical, geological and biological.**

**Can your cells twin like crystals? Can you hear the tin crying? Round here we cherish our knowledge of minerals and Metalurgy is almost religious. Simple, but religious.**

**Everyone wears cagoules.**

*The torch light picks out the contour of Min's top lip and the strap of her training bra – the boys can just about see her mouth moving, can just about hear her reciting:*

Smithsonite: drusy and pink... Sphalerite: chief ore of zinc...  
from the Greek for treacherous...  
...Anglesite: 74% lead by mass... high specific gravity of 6.3...

*Breath is slow and even.*

... once called Black Jack...  
complex and distorted,  
Galena: also called "lead glance"  
also called "potters ore"...  
... curved and conical faces... Calcite... earthy; opaline...  
Rosasite... truncated, irregular terminations...

*The other kids are asleep or pretending. Tense. They heard the kissing.  
Moonlight through the net curtains lifts the darkness into TV static. Half-open  
eyes imagine the room as a surface of wiggling grey ants over soft mounds and  
powder-coated steel.*

Zinc bloom... may fluoresce yellow under UV light...  
Chrysocolla:... radiating clusters;  
fine fibrous, or enamel-like...  
from the Greek for gold and glue...

*Min, like lots of 2<sup>nd</sup> years, who know the minerals by rote, feels her knowledge  
slide into incantation. The boys drink up the terminology. The flow is familiar  
and refreshing spring water. Sometimes they get so parched.*

*They let Min's recital fade out, pausing for a while for the words to stop  
vibrating, before setting up. It's a squeeze. They have too many elbows and  
knees when they have to move into a new configuration for their experiments.  
They repress giggles so as not to break the mood of their serious science.*

*Matti holds the jam jars, while the hot water and Alum is poured in. They  
should be wearing gloves, but Serge gets a rush from the itch. He scratches the  
back of his hand and the spot to sooth is chased to his wrist and up his  
forearm. Min helps him scratch. Matti scratches her. They become a feedback  
loop of fingernails, and temporary satisfaction. Hands reach under T-shirts  
regardless of the lack of skin to mineral contact. The flask is forgotten and  
pours out the rest of the warm water onto the mattress. The shadows watch the  
puddle sink down through the sheet. Now they are an animal concoction of black  
ink and sherbet paste, hair spiked through with twigs of cable ties and cotton  
buds. Clothes come off and shampoo and salt are rubbed in.*

**The bell rings once at start of service at 5am and again when the kitchen closes at 7. Bill scrambles eggs  
to the news on the radio.**

**"Today the Prime Minister travels to Laxford Brea to make her annual address to the nation. As well as  
restating her familiar comments concerning our debt to Gaia, she is expected to comment on the tragic**

folly of the failed American Challenger mission, and will extend the nation's thoughts and prayers to families of its crew... In other news, the latest dig at the Callanish Stone Circle has revealed new evidences that..."

*Upstairs the whole room is awake. Yellow light cuts in. Three young bodies tremble into a pile that no longer knows about the angles elbows can make – it only knows about lava.*

*They whisper Hutton's Deep Time Hymn together over and over:*

*"No prospect of a beginning, no vestige of an end"*

*But now, wrapped and sticky over each other in fleshy strata, they realize that this prayer they learnt as wee babes, describes them too. Tomorrow they can harvest seed crystals from the jars and be proud of their rashes.*

Outside, the morning reveals the tarmac of the road leading from the hostel and round to the quarry. It suns the scrub of the heather and picks out sparkles in the granite.



**Glossary:**

**Alum:** aluminum potassium sulfate, a pickling spice.

**Cabiner:**



**Cagoule:**



**Fire-setting:** a method of traditional mining used most commonly from prehistoric times up to the Middle Ages. Fires were set against a rock face to heat the stone, which was then doused with liquid, causing the stone to fracture by thermal shock.

**Hushing:** sluicing away the overburden of soil to reveal the bedrock. The Romans were big on Hushing.

**James Hutton:** a Scottish geologist, physician, chemical manufacturer, naturalist and experimental agriculturalist. He originated the theory of uniformitarianism—a fundamental principle of geology—which explains the features of the Earth’s crust by means of natural processes over geologic time.

**Laxford Brea:**



**Leat:** an artificial waterway dug into the ground. Especially one supplying water to a watermill or mill pond. Other common uses for leats include the delivery of water for mineral washing and concentration, for irrigation, to serve a dye works or other industrial plant, and provision of drinking water to a farm or household or as a catchment cut-off to improve the yield of a reservoir. “Leat” is cognate with “let” in the

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sense of “allow to pass through”.

N.B. In *your* timeline, **British Aerospace Plc** is now known as BAE Systems.

*Jay Tan is an artist who grew up in 1980s Britain. Until she was about seven years old she assumed most heads of state were female.*

*Marnie Slater is an artist who grew up in 1980s New Zealand. During 2015, she is commissioning a series of texts by women, of which this one is the first, to be read in parallel to the exhibition programme at P/////AKT, Amsterdam.*