Darkness Visible: An exploration of recurrence

Part A

The Sacrifice

A novel submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is entirely imaginary, but I have based the historical and folkloric references on material found in the wonderful local history section in the library of Deal, on the east coast of Kent in the UK, and in the local history museum of nearby Sandwich. I extend my thanks to the anonymous volunteer custodian of the museum. The village of the novel is an imagined combination of Deal and Sandwich. Old Soar is the real name of a nearby village.

I have consulted more history books, documentaries and folklore collections than I can list, but one crucial text was Mircea Eliade's The Myth of the Eternal Return (1954). I learned much of Celtic religion and history from books such as The Celtic Realms (2000) by Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, and Celtic Myths (1993) by Miranda Green. The quote on p. 30, ‘Grief is stronger than the sea...’ is taken from 'Exiles of the Sons of Uisliu', an early Irish saga, found in Dillon and Chadwick's book. I was also inspired by many time fantasy novels, particularly Penelope Lively's Astercote (1970), Nancy Bond's Country of Broken Stone (1984), and Alan Garner's The Owl Service (1967).

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The story of the flint in the tree may seem like a novelist’s excessive fancy, but if one goes to the churchyard at Ringwould, Kent, one may see a yew tree estimated at over thirteen hundred years old, split and hollowed as the tree in my book is, and in the lintel of the bark, a very old and mysterious stone embedded there. Long may it reside and keep its secrets.
Dedicated to my sister, Jenny Holden.

A sacrifice, for example, not only exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god \textit{ab origine}, at the beginning of time, it also takes place at that same primordial mythical moment; in other words, every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it. All sacrifices are preformed at the same mythical instant of the beginning; through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended. [...] there is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of “history”; and he who reproduces the exemplary gesture thus finds himself transported into the mythical epoch in which its revelation took place.

Mircea Eliade, \textit{The Myth of the Eternal Return}
PROLOGUE

There are rivers in England that call to passers-by. They want a drowning. Every year, three years, seven years. Someone must come and be lost. It’s time.

_The hour is come but not the man._

A wailing, a mewing; a shriek, a sob. The river’s voice. A man might stop, stare, listen. His friends will notice, or perhaps he’s alone. A woman, on her way to bring her man’s dinner in the field; a drunk on his way home from the pub; a child listening to the moan.

_The hour is come but not the man._

The river is not one to spill its banks and grab. The victim must come willingly. He must step, deliberately, nearer. Down to the bank, down to the shining water. Or, better, if he runs. Into the shallows, deeper into the current, the chill around his knees, his waist. His organs shrinking from the cold, his heart hot, mouth open.

Deeper still.

Then the water will rush down, fast, singing, and take him. Holy, offered, precious, gone.

There was once a man who stood frozen beside the river and when his friends urged him to walk on with them, did not shake his head or laugh or come, but remained standing, watching the river with a strange smile. And when his friends shook him he began to run. He rushed to the water—but his friends seized him, and took him to a church, to prevent him taking to the depths, and left him there locked inside, to come to no harm. And when they opened the church door in the morning there he was, on the floor beneath the holy water font, all the holy water all over his face, his lips wet and his breath gone.

_The hour is come but not the man._

How the river calls, calls, calls.
Part One
Joss lies in bed early in the morning. She’s always wanted an upstairs room; the breathy
delight of looking out of an open window, looking down. At home in Australia, living
with her older sister Rebecca and Rebecca’s husband Mark in their rented house, she’d
been stuck out the back in a little room next to the laundry.

This new room of hers, now, is emptier than she’s ever known. She had to leave
most of her books in Australia, crammed into a storage cubicle. We’ll send for them,
Rebecca had said. Her little mattress on the floor. Briefly she misses her collection of
books with a mental pain like a hung

But there’s a grace in emptiness too. A kind of clarity. Perhaps she’ll never fill
this room.

The light of the early morning creeps across the mattress on the floor. It’s only
five thirty. Jet-lag. She’s awoken as instantly, vividly, as if someone had touched her and
spoken her name. The first thing she is aware of thinking is

The house is quiet but she can hear the trees, and seagulls flourishing themselves
in the clean air. The building hides in its little cowl of land. Joss imagines the rooms
below, empty since Mark’s ex-wife Diana went to hospital to die, their stillness, the sun
and light washing in and out of them, the doors unopened, the window-frames settling
more snugly in their sills. Perhaps the house was surprised when Joss and Rebecca and
Mark arrived last night. Perhaps it was sleeping. The house doesn’t feel hostile. Perhaps
this morning it too awoke and said

In Australia Joss never knew when someone would walk past her door. Now she
writhes slowly against her sheets and ploughs a hand down to between her thighs.
It’s new, this secret. It took her a long time to master it. At first she’d felt like a fool,
sweating and grimacing and fiddling away in search of something she’d only heard
about. Don’t you do it? the girls at school asked her. Of course, she’d said. The first few
times it didn’t work. But her fingers have learnt their tricks. The first time it was like
being drenched in water, the surprise of it. Every muscle rigid with shock, and then a
relaxation more profound than she’d ever known. Oh yes, she’d thought, and made it
happen again.

She’s not especially pretty, thin, or fit. Her pants are tight in the seat and thighs,
her arms are from time to time speckled with spots. She doesn’t get a lot of attention
from boys, but that’s fine with her. The boys she knew at school stank. In class the room
was loud with the sound of mouth-breathing from slack jaws. Touching any of those
boys would be like sitting in dirty bath-water.
Though there was Sam in her class. He hid his face beneath dark hair, his berry cheeks and bright eye. He’d talk to her, peeping up sideways through his hair, droll and clever. She’d liked Sam. But his hand, when he’d taken hers on the night of the school concert, was damp, and she’d smelt something different on him, a sharp, body-ish smell, dark and unexpected: not-Sam. There was a moment when she knew she was meant to kiss him, and she’d felt her heart cramming her ribs, had faltered, and let those tremendous seconds pass. The next morning the feeling she’d had was, most of all, relief. Then it was too late.

She brings Sam’s smile to mind, but it won’t adhere, it sags away. Her fingertip circles, slowly, luxuriously. The thing that fascinates her is the images that do flush up in her mind’s eye. A cavern scooped from her, a well dropping. An arched bow of thin wood, as she rises on the backs of her heels, her belly tight now, the bed hard beneath her shoulders as her head thrusts backwards and her thighs tense rigid. Her fingers work and work at her flesh, tiring; she concentrates on finding the thread of tension, stringing it through every tendon. She sees an opened mouth, she sees water, a glimmering, a bared throat, a head tipped back, her own face, she sees herself engulfed. More and more urgently, almost with panic, she jabs her fingers at herself—a hot hand of blood is laid across her brow—something collapses inside her, she thinks she will plunge through the bed; she bucks and coils, holding her breath, holding her breath; she’s drowning.

She lets go. All over her, sweat and relief.

Has she made a sound? Is that a footstep?

It’s nothing. The house composes itself around her once more. Joss lies there, giggling silently, smoothing her clever hands down her hips.

Anything is possible here.

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Mark has gone out, to buy milk and bread and some basic groceries so they won’t starve. He got up early, when Rebecca was still floundering in sleep, and went into town. She heard him say, ‘I’m sure I remember where everything is.’ Then she had plunged back into sleep so dark it bruised.

Being alone in the new house is good. It’s still morning, but Joss isn’t up; how quiet it is here. Rebecca runs her fingers along the windowsill of the bedroom, looks at the old lock on the sash. The wood beneath the paint is soft with age.
She’s weary. They’ve come across the world, switching time-zones and seasons, all that long ploughed way over the seas, picking up the car at Heathrow, the long dreamlike drive to the house as dusk stained out the daylight.

Joss walks down the hall to the bathroom and shuts the door in Rebecca’s face and Rebecca just stands there a moment in the passageway. Her younger sister is not a precious teenager in general, but she can emit resistance like a fume. It’s hard to know what will set her off. Joss seems to hold her head one muscle more tightly since she turned fifteen. Within the bathroom the shower turns on, full. The water-tank clanks and hisses. Rebecca goes to the front door, opens it, pauses on the threshold.

The house is in a declivity, about a hundred metres wide; around it the land rises, so the house seems half-sunk in the earth. Rebecca has asked Mark for the reason for this strange hunkering, but he didn’t know. ‘It was Diana’s house,’ he said. ‘It suited her, to be a bit hidden away.’

It faces the road, shaded by a tunnel of trees where the road turns in front of the gate. Beyond that, to the right, is a thicket of trees and past that, further around, above the rising of the ground, Rebecca can see the gold of a field.

A seagull strays across the sky. They are near the sea, but not in sight of it. It’s very quiet. There’s a burger wrapper lying by the verge. The road-sign, black letters on white, points in one direction to the village and a windmill, and, to the other in green and white, to Canterbury. On the way in, the other evening, she saw another sign labelling this a Pilgrim’s Way.

Rebecca looks out on it all now in a kind of amazement. Then she shuts the door and goes upstairs.

The bags lie, bulked with clothing, on the bedroom floor. Some of Diana’s furniture is still here; she had spent the last months of her life in hospital, and her family has removed the personal belongings and cleaned the dust from the sills, but the bed remains, a dresser and some tables and chairs. For now, Joss is sleeping on a mattress on the floor in her room at the end of the hall. Not quite like a furnished house: but there’s still the sense of Diana in the way the bed is tucked into an awkward corner of the room, the dresser of beautiful teak balancing it across the room. Rebecca sits on the bed.

That’s enough, she says, and stands to begin unpacking. Outside, through the window, she can see the field baking gold, and the line of dark trees edging it at the horizon. The shapes are so mild here, the horizon is close.
Mark returns with milk and bread and a look of exhilaration on his face.

‘I can’t believe how little the place has changed,’ he says, placing the plastic bag on the table and pulling out a newspaper and a map of the town. ‘I got you this, so you can see where everything is, but I’ll show you around. Oh god, it’s strange being back. Ten years! It feels like no time.’ When they all arrived at the house the other night, Rebecca had seen Mark’s lips tighten and still with each room they entered. Once these were his rooms, too.

Mark’s work as a geo-physicist involves scanning the earth with electronic equipment that takes mysterious signals of depth and density from below the surface. Each stratum, or buried object, is revealed to his equipment as a stain or wriggle on a white screen. Clusters, blurs and concentrations of substance. As a younger man in Britain he’d used this in the archaeological field, helping to decipher remnants of old settlements submerged below grassy fields, but in Australia, he turned his work towards surveying for property development on vacant lots. He can see at a glance when there is a blockage to be cleared, an unsuspected flow of water, or a hidden dump of things left behind to get in the way of the bulldozers.

He married Rebecca two years ago. She hadn’t expected it of herself, to be a bride for crying out loud, and to this man with his hair in a dark cowl around his skull and his slightly dry skin. But he had put his lean hand on her arm, and stood very close, and she felt a tremor of relief that ran through her and out again before she had a chance to turn her feminist glare on it, and she said, smiling gently, ‘You’re ridiculous, marrying a stringy chick like me.’ And then it was done. Besides, she’d felt, at thirty, more like a middle-aged woman. It was eight years since her parents died in a car crash; she’d proved that she could survive, could take care of things. She was tired of being alone. And there was her little sister Joss, needing a second kind of parent, to think of. She hadn’t expected that either but there she’d been, since twenty-two, mother to her own sister, struggling alone. And five years before all of that, she’d been an only child. She wasn’t sure, at times, whether the feeling that still spread amply in her belly was shock, dismay, or pride.

After some toast Mark is poking about upstairs and Rebecca opens the back door to find a walled garden, soft pink bricks holding a cup of warmth and light. It is calm and quiet here, sprung with ivy and flowering weeds, more weeds feathery all over the beds within. In one corner an old fruit tree is espaliered against the wall, its brittle dark branches puffing out thick white blossom. The over-grown grass is still wet with dew even so late in the morning and in the clean morning light it glitters like tinsel. The sun is frail on her face. In Australia such a direct sun on the face would prickle and burn,
she’d be looking for shade, she’d be making sure Joss had a hat. Here the sun only
warms, it doesn’t penetrate. Her bones feel light as pumice.

There is no one to see and for comfort Rebecca slips a finger inside her
underpants and lays her hand on her belly. Like a young child does. The sweet comfort
is good. She just rests her hand there, quietly. The morning is like a breath exhaled.

A tickle, a shock; Joss is teasing her face with a frond. Rebecca damps down the
sudden smack of panic, pulls her hand out of her pants and smiles. ‘All right there?’ She
scratches her nose.

Joss is ignoring the hand. ‘It’s amazing.’

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ Rebecca says, rubbing where the tickle remains on her
cheek. The sight of her sister seems inordinately reassuring here. She had drifted into
feeling quite strange. ‘I’m really glad you came.’

‘I had no choice!’ But Joss is smiling. ‘There was a horrible boy at school who was
always asking me out, I had to escape. It was either that, or stab him and flee anyway.’
‘All the way to England. Can you believe we’re in England?’

Joss sits, balancing on a stray fallen brick, looking up at the pale blue sky. ‘The
sky seems lower.’ She looks around at the garden, the unfamiliar wildflowers. ‘It’s like a
book.’

‘Ridiculous,’ Rebecca agrees. ‘Nearly revolting.’

‘It’s like walking into some kind of dream. All the times I’ve seen England on TV,
and here it is. I was expecting football hooligans and everyone whining; you know, rain.
This is great.’

‘It’s hot,’ Rebecca says, ‘who’d have thought?’ The skin on her arms is flushed.

‘Well.’ Joss dusts her bottom free of brick-dust. ‘Think I’ll leave you in peace.’ She
strides off.

In some places the vegetation is as high as a girl, but there are still faint seams in
the chaos, where a planting bed is limned with bricks.

It was like a plot in a children’s book when Mark returned from the lawyers two
months ago. Back in her childhood Rebecca had read many a tale of children sent away
to houses in the English countryside, or irresponsible parents buying old tumbledown
castles, where secrets lay and adventures awaited. As a child she’d yearned for such a
thing to happen, but now it dismays her. Rebecca had not known what to say when
Mark told her Diana had left him the house. His hands, pulling the cap off a pen,
pushing it back on, pulling it off, as he faced her across the living room, the sound of the
seven o’clock news starting on the television.

‘Didn’t she have anyone else to leave it to?’
'It was ours. It was all in her name, after the divorce, but—it was ours once. She knew I’d want it back.'

A pause.

‘Do you?’

Mark twirled the hard end of the pen into his palm. ‘It’s there.’

‘So far away,’ Rebecca murmured.

‘Australia was far away to me once. And if I’d never come here, I wouldn’t have met you.’

‘Can we think about it?’

‘I still can’t believe she’s dead.’

‘I said, can we think about it.’

His hands seemed raw and aged, the knuckles red. He rubbed a finger into his eye. ‘It’s there. You know we should go.’

It wasn’t as if it was hard to give up the cramped house she and Mark and Joss shared in Melbourne but every day as she boxed up her belongings for storage, put another part of herself away, judged what little she’d need, it had seemed unreal. It’s true that Mark would be happier. She’d picked up homesickness in him from time to time over the years—as his mother back in England grew older, as he began to grow older himself. He’s had ten years in Australia and it’s only fair to turn about. She remembers the surprise of the first time he had reminded her of all he’d given up to be in Melbourne.

‘But you love it here! You always say you’re glad not to be back in grisly old England.’

‘Yes. It’s just… Sometimes you have to go back. It’s not right, not to go back.’

She hopes she’ll find a new way of living—find a job, find a school for Joss. It seems enormous, starting up a whole new life. ‘Choice is sacrifice,’ she remembered her father telling her once. ‘For everything you gain, you’ve let something else go.’ She swallows down the gulp of anxiety. The sun is warm on her teeth. She presses the back of one hand to the wall behind her, the rough scrape of it against knuckle, and waits. It is just stone. But Rebecca feels that it is real, and that’s enough for now. Maybe soon she’ll feel real too.

The silence is like glass. She thinks that surely it isn’t possible to be so alone here. There’s always someone watching her, or it has always felt like it. She moves carefully, always, because of that. A certain selfconscious set to her mouth. Now, apart from Joss, singing to herself somewhere in the weeds and Mark, upstairs, there is no one. Rebecca
wonders how long it will take, in this isolated place, before she relaxes. She shuts her
mouth and closes her eyes again, just in case someone sees.

There’s the sound of weeds brushing stone, hushed as hair, someone breathing out, and then no more sound.

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This coast is one long, gently wavering strip of shingle and marsh, where reeds grow sparsely among pebbles almost down to the water, where the land appears as flat as the sea beside it. Marsh flattens the contours of the land, and banks of shingle have shoved up beneath the rich green grass of this lip of England. It is a very old place, and in the way the sea has deposited more land over centuries, also a new one.

The house is on the outskirts of an old town jammed up against the eastern shore. It was once a handsome town, renowned for its port and pride: kings and queens embarked here, houses were snug with imported luxuries, and the wharf was bright with gilded poops. It is still pretty, still proud, but the river silted up and the sea withdrew its custom long ago. Now it is sleepy, a quaint old village really, where tourists wander in little quiet groups and its young people walk resentfully through the little medieval streets, banging their hands idly against the old lurching timbers and squealing loudly, for the echo.

Mark takes them for a walk around town. It’s the first day. He leads them through the little streets, past the river thick with reeds and the battered little fishing boats idling at the quay, past pubs called The King’s Head and The Greene Man. Joss stops to marvel at a wooden gargoyle craning out from a corner. Her sister smiles at her curiosity and Joss walks on quickly.

The shops of the high street are mostly plain Georgian with blank brick walls and small doorways, or cake-icing Victorian. A greeting card store, the usual chain outlets, Woolworth’s, an old-fashioned bakery and butcher’s, another pub. There are baskets hanging from many of the windows, filled with bright flowers. Joss squeals when she sees a thatched roof and a tile scratched with the house’s date.

‘1590! Look at how old that is!’ She stares at it in wonder.

Mark walks ahead, with the ostentatiously casual pace of the guide. Rebecca and Joss linger to look in the shop windows, as if they’d never seen hardware supplies, cheap women’s clothing, ugly lampshades before.

‘The village church,’ says Rebecca. ‘Oh what a cliché.’ It looks just like the dark stone churches at home, with a severe dark pointed steeple and thick stone lintels, but in
Melbourne they’re no more than a hundred years old, pastiches of the real thing in England. This might be hundreds. It is cobbled all over with lumps of dark rock like growths.

‘There’s a better one near our place.’ Mark takes her arm. The footpath is narrow and it’s hard to walk together. A car goes past, very fast and loud, with a shaven-headed young man at the wheel. He turns a raw face to stare as the car plunges past.

‘There’s your next boyfriend,’ Rebecca tells Joss.

‘Oh, shut up.’

They have coffee at a table outside a pub, watching the locals. The street is busy, the people utterly ordinary. Joss keeps chanting examples of the flat, sing-song accent under her breath to amuse the others. ‘They all sound so wistful,’ Rebecca says. ‘As if they expect to be slapped.’ No one takes any notice of the new citizens. Mark points out that there are no Asians or black people to be seen.

The village is called Soar. ‘Funny word for a place, isn’t it,’ he says to Joss. ‘It’s an old Norman word. Means something like “grief”, but that’s just the countryside being poetic for you.’

They walk out of the village again, taking the long way home through some of the outer roads. For all its flatness, the land seems to change constantly. There are, after all, little shallow hummocks and grooves. To one side of the road, towards the coast, the land drops a little where the sea has slowly deposited silt and shingle to make a soft fertile strand between the old shoreline and the new. Lines of dark trees hem the meadows and roads, fresh green in these early days of summer. The fields are pale, the crops already ripening in vast neon blankets of yellow. There are hedgerows everywhere, springy with wildflowers and stalks. Three massive concrete cooling towers of the power station, pale as dust and smoothly shaped, rise out of the horizon not far away, almost beautiful in their sculpted simplicity, serene and pale as if shaped from clouds. The sky above is vast and flattened, as if caught in a panoramic photograph, its clouds skewed sideways.

‘It’s so much greener than home,’ Rebecca says. She’s thinking of the parched straw on the nature strips, even during the autumn they’ve just left.

She has an unsettled feeling, as if her thoughts are floating like a dish on top of water. Not quite stabilised. This is the first time she’s been out of Australia and it seems impossible, implausible, that reality can be so concrete in a place she’s never been. She would rather like to be back in their little bedroom in Melbourne, where everything was where she’d put it, the very paint on the walls smelt like her. That room, where she lived for two years: she can see it so vividly in her mind but already framed, like a painting.
still life, because that room is now dismantled and everything packed away or given away or thrown away, and now she herself is away, far. The house they’ve come to live in is bigger, and charming, with its jumble of rooms and softer light in the windows, and she knows she’s lucky, but that morning she had awoken for the first time in the new place and all she could think was: I’ve never slept in an upstairs room before, there’s too much air beneath my bed. Like a tree house, but without the close cage of branches around her.

‘The Roman fort,’ Mark says, pointing across to the towers. ‘Just in front of that. The first proper fort they made, and the last one they sailed from centuries later.’

‘How Famous Five,’ Rebecca says absently. ‘Joss, you’ll have to go and have a ‘scramble’ around there with your ‘chums’.’

‘Picnics, lashing of ginger beer, smugglers, spies...’ Joss says, trailing a hand along a hedgerow.

‘Actually Soar was a real smuggling town,’ Mark says. ‘And there was a huge depot here in the First World War. Sending supplies to Flanders, bringing the bodies back.’

‘I guess it’s so close,’ Rebecca says.

‘St Augustine landed just next to those towers, and the Vikings.’

‘I should hope so.’

‘Henry the Eighth built the castle...’

‘Least he could do.’ The corners of her mouth are turning up mischieviously.

Mark perseveres. ‘Famous shipwrecks, secret stuff going on in the second war, Lord Nelson, all the battle ships just off the coast...’

‘Sounds just like home.’

They unlock the front door and walk into the house with the unfamiliar smell.

‘Time for a cuppa,’ says Mark, and his voice is already more English than ever.

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Mark sits in one of the stiff-backed wooden chairs in the lounge room. Rebecca next to him, hands in her lap, cup of tea on the floor. The movement of the trees outside keeps catching her eye; she pulls the rings off her fingers, nervously, twirls them around and around in her fingertips.

The room is oddly half-furnished: a table, two dining chairs, an old wire magazine rack. Nothing else, dust hanging in the air. Diana’s relatives have plundered the house of all the comfortable items.
Joss is sitting on the table, where she has been writing her diary. Face fierce and intent, she writes from time to time: clearly their advent to England has provoked an entry. Perhaps she’s taking notes from what Mark is saying, as he gives another of his awkward little lectures.

The pre-historic settlers came here, he says. He went to the museum in London, years and years ago, and he still remembers how simple were the oldest things. ‘Flint tools. And wood. Big branches of yew that they found in the bogs. You could still make a table from them. Just those two things, so simple and durable.’

‘There are things just as old in Australia,’ Rebecca observes.

‘Not quite!’ Mark is amused. ‘Aborigines arrived in your country 50,000 years ago, more or less. A long time, I know. But imagine. This place—this very spot where your chair is—has been inhabited for many times that, an inconceivable number of years…’ Rebecca wants to say something about Australia, Mark can’t simply make these sweeping statements, and anyway, he’s wrong; but he talks on. ‘The Celts were here, too. Later.’

Joss looks up. All her life she’s read mythology, history books. To her, ‘Celtic’ means Stonehenge, druids, mistletoe, mysterious rites at dawn. ‘The Saxons, the Normans, the rest,’ Mark goes on.

‘Tell me Celtic stuff.’

‘They were pretty frightening,’ Mark says. ‘Mysterious, very poetic. Obsessed with sacrifice. I remember reading something gruesome about it once. They’d cut the heads off children and hung them from hooks, a whole ghastly row of them. They put the heads of their enemies in the trees.’

Rebecca raises an eyebrow. She’s been gazing absently at the trees outside the house, their softness, solidity, the felted darkness of them massed around the building. She has been feeling something for these trees she doesn’t know, a kindliness. They’re animals to her, animals with quiet memories, sitting there, moving and immovable.

‘…or they murdered young men and left them in the bogs and the wells. And god, they were vicious. They didn’t just kill a man; they drugged him, hit him with a stone axe, strangled him, cut his throat and pushed him in the water.’

‘Why?’ Joss is fascinated.

‘They were very careful about nature, I suppose. They wanted to propitiate the gods. Keep the balance right. Nature gods are the most powerful, you know. These Celts were here in a dark place. It was all forest around here then. All forest, right down to the sea. A huge carpet of trees, it would have been terribly dark and scary. You’d think all sorts of things in a place like that. I’d have been putting things at the foot of trees too, if
they’d only not crush me. The Romans called it Silva Anderida, “the wood where no one lives’.

‘I love that,’ Joss says. ‘I like the big ones. Oaks? With the leaves like hands?’

Mark smiles. ‘Quercus. Isn’t that a wonderful word? Quercus. I looked it up, when I was planting the garden with—’ That quick check to his emotions. ‘The trees weren’t all native, of course. They came over from Europe too. Migrants, like everything else. That idea that England has always been ‘England’ is just bullshit. And they still come, you know. There are trees here, now, that people brought back from Japan, Russia, America. Even Australia. There are gum trees here.

‘People, maybe people in Australia think of England as always being British, these goodly blond stout people, at least until the last forty years. My gran used to hate the idea of outsiders. But the country’s always been a mix, people coming and going. And this part, this has been the starting-place for so much of Britain. It was on the coast just here that Julius Caesar turned up’

‘He might have walked right past this house,’ Joss says.

Rebecca is listening, but she’s not really engaged. It’s a long time since she thought of history, except her own. In Australia, she’s heard, it’s said that the indigenous people go into the future with their faces pointing at the past. She doesn’t know quite what that means. The future has always been unreal to her: a haze barely worth peering at. But the past is no clearer, or more enticing. Really, she sometimes thinks in cranky moments, the past is all best swept away. What’s that quote? History is a lie agreed upon. In Australia, it’s complicated, thinking about history. Whose history, who can tell it, and all the really old, ancient history of the country tied up in land and memories and stories that she doesn’t even know, or know who to ask. She has no Aboriginal friends to ask. And it seems wrong to learn their stories out of books. They’re not book stories, after all.

‘Don’t you think, Rebecca?’

Her thoughts are with the trees now, how they hem the house, how they make her feel safe. Joss is leaning forward, though, rapt. Mark talks on.

‘This road—did you see the sign? It’s a very old one. The freeway we took down here from London: part of that is Watling Street, the old Roman highway. A lot of the roads around here were used by the Saxons, and they followed the old Roman ‘ways’. God knows if they were used even before then. A road is a road. If it’s a good way, people will always use it.’

‘We’re sitting on history,’ Joss says.

‘We certainly are.’
'In Australia... I know it's a very old place. But it always feels like, like there was no one there before. I don’t mean that ‘terra nullius’ stuff we did at school. I don’t mean that it doesn’t count, what went on before the whites. More just... There’s nothing to say there were people living where our house is. I know they were there, but...' Joss says. She flaps her hands. ‘I can’t wait to see something really old.’

Mark laughs. He’s pleased that someone is interested. All this history he has in this place, this country, and he’s never spoken of it. All the facts and stories inside him. In Australia he’d usually confined himself to appreciating the modern lifestyle and mocking the nation’s ignorance. He glances over to Rebecca. ‘And you? Are we going to find you prettily decorating the trees with heads?’

‘I’ll find something,’ she says. ‘Just watch me.’ She looks at him steadily.

Mark turns away and Joss goes back to her diary, writing furiously now, and Rebecca watches Mark thinking of the past, his face motionless, as she crams her rings on and off her fingers.

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When she was a little girl, Joss sat in her backyard and dug for treasure. Maybe the local tribes had walked across this land; maybe lived right here. But there was no trace in the buffalo grass. All that was unimaginable, in that pale suburb where the gum trees grew in straight lines along roadsides. She dug up broken glass and tattered plastic; in the dusk she put her child’s fingers in the soft black earth and felt the hollow scoop of something small and hard, something with sharp edges; a bird’s skull, she thought. Or, with a terrible thrill, that of a human? But when she pulled it out, gleaming like bone in the twilight, it was only a crushed old piece of plastic. There was no point in digging further. This was only a back garden in a suburb that had sprung up fifty years earlier. Anything older had left no trace.

She had hidden in the school library, and held soft old paperbacks in her little hands, held them right up close to her face, absorbing the scent of the doughy paper, the ink illustrations, the quaint chapter titles. She walked home from school through the blasted heat of a summer afternoon, the gum trees rasping with their bark hanging limp like peeled wallpaper, and she tugged at the bark, but when it came away there was no message written there, no secret door behind. In the low-ceilinged, yellow brick cottage she shared with Rebecca and Mark, she dreamed of attics and towers. She wanted a horse’s skull, a magic portal, a stone circle in which to stand and be transformed. The bare boards of the backyard fence were not standing stones.
Imagination glosses everything if you try hard enough, a gloss that can set like varnish.

::

Once the meagre unpacking has been done, and the house canvassed, and the village visited, there is an uncertain pause. The second day, Mark, Rebecca and Joss sit in the kitchen.

‘Well, I should show you the sights,’ Mark says. He sounds a little apprehensive, as if he’s just realised that having brought the women all this way, he’s somewhat responsible. He looks the part of a capable *pater familias*, with his crisp mouth and straight spine, but in reality he has always hung back from taking too much on himself.

‘There’s a castle,’ he offers now. ‘And the Roman fort. And there’s a little museum in the village.’

‘No?’ Rebecca says. ‘Gosh!’

He gives her a sharp, hurt look. ‘You don’t have to come. I only thought it might be nice. Joss will like it.’

‘I think it’s going to rain.’

Mark makes a face at Joss, and she rolls her eyes, but they keep sipping their tea and Rebecca turns a page of the newspaper.

‘I’ll come, of course. Though as you see I’m flat-out busy.’ She tries to make it into a joke.

‘Where’s the castle?’ Joss asks.

‘Down the coast a bit. There are a few of them. Some of them are in better state than others. Dover Castle is the really spectacular one, so that’s where we’ll go.’


‘No singing,’ puts in Rebecca. ‘No singing allowed.’ Joss pokes her tongue at her. She has a weakness for old songs.

They drive down the coast, on a curving road that seems to pass no other villages, only near-identical fields, bright yellow and green. The road rises and then dips just before they get to Dover and there, on a high promontory against the horizon, is the castle. Its flags flutter, its stern grey battlements look neat as Lego.

‘Is it real?’ Joss queries.

‘Very.’
They park, pay the large fee for entrance, and walk in through the massive stone gate. The walls are terrifyingly thick and high, studded, like the village church they’d seen, with black eggs of flint. They are informed that the tea room will close at four.

‘What did you think?’ Mark asks two hours later as they tramp back down the drive to the car park.

‘It’s huge,’ Rebecca says, stretching her back.

‘Pretty cool,’ Joss offers. She had insisted on exploring every nook, every oubliette and dank hole and staircase. ‘It’s like a toy, though. All those little fancy painted signs: ‘The Keep’, ‘The King’s Room’. And it’s so perfect, it doesn’t seem like it had ever been used.’

‘It’s just amazingly well preserved. You think things are only historic if they’re damaged?’

‘No…’ She pauses for thought. ‘But it’s good to see something to show that people have been there. If it’s too clean, you know: it looks like a display home. None of the taps actually run water.’

They have lunch in Dover, a grim, stained town plastered along the base of the cliffs which are, to Joss’s approval, actually white, and topped with bright green grass. The town is cluttered on one side by the immense docks, and on the other it is squeezed against implacable rock. This, Mark tells them, is the edge of the great chalk downs that make up the geology of the county.

‘Did you know,’ says Joss, bright with knowledge, ‘that chalk is made of dead things?’

‘I did not know that,’ says Rebecca. ‘How macabre.’

‘Millions of them, all packed down and mineralised.’ She glances at Mark to see that she’s got the right term. ‘It was all under water once, you know. Now we’re sitting on a bed of a zillion tiny little dead bugs.’

There is a little museum in the town, and Mark, deciding to deliver the best of local history all at once, chivvies the other two in there.

Among the cases of old railway tickets, lumpy flint knives, scraps of Roman armour and Civil War paraphernalia, the thing that captivates Joss is a small, crudely made terracotta oil lamp. Rebecca finds her staring at it through the glass. The case isn’t well lit, and Joss is crouched to see better.

‘Something you’d like to take home?’

‘Look at that.’ Joss points. ‘See how it’s black where the flame was? Someone actually lit that. Like, two thousand years ago.’

‘Not a model-home oil lamp, then.’
Joss scowls. ‘No.’

‘I wasn’t having a go at you!’ Rebecca calls, but Joss has already moved on stiffly to the next room where a grinning mannequin is modelling some rigid fabric, a Saxon costume.

‘Had enough?’ Mark says, coming up a while later to where Rebecca is dully staring at a collection of Second World War evacuation posters.

‘Evacuate me from here,’ she says, putting her arm around his waist. ‘I can’t take too much of this all in one go. I end up feeling old.’

‘It’s important to get a feel for the place.’

‘I know. But it’s just as Heritage to want a good old cup of tea, right?’

He hesitates; kisses the top of her head. ‘Poor thing. We’ll take you home.’

Joss wanders up, looking cheerier. ‘Cool stuff,’ she says.

Mark pushes the door open for them to leave. ‘We English are obsessed with oldness. Obsessed! I looked in the newsagents in town. There are three magazines of local history. You’re going to have more history here than you know what to do with. You should go to the library.’

Joss really is enthralled by all this talk of history. Rebecca wishes she could be as happy to be here, that she too had something to be looking forward to. Australia hovers in her mind, a bright-lit kite, an airiness, the colour yellow and the burning blue of the sky. She has left what she knows and she doesn’t yet know what she has gained instead.

‘Since you’d be in school in Melbourne, and here you are at a loss until next term starts—why don’t you make that a project? Find something about the history down here, and write it up for me. It’ll be interesting, sweetie.’

‘That’ll keep me off the streets,’ Joss remarks. ‘You’ll be glad of that.’

‘Find one thing,’ Mark suggests. ‘Do some reading, find one thing that gets you going, and trace it all the way through. Find the continuity. There’s got to be something you can use.’

They get back to the car. Mark and Joss talk about the castle and the artefacts all the way home. Joss is satisfactorily impressed, and Mark animated with pride. Rebecca sits and looks out the window; the best bit of the day, she thinks, is driving past the fields, the horizon steady, the green flickering from dark to light, from yellow to blue, a subtle peace out there as the car moves her through it, heading towards the sea.

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THE SACRIFICE

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'Have you seen the cups? They've all disappeared!' Rebecca calls up the stairs.

'There were only two anyway,' Mark replies from the bedroom. 'Plastic ones under the sink.'

Life in this house really is like camping out. 'I can't find anything,' she mutters. She drinks her tea out of a glass jar she finds in the pantry.

Mark comes down. 'Where's our miss?'

'Around somewhere.' She sips awkwardly from the jar, the thread for the lid unfamiliar against her lips. 'I hope she's all right here. She seems happy so far. It's just such a huge jolt, this new world. I'm still trying to catch up myself.'

'What have we done, that's what you're thinking?' He leans against the table. 'Where on earth have we come to? How are we going to eat? Will we have to hunt in the woods? Come on mate, it's early days yet.'

She flicks him a glance. 'We'll have to find her a school. Some other kids to meet. She was pretty brave about there being no internet, but you know how she lives online. We didn't even set up her phone to work here. I know she's a loner, but I don't want her to feel completely shut off.'

He looks at her, something hovering behind his firm mouth. 'She'll be fine.'

'She couldn't even bring her guitar. Her books. Most of her clothes…'

'Listen.' He doesn't move to comfort her, but his voice lowers. She knows to pay attention to this voice. It's a voice that promises to take care of things. Sometimes she wishes the assumption hadn't been made that things needed taking care of for her. She thought when they married that Mark would be a support, but it looks like she found a father-figure instead. How trite, how weak. Her friends might have been correct to watch her bridal walk with the sceptical smiles she suspected they'd hidden from her. How easy it is for her to play the child, even after all these years of growing. But how good it is to be looked after.

'Joss is busy finding out about the place where she lives now. She'll find things to do instead of talking to all those pathetic people online. She'll have to go out into the real world now. She might learn something new.' Mark comes over now, and touches her shoulder. She doesn't move closer, or shrug him off. A faintness of despair comes over her. She wanted things to be different here, but now they're just strange.

He moves away again.

'Brave new world,' she says. 'I'm sure you're right.'

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In the library in town, old men belch over newspapers, a young Slav man talks quietly, urgently into a mobile phone, there are young mothers with prams at the bank of computers devoted to internet use. A truck passes outside; someone is surreptitiously eating crisps, the smell of onion and cheese sour in the artificial air of the building.

Joss is here to get more books for the endless reading at night. She’d said she’d learn about the area, and, dutiful girl, she is doing so. There’s a lot to read; Mark wasn’t joking when he said the people here were obsessed with the past. Although when Joss had asked at the library counter for local history and, trying to be friendly, said to the librarian, ‘You live in a really interesting place,’ the woman had gazed at her, pebble-eyed, and said only that she was from Nottingham and didn’t really know anything about history.

Joss is very young and she doesn’t know much about time but she understands that she feels more secure when she can find her place in it. This year is so different to last year at school; whoever she was when she was twelve feels remote as a ghost. For her, the wide valleys of ‘history’ have always been a landscape, marked out with recognisable moments like strata, like the layers of soil and rock that Mark had shown her on his scans, the deposits and wrinkles where cultures have folded themselves over and over, like a man turning earth. The richest loam for her is the very distant, mysterious past: myths, legends: stories which take her somewhere on the line between knowing and not-knowing, the places where, secretly, ‘maybe’ becomes ‘might be’. Now she is here, it’s as if she’s been given a shovel and invited to dig.

Bound on three sides by water, this corner of Britain is claustrophobic with itself. The past violence of the place can’t be denied, but it is well hidden. What are now miles of peaceful fields, bland and identical beneath their crop of yellow rape and barley, have been battlefields, roads, places where people lived and passed. There are the usual ghost stories, and tales of murder, tales of smuggling and shipwreck and piracy. There’s a ring of beech trees, built on the ruins of a Roman temple; the legend tells Joss that the Devil appears if you run around the circle seven times on a dark night. There are the Countless Stones, another circle, which cannot be numbered no matter how often one tries. The area is jammed with stories, with histories silting up on each other. Used to a room in suburban Melbourne, Joss looks up from her book and realises that the Countless Stones are only an hour’s bus-ride away. The church down the road from Mark’s house was built by the first Normans; the sky above the house was reamed by

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German fighter planes. It’s all a little hard to believe. A kind of vertigo of the imagination.

So, summoning her courage, on her way home she walks past the house and keeps going. A ridiculous thought crosses her mind that, like some kind of Huckleberry Finn, she should have some bread and cheese tied up in a handkerchief; she giggles. To be honest, she’s a little apprehensive of going out into the countryside alone. All she’s known is suburbia, and the occasional bushwalk in the hills outside Melbourne organised by her school. Mark and Rebecca weren’t ones to go far afield; they prefer cafés and markets. Joss wonders if she should take a map with her, but after all, she’s not going far. This is just an exploratory wander. It’s not like the bush, where you can get hurt.

It’s bright out here, bright and quiet.

She swings quickly down the road, her footsteps loud on the asphalt, a different sound on the rough gravel or untidy grass of the verge. A profusion of vegetation, feathered and fronded with blossoms and thick tangled stems blocks her view on either side; the only thing is to follow the road wherever it leads. She knows that eventually it connects with a big road towards Canterbury, but that’s a long way away. She’s certainly not going to walk to Canterbury; whatever 40 miles is, it’s probably a very long way. Though, she thinks, in a way she feels like a pilgrim. A pilgrim to the places she’s yearned for in her imagination. Wherever they actually are. Judging from the impenetrable hedgerows, Olde Englande is going to be forever blocked off from her.

She’s just about to give up and turn back when the hedgerows relent and there’s a gap; beyond, a field and above her head, a sign pointing into the field, saying Footway. She’s not sure what this means, but she thinks Mark’s mentioned the old footpaths that cross the countryside regardless of roads. ‘Old ways’ he’d say. ‘No one can quite wipe them out.’ Looking, she can see a thin seam in the crop, a delicate low feathery stuff.

She walks in, feeling conspicuous and prepared at any moment for an irate farmer to charge out of the hedgerow shouting at her. But there is no one, and she walks cautiously along the seam, which is a kind of path, feeling rather Biblical as she stands amid what looks like some kind of corn. Alien corn? she thinks. Something to do with exile? How appropriate.

On the other side of the field there’s a stand of trees. She reaches it, and rests a moment under the shade. So, she thinks. I’ve made it in.

Now what? It’s not like old Enid Blyton or whatever, some wizard isn’t going to come down from the tree and tell her something. It feels weirdly like that might happen, though.
Pale clouds cover the hot sky. She stands and squints through a hedgerow, wandering her hand through the soft grass and honeysuckle tendrils, to see the field on the other side, some kind of different crop this time, burnt yellow. There’s a big windbreak of trees on the other side.

A crack of thunder comes over. Joss looks up. The sky is shadowed, with big sultry clouds barging into the light grey. Wind shuffles the hedgerows. She stands there, looking at the field. A weird brightness; thunder crushes again.

A drop of water hits her face. A drop. A drop. Then the rain shouts down.

She stands there, thrilled. Water in the creases of her closed eyelids, running down her face, soaking her hair. Water thrashes on the ground.

Joss opens her eyes, grinning against the streaming rain. On the other side of the hedgerow she sees a movement. A boy, cream and gold, flickering past the high fronds of vegetation, the delicate flowers. He’s running across her vision on the other side of the field, fast—he runs to one side and she can’t see him anymore.

The rain is overwhelming, and there’s another flare of lightning. I should get to shelter, she tells herself, and stands there still, looking to the right to where her house is, the direction the boy ran. The country is all hers and she stands there, marvelling at how empty air can be so full.

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‘So these,’ Mark says, ‘are the grand ladies.’

He and Rebecca walk that evening under the shade of the huge trees that cloak the entrance to the house. The trunks remind Rebecca of thighs, smoothly muscled; above, the leaves are large, a lustrous fluttering green.

‘I suppose they were a lot smaller when you were here,’ she says.

‘Well, only because I was a giant of a man back then,’ he says, smiling. ‘No. They were just the same. Just the same. Aren’t they lovely?’ The leaves cast myriad shadows on the still-damp road, shifting like water, in patterns of gold and bronze. ‘As Gerald Manley Hopkins said, God bless dappled things.’

They’re strolling out, after an early dinner. Mark promised to take her for a perfectly safe walk, ‘No boring monuments, no scary social challenges...’ Rebecca threw him a look. ‘We’ll just walk around a bit. Then you can teach Joss how to recognise a yew, and other useful things.’

‘We do have trees in Australia, you remember. Even some of these.’
'Yes. But these are *trees.*'

They walk towards the village, down towards the sea. They do not hold hands, but they walk in step, from habit.

Rebecca pushes her hair off her face. ‘We’ll have to get the place set up soon. I feel naked without all my junk. I must be more materialistic than I thought. When you lived here the house was full of stuff, I suppose.’ She hesitates, but Mark’s hand hasn’t tightened on hers, or removed itself. ‘Does it feel weird, being back here?’ she goes on. ‘I suppose it’s like you’ve never been away?’

‘Mmm. Yes.’ He looks at the road just ahead of him, as he always does when he’s walking. ‘It’s as if time has tucked around itself, in a way. Have you ever gone back to a place you knew well before? It’s the most uncanny thing. You, who you are now; you almost feel like... a ghost or something. The house is the same, the countryside’s the same—though I lived here before they started planting this horrible rapeseed everywhere, that bright yellow stuff you see. And I feel like I should be different, after all this time, but I’m not. Or I am and I can’t see it? Sometimes I feel like I’m going to walk into the room and see Diana there. Because I wasn’t here when she died, she’s more real to me alive, than dead. And then it’s you, instead.’

‘I can see why that would be a nasty shock.’ She’s trying for joking, but it comes out a little sour.

Mark doesn’t notice. ‘Perhaps there’s two of me now, the one from before, and the one now, superimposed.’

‘Hmm.’ Mark’s not usually this fanciful.

‘It’s an odd feeling.’

The light, at nine in the evening, is simply darkness bleached pale. The road rises a little, rounds a corner, passes the service station and the pub, takes them between more fields and then between houses. The village, at this hour, is almost entirely quiet. Televisions can be heard in the lounge rooms that stand right on the high street. Rebecca isn’t used to walking down a street and peering in a window to someone’s living room. A car comes along, but takes a corner and disappears. There are a few middle aged couples at a table outside one of the old pubs, but they’re mostly musing silently on their pints. Rebecca doesn’t suggest they stop for a drink. All the shops are closed. They walk on.

‘Did you love it here, before?’

‘I did.’ He’s walking steadily, with a rangy, loping stride, a walk that will take him far and fast. She always loved Mark for walking as fast as she. ‘I thought this place
had a real atmosphere. It meant something, to be where things had started. Even to me, coming from the Midlands, it seemed old.’

‘I don’t feel that. It’s just a place to me. It has fields and houses and trees, but I don’t feel any—’

‘—We’re very proud of oldness, the English.’

‘—echoes. Echoes!’ She laughs. ‘And I used to be really romantic, believe in ghosts, all that. If there were something, I’d like to think I’d notice. I just don’t feel it here. Maybe it hasn’t been long enough.’

He looks at her. They’ve neared the beach, and the wind comes up against their faces as they pass down the last narrow street before the broadness of sea and sky.

‘I don’t believe in ghosts,’ he says. ‘I think things have a spirit of place, though. I do. I can feel it all around me here.’ He points at a plaque screwed into the side of a bench along the promenade. ‘Look at this.’

*From this place generations of sea-men launched the lifeboats which brought Soar the gratitude of many.*

*In the memory of all souls lost at sea, and with the heartfelt prayers of those saved. 1936.*

‘But that’s what I mean,’ he goes on. ‘Because you can read as much as you like about this place, for example, even every plaque on every wall in this town, and you still won’t get the feeling of—what is it, resonance?—that I can feel walking in the fields—that understanding that someone else has walked here long ago; as strongly as if they stood beside me. Some things persist.’

‘I just don’t get it. Do you think it’s because I’m Australian?’

‘Do you?’

‘I hope not. I have ancestry, I have an understanding of time as much as anyone from Europe—I think. But I must say, I don’t feel as if I’m walking in anyone’s footsteps. I’ve spent most of my life trying to get over the past.’

‘But look at me. I thought I could, and now…’

They are trudging down onto the shingle. Ahead the beach is soaked in shadow, and the water comes slowly, the tide going out little by little. The pebbles on which they walk are shiny and dark with water still.

‘Maybe, what you’re talking about, it’s a bit like the Dreamtime. Aborigines don’t feel that it’s history. To them, it’s all happening right now, because the land endures, and the stories endure, and it’s all still Dreamtime, to the old ones at least. If you believe it, time can disappear. I wish I had that, sometimes. Mum and dad could still be alive,
even though they’d also be dead. I could be the person I used to be, as well as who I am now. If you could have everything at once...’ She grimaces.

‘But perhaps that’s too much for a person to take on alone. That’s what I’m saying, I guess.’

A seagull comes idling overhead, holds its position on an invisible breaker of air.

‘I hope you can come to love this place,’ Mark says.

She stands and looks out over the water. It’s beautiful, but the loneliness of the expanse disturbs her a little. All the lines between sea and sky are collapsing. She’s glad she’s got Mark to break the force of the fresh breeze, and she moves further into the shelter of his body. She wipes hair out of her eyes.

‘I’m sure I will. It’s hard for me, this thing about Diana—’

‘Don’t think about her.’

‘Well, you do. I know you do.’

‘Let the dead rest,’ Mark says, looking out to the horizon. ‘Let the dead bury the dead.’

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Joss opens up her laptop. As soon as the screen flashes into light she relaxes. It was a blow to find that there was no internet connection here. For a moment she panicked. What would she do with all her time? Normally at home Joss lived online. She was a bit of a gamer, and had a blog, the usual stuff. All of that is snatched away here; the idea of a house without a connection is shocking. But she’s brought her files, and she brings up one of the landscapes she was working on before they left. At fifteen, she is expert enough with a visual editing program to be employable. Hours, she’s put into this: composing an imaginary terrain of mountains and valleys, haunted by a foggy sun and sheened with a kind of supernatural glow, the obscured turrets of a castle in the distance. She stares at the landscape, which she had invented to suit a certain mood—a kind of wistfulness, a kind of wishing. It’s beautiful, and she knows that back in Australia it meant the world to her. But here she has hopes of finding something like this, for real.

She gets up and goes back to her pile of library books. She’s a good student, she makes notes, and is working through chronologically. There are things familiar to her from all the fantasy books she’s read back in Australia: special stone knives, magical wells and springs, groves of trees. There are wonderful quotes from old poems. ‘Grief is stronger than the sea, if you could understand it,’ says one. Water is a big thing. Water
was special. They were very careful to respect it, and to give to it. Archaeologists have found all sorts of things at the bottom of rivers and wells: swords, jewellery, flint tools and even bones. Joss likes rituals. She likes the idea of this.

She reads about how just near the village there is a field where there was a manor house, formerly a castle, and before that there was a Saxon church, which was built in the ruins of a Roman temple, which was apparently put on top of a Celtic shrine. It was a shrine to a god called Teutates, who liked cutting throats. Joss draws her lips back. It seems that cutting throats was a big thing. All those bog bodies strangled, sliced and drowned.

She reads on, about the Celtic love of shape-shifting, and immortality, that souls can travel from one body to another, and how dogs are the symbols of death and the underworld. The old people paid a lot of attention to things that moved between the two. Perhaps that was why water was so important: it came out of the deep of the earth, it moved. It couldn’t be held tight.

That old world enthrals her. It sounds strange, a little sinister, very organised. You knew that they had understood something, some deep dark truth. In a frightening world, it was important to keep the balance right.

::

Mark’s thigh lies heavy against hers and Rebecca is aware of his groin cushioned soft behind her buttocks. He is so heavy with sleep and she is tight and awake. His breath goes on, one long exhale and another. She is awake. Sweat sticks them together; she longs to shift and be released, to disturb her husband, to make something happen. She thinks of him inside her, and her belly tenses. The night is so densely silent, except for his breathing. Her own throat makes no sound but it is open with restlessness. The room doesn’t have enough air.

There’s a hotness in her, a child’s petulant confusion. This was Mark and Diana’s bedroom, was she lithe and lovely here? Diana, with her quick blonde hair and her English refinement and this house, all hers. Diana would have stared at this ceiling, past Mark’s face, with an expression of ecstasy. Diana would have had a younger, stronger Mark. His neck uncreased, his mouth supple. Grief twists inside Rebecca. She would like to curl up and cry.

It’s been a mistake to come here, she’s a fool. Mark, too, is thinking these days of Diana, she is sure. A hot memory.

She whimpers aloud. Hold me, comfort me, wake.
Abruptly she writhes and turns. Mark stirs and then places his hand over her shoulder, sleepily pushing her away as he rolls to the other side. Now he curls away from her, and she presses up again, fitting to the snug of his spine, the front of her thighs against the back of his. Her arm falls around his ribs, the hand flattens against his belly. She appears to be sleeping but she’s not, her hand presses, senses. Lowers to where Mark’s penis waits, takes it in her palm.

Her fingers are clever, her whole body is aware; invisibly, as she softly teases the hot sticky flesh, the muscles of her legs flex and quiver. If he would just wake, and turn.

He breathes.

She massages more firmly, vehemently, until there’s stiffness and her palm is full of a hard thing, she’s using her whole hand now, it’s incredible that he doesn’t wake. Her breath comes more hoarsely against the ball of his shoulder, she can feel it on her face. She is getting wet.

‘What are you doing?’ A whisper. Her hand falls still.

‘Is that okay?’

His hips don’t move. He sighs.

She keeps massaging him, half-furtive, half-provocative. She lets him feel her open-mouthed breathing, her hips pulsing slowly against his thigh.

Mark’s hand pushes at her shoulder. He’s telling her to turn on her side, the other side. Obedient, she goes. He pulls at her leg, raises it in the air. A shameful flush of gratification heats her face, turned to the door. Mark’s face is in her hair, a hand grasps her shoulder, pulls her taut. He fumbles with fingers within her cleft, puts himself at her entrance. She moans, gladly, into the pillow.

But when he’s inside, her body arced between his prick and his hand, it’s just flesh, not what she wanted after all. Her body feels inert as mud. She keeps her head turned, and she knows Mark has his eyes closed. He slumps back to sleep after, and she lies there, her head thrown back, eyes open, not thinking anything at all except, ashamed.

::

Mark holds his hand out, the next morning, as Joss is dumping toast crusts in the bin. He has his rucksack on, is heading out. ‘Coming?’

‘What?’

‘Not ‘what’— ‘pardon’. ’ He cocks his head at her. ‘I’m going for a walk. Do you want to come along for a bit?’
She is a little shy. In Melbourne she had usually avoided being alone with Mark—not unwilling, exactly, but there was a freight of caution. She was always afraid of being too young, too foolish and mute with him. He is a smart man, and Joss wants to be a smart girl, but on the occasions back home when he’d driven her to the dentist, or Rebecca was out with her friends and the two of them had had an evening together, talk was a little clumsy, swung heavily with a weight of awkwardness. They spoke shyly, not quite looking straight at each other. They spoke of schoolwork, books, history; safe things. Matters on which it didn’t matter if their gazes skittered, if words stumbled a little, if there were pauses.

Joss blinks, pleased now. ‘Sure.’

The road outside is gilt with morning sunshine. A fresh cool breeze stirs the trees, but the countryside is quiet. Joss inhales, settles into a steady pace next to Mark’s. They walk in silence for a little while, away from the sea, along the curve of the road.

Joss finds herself relaxing. The air is so light, her legs feel young and strong. Birds call out from the trees, calls she’s never heard before.

‘I know it’s a bit of a wrench,’ Mark says. ‘We’ve just abducted you from school—I suppose you’ll be missing your friends.’

‘I don’t really have many friends there.’ She trails her fingers through the fronds of a hedgerow. ‘I’m a sad loner.’

‘Me too.’ He pauses. ‘To be honest, I’m glad to escape.’ He inhales, lets it out.

‘Are you?’

‘I’m not really the convivial type. Happiest with a field on either side, the sky above. Real man of the land.’ He pats his chest, laughs at himself. Joss giggles.

‘The kind that sits in the corner of a pub, making faces at everyone?’

‘That’s it. Cap pulled down low, pipe in the corner of my mouth.’ His smile grows. ‘People say I killed my brother, but they never found the body, out there in the bog.’

‘You wear nothing but old woolly stuff.’

‘I smell like dogs.’

Joss is giggling. ‘But you have a passionate affair with the barmaid. It’s a tale of forbidden romance, and no one knows, but she’s young, with firey red hair, and you love her—’ She stops.

He glances at her, amused. ‘Yes, a secret love.’

She walks on, a little unsure. ‘Yeah.’

The road seems to just go on ahead of them; she can see it appearing at the rise of a hill beyond.
‘Joss?’ She looks at him. ‘Have you got a boyfriend?’
She doesn’t reply.
‘Bit early for you?’
‘Boys are rubbish.’
Mark laughs. ‘Indeed. You’re probably right to leave them alone. Horrible beasts. Not anyone on your blog?’
‘That’s all girls.’
‘I remember when I was fifteen. Terrified of girls. My parents had given me the idea that if I slept with a girl, I had to marry her. And they were so vicious! The girls I knew—and I went to a boys’ school, so I didn’t get to see them often—they were so tall and perfect and looked like they’d have your head off with a hockey-stick as soon as look at you.’ He chuckles. Joss wishes he’d stop talking about this. ‘The first girl I kissed tasted of orange juice. She didn’t even like me, she only felt sorry for me, I think. Her name was Madeleine, though, and I thought that was the most romantic thing in the world. Madeleine, in a pink dress, her beautiful knees.’ He smiles at the road in front of him. Then at Joss. She doesn’t know what to say.
‘Have you kissed anyone, Joss?’
She shakes her head.
‘Would you like to?’
Her steps faster on the road, she feels for a moment the relief that they’ll be there soon, and then she remembers that they’re still walking away from the house.
‘Kissing’s not so bad,’ he says from somewhere far away.
There’s a terrible sensation in her chest, as if something is flaking and shedding.
‘It isn’t, you know.’
They are passing under trees, the shade is cool. Her face feels wrong.
‘Well.’ He puts his hands in his pockets.
She must make herself say it; she coughs, slows, doesn’t look at him. ‘Can we go back?’
Mark swivels where he stands. ‘Of course.’
They walk back to the house, not speaking. Joss is aware that on her face is a small half-smile, of nervousness and also, a terrible kind of satisfaction.

::

In Melbourne there was a rhythm to things: they would eat out once a week, watch television most evenings, or have friends over for dinner: routines that swept them
through year after year, rarely at a loss. Even when Mark entered their lives, not much changed. Joss had her homework, her online friendships, and whatever fad of interest she was going through, like the guitar she sporadically played.

Here the evenings are stiff things, and they all feel in a rush to have them over with. The light, in early summer, lingers on and on. It is not even quite dark when they clear the table from dinner and go to their rooms to read. Reading is the only thing to do, and each of them sits, isolated by a sheath of lamplight, in their bedrooms, disappearing into worlds other than this.

Dinner is late, and the house is still light, with the pale grey haze of the day’s fading outside. Rebecca goes to the garden for a cigarette afterwards. The birds scream in the trees. All the flowers are closing up.

‘It’s so peaceful here.’ she says to Mark, who’s come to lean against the doorway behind her.

There’s silence.

‘It’s very pretty.’

Her belly is tight, she hates it when he forces banality from her like this. She lets out a stream of smoke.

‘I’m buggered. I think I’ll go to bed.’ A hand rests on her shoulder briefly, and then is lifted away.

‘See you in there, love,’ she says, as the door snaps shut. He always keeps the doors shut, and the windows, even in summer when she wants to throw them open. What’s the point of summer if the windows are closed? Freshers and fuggers, someone had told her. Men all seemed to be fuggers.

How long has she been nervous of him?

::

In the bath, Joss sticks her legs out of the water. In the uncanny silence of the bathroom, every time she raises a hand to wipe her hair from her face, the noisy trickle echoes and then deadens. Her heartbeat is slow and heavy under the hot water. She’s reading about prehistoric people, and their careful placating, their diligent care of their gods.

The ancient people, according to this book, saw the world divided into two: the holy, and the other. Normal time, normal experiences could enter holiness by repeating the acts of the gods. In a sense everything was holy: eating, fighting, sex, birth, death. But only if it were done conscientiously, with the deliberation due to something sacred.
To eat was to consume the world as the gods had; to fight was to enact an epic conflict between hosts of primordial deities. Without sanctification, cosmos was merely chaos.

There’s something about this shadowy macabre which makes sense to her. Ritual and reason, the mad logic of the ancients. A sense of balance and equity. Up and down, to and fro: the constant comforting of fretful gods, the fearful, cynical offerings. To life, the people brought death. For death, they spoke to themselves of eternal life. Always the offering, the sacrifice. Joss wonders. Are they the same thing?

She had practised her own made-up little rites once: the careful placing of stones in a gutter to make a shrine; always the biggest stone last, the key. The hoarding of detritus, for fear of losing the one piece of scrap paper which might reveal the magic map. The furtive pouring out of a glass of Mark’s wine in the back garden, for deities on the other side of the world. Always leaving something on her plate, as she’d read in a fable, against bad luck inflicted for greed. Never watching someone pass out of sight. That would mean you’d never see them again. Superstitions she barely noticed, though she enacted some of them still.

And for the old people, to imitate the gods was to reanimate them. Spirits of the trees, spirits of water, spirits of a shrine, they were present and living in the moments when humans did again the things that the gods did: ‘did’ become ‘does’ and time itself was vanquished. For when an act was made sacred, then again the god performed it; holy time was no-time, and the instant became eternal. Space and history didn’t exist; only the recurrence, only the endless now, with each birth, each death, each sacrifice. All of them pressing together: the momentless folding in of time.

Joss is struggling with this. The steam has made her sleepy; she heaves her other leg out of the water and lets it rest on the side of the green enamelled bath. The idea of no-time radiates in her at this moment: she feels unreal, as if she has always been in this enclosed, silent room with the candlelight wavering on water made metal by shadows; the Joss who went to high school in Melbourne, who walked those streets, saw those people, is gone, as a dream; this is a dream, here; every morning she awakes and bemsedly, contentedly agrees to it. She knows she passes from moment to moment, along with the world, but for her there is only the instant, and that, too, baffles her.

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Rebecca stands outside the kitchen door in the walled garden, after getting up for a pee. She is too alert to go back to the bedroom where Mark has just dropped off to sleep. She thinks she might have a cigarette and look out at the darkness. But outside it is very
black, blacker than she is used to in the street-lit nights of suburbia in Melbourne, and
the body of darkness that stands beyond the door makes her halt still on the doorstep.
The kitchen light is on, and a curve of illumination paves the steps before her. Past that,
however, the whole world has disappeared. No pale outlines, nothing. The sounds are
more vivid than she likes. A night-bird chuckles, there is a strange repetitive clanging
somewhere in the distance, a creature rattles twigs, the trees make a noise like the sea,
always coming closer, never arriving. Stupid superstitious fears about sudden grabbing
hands and looming faces come to her, as if she were a child. Smoking more and more
quickly, she finds herself retreating. She looks out into the darkness, because to not look
at it is more disturbing. The curious thing about light, she thinks, is that the stronger it is,
the more it creates its own fugitives in shadows. Then she finishes the cigarette and
shuts the door, turns the light off and walks quickly through the shadowed house, where
the shadows are deep enough to be, in fact, the world.

::

It’s muggy today, close, as if someone has hands pressed over her cheeks, and the
window glass is so cool against her hot face. She opens her eyes, and there’s something
there. Outside. There’s a person in the front garden below. He’s small, standing just
inside the wall, looking up at her. A blond, thin boy, tanned dark as honey, a little
younger than she is. She can tell from the skinniness of his limbs, the size of his elbows.
Wearing khaki pants and a green shirt. He’s smiling at her.

Joss moves back from the window. He waves. She comes nearer again, a hesitant
smile on her face, though surely he can’t see her expression hidden in the dark of the
house. He’s still smiling, with his lips closed, looking steadily at her from across the
yard. Joss waves, a little wave, her fingers closing again quickly over her palm.

Then he turns and hops easily over the wall. Joss watches as he walks to the
shade of the trees in the road outside and vanishes.
Part Two
They've been in the house for over a week. The early summer air moves around them so lightly they barely feel it. Joss has already stopped remarking every day ‘It’s only three days since we left Australia, it’s only five days…’

Mark goes out every day, walking. Suddenly he seems terribly British and competent. Rebecca thinks there’s something fuddy-duddy about his earnestness. He comes home in the early evenings and collapses. ‘Did you take any photos?’ she asks. He hasn’t asked her to go with him. She hasn’t invited herself.

‘Just notes.’ He stands up wearily to put his boots outside. ‘I’m having a beer.’

He seems intent on getting out of the house where he’d lived once with Diana; but he brought them here. He wants to speak of her, but keeps his memories private. It is as if, nostalgic for the past, he finds the reality of what remains more alarming than comforting. He looks like a man who is feeling things, but cannot begin to utter them.

There’s a forbidding distance about him these days. The more she tries to reach him, the cooler his politeness seems. The kitchen is where they meet most often, since they barely speak in bed these days; they exchange their terse pleasantries, they eat, with Joss, they cast glances at each other when the other is staring into a bowl of food. When he speaks, it’s in a low voice, tiredly, as if Rebecca has asked him to recall some trivial detail of an old life. ‘I suppose so,’ is a phrase he uses too often. It makes Rebecca want to mock him. But she doesn’t speak this new terse language, she cannot find the steadiness in it from which to tell him what his distance is doing to her.

His memories of Diana taint the house invisibly, a fug.

‘Love you,’ she says, in bed at night, smiling. Trying yet again. She curls towards him.

‘I’m very fond of you,’ he says, but he rolls away and goes to sleep.

She’s settling in, she supposes. Rising late in the morning, drinking her tea slowly in that lovely quiet garden. Watching the sky, and the trees heaving in the breeze. The weather’s warming into June, pure and fresh; there are more and more wildflowers growing in the weeds. Occasionally she bends and yanks out some fronds, in a gesture towards gardening, but she likes the rough profusion of it, the garden is a good place to hide.

This morning she ambles up the path to one of the old sheds that sag at the back of the garden. Crooked slate tiles teetering towards the edge of a sloped roof; peeling paint walls. The door is wooden and opens with a tug: no lock. The scent inside is of rotten wood and stone dust, hot air captured in a small place, musty and familiar. It smells like her father’s shed, when she was a child. Oh, Dad. She
remembers him for a moment. How she misses him and her mother. They lay light hands on her shoulders and are gone again.

In the shed there is the usual jumble of cast-off household stuff. A radiator, a broken deck chair, some tins of paint and a shower curtain, cracked and brittle with age, over something larger. Rebecca pulls it off. A bike.

Years since she’s ridden a bike. She drags it out, tosses one thigh over the saddle. The tires are a little slack but otherwise seem fine. It’s a little too low for her, and she places her feet on the pedals, pushes one forward cautiously. In the long grass the traction is good. Weeds hiss at the spokes of the bike as she trundles it out the front gate.

This a freedom Rebecca hasn’t expected. One hesitant push with her foot and she spins off down the road. Lightness and ease rush through her. One long thigh shoves down on the pedal, then the other, and she’s amongst the fields. Down the slight hill she goes and goes.

It is an oddly comforting feeling, to be following Mark into this land, seeing the things he’s been seeing. If she can’t do it with him, she can come after him. It makes her feel closer, as if she’s seeing through his eyes; as if he’s somehow inside her.

She could ride forever, like this, past the blank bright fields. Past a thatched-roof cottage, past an old coaching-inn; a dog barks from a garden. There are no people to be seen. One after the other junctions appear and random turns are taken: it all looks the same, whichever direction she goes but there are signposts, she’ll find her way back. Suddenly it doesn’t seem to matter after all. She sings to the cows as she passes them and they look up with their calm intelligent eyes. The sun is blazing and she’s sweating, but there’s no overwhelming heat. She’s proud of the wet under her arms, damp on her back. ‘One of these mornings,’ and she inhales, ‘you’re going to rise up singing…’ In the tunnels of trees through which the road passes, the air is cool and green.

She stops the bike on long stretches, when it takes her up high, and across the rim of trees she can see the sea and closer, the fields. They are all full of that crop she doesn’t recognise; of course, she wouldn’t recognise any at home, either. Stalks a couple of feet high, fringed with pale yellow fronds on either side. The field looks soft, like a thick carpet. This is a kind of corn or barley perhaps. There’s a plume of cloud on the horizon that might be smoke. Imagine if it were smoke, a settlement burning. For a moment she forgets to concentrate and there it is, a possibility of imagination. Someone has stepped here, in this field, people have walked and died here. It’s calm. Thoughts flush away.

The trees, close and far, are her great delight. They are markers here, she orients by them, pays attention. The endless twisted silhouettes of them: she’s never
seen this kind of beauty before. Laced about with ivy, filigree leaves, a hundred shades of green and grey, they are so different to the ghostly eucalypts of Australia and even to the staid European trees she’s known at home.

Rebecca is one of those people who loves the bush in Australia, but never goes to it. Somehow there was never time to go camping, or for more than one jaunt to the hills a year. Absurd, really, when being in the tangled cocoon of vegetation has always soothed her. An odd kind of soothing, because it seemed a consolation despite itself. There was something alien about the bush; it belonged to other people. She always felt like an intruder; bush walking, those few times, she had often taken the position at the rear of the line of walkers, so she could sometimes pause and look behind, at where the trees were carefully ignoring her passage, lowering their eyes before the hikers disappeared out of sight and the bush could ease again. She respected its privacy, that was what was consoling about it; it respected hers.

Here the trees range along hill-tops, wreathing their perfect dark limbs against each other, substantial and still delicate, grave and beautiful. A harmony of forms which holds her rapt. As she passes the hedgerows she thinks hawthorn, birch, lime, chestnut, oak. The names come to her from memories wrapped up in comfort and the cosiness of a childhood bed.

Coming up a hill on the way home, panting, the bike heavy in her arms as she stands on the pedals, there’s field enclosed within a hem of trees, dark, fir-like, cool. She thinks she’ll pull in there, sit in the gully between the barley and the trees. As she yanks the bike through the opening she notices flies.

Feathers under the tires. Ripped, a wing-bone, dirty grey and white, a dank smell. Where she was planning to rest there is a mess of bird carcasses, smashed and torn, matted, crushed. There are dozens of small white and dirty bodies and a rank smell.

She wheels out again in revulsion.

The day is bright like a glass of wine. She can leave the dead place far behind in only a minute.

But at the top of the next hill, heading back towards the coast and home, she pauses, sweaty and breathless now, and looking to one side sees a meadow, like any other, except that Mark is in it, standing there in the middle of the long grass. He has his head in his hands. His shoulders are bent.

She is about to call out when she sees how he shakes.

He seems a stranger, this man crying alone in a field. Very quietly, she puts a foot on a pedal and pushes off.
While he talks, she looks at the details of his face. It’s a good face, firm and characteristic: the neat nose, slightly veined now with age, the dark brows, the thin firm lips, the elegant planes of his cheeks. The kind of face one might see in a regimental portrait, or a university don’s hall. Rebecca remembers, vaguely, loving the tender plateaux of young men’s cheeks, the little creases beside their soft mouths, the fragile skin at the corner of their eyes. But to her, this is what beauty has come to look like.

And love is looking closely, and never flinching; only, ever, looking more closely, less and less afraid.

He turns the side of his face to her now because he cannot seem to address her directly. She has the sudden urge to tell him not to be ridiculous, not to be so fucking British and stiff. Oh Mark, she says inside, You really are turning into—what would you call it? A chump.

But then he turns to her and she can only notice how frail his skin has become, how the light catches in his eyelashes, as he says, ‘It’s a long way.’

She hasn’t been listening closely. He was talking about his mother, up in the middle of the country, and how ill she’s been, it’s been so many years and how she might not be around for much longer, she’s over 80 now. They’re not close, Mark and his family, and after ten years overseas he’s become simply a name to his mother, a voice on the phone and a collection of old school-books in her house. But he has begun talking about her since they arrived, and obviously it was only a matter of time before they all trooped up to some godforsaken industrial town and paid their respects. It might be good to get out of this place. Her whole body feels stiff, as if all she’s done is lie in bed.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘When’ll we go? Next week? Joss has to start school soon.’

He looks at her and almost without thought she realises: he hates me. ‘I don’t think so,’ he says, very distinctly. ‘I know you’re not stupid. But you’re not listening.’

‘What?’

‘I’m trying to tell you.’ He makes to take one of her hands; pulls his hand back. His voice is formal, with a note of caution that is only patronising. ‘I’ll say it slowly. Rebecca. I do care for you. You know I do. But I’m going to have to go away. For a while. I don’t know when I’ll be back. I..’

She sits very still. Something flushes through her, a rinse of shock. And the immediate wash, following, of familiarity. Oh, she knew it. Just as when her parents died suddenly, and she thought, most of all: How stupid I was to think I would avoid that.

‘You’re going away on your own?’
‘It’s being here. I am sorry. I thought I could stick it. This house, it’s just too much. I’ve got to get away for a bit. And…’

She stares at him.

‘And you. I need some time alone.’

Her pulse, slowing, is the only thing that moves her. She can feel herself, swaying minutely in her chair, once a second, with the rhythm of her heart.

‘You arsehole.’

‘What?’

‘You—’ She fights for control, to breathe. ‘You’re going to leave? You’re just picking up and moving on now? What do you mean, you have to go away for a bit? Are you coming back? What do you mean, ‘and you’?’ She slaps his arm, messily. It comes out a weaker blow than she meant. She slaps him again, harder. ‘Fuck!’

‘Rebecca…’

‘Jesus Christ.’ She’s trembling.

Mark is clenched tight with resentment. ‘I knew you’d make it difficult. Get hysterical. I just need some time for myself. This is hard.’

‘Go fuck yourself.’

‘Fine. Fine.’

They sit there for a few moments. Rebecca cannot make herself look at him. Breath is a bubble in her throat, caught and painful. She has no idea what expression her face is making.

‘Look, I didn’t want to upset you. But I have to do what’s best for me. You demand a lot, you know. At this point, I just don’t know if I can give it anymore.’

Rebecca speaks quietly. ‘I thought maybe… maybe we might try again. Mark?’ She doesn’t know where this thought has come from but suddenly it opens in her: a cup of light.

Now he stares. ‘What on earth are you talking about?’

‘I know I wasn’t ready last year. We decided together, but I know really it was me who wanted to get rid of it. But now I’m thinking, and it could be really great, you know—you, and me and Joss, and a little baby…’

‘I’m going tomorrow,’ Mark says. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll keep in touch. Don’t fall apart, Rebecca. For Christ’s sake.’

He gets up, awkwardly, from the little narrow old chair, and Rebecca watches as he walks out of the room. His footsteps are loud on the stairs. She sits in her seat for a minute before she begins to breathe hard, pressing her fists against her sternum, beating her fist against the heart.

::
Joss is out, and Mark has gone. When he put his arms around Rebecca in farewell this morning before driving off, she felt every inch of space that he carefully held between them. A formal embrace. She could barely look at him, but as the car disappeared around the corner she watched it out of sight, found herself leaning forward.

Now Rebecca flinches through the rooms of the house. Outside the sun is shining, inside the house is chill. Her bare feet don’t seem to meet the floor surely. She finds she is walking with her head meekly held forward, penitent. Under her heart, right there beneath her breastbone, is pain. It feels as if an anvil is swinging, straining the muscles from which it hangs. It aches and aches.

She puts on her boots, jams a packet of cigarettes in her pocket, and walks out the door.

The day’s brightness blasts her. There’s the sound of birdsong, and the trees against the house whisper. Everything in the world has been going on out here without her again.

She takes the path from the front gate, turns, and follows the outside of the garden wall to a nest of trees, wrapped in ivy, trying not to put her hand against any trunk or drape of leaves. There are spider webs, but only tiny delicate ones. She can’t see a path through the thickness of vegetation, but on the other side of it is the big field that lies behind the house. Rebecca wants to be in it. The crop has been shorn and the large pale yellow space is empty enough for Rebecca’s yearning. With an Australian’s fear of snakes and spiders, she gingerly picks her way over the rumpled ground, its lumps of ivy-covered stone and tussocks.

In the shadows on the other side of the glade, Rebecca pauses. Is she allowed to walk on the stubble? She feels watched. ‘For god’s sake, you fucking idiot.’ She strides out.

Underfoot the ground is clumpy with the drying crop stumps, and the scent of it is dusty and fresh. There are patches where stones—are they flints?—have been ploughed up and some broken. Most of them are intact, however, lumpy and chalk-white as bones. Her boots make a loud sound as they crunch in the runnels of cleared ground. The sky is hazing with clouds, darkest to the east, but the sun is still shining.

It’s the middle of the field and she lies down suddenly. Flat on her back. There is the sound of stalks under her hair. The sky a great blue skin above. ‘So,’ she says aloud.

Her mouth makes the shape Mark’s does, when he’s holding something in. She can feel his expression on hers. It’s a comforting ghost. But all her words when she mumbles them in her mouth like a pebble taste only of water.

The sun is prickly hot. She can smell her own skin, feel the glossy heat covering her hair like a cap.
Back out onto the quiet road, and there are the signs: *St Crispin’s*. The white arrow points to her right. Rebecca hesitates, then swings down it with quick, cross steps. There is no one around; only one more house, on the corner, and no flicker of life behind the lace curtains there.

At a junction with a smaller road to the right there is another sign. This road is lined with aspens and they sough as she passes beneath their kind feathery shade. Five minutes’ walk around the base of a shallow hill and there’s the chunky steeple of the church, rising above a thick of greenery. She slows.

They’re almost all Norman around here, Mark had said. Churches. The Normans arrived on the south coast, not so far away, and they put up castles and churches. Sometimes they were shoved on top of older Saxon ones. The Normans wanted to put their stamp on things. And god, but they knew how to build. All made of the same stuff, see? And he’d gestured at the thick flint walls and square towers. Castles, churches, they all look the same. Indestructible.

This one is benign with quietness. It’s surrounded by a low flint wall; she runs her fingers along the chunky stone as she walks, until the tips go numb. There is a little wooden portal opening in the low wall, a structure on poles like the kind of roof put over a wishing well in children’s stories. Rebecca bends to read the faded yellow tourist information plaque by its side. *The lych gate dates from the 1760s and forms the entrance to the Path of the Dead, along which bodies were borne for burial.*

She steps through the gate.

There is grass and ivy everywhere, soft and forgiving, massed around the half-sunken gravestones that sprinkle the grounds. Clusters of them nearer the church itself. Inscriptions in old, elegant script like Book Antiqua on Rebecca’s laptop. *Here lieth Sarah Wooton, relict of Samuel Wooton, who departed this life on y 20 Jan 1756.*

Rebecca notices some strange graves, with stone bodies, it seems, lying above the earth. Rounded mummies, with a ball for a head and a tapering tube for a body, as if in their shrouds. There are two or three miniatures, the size of children.

She strolls, slowly, narrowing her eyes at the tombstones as she tries to decipher the eroded scripts. There are precious few she can read. No matter how grand the stone, how large and carefully inscribed, most of them have not endured two or three hundred years in legibility.

She nears the church itself, its flint-studded foundations warped to the uneven ground. The steeple rises, stiff and square, like a watchtower, square at the top, clad in ivy all over one side. Halfway up the façade of the church is a crumbling carved rosette with a round, projecting nub at the top. Looking lower, as the clouds topple the tower towards her, she notices more nubs, on either side of the door’s lintels. They are heads, she sees, almost life-size. The one on her left is a woman, wearing a cowl, her face smeared with time but still recognizable. She is smiling, Her
companion on the other side is also a woman, also hooded, but her mouth is chipped out of shape, and her eyes have a sadder aspect. Rebecca stares at the two of them. They make her feel as if she’s welcome here. Three women, gazing peacefully at each other.

She wonders, briefly, where Diana is buried. This place looks as if no one’s come to worship here for years. Diana is probably in a modern cemetery, lined up alongside all the other shiny black marble bookmarks. Perhaps Mark has been to see; he didn’t say.

Rebecca has not been to a church service since her parents’ funerals ten years ago. And they were awful, stiff affairs. The priest got her mother’s name wrong, she remembers. Margaret, instead of Marguerite. And there were flowers everywhere, prissy arrangements, all the wrong colours. White and orange. She didn’t like the bare modern chapel, with its pale pine fittings and blank white ceiling. There was nothing grand or eloquent there. Only awkward people and too much space around her body, so she’d pulled little Joss closer to her, feeling the trembly warmth of her sister’s body, hating everything, wishing only for somewhere dark and small.

There are notices pinned up in the porch of the church, and on either side, an age-shiny wooden bench. The porch is stone, and it smells damp and old. On the sill of the inner door are scratches in the pale stone; little fine crosses. Another tiny label on the board draws visitors’ attention to them. Crusader Crosses, it says. It is believed that Crusaders, on their return to England, would blunt their swords on the lintel of the first church they saw, in thanksgiving for a safe homecoming. Rebecca draws her fingertip along one of the frail lines. What did they do when they departed in the first place, she thinks. Was there a sharpening of swords? She likes the idea of marking an arrival. Perhaps she should do the same, somehow. Here I am.

She wouldn’t put it past Joss to have some little ritual. She’s good at things like that. After the funeral Joss, aged only five, had insisted that Rebecca and she stand in the back garden. Stand, said Joss. Here. Next to me. The two of them stood, in the buttery late light of the evening. Now bow, said Joss. This way. She turned to the left. And this way. Rebecca followed. They did a circle, bowing in every direction. Joss pointed up at the sky, to where two clouds were being tugged slowly towards the sunset. Now mum and dad know we’re sorry.

Maybe Joss has made her obeisance to this place already. She’s taking hold of England in a way Rebecca is resisting. Rebecca lays her palm on the cold yellow stone. Maybe she should try harder. Anything’s better than this mewling and listlessness. The wet cement in her heart. But oh, she thinks. How hard it is to give up that sweet grief too.

The dense wooden door to the church is locked. Well. She goes back out into the sunshine. There is a huge thick tree near the door, scruffy-looking, with tiny little
dark leaves like needles. Its branches extend in every direction, long, twisted and fringed with smaller twigs. It’s grotesque, almost sinister; under the boughs, as she wanders closer and ducks her head to reach beyond where the branches curtsey right to the ground. The shade is cold, colder than the other air. It’s a messy tree, haphazard, not pretty, with stiff dead twigs bristling out in a chaos of shapes. But she sees the trunk and comes up to touch it. The bark is contorted, corrugated and dark, harsh as asphalt, but sheened as if with skin where the sun catches it. The little needle leaves make a fluttering, rushed sound.

Knotted and ridged, with columns of bark twining against each other; the trunk has split at one point. There is a hollow inside, and the bark edges there are glossy and round, like leather. Rebecca peers in. Cobwebs, a dry dusty scent. The hollow is big enough to sit in, if one weren’t afraid of spiders.

There is something about this tree that makes her feel good. It’s ugly but safe as its boughs drape down all around her. Yew trees, Mark had said. They’re for both life and death. Very common in churchyards, even when they’re older than the church itself. That tells you something. Some of them are more than a thousand years old. They live so long and they’re always green, people associated them with eternal life, that’s why they’re in graveyards. But they’re also poisonous. So, death. Very tidy symbols, aren’t they?

Something hard presses on Rebecca’s palm as she leans in to peer into the hollow. Wedged into one side of the wooden lip is a stone. A flint. Like a blade, like a handle. Strange. She tugs at it, but it feels stuck tight as a rivet. A knife in a tree.

Abruptly a little rotten wood crumbles away under her fingers. The flint loosens a little. Sunk so deep for so long, unchanging within a living, growing thing, like a chunk of time itself. She lets it go, sorry to have disturbed it.

She walks on, and out through the church gate again, feeling almost as if she’s trespassed. But she would like someday to come back. The weather is turning.

::

Joss spends the afternoon reading in bed, in her bright eyrie of a room, all the windows open and the hot smell of grass coming in.

Mark’s gone to visit his mother: Rebecca seems devastated, but Joss doesn’t really understand what’s happened. She figures she’ll be upset later, if that’s required; but for now, she’s feeling almost relieved. So she writhes into a more comfortable position on the bed and fingers the edges of the pages of a history book.

Below, in the house, there’s a distant sound, as if Rebecca is moving something, dragging some furniture around. Joss twirls her hair and takes another bite of her apple. She doesn’t, she realises, actually like sour apples, though she always chooses them.
He is there as she’s walking home a couple of hours later. Stiff from lying on her hot bed, Joss had walked a way down the road just to get some air, and then turned to go home. More fields, more road, more trees. Twilight, the birds loud in the trees across the fields, the hedgerows a pale spume on either side of her. Singing under her breath, swinging her arms. Hastening a little, not wanting to be caught in the dark. Joss is not used to being in a place without street lights, she wonders just how dark it will be out here in the fields. It would be blacker than anything she’s ever known. She starts to hurry.

The boy comes towards her in the gloom, down the road. He might not know her. But he’d waved, that time. A stranger on a road. He comes right up to her now, smiling. There is something about the way he walks, an odd little jerk: he limps.

He stops. She stops too. He grins at her.

‘Hi.’

He smiles more broadly.

They stand there, in the thick gloom, the sky streaked with grey and silver, huge clouds lazily taking up the world.

He cocks his head. He is only a boy, younger than she is, she thinks. ‘Do you live around here?’

He takes a hand out of his pocket and shakes it out by his side in a strange gesture, still smiling. Then he points across the field to her right, where there is a slight hillock crowned with trees.

‘Over there?’

He nods, thoughtfully.

‘You’re kind of quiet. You don’t talk much, do you.’

He laughs, and walks on. As he rolls away with his lopsided gait, he turns and smiles at her: a smile so fresh and knowing and fond, as if they are old friends, that she too grins and waves.

He is strolling away with his strange tight lurch, further down the road to the dark horizon, his hands in his pockets. Everything in the air is gathering in. She walks home quickly, smiling.

Already the smell of Mark in the sheets is vanishing. But Rebecca carefully covers the sheet with the doona every morning when she gets up, like tucking a child into bed.
She doesn’t want his scent to go. She knows it’s ridiculous—morbid—but she snuffles her face into his pillow at night, damps down the scent with wet eyes.

This is why he’s left, it’s her, it’s the shame of her, she was weak and stupid. She showed him everything. And he’s left, because how could anyone love her, so naked and hoping?

She knuckles herself into the bed. The trees are blowing against the house, in the dark. She hears Joss’s footsteps, going down the stairs to the bathroom.

Something about sex always simultaneously frightened and amused her: the frantic bucking, the absurd fleshiness of it all. Men so urgent and intent, their faces transformed and swollen with blood and their single-minded clamoring, their eyes staring beyond her. As if they were trying to squeeze themselves through a tiny hole, invisible, somewhere in the air behind her head. She’d often had to fight the urge to laugh; once, she began to giggle helplessly, and the young man she was with had stopped dead, and glared at her. Rebecca’s own body had embarrassed her, with its ungainly reaching, the way it fought her as she, too, tried to swim through that narrow aperture of pleasure into bliss.

For years she has known only Mark’s body, and the revelations of her own under his touch. She has, for a long time, missed the moments when his gaze became hot as he bent his face to hers.

Then, after sex one night last year, she had realised she’d forgotten to put in her diaphragm. ‘Well,’ said Mark. ‘Perhaps you didn’t really forget.’ It wasn’t as if he asked for a child. But Rebecca, at thirty-one, was at the age where she might consider one. And when she had found she was pregnant, Mark waited for her to say ‘Oh, god, this is awful’ before he said, ‘I guess it is.’

The termination hadn’t been so ghastly; what had seeped unhappily at Rebecca as she lay in the recovery room was the knowledge that Mark, in the waiting room, was mourning the loss of a child he had wanted. ‘Choice is sacrifice,’ she repeated apprehensively to him later. He had simply smiled sadly, and taken her hand out from under the pillow of their bed where they lay, and lain there, his face still and his eyes closed, while Rebecca tried to see in the dimness whether there were really tears beneath his lashes.

::

Joss corners Rebecca in the bathroom. ‘When am I going to get a real bed?’

‘Oh, shit.’

‘I know you think I like being a total rat, and I don’t really mind sleeping on the mattress, but it’s a bit yucky.’
Rebecca’s hair is such a pale brown in the mirror that she looks, literally, washed out. There are shadows, almost yellow, beneath her eyes. She’s lost weight from her face so fast: Joss thinks she looks like a little kid, and at the same time, so much older than she really is. Thirty-two looks like hell, she thinks.

‘Can we at least go and buy me a kind of bed?’

‘You just want to go into town and email your friends about what a revolting time you’re having,’ says Rebecca. She goes back to plucking her eyebrows, but she gives Joss quick, not unsympathetic glances in the reflection. ‘I don’t know what we’re doing, mate. I know this is bullshit. But we’re here now, at least for the time being.’

‘Can we afford to make the place a bit more—’

‘Sure.’ Rebecca plucks at a hair. ‘Sure we can. Anyway,’ she says, frowning at her reflection, ‘We’re grown women. We can fend.’

:::

They go into the village, get a bus to Canterbury, and find some furniture. A fold-out bed for Joss, a desk for Rebecca, a couch, a television; some other small things to make life civilised. After a few weeks in the small realm of the house and its surroundings, the bigger town feels almost overwhelming: the stores pumping music, the young people in their bright clothes, the acerbic glares of the elderly. They spend an hour at a café simply gazing at passers-by. The consensus is that the mass of humanity is not, after all, worth pining for.

A van comes the next day and delivers everything. For a morning, Joss and Rebecca are invigorated, flushed with the pride of making the house theirs. ‘Fuck Mark,’ pants Rebecca, as she pulls the couch into place below a window. ‘This is what happens when he leaves me.’

Joss doesn’t say anything, but shoves the couch against the wall and wipes her cheek.

The most exciting moment is when they connect the television and the mellow tones of a BBC newsreader tell them that there was a massive traffic jam on the A25.

‘Lamps,’ Rebecca observes. ‘We forgot lamps. I hate overhead lights.’

But Joss has a stash of candles.

‘You are a little boho.’

‘Hobo, more like.’

‘I like this, you know,’ Joss says, later. ‘It’s kind of like camping. Like we’re an outpost of Australian civilisation in the wilds of savage Britain.’

‘Kind of like a reverse First Fleet?’
‘That’s it. They don’t realise it yet, these people, but we’re going to violate their women, steal their land, and make ourselves boss. They’ll be lucky if they get to keep their ancestral Jaffa Cakes.’ Joss takes another one.

‘You know, really, we’re like the ghosts of the colonies, come back to haunt the place.’

‘We must have had family here once. Do we know anyone?’

‘Well, we don’t have anyone here now. Not that I know of. But I remember mum telling me once that we’d come from convicts sent to Tasmania, and that they were smugglers. I wonder if they came from around here? Mark said something about smugglers, didn’t he?’

‘That would be typical. I always thought you had a sly, kind of criminal look about you, Beck.’

‘A rough tough cream puff, that’s me. A nasty pasty.’

‘Yeah. All that bad-ass pastry stuff.’

But after a last cup of tea, Rebecca becomes silent again, and smokes a cigarette out in the garden with her lips pressed tight against tears. Joss says goodnight, but Rebecca doesn’t answer, and her sister goes to bed abruptly irritated, for what good is a sister if she’s not paying attention?

::

From her bed, Joss can smell cigarette smoke and hear Rebecca in the garden. She’s talking to Mark.

‘And you, you never, god, you never tell me anything, you just make me sit and wait and wait like a fucking... You’re so stiff and righteous, keeping all your secrets, like Diana, what the hell was she like, you made it all sound so perfect and... Shit. I wanted you, I loved you so much, you bring me and Joss all this way and then you leave, you leave...’

::

Rebecca is growing accustomed to waking with her legs stretched across the bed. Luxuriously, they scissor back and forth in the warm cavern of sheets. Sleep rises off her like steam. And then she is awake, and she lies there very still for a moment, aloneness thudding in her throat.

Joss has been wandering, a new child it seems. Free and unafraid in the new country. Rebecca doesn’t know where she goes. ‘Oh, out,’ Joss says carelessly. She’s pulling her boots on in the kitchen when Rebecca sleepily walks in. ‘I just like it.’
gives a short tug to the laces. She gets up, straightens her shorts, and leaves with a quick smile.

There on the kitchen dresser, forgotten, is one of Mark’s Ordnance Survey maps. Rebecca opens it. It all looks quite complicated, until she peers closer and realises that it simply represents everything in the countryside. Bridleways, manor houses, copses of trees, golf-courses, hamlets of a few houses. All are shown in tiny pictographs. There’s St Crispin’s, the church. Rebecca hadn’t realised the road outside curved so; nor that a river was so close, and the Roman fort. Not far away is a small plot marked out in dotted lines, with the label ‘Disused dump.’

There is nothing to do today, except for sitting in the garden, fondling fronds; except for the washing; except for waiting for Mark. She has resolved to push the thought of him out of her brain whenever it comes, with its taste of vinegar in her mouth.

After a moment’s thought, Rebecca grabs an apple, the keys, the map, and leaves the house.

::

There’s her sister, far ahead on the straight of the road before it curves off again like a blade into the distance. Joss swings down the road quickly. Rebecca ambles more slowly, hovering by the hedgerows, ready to push herself furtively into their cover should Joss turn around. It’s not that she’s following her, but she feels a bit foolish walking behind. The white broderie flowers of Queen Anne’s Lace brush her face. The scent from the hedges is sweet and powdery. She snatches a handful of daisies and valerian, rolls the stalks in her fingers as she walks.

The road curves, there is a grove of trees—oaks, their stiff sturdy trunks and friendly big leaves—and Joss is on a diagonal across the verge when Rebecca sees her. Against the dry grass verge there is planted a windbreak of poplars shivering white in the breeze, and beyond them a field. Joss, who always in her Australian life walked on the footpath, superstitious of stepping on the cracks, is climbing the white wooden stile of someone’s meadow and striding through the barley. Rebecca, hesitating as she approaches, notices a sign: Footway. It points into the field. Perhaps she’ll follow Joss a little, after all.

Once she has swung over the gate, she notices that the crop of barley is run through with a track that bends the stems in a smooth line to the horizon. More trees up there on the little hill. Out in the open, wary of being noticed, Rebecca pulls back, lingers against the poplar trunks. The many leaves make a smooth susurration in the breeze.
Joss has reached the stand of trees on the hill. They are bent low, more wrenched and thick than the serene poplars. Rebecca sees her bend, take off her little satchel, plop down and cross her legs. A silhouette dark against the bright day, pale against the dark trees. Which is it? Rebecca squeezes her eyes shut, opens them. Joss sits, facing the field. Rebecca shrinks back. Joss’s head is tilted, her legs spread carelessly.

She plaits her fingers, stretches them; then pulls weakly at one ankle—her sloppy socks, thinks Rebecca.

Rebecca creeps around until she’s behind the poplars. This is like spying on herself, in the moments when, idle, she presses her blood-warm lips to the cool thick paint of the kitchen door frame, or finds herself absently swinging her hip against the hip of the table, just for the movement of it, the easy sway. Lonesome things. Joss is lonesome too. Not once has Rebecca asked how she feels about Mark leaving. Joss is all alone here. The realisation recalls the vinegar of hurt to Rebecca’s mouth.

She has been staring at the bark of the poplar and forgetting Joss, the field, the hill and the trees up there where her sister is sitting. This is mad. What’s wrong with her? She heaves off the tree’s support and turns back to the road.

::

Joss scratches her ankle and eases her spine. The fields below her lookout are shivering with yellow heat.

There’s a footstep behind her.

She jumps. Her heart a silly bird. Flush under the sweat on her face.

His face is brown, with clear skin over dark freckles, summer’s flush beneath. Black irises in hooded eyes. Joss thinks of the broken flints she saw at the church in town, eggs of stone embedded in the walls, broken off roughly, each surface bevelled a dozen different ways, each angle glossy as black water. His knuckles are torn, patches where the sunburned skin has rubbed off, pink against brown. He smells dankly of sweat. Like an animal. Joss breathes him in.

There is a flex inside her that is like the sweet panic of touching herself. She lets it wriggle inside her, voluptuously. She too is damp.

The boy looks right at her, smiling a little, his sharp teeth crooked at one corner. He squats, crosses his arms over his long thighs. His forearms are smooth and brown, but flawed here and there with small shiny scars. Joss stares at the fine blond hairs there, the thin sinews of his hands.

A boy. He is so beautiful she thinks she will burn.
She looks out over the field below their little eyrie, the dry green trees dissolving in the thick air into the distance. ‘It’s so pretty around here.’ Is it stupid to call this place pretty? He’s watching her. ‘I live over there.’ She points to the right.

He nods.

‘My sister’s husband got the house. We’ve just arrived. It’s, um, it’s really cool.’ Just how stupid is she making herself seem? She is stupid, stupid, stupid.

‘Where do you live exactly?’

He points to the left, towards a deep thick of trees that runs down and out of sight, and beyond, where the land melts towards the sea. They can’t quite make out the water from here, the horizon is too hazed, but it’s there, a pale rim.

‘You live with your parents?’

The corn-coloured hair over his forehead is spiky with sweat. He runs thin fingers through it, pushes it back. There is a long scar on his temple, pale seam puckering the skin, Joss is entranced.

She’s wet under the arms, pink in the face. It’s getting even hotter, but the sky has clouded, cataract on a blue iris.

The boy is looking at her steadily, with his black eyes, simply staring. Then he takes her hand and wrenches her to her feet. The bright world tunnels black for a moment and then swerves back into focus. She feels trembly. He stands there and looks at her, smiling, with serious eyes, intent.

‘What’s your name, anyway?’

He makes that odd gesture again, shaking his fingers out. ‘You don’t talk, do you.’ she says. ‘I’m going to just call you Flick. You kind of flicker.’ He still has her fingers loosely held in his. ‘I’m Joss.’

He looks at her in silence. He clamps her fingers more tightly and tugs her hand, as if wishing to lead her somewhere.

The wind comes up and all the trees around them flex towards the ground. Leaves shake and shake.

‘Come on then. Show me.’

::

The woods are cool and damp after the sun. Thin young trees close around as she follows Flick’s footsteps, his careful treading over mulch and twigs. She thinks they are heading towards the sea, but she can’t be sure. He’s taken her, sometimes holding her hand, sometimes walking ahead but always turning back with a secretive, conspiratorial smile, encouraging her as they walk across fields, alongside windbreaks. The land around had seemed flat, but Joss feels that she’s walking downhill. Everything is getting dimmer and deeper and her hands are clammy as she
follows Flick between the still, silent trees. She can hear birds, distant, then one
flutters out of a tree just ahead of them, shrieking. The chinks of sky are white
through the pale green millions of leaves above. They walk in quiet.

Ivy cloaks many of the trees, where they are not scaly with lichen and moss.
Small flowers spill in pools where the ground is clear: delicate white cups of silk,
bulbs of dark indigo. The air smells of growth. There is no track, and they crunch
through ferns and brambles. Joss accidentally brushes a craggy stalk of green with
one finger; the sharp pain startles her. A nettle. She’s read about nettles.

There’s the sound of water somewhere nearby. Joss is thirsty. Flick is going
ahead, his small, straight back, blond hair metallic in this gloom. Joss’s boots
stumble. She stops.

‘Flick?’

He turns. There is a strangeness in his face. So fine and smooth, his child’s
features, the polished planes of his cheeks, the silken skin of his lips. In the light
beneath the trees he is gleaming like gold.

‘Flick? Where are we going?’ She is embarrassed to be faltering. Not brave
enough, bookish girl, city girl, foreigner. Mark would scorn her. Perhaps she’s not
ready for this adventure. Her finger is stinging sharply from the nettle. It’s getting late
in the afternoon. She gives Flick a tentative smile. ‘Are we nearly there?’

He takes three steps back towards her. It’s strange how nervous she is of him,
a boy younger than she is. She wishes he’d say something; what’s wrong with him?
He stares into her eyes.

‘Yes, yes, I’m coming. I’m fine. It’s just—it’s just, I reckon I should be getting
home—’

The trees hiss in a little breeze. How dark the irises of his eyes are. He takes
her hand.

The way he yanks her forward, startles her. His small hand is very strong. Is he taller than she’d thought? She lurches ahead, finds her pace again. The scent of
sweat from him is strong, bitter. He leads her to the side, towards the sound of
water.

There is a little creek there, water running in glossy roundels over rocks. Joss
steps forward, peers into the water. The light here is dim, shaded, and the trees are
thick on the other side of the bank. The water is loud, running past, there’s no other
sound now. Among the weeds trailing the banks is a clump of something, ragged and
tattered. She glances up to Flick. He stands, looking into the water, smiling with
pride.

‘Beautiful.’ Joss doesn’t know if this is it, if this is the place they’ve arrived.
It’s a creek, where she hadn’t known there was one, but she doesn’t know anything
about this country, should she be impressed? ‘Lovely.’
He gestures at the water.

She looks more closely at the round thing there. The water is curling around it, easing past, relentless. It seems the current is growing stronger, the sound of the water’s passage is becoming loud. The shape in the creek is fabric, a cowl of fabric torn at the top, and inside there is something leathery, pale. Something sinewed.

‘Oh, god!’ Joss jerks back.

The drowned dogs are like wood, stained and polished by the water. Their muzzles are lean, their flanks, where the skin appears over the smooth rippling surface, spongelike. The eyes of the dogs have pearled white.

Flick laughs.

Joss looks at him in horror.

‘Yours?’ He shrugs. She can’t stop staring at them. Their snouts all pushed together, a rope tied cruelly around the thin stiff legs.

She feels as if snails are crawling over her. ‘I don’t know why you—’ She bites off the words. He seems very strange now and Joss wishes she were home. This country is all wrong. Where are the spells and the fables? Where’s the magic? The creek stinks, she realises. Small bugs are festering around the dead animals, swarming in the water.

‘I have to go now.’ Her voice is shrill. She will just get home. She’ll find the way. ‘Thanks. Thanks for the walk.’

His hand is on her arm again. His hands seem bigger, the fingers reach all the way around her upper arm. He is taller than she is, surely he was not so large before? Not a child, a young man. His gleaming face comes near, she can smell his breath. She prickles all over.

His eyes close and he leans in, his other hand at the back of her head, he pulls her face forward, and his tongue is squirming at her lips, slithers between. Joss grunts. Her teeth part, her head goes back, she is kissing, she is kissing a boy, he tastes of metal and he’s right inside her mouth, he’s swallowing her. The world is a mouth.

He breaks the kiss and steps away.

Joss’s face is warm and wet and there is a cool smear of saliva on her chin. A loose smile on her face. She doesn’t know what to say, she is frightened. Her lips are cold.

He looks at her; walks away. Turns. A smile, perhaps scornful.

He turns again and ambles off through the quiet trees, further into the woods, towards the sea.

Joss stands and stands, and she doesn’t know what to do, which way to go, except back.
Joss wakes the next morning, and, slipping a hand along her upper arm as she rolls slowly into wakefulness, she finds a soft pain beneath her fingers. She throws back the light summer coverlet and sits up.

Four small bruises, the colour of moths, in a curved row along her bicep. **Flick.** Her mouth wets.

A kiss, her first kiss. She wasn’t expecting it, and it scared her. But now with her limbs loose and soft from sleep, a new feeling sits high in her throat as she looks down at the length of her smooth young body in the creamed morning light, she thinks that she isn’t really sorry; she will, instead, open her mouth for more.
Part Three
But when she sees him the next day the sight of him fills her veins with cold water. Joss pulls back into the hedgerow, out of sight of the boy coming towards her far ahead on the curving road. The twigs crunch and rasp loudly near her ears as she pushes into the prickled growth, but she can only hear her heart thumping. She cranes her head forward a little, peeps around the bend.

He has stopped. He knows she’s there. Joss flinches back into the hedge. This is ridiculous, but she knows only that she can’t see him, she cannot move towards him, will not meet the gaze she knows he’s casting back down the road. Something terribly frightened beats in her chest.

Why is she so fearful? There’s just something about him. Something hard and cold, for all his golden heat. There’s something in the way he was coming down the road, how he’s not coming any closer, but just standing there invisibly, his black eyes, his smell in her nostrils even from a distance.

She waits and then, more carefully, she peers again. He has gone. The hedge is a spring; it pushes her back out into the road. She hurries back to the house.

::

‘Huh?’ Rebecca says absently.

Joss is stirring coffee on the kitchen counter. Her sister has been staring at the Ordnance Survey map.

‘I…’

‘Quiet, I mean,’ says Joss. ‘Should I be going to school?’

The days seem too open around them, without corners.

Rebecca says, ‘You seem busy.’ She’s still staring at the map, its busy green road lines and firm circles for towns.

‘Not really.’ Joss sits down, jogs her foot up and down.

They’ll have to enrol her in the local school, it should have been done ages ago. What a mess. It’s the long holiday now, but soon—will Rebecca and Joss still be here? What if Mark’s not coming back? What should they do? Inside her, Rebecca feels embers wearily flickering out.

‘Met any friends?’ Rebecca knows she sounds stupid. In Melbourne she and Joss could talk easily, about things going on, Joss’s homework, Rebecca’s friends who were all like aunties to Joss, laughing and lively; weekend afternoons in cafes, joints smoked by the adults under rattling gum trees in the back garden.

‘No.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Joss shakes her head, quickly.
The morning, outside, is flashy with sunshine. Joss tips up her mug, drains her coffee. Rebecca goes to the open kitchen door, lights a cigarette.

‘Wonder what Mark’s doing,’ Joss says.

Rebecca inhales, smoke hot in her throat. ‘I couldn’t care less.’

::

They watch television together, eating off plates on their lap. Fried eggs and bacon and huge mugs of tea. The Wimbledon tennis is on: a posh-sounding commentator is lustily quoting Dylan Thomas. ‘Do not go gentle into that good night,’ he admonishes a failing player. Joss snorts and changes channel.

There’s a documentary, about Britain before the Romans. Footage of meadows and Stone Age monuments is saturated to bring out the resonance of colours, with unearthly greens; fields aflame with crimson poppies, bruised vast skies. Eerie Irish music plays. A historian with excited gestures and a scholarly little ginger moustache wades up coastal paths and down hillsides, explaining about how, in the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, the dead could return to the living world. It was the time when time stood still, or turned about: the apparition of the horse with its funeral associations, and the ritual combats and the mad sexual frenzies to assert the power of life and fertility in those black frozen days when the year turned on its pivot, and almost stopped.

‘Wow,’ says Joss. ‘I imagine it’s pretty exciting around here at Christmas time, then.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Rebecca says, reaching for a biscuit. ‘They block the whole high street off for the sexual frenzy.’

They sit and watch more. The historian visits an old church, blackened and stern. He tells them that enclosed within this Norman church is an older Saxon one, and below that, the foundations of a Roman temple, where, thrillingly, the skeleton of a child was found. And below everything, a prehistoric sarsen stone, blank and implacable as a giant tooth.

‘Now that’s cool.’

‘It looks a lot more fun on telly than real life. But you really love this stuff, don’t you? You can get hold of it,’ Rebecca dares say. There’s no knowing what will make Joss prickle, of course; she’s got all the secrecy and perverse pride of a small child. Remark ing on her predilections and obsessions has had doors slammed in Rebecca’s face before. But Joss is sleepy and comfortable, her legs resting across Rebecca’s lap.

‘Yeah, I guess. I like it. It’s like some safe world, some place I can just go, in my head.’
‘Do you have much feeling for... I don’t know. For the amount of time that’s passed here?’
‘I’m fifteen. I don’t even know what it’s like to be sixteen.’

They sit in silence. The news comes on, a brief update, and then a talent show. Everyone in the audience is pinkly sunburnt. The contestants are garish with fake tan.

‘It’s strange here. The stories aren’t really just stories anymore. They’re more real.’ Joss shifts sleepily.

‘I don’t know about that. It was all a long time ago, whatever that means. And you know, I keep thinking of that joke, about the American tourist arriving at Heathrow and asking a policeman, “Excuse me, could you direct me to your nearest pageantry?”’

Joss giggles. ‘I know, it’s a bit much sometimes. Good old Olde Englande. I’m such a sucker for it.’

‘Have you been reading much?’ Rebecca asks. Christ, she’d forgotten to ask.

‘Of course. I wouldn’t want to disappoint you when you’re going to hassle me all the time.’ It’s clear from Joss’s look that she’s noticed her sister’s entire lack of interest.

‘You’ll have to show me.’

‘Just old stuff. Just lots and lots of old stuff.’

‘I found something the other day,’ Rebecca says, shifting Joss’s legs a little. ‘A beautiful old tree in the churchyard, with a stone stuck in it. Some kind of old knife. It looked like something out of your old books.’

‘You’ve been to church?’

‘Mm. I thought I might get Born Again. In the love of Jesus.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘You’ll have to come and be baptised with me in the well. It’s a long drop, but they said it’s quite safe. You look like you could do with a wash, anyway.’

Joss is watching the television. It’s showing a picture of an up-ended ancient tree, its trunk buried in a marsh, its roots spread out to the air. ‘What?’

Rebecca pats her hand. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, I’m too much of a poor sinner to be let into a church. There was no one there. But the yard is nice. All those wonderful trees, witchy trees, it’s so peaceful there. I don’t hate everything, you know. Contrary to appearances.’

‘You’ll become some kind of mysterious woman of the wood,’ Joss says, standing and stretching. She reaches for their empty cups. ‘I’m going to turn into some Celtic princess and you’ll be the wise witch. I guess we could see that coming, couldn’t we.’
He comes to her again, in the road outside the house, as she’s on her way out. He stands on the other side of the low stone wall, where she saw him once through the window. Nervous, Joss doesn’t know where to look.

His hands in his pockets, his dirty hair blown sideways. He seems so small, his knobby elbows, his pure skin. Freckles dark beneath the tan across his nose. He jerks a shoulder back, raises his eyebrows. Come with me. There is metal in her mouth, but she says yes.

Down the shaded road, into the fields, across a pathway. Joss hesitates as they near a darkness of trees. The weather is brackish, murky. More thunderclouds on the horizon, the blue of the sky paling above. ‘I don’t want to go in there.’ She stops, well clear of the grove.

Flick watches her. Then he sits down and beckons her to do the same.

They sit in a runnel between barley stalks, where a footway passes through the crops. Already Joss is used to these; the old rights-of-way, across private farms and crossing highways. They’re marked with signs from time to time, but not always clear.

His darkness is gone; he’s easy with the day’s warmth. Joss will not speak of the kiss.

She waits, staring warily at him and then at her own bare knees, the dried barley stalks beneath. He does nothing, doesn’t attack her. Then their gazes drift off to the horizon, they sit in silence, and she lies back, and the sky pearls more, and she’s enormously aware of him sitting just beside her.

The crops blow and tick their dry leaves together in the warm breeze. Flick breathes; shifts occasionally, settles. Minutes and minutes dissolve. Joss is almost asleep. The air has grown damp and the sun has gone. Under her head the dried barley tatters rustle until she stops moving, and she lies there, concentrating on that silence, that stillness. The trees have quietened.

She has her eyes closed, she can’t even hear him breathing. Behind her eyelids she sees his face, so fine and clear, the burnt skin and the brown. The thought of him just near to her comes like a surge across her body, exciting as fear. Now that he’s here, she has to respond to him; this is real. What she feels, more than anything, is want. Then again, she wishes nothing need happen; that there be no next moment, that they could lie like this forever, caught out of time.

He’s only a child, she reminds herself. But his grip was so hard, in the wood, his mouth so fierce. She imagines his skin hot, how hot he would be if only she could move and he would move and touch her. He has nakedness beneath his clothes.

Something shivers across her skin.
She opens her eyes a little and squints up at him kneeling over her. He is looking at her mouth, with a hard, adult gaze. He doesn’t move at all.

‘Flick?’

Heat is coming from him in a haze, or is it just the thick afternoon air? She twists awkwardly to rise, and his eyes are huge, staring at her now, his face has firmed, he is the only golden thing in this pale field, he is the only colour against the blank heavy sky. His hair is bright gold and the scar on his temple is crimson.

She kneels and she puts her hand on his arm. They look at each other. His gaze is almost fearful.

Joss lowers her head, and watches her hand stroking his arm. Her heart is beating so fast she think she is going blind. A plane passes somewhere lost in the hazy sky, sounding large as thunder.

When she lifts her head once more it is closer to his. She can see the fine hairs of his brows, the spangled iris of his dark eye, his chapped lips. She can taste his breath. She has a sensation that the air itself is pushing the two of them close together.

He murmurs, but too low to hear. She puts her mouth to his.

Lips meet, press.

Then he clamps her hard with his hand. Resistance becomes give, give becomes want.

A kiss like a fight, clumsy, scrambling. Their bodies push together in haste. Hands grasping, grabbing, restless, hungry. Joss barely knows what she’s doing, she pursues him, she grunts and flattens against him as he arches against her, both of them straining to climb each other, falling away and clambering harder. Her body has never made these movements before. Her throat has never made these sounds.

It is as if there's water in her ears, she is drowning in this boy. Under her he writhes, twisting her, legs tough beneath hers, and something else hard, thin and hard against his belly. The fulcrum of her body pushes onto it, pushes onto it deliciously again. Her breath stops with need, her flesh empties. She’s nearing something, something frightening, wonderful.

There is distraction in the distance. A voice.

Joss?

The boy clasping her. Joss tunnelling into him, silent and animal.

Her hearing clears, she is sweating, she lifts her head.

Rebecca, calling her. Joss opens her eyes.

Her sister is coming, looking for her, and Joss scrambles backwards, blinks away heat, scrubs her hair from her eyes, looks around.

There’s Rebecca, on the other side of a windbreak, a small figure. Joss gulps down her fright and looks at Flick.
He is gone. She is alone in a tunnel of pale reeds. There’s only Rebecca, coming closer, a dozen feet away, smiling.

‘What do you want? What do you want?’ Joss says. The words jerk out of her, she’s not aware, her face is flushed. She feels as if the humid air has lightened and her body is floating. It’s not possible that he could have gone like that.

Rebecca halts. Her face, confused, is loathsome at this moment. ‘What are you doing?’

Joss is hollow as a stalk. She gets up from the ground. ‘Nothing. Nothing!’

They walk home, Rebecca cautiously silent, Joss staring at the road. There is more space between them than there might be.

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It takes two days for the new bruises to appear. Three fingerprints along the side of her throat. They rise on her skin, welts of memory. Joss hides them with her hair, rubs at them gently, with closed eyes.

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The next day, Rebecca wakes thinking of taking the bike out again, but then she feels tired, and doesn’t. She’s been waiting for Mark to ring. The courage it’s taken, to wait, is enormous. All day every day, in fact, days and weeks, she has waited, and thought of him thinking of her, and how soon he’ll give in and call to say I was wrong, I’m coming home. But he doesn’t and doesn’t, and she’s so disappointed that sitting up in bed, simply imagining herself sitting up in bed alone, unwanted, she curdles into tears. It is early afternoon before she rises, leaden.

‘Jesus,’ she says when she walks into the kitchen. ‘What the fuck’s this?’

Joss, eating a boiled egg at the table covered in newspapers, looks at her. ‘What?’

‘I suppose you haven’t gone out to get milk, either.’

Joss stares.

‘I’m really not in the mood for this,’ Rebecca says, yanking out a chair and sitting at the table.

Joss is silent, but edges her book away from Rebecca, pretends to read.

‘I can tell you’re not reading.’

The younger girl doesn’t say anything but inches her book even closer to the edge of the table.

‘Your eyes aren’t moving.’

‘Go away,’ Joss hisses. ‘You’re being a bitch.’
‘Fuck.’ Rebecca gets up and shoves the switch of the kettle on. Joss’s chin becomes ugly.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

The sisters raise eyebrows at each other. ‘Oh for god’s sake,’ Rebecca says. ‘I’ll have to put you in the naughty corner.’ She jerks her head towards a nook where the tea-towels have been stashed. ‘Fuck!’ she says suddenly. As she sits down again she clenches her eyes closed. ‘Sorry.’

Her sister scowls at her. ‘You look like shit and you’re being a total, total—’

‘I am a bitch. I am the biggest bitch there ever was.’ She glances at her sister. They sit in silence for a minute, Joss picking up egg crumbs with a fingertip. ‘I’m sorry, I’ve been awful.’

‘You’ve been very boring, yes.’ A pause. ‘What’s going on with him?’

Rebecca tilts her head. ‘He hasn’t rung, but I got a postcard yesterday.’ She takes it from the kitchen counter and hands it to Joss, puts her head down on the table again.

‘Doesn’t say much, does it.’

‘He’s never coming back. I guess.’

Joss gets up, pulls a mug out of the cupboard, puts a teabag in it. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘I’m afraid it might be true.’

‘Yes.’ Joss switches the kettle on. ‘But don’t say it. Don’t they always come back in the end?’

Her sister looks up at her. ‘Only in books, my love.’

‘Well, then.’ Joss tilts her head towards her book. She pours boiling water. There’s no milk and Joss has forgotten the sugar, but Rebecca takes one slow sip after another. ‘I can’t believe I’m taking advice from a fifteen-year-old.’

‘Shut up! How long are we going to wait?’

‘Well, we’re here now. Can’t afford to leave. We’ll have to stay until he kicks us out.’

‘I can’t imagine how you feel, you know. I don’t know anything about—you know, being married.’ Joss thinks she knows something of love. For the first time, she knows something about love. It’s too precious to talk about.

‘Me neither.’

‘Is it awful? This?’

‘Yes. Yes it is.’

Joss gets up, reaches out her arms, bends awkwardly to hug her sister. It’s the first time they’ve touched like this in a long time. They press into each other. Rebecca is warm and small. Flick, thinks Joss. I want his body. Is it wrong, to want him so much?
‘I’m okay.’
They disengage, step back again, embarrassed. Rebecca wipes her eyes. ‘This place. It makes me claustrophobic. You seem to like it.’
‘That’s because I’m a better person than you.’
‘Shut it.’ Rebecca knocks her sister in the arm.
But now Joss is thinking of Flick again, and says nothing. He’s pressed hard up inside her throat, and she’s nearly choking. There’s a new kind of loneliness, she is discovering, not to be caught having a secret.

::

The beach slopes towards the water, ridged in banks where the receding tide has paused and thought, then dredged down. Her boots crunch firmly on the pebbles: small ones down the slope, bigger ones at the keel of each hollow.

She’s left all behind except water, stones and sky. Once the light thickens the fishing boats sit alone with their pennants fluttering. Everything is grey, soft, soft velvet, a little bluish, exquisite. Far off there’s a ship’s light shining scarlet, and there are a few lighter clouds still smearing the grey, but all else is peace. The sea withers and worries at the shore. Giving a little, with each handful of stones cast up; taking it back with long slow scrapes.

The water makes a low roar, slopping the last of its ebbing tide onto the finer pebbles along its edge. It has cleaned the basin of its passage and skitters with a kind of fatigue in long, messy curves, back and over itself, skimming, as if any moment it will subside altogether and rest. Every now and then, when she’s lulled herself with the ceaseless rustle of it, there’s a bigger crunch and a heavier wave slumps down, like a sleeper throwing out a careless arm.

If she waits until it’s a little darker, she can scrabble up a handful of the stones and throw them, hard, against the rest by her feet. She can snatch up cold round pebbles and smash them down; tiny little sparks will jump off. Much of the beach is flint, that oldest of playthings; it’s hard but brittle, easily chipped if a blow hits it the right way. In a hundred pebbles there will be ten with their chalky white skins battered to reveal the glossy dark centre of each stone egg. Flash, flare—the sparks vanish instantly. It’s for the satisfaction of throwing that she does it, not the useless light.

She’s already left it late to leave on the walk home to the house down the dark road. Since when did she become so nervous of everything? Rebecca clamps her palm savagely over a sharp flint of stone until it hurts. Sitting down, she finds a tiny scrap of charcoal. On one flattened grey pebble, almost unthinking, she writes Here. On another, There. On a third, Me, and places it between the others.
The beach is dissolving further into a fog of greys and powdery blues, all edges vanishing. There is hardly any telling where the shore becomes sea. A little way away she can see the pale orange streetlights of the town. The afterburn of them makes the soaked blue of the shore even deeper.

So she’s lost her husband, it seems, and that baby that might have been. Her parents, long ago, and her old home. She sits on the shingle, aware that she, in her dark clothes, is the only solid object in this haze of grey: marked out, so utterly solitary in all the space around.

For years she had carried her mother’s laugh within her own, oddly released when she wasn’t expecting it; her father’s way of jamming his hands in his pockets and swaying gently from side to side as he talked. Her whole character is, she sometimes thinks, made up of the memories of those she’s known. One friend’s way with words, another’s opinions; all absorbed into her, all coming out again when she doesn’t expect it, when she thought those people long gone. Now that she’s alone, here in this country where, but for Joss, she knows no one, she wonders who she will be. And without the glints of others’ lights illuminating her, who’s to say she even exists?

She looks down at her thin hands, the darkness of her clothes; almost obscured in the growing dusk. Well, she has this. A sense of herself as discrete, whole and condensed as a glass marble, buried right down deep inside. Her strong hands, her straight body. The woman she has become, in this place, in this extraordinarily beautiful moment. Something solid, something true.

And, biting her lip, smiling, she says to herself, finally says it: *I think I might be pregnant.* She lets out a shout.

It’s late enough to see it now. She stoops, gathers a palmful of small flints, and throws them as hard as she can at the shingle. For one beautiful instant, flecks and sparks ring out bright. She does it again and again.

::

Flick, Flick. Joy burns inside her. She fancies his scent is still on her, her own breath smells like his, her skin. He’s coming out through her pores. At night, in the morning, she twists under the sheet, one hand between her thighs, thinking of his face, his hips, the way he breathed against her ear, fast and helpless. The way she had undone him. The pleasure is like a searing, it hurts, makes her body move to meet his phantom touch.

She tries to press bruises into her skin as he has done but her fingers leave no mark.
The packet from the pharmacy is easy to open. Rebecca’s hands are trembling as she unwraps the little plastic wand. Naked, she sits on the toilet. Outside the sky is just a haze of palest orange. It’s important to get the result on the day’s first pee; she had woken, impatient to find out, and now, in the glare of the bathroom fluoro, she urinates onto the plastic. She puts the wand aside, dries herself, averts her eyes.

If it’s two blue lines, if it’s two blue lines. She tries to envisage what the two lines will look like, how she will feel. If she could only jump ahead five minutes, and then scoot back plump with knowledge, but nothing actually irreversible.

In the mirror, as she waits, she anxiously regards her face. It’s too thin, and she looks older than she should; there are faint seams from nose to lips which have appeared in the seven weeks since she and Mark last made love, in the weeks since Mark left. They’ll fade if she’s pregnant, if her body and her face grow round. She practises a look in the mirror: the happy expectant mother. Slightly too smug. She practices disdain. In the reflection her eyes are unexpectedly forlorn.

The sky is going pink; it’s going to be hot again. Or does it mean rain? Red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning. Her mother told her that; ridiculous. When did her mother ever care what happened to a shepherd?

It’s time. Sooner than she expected. She picks up the plastic wand, careful not to look at the aperture that will show the result. She covers that with her other hand. Looks at herself in the mirror. One, two three. She uncovers it and looks down.

One, two. Two lines. She is pregnant.

One moment she thinks of Flick, and there’s nothing. No feeling. Her body doesn’t cramp with want, she can’t even remember what he looks like. She blinks. There is a smear of gold in her mind, where Flick used to be, dissolving away.

She concentrates, remembers his fingers trembling on her shoulders when he kissed her, the curve of his neck as he walked ahead of her, the way he’d narrowed his eyes at her. There it is again, that cold flush, the hot pleasurable promise in her. He rises in her mind’s eye, is present in the angles of her body as she spreads her limbs and then curls them tight again. She can bring him back, he’s always in her, he’s too precious to let go now.

It’s been ages, but Joss remembers her landscapes. She borrows Rebecca’s laptop and lies on her bed on a hot, drowsy afternoon. Opening the program, she flicks through files she has collected of landscape features, looking for some she can stitch together into the right dream. She picks out an image of a shaded forest;
another of sunlight. This she makes transparent, so that only glints of light stain the green glade. The trees aren’t quite right: she elongates them, makes them paler, more spectral. In the midst of the tableau she runs a river—she takes only the water of the original image, not the rocky banks—so that it streams through as subtly as light. She darkens the image, to bring out the shadows; raises the saturation of the green, adjusts the contrast, for drama; uses the light-casting tool to angle a strange glow from one corner. Lastly, tweaking the levels to blend it in perfectly, but blurring the outline so that it appears lustrous against the dark background, she pastes in the image of a naked man—a nude god. His marble body twists away from her; she warms the tone of his flesh to gild it. Thighs and torso show young muscle: his form is harmonious, boyish, but deliberately sexual. Joss conjures a shadow for him. The shadow absorbs the detail from the river glade; it’s soil-coloured, extended, reaching towards the viewer.

Joss compresses the layers, saves the file. She stares at the picture she has made. It is something, it’s beautiful, but it’s no longer enough.

::

A week of weather radiant as joy. The roadsides are splashed with frail scarlet poppies. Every day is a little hotter, a little more voluptuous than the last. It’s unbearable, alone.

Joss tears at her nails with her little teeth, uses all the hot water, changes channel restlessly, eats nothing but toast. She complains of the heat, throws the windows open to let it in, treks dust into the house. Rebecca doesn’t mind the dust—housecleaning is the last thing on her mind—but she flinches anew at the truculence thrown at her. She’d thought they were growing closer again. Eating dinner on their laps in front of the television, gentle goodnights in the passageway between their rooms. A little while of that, and then Joss’s cheer had suddenly become brittle, she had become impatient with Rebecca’s mild jokes. Sealing herself up over something. The quick glance of apology after a sharp remark, the inability to stop herself making it in the first place.

It seems as if, good sisters, they take turns being out of sorts. Turn and turn about.

Rebecca hasn’t told Joss about the pregnancy test. It is, for the moment, her little glow of a wonderful secret: flesh-coloured, deeply warm within her. Joss isn’t the only one feeling disturbed, however. Rebecca has begun already to feel tired, slack and sloppy, her belly aching and dreary nausea coating her sensations. But Joss isn’t helping. Her fretfulness is like someone scratching fingernails too lightly on bare skin.
How much does Rebecca remember of being fifteen? She recalls the fluttering joys of her teenage years with disdain: it had been books, boys, loathing for her unshaped, pudgy face, pride in her strong body. All of that long since forgotten. Her face is thin now, her body in her early thirties already beginning to thicken. She does not remember what she dreamed of half a lifetime ago.

Rebecca wonders whether Joss had a boyfriend in Australia. It would be typical of her to keep it a secret, in her awkward pride. There’s something virginal still about her: her clean face, her hair rough and long. She hasn’t that glittering selfconsciousness of a girl aware of her power. But there is a sheen to her skin, a way she has of smoothing her palms against her thighs as she sits. Rebecca has woken in the night aware that she is not the only one awake, and heard a muffled croon from Joss’s room. My darling, she thinks. When it comes, it will hit you like a bomb.

::

Four long days have passed since the barley field and Joss feels frayed with waiting. She’s been walking the roads, one alert step at a time under the dappled shade of trees, along the endless hedgerows. They’re a mess of foliage, foamy white flowers and delicate pink ones, sometimes tiny forget-me-nots, orange daisies and a dozen types of green leaf all crowded together in banks of growth and twigs. She picks flowers and tries to make them into chains, but the stems split too easily and the chains fall apart in her fingers. Fretful, she throws the flowers behind her and walks on. Every moment she expects to see Flick, find his hot hand laid on her arm. The reality of him seems hard to pin in her mind; he’s become a shadowy thing of hard bones and golden skin, a flashing skewed smile, the river-light in his black irises. His scent, rich as a body’s secrets. The sound of him, breathing. Just thinking about his harsh helpless breathing, his body beneath her, she moans aloud, buckles at the waist in a billow of pleasure. She will do anything he wants, she will be radiant under his attention. Just let me put my hand on you, let me flatten against you. Bear me up, swallow me down.

Her mouth tastes of water, bitter and mineral with want. Where is he?

The road is empty, the trees restless as she is. Above, the sun glares and she realises she is also waiting for thunder, waiting for that sultry oppression in which Flick comes and sets her alight.

::

The evening is warm and drowsy as Rebecca walks home from the library. A late-afternoon summeriness, such as she remembers from her childhood, a kind of
benevolence in the mildness of the light, the way it melts away on her face. She walks down the ugly high street with her hands in her pockets, the insides of her arms greeting the air. Stopping at a shop for a newspaper and milk, she enjoys the cooler air meeting the warmth of her skin. Outside, as she approaches the fields between the town and the house, she raises her face to the trees. A matt of trees, stitching sky to land in dense knots.

Growing always from the same place, in soil that’s been turned again and again for centuries. A rock in field tossed out of the way by one farmer, tossed again by his son, by his son, by his son, never moved very far. This field will have a name, an old name. It is reassuring, this great continuity.

For Aboriginal people, she heard once, trees, like the rest of the landscape, mark places and what has happened there. They are full of spiritual power, reservoirs of spirit, ignitable. When someone dies under a tree, he is called after the place. The tree is special; but when it too dies, its offshoot, perhaps from a seed drifted a little further away, is still known by the same name; the dead person’s family might travel away; the memory of the dead dispersed and diffused, but surviving.

She had thought, when she was a little girl, that Europe was the place for her, not scant, brittle Australia. She’s changed; she came too late.

But she finds she has grown used to these textures and colours, this soft rustling, so different to the casuarinas and gums she’s known. It’s not that these trees are more beautiful. She loves the ragged dry things of the bush. That’s her habitat, not this. Here she feels foreign, for all that she has the same skin as the locals and perhaps those smuggler ancestors of hers might have known these same fields. It seems incredible that she has no family here, and not much of it in Australia either. Small bubbles of DNA, which have floated far from their origins, that’s her and Joss.

Australia, with its own dizzy cliffs of time, its mystery, is her place. She envies Joss the liberty of her roamings; she herself feels clamped by this country, its history. Jammed in, choked. Her imagination can only take her so far; then it’s just an inert stone, the empty fields all around. No one speaks to her here. The voices are too many, too soft, too dead.

These trees, though: perhaps they’re the only things that call to her. These friendly beasts.

A tree is endurance. Wearing its breathing skin against all weathers and seasons. There is a great courage about trees, she thinks as she passes beneath a small glade along the road. The varieties here have stateliness. Poplars shaking and silvering. Lime trees, generous and at ease. Others which Rebecca cannot name. She recalls another of her mother’s sayings, a song about oaks.

*Three hundred years growing*
Three hundred years standing
Three hundred years dying.

Rebecca walks along, the sun cupping her head in its hot hand. She is smiling at the trees, brushing her hands against leaves, slowing under their shade. Inside her something is richly growing. Above her the trees surge and surge and surge in the wind.

::

Here I am, says Flick. Here I am. And he tips his head back, to show the underside of his sweet throat, the elegant tendons, the golden skin. His brown hands, long and boned like wings. Don’t be scared, he says. It’s all okay, it’s okay, he whispers. I love you.

Behind Joss’s closed eyes, everything is golden. Like the bottom of a river in sunlight. And Flick comes swimming up out of it, towards her, smiling, and again and again he holds her and pushes her legs apart and the water runs right through her bones.

Lying alone under a tree on the edge of a field, she plays this dream over and over, drowsily, curling and flexing in half-sleep, smiling too.

::

Rebecca takes the library books to the lounge room. It is sunny in there; the brief minutes when the sun finds its way in through the thick windows.

She looks through the books: a guide to varieties. She feels stupid, still not to be able to recognise most of the most basic types. Looking through it quickly, she realises that she’s barely observed anything of details. She couldn’t say whether a birch tree has big leaves or small. Honestly, she may as well be blind for all the notice she’s taken.

She’d borrowed a book describing various famous old trees of Britain and another, of legends associated with trees. She flips through them. Naturally, British tree-lore is odd. The memory of the sanctity of trees in the pagan days has clearly not quite faded in the modern era. Rebecca reads of a ‘Wishing Tree,’ situated by the side of an old highway, its bark encrusted with coins pressed into it by passers-by with wishes for protection. Some of the coins date only to the Seventies. A huge old tree in the north of the country is known as the ‘Bleeding Yew’, after it seeped crimson sap and a legend emerged that a holy man had once been hanged from it; of course, trees were also used as gibbets.
Rebecca remembers a story one of her friends had told her in Melbourne: ‘A true story,’ Sarah had said. About driving down a lonely country road at night, past an old tree once used as a gibbet, and seeing, flaring in the headlights, a pale figure walking down the middle of the road. ‘It was totally dark, that was the thing,’ she’d said. ‘And this person was all white, like a mummy. Swaddled in cloth. And when I drove past—quickly, I’m telling you, because there was something very, very weird about it—the thing that frightened me the most was that it had no face. No face at all.’

Rebecca is sure there is no shortage of ghost stories around here. There are the eldritch stories in this book: a yew which, if one stuck a pin in its bark and ran around it exactly twenty-four times at midnight, would allow a person to peer in through a window of the nearby church and see a vision of a woman murdering a baby. You can see that on any episode of a crime drama, thought Rebecca, without running around a tree like a lunatic.

The yew, with its resilient wood, was prized as the material out of which to cut great longbows with which to deal death, but its evergreen branches were also used in place of palms in religious ceremonies. Boughs of such symbols of eternal life were placed under bodies, as biers. And the power of trees to restore or repair life was undisputed. There were Miracle Trees of the Middle Ages, passing under which could cure disease, and others whose fruit and leaves were taken as an antidote to the Plague.

Perhaps the woods were creatures of life, but they, too, had begun to die. The woodlands of the county had ebbed and flushed through time. The Silva Anderida of Roman days was cut back for charcoal; Andreadsweald in the Saxon era had thickened once more, hollowed out only by settlers. During the Civil War a thousand years later, the trees burned away as fuel in homestead fires, but then grew again; the threat of Napoleonic invasion had them forming the keels of a hundred navy ships, holding cargoes and men safe above far-away waters. The last great woodlands of England were felled only seventy years ago, in the War, and now, as Rebecca had seen on Mark’s map, only minute little remnants stand. One of the largest, she reads, is not far from the house, down by the river. One of these days she will pay it a visit, in tribute.

She should go back to her yew tree in the churchyard. It had bent over her with such grace and solace, when she had needed grace and solace. No wonder the old people had worshipped them, and given them tribute. Perhaps, Rebecca thinks, the stone knife is like that. Someone put it there once, for something. How lovely. It seemed right, to give up one thing that you loved, to set a balance right.

She should like to give up her sadness. If only she could find some place that would want it.
Again, in the morning. A bruise on her leg, and another, a handspan away. Quiet as flowers, they are, blooming in the night. Joss smiles. It won’t be long now.

Rebecca finds herself picking up the phone. It’s the first time she’s used it; how odd. There isn’t anyone to call in England, and she’s been shy of confessing the situation to her friends at home. After the big send-off in Melbourne, it is too humiliating. As far as the people at home are concerned, she imagines, she’s simply disappeared. Out of sight, out of mind.

She’s still not ready to talk to her friends, to breach the silence. But she holds the phone, the back of her throat hollow with apprehension. In front of her is the number for Mark’s mother. She dials it, quickly, before she can think about what she’s going to say.

‘Hello?’
‘Hello? Mrs Cole? It’s Rebecca here.’
‘Who?’
‘Rebecca… Is Mark there?’
‘Oh, Rebecca. Yes, he’s here. How nice to hear from you, dear. I’ll fetch him.’

Sound of the phone being put down; mumbling voices; the phone is picked up.

‘Hello? Mark speaking.’
Appallingly, tears spring to Rebecca’s eyes. ‘Hi. It’s me.’
‘Oh. Hello.’
‘I thought I’d see how you’re going.’
‘I’m fine.’ He clears his throat. ‘How are you?’
‘Fine.’

She holds the phone slightly away from her head, she wishes she could just put it down and walk away quickly. Her voice is coming out thin and nervous.

‘We’re getting on okay. Joss is around somewhere. The house is still standing.’
‘Well, good.’ There is a pause. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t rung.’

‘That’s okay,’ Rebecca finds herself saying. ‘I guess you’ve been busy. How’s your mother?’

‘She’s well. It’s fantastic to see her. Do you know, she didn’t bat an eyelid when I turned up? Just told me to go down the street and buy more bread.’ He laughs.
‘That’s mothers for you. Hard to impress.’ If they’re going to have a jolly-jolly conversation, she’ll keep her end of it up. ‘Did she ask about me?’

‘Of course. I said you were busy getting the house sorted, and she said she’s looking forward to meeting you one day.’

Rebecca lets that one sit for a moment. ‘It’s nice to hear your voice.’

‘And yours.’ For a moment there, intimacy breathes on her face, she thinks he might say something, his voice has softened, hasn’t it, he’s eager to talk to her. For God’s sake, she thinks. But she’s smiling now.

‘Well, I’ll be in touch,’ she hears him say. ‘Say hi to Joss. All the best.’

It’s like a punch in the throat. She gathers herself. ‘You too. You too. Bye, Mark—’ but he’s already hung up. She puts the phone down, quickly, carefully, as if it’s hurting her. A moment later she’s in the walled garden, reaching for a cigarette and then stopping herself. Her skin is goose-bumped. The baby—she’s glad now, she didn’t mention it.

She bends, wrenches a small plant out of the earth, and hurls it as hard as she can against the wall.

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Joss flexes out of sleep. Fast, as if in fear. Her head is raised from the pillow before she opens her eyes. Blackness in the room, pewter light at the window. Nearly dawn. She can smell her own sweat; it lies as heavy on her as the sheet she kicks away.

Her heart is beating fast: has something happened? Outside the trees sough and rasp. She is naked at the window, her mouth half-open and soft with excitement.

Flick stands in the garden below. His chest is bare, his face dark in shadow. He raises one arm to her.

Joss yanks on clothes.

It is disturbing, walking in the black house. She misses a step on the way downstairs; her heart bangs.

Flick takes her hand. His palm is cool, dry; she clenches it between her fingers. They walk out of the garden.

It’s a land of the underworld, this early morning twilight. There’s no sun at all yet, just a silkiness to the dark sky which suggests the night is nearly done. Joss can see the road pale beneath her, and stretching ahead. This old road, like a stream between tall banks. On either side the hedges are closer than in daylight: their tendrils of white flowers reach out to caress her as she passes. Flick is silent, holding her tightly by the hand, walking steadily. His limp is scarcely noticeable. Now it’s Joss who stumbles and hesitates. The wind is warm as water.
Down the road, around the corners, over the stile, across the field. In the middle of the field Joss stops for a moment, to tip her head back and look up at the sky. A sense of rapture comes over her. What a moment; so free. It’s like fever on her face. The wind brushes luxuriously over the barley around them: one, two, three heaves and then stillness. Flick strokes her arm, slowly. They smile at each other. She thinks she will melt when he touches his tongue to hers, soft as the wind.

He is taking her back to the river, of course. As they pass into the woods Joss is glad. She was startled, the first time, with the dogs and the savage kiss, Flick’s face strange with intent, the way he had changed. She had thought him a small boy then. Tonight he is as tall as her, his shoulders wide.

From him comes a sweet tang, as if he’s been running, the blood as quick in his skin as it stings hot under hers.

In the woods there are sounds. A crackle behind a tree, skittering above. Such darkness here where the sky above holds only the potential of light. Joss feels as if her body is weightless, in this watery dimness, the close air. Her hand reaches out to rest on slim trunks as they edge further in; the bark is the same temperature as her palm. She is breathing through her mouth; she tries privately to wet the dryness, thinking of the next kiss.

The river is noisy, as if the woods were all water. Joss’s hair feels tight on her scalp, now that the breeze no longer lifts it. Flick takes her by the upper arm; she squeezes it closer to her body, to let him feel the side of her breast. Now that it’s here, she is patient with the brimming in her, she lets it shiver at the edges.

They are at the river bank. In the gloom Joss sees only a dim glisten, tiny flares of light. She stands beside Flick as they stare at the darkness where the river moves.

‘I was hoping you’d—’

He pulls her down suddenly, and they’re on the ground, sprawling. He rakes his hands down the sides of her arms; she staggers onto her back.

His fingers are skimming her, she can barely feel them. The world has jerked sideways, she is unprepared. Flick above her feels unreal, is she asleep, who is touching her? It’s as if she’s lying washed with wind; her throat is a hollow, her head full of blood.

Flick moves quickly above her, ramming hard hands up beneath it against her ribs. He squeezes her breast with chapped fingers, it hurts. Still her mouth is stopped; by his, and then when he pulls it away for a moment, gasping, by an instinct that if she just keeps quiet, if she waits, he will calm, and—

He jams his tongue into her mouth again. His hands are wrenching at her pants, he pulls them over her hips, uncaring of how she is squeezed and pinched. How heavy he is, his weight tilts and slithers over her but never eases. He’s making a guttural noise, his mouth is messed with saliva; her face is wet from it and if she
could just free herself for a moment, have an instant to adjust, she’ll smile and hold him. She squirms, makes a sound.

He takes her hand, which has been loosely resting on his back, and pushes it down on the ground above her head.

This is sex, this is how it goes, this is what she’s been burning for, why is it so ugly?

She is helpless as a doll. He sits back, then, and pulls his own trousers open. Her pants are ruched around her ankles, great clumps of cloth awkward there. Impatiently, he frees one foot, and shoves her knees up. A sharp scent. He is hard against her hip. The hair on her pubis rasps on his. She dare not look down. Everything is black with shadows, anyway.

The sensation of another’s flesh inside her. It’s difficult. He pushes, clumsy. She can hear breath tight between his teeth. It feels as if a blade is parting her inside, bloodily separating wings of flesh. She has her jaw clenched. Her hands grip his shoulders, she pulls down, brings her knees up higher, he’s invading her. She fights through. She did not know she had so much heat in her body, that anything could hurt so much. Then something slicks and eases inside her; the hard part is done.

Flick’s breath is harsh in her ear, he’s jammed up against her and she pulls him down, closer still. Her hands claw on his back, down to the curves of his buttocks, pressing in tightly; her legs rise and crush him in. It’s easier now, the passage of him, and percussion rings through her body with every thrust.

He squirms, then; writhes and rises, wringing something from her. He holds his breath, moves his head slowly from side to side against hers, his face is so hot. A groaning in his throat, echoed in hers, a long strange sigh. His pain almost breaks her heart, but then she opens her eyes and sees him looking at her calmly, dazed. With the blood still up in his cheeks his face is very young.

He lays his head down beside hers again and they are quiet.

Is there blood? wonders Joss. Was there blood?

She is very tired now. Flick’s body is heavy on hers, growing heavier, looser. She opens her eyes again. Above the treetops the sky is a cup upturned, filled with water that does not fall, glittering black-blue. For long moments she watches a smudge of cloud move, pale against the darkness, towards the tree above her. When she opens her eyes the cloud is on the far side of the tree.

Flick stirs and shifts, slumps off her to lie on the ground beside her. His face is turned to the sky like hers. She fumbles and finds his hand, holds it hot and damp.

‘I,’ she says. Her mouth is dried, her throat coughs. He turns his head, questioning. She moves her head a little, presses her lips against the softness of his neck for a moment, lingering. ‘I,’ but her voice fails again. She mouths the words silently into his throat. Love you.
He stares at the sky again, and shakes his head a little, as if to say, It’s not like that.

Joss feels a shiver run up her thighs as her skin cools in the air. She reaches out and finds a piece of her clothing, pulls it across her belly.

He has raised his head, leans on his elbow. He plaits his fingers with hers.

‘We did it together. You’ve given to me, too. Haven’t you?’

He makes a sound of assent. But his face is drawn in a frown.

She hesitates, slides a hand across his chest. All she wants, as the air chills her, is for his heat around her, an embrace, something to fit her back together again.

Her hand, remote, strokes and pats him.

He makes a hissing noise, stills her hand.

‘Flick?’

He lies there, his eyes closed. Faster and faster come the huffs of breath from his nostrils.

‘Flick?’

She kisses his face. When she kisses his eyelids there is wetness beneath her lips. ‘Oh, don’t cry,’ she says stupidly.

They curl around each other, two small creatures in the dark.

He shakes his head gently against hers. His eyes press blind against her throat. She is so satisfied, she realises, to find him needing her like this. He makes a small animal sound of misery.

Absently, Joss’s fingers paddle between her legs. She raises her hand to see it in the faint silvery light: the tip of her finger is dark with blood. Softly she runs it down Flick’s belly.

He says something then, suddenly. Something Joss can’t understand. He’s looking right into her eyes, intent. Then he pulls away, fast, and rises.

‘Don’t—’ says Joss, clutching for him. But he stands over her, naked and pale as wax.

Again, he says something. His voice sounds sad.

He runs to the river, and Joss hears a great splash, and then nothing.

In fright she scrambles to her feet. She cannot see the other bank clearly. There is nothing, not even a ripple in the smooth sluggish water. No shadow, no glimmering limb.

The trees say Hush. The sky comes down a little. Joss stands there, alone once more, the print of Flick’s skin on hers, too shocked to cry.

How much darker it is now.
Every tree has a million leaves hanging heavy and each leaf scuffles only as she passes below. This dawn has become edged with unease, a strange stillness at the centre, disquiet shivering at the rim. Joss’s eyes dart about as she steps uncertainly through the woods. The sound of the river has gone, the sky has clouded and lowered. Without even starlight there is no path to follow, without Flick’s hand in hers she cannot walk straight. The dark is a negative left dazzling on the inside of her eyelids after the brightness before.

She loses track of time as she walks, setting her narrowed gaze on the next tree, the next, as their trunks mist up into vision before her. There is no lick of dawn in the woods. She is the only person awake in miles.

A pressure has been lifted; she’s like a wave which had been poised, travelling eerily static towards a shore, and now breaks.

Why did he leave her alone here? So solid, so present under her hand, his breath moist on her mouth. Oh, the sound of him. In the middle of a pace she stops and a cord snaps tight through her, her eyes water with the phantom of pleasure. It is different to the sensations she had actually had with him. Was it pleasure she had with him?

But he is always flitting away. It seems no sooner does Joss find him, clutch him a little harder, than he is gone again. Leading her into landscapes she cannot find her way home from. She stumbles on a rock buried in the dead leaves and bites her lip.

This darkness is tightening, not loosening.

She raises her face to the sky and holds herself, binds herself in tightly, holds to the small solidity of herself.
Part Four
‘Joss!’

Rebecca opens the kitchen door wider, listens. ‘Joss, that’s you, isn’t it?’

The front door slams, there are two footfalls, then silence. Rebecca can hear someone breathing hard, rough on the inhale.

‘Where have you been?’ Frowsty with the early hour, she comes down the hallway. ‘Don’t tell me you got up early for a walk in the bloody dawn! Have you been out all ni—’

Joss is standing inside the door, her eyelids closed tightly. She has her arms folded around herself and her hair is frayed with static and tangles.

‘Christ, what is it?’

Joss’s face is cold, Rebecca can feel the chill against her own cheek when she draws close in the embrace. Joss puts her head down on Rebecca’s shoulder and says nothing.

‘Come on. Let’s be British and have a rousing cup of tea.’ Rebecca is chemical with dread. What’s happened? Assault? Rape? Has she seen an accident? Been in one?

As she follows Joss into the kitchen Rebecca watches her sister. She fetches an old hoodie and puts it around her. The kettle boils, Rebecca pulls a cup down from the cupboard, turns on the light to banish the early morning bleakness, watches Joss. The younger girl pulls the hood over her head.

‘Why are you up so early?’ A mumble.

‘Expecting trouble.’ Rebecca’s smile is the brave wry smile of a parent. She had been restless all night, chewing on her fury with Mark.

‘Trouble?’ Joss’s head comes up, fearful.

‘You. You, you duffer. I didn’t realise I should be worried until I saw you come in, though. Where’ve you been?’ She pours milk. ‘And are you okay. Tell me. Are you all right?’

‘Tired. Cold. And—’

‘What?’

‘Lost track. Of time.’

‘And where have you actually been?’ She finds herself feeling the stern mother. But she’s watching Joss, how small her hands seem, the way she keeps shoving her hair behind her ear—Joss’s sleeve falls back and there’s a blue bruise and scrape on her wrist—

‘Jesus. What’s that?’ She snatches Joss’s arm. ‘What the hell is that? Did someone hurt you?’

Joss stares up at her, those eyes, the colour of a sky full of water, mumbles a word. She rubs the bruise thoughtfully. ‘No, no one hurt me.’
Rebecca sits down. ‘Just tell me.’

Joss drinks her tea, and talks. This is the first time Rebecca has heard the boy’s name but she knew, oh she should have known, there was a boy. Here, though. Out here in this new place, in the middle of nowhere. Some local kid, with pimples and a shaved head, his father’s mean jaw and a hoodie and runners. How could she have known? And Joss, out there in the dark with twigs in her hair and her wrist held tight.

‘Oh my darling.’

Joss flares. ‘He didn’t hurt me! He’s nice. He won’t hurt me. I’m not a child.’

Rebecca sits back.

‘It was just…’ Joss gathers herself. ‘It was just that he was with me, and it was all, oh, and then he just jumped up and left and I was walking home, I didn’t mind that he left, I mean, that was cool and I know the way, but it wasn’t the way, the right way—I think I got lost, and I saw things in the trees and time went all—’

‘Like when you were a kid, and we drove in the country at night and you swore you saw a man jump out of a tree…’

‘No!’

Rebecca puts her lips to her mug, even though it’s already drained.

‘And time was wrong.’

‘Okay.’ Tiredness, and disorientation, and the imagination of a teenager. Perhaps it’s been too much, coming here—it’s not like Joss was exactly normal back in Melbourne, no parents, brought up by her sister… and this place… She’s always lived too much in her head, that little box of wonders. Rebecca and Mark had even talked about it, a little, how Joss loved imagination and history, and England would be the perfect place where she could really dream and be herself. Maybe it’s gone wrong. They are living here, but not really living; just existing, suspended: no work, no school, in a house on the edge of a small town on the other side of the world. Abandoned. It’s total madness.

Joss rubs her lips meditatively against the rim of her cup, back and forth.

Rebecca sits back, musing. ‘Did I ever tell you about Julian?’

Joss shakes her head.

‘He was the boy I thought I’d die for when I was your age. I’d never kissed a boy, never thought anyone liked me. And he was so, so gorgeous.’ He had had the kind of skin that flushed right up to his cheekbones when he was hot, as if he’d been slapped. His hands: Rebecca remembers looking at his hands on the one time she’d sat next to him on the bus, looking at them more closely, more marvellingly than she’d ever looked at anything. ‘I saw him being picked on by other boys. That’s how I knew I loved him. Because he was so clever and bright and the other boys hated him, and I saw his face as he walked away. All I wanted to do was tell him I understood.
So I bought him a candle, a beautiful round red candle. I took it to school with me every day for a week before I got the courage to go up to him. I found him alone one day and I said, oh god, I can’t believe I did it, now—I said, “I bought you this” and rummaged in my bag and pulled out this damned candle and held it out. I may as well have just yanked up a bleeding chunk of my heart to offer him. He didn’t know what to do, he just took it and I walked away. He looked so embarrassed. And that was it. I couldn’t bear to talk to him again. We never were true loves, I was just an idiot.’

Joss glances up at her. ‘Is this meant to be a comforting story?’

‘Oh.’ Rebecca winces. ‘Well, I suppose so. Because the moral of the story, if there’s a moral, was that I wasn’t really an idiot. I looked like one and I felt like one at the time, but now that I think of it—it was a lovely thing I did. That candle, I mean. There wasn’t anything wrong with giving him a candle. It might have been just what he wanted. But I didn’t know how to give it, that was the problem. Maybe it just wasn’t the right time. Or he wasn’t the right person. He didn’t know what to do with it.’

There’s silence. A straying seagull squalls outside the window, briefly, then shears away disconsolately.

She sits back and sees the grey shadows under Joss’s eyes. ‘Come on. Come on and let’s get you to bed. Come in with me for once.’

Joss rises, creakily. The hood falls back from her face. ‘I’m tired. But thanks. Nice parable about the candle.’

Rebecca blinks in apology.

‘I’m joking.’

‘Sorry. Not exactly what you need.’ Rebecca realises she’s nervous. Nervous of Joss and her trouble and not knowing how to handle it. She puts a hand out towards Joss’s shoulder, lets it hover, puts it down on the thin bone.

‘I feel like I’m made of water,’ Joss says.

They go upstairs, and Rebecca leads Joss into her bedroom and pulls the covers back and curls around her. Joss’s bare legs are cold. Rebecca presses up against them, for warmth. ‘I’ll be here if you’re scared,’ she murmurs, and Joss shifts a shoulder, in impatience or acknowledgement, she can’t tell. A thick scent comes from Joss’s skin. Rebecca knows that smell. It’s the smell of touch, and nervous kisses, and a strange boy. It’s the rich seductive smell of sex. For a moment Rebecca experiences a kind of envy; and then once more a low thrum of anxiety, and a great tiredness, and then the warm rolling of sleep.
Later, when Joss wakes up, the bed is empty beside her and the sun comes glaring through the curtains. She lies there, curls tightly onto her other side, lets her body flex back into feeling. She runs a finger thoughtfully over her dry cool lips.

So she’s not a virgin anymore. That’s done.

She lies with that thought a while.

Something brims inside her skin: satisfaction. The darker memory moves into her mind. Joss wishes there weren’t that regret, spooling like cold dark water across her satisfaction. But there’s something in fear that’s satisfying, too.

It is done. She has had sex. She’s lain with a boy, under that magic of trees and night and the breathing of the river. Her body has opened and closed around another’s. Her mouth has tasted the peculiar flavour of desire. It is different to the pleasure she’s given herself; the way her body clenched and clamped at Flick. She had barely been able to breathe in the hot flush of it. Not what she expected. She was frightened, after all. Perhaps it’s always frightening. And it hurt so much. He didn’t care, that he hurt her, that there was no time for her to feel anything. What does that mean?

Enough that she was there, that she held Flick’s face hard in her hands as he stared in panic at her and then found the horizon he was looking for; enough that her skin was alive with feeling. The next time, she will move more slowly, she will kiss him with every beat of her hips against his, she will be the radiant horizon.

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There is another card from Mark in the post that morning. Will be here a while longer. Am thinking of you. Are you all right? Rebecca has a moment of glee; then anger. She thinks of Mark and she thinks of a heavy hand on her heart. How does he dare? Baggage, comes the word to her mind. A word for a woman.

It would serve him right if he returned and found the house empty, the milk sour in the fridge. She should take Joss away, that’s the other thing. This place is doing something to her; the bruises, the boy. Running wild. That was something she always wanted to do, herself. It scares her to see it in Joss.

She puts her shoes on and goes out, leaves a tea-bag in the bottom of a cup for Joss, the sugar-bowl next to it.

Out the door, into the hot blue and green morning. There’s a dry wind in the trees, stirring them. She thought of going into town and buy some pastries, a treat for Joss; but instead the road is brighter in the other direction and on impulse she takes off that way. Past the wildflowers: rowan, cow parsley, elderflower, hawthorn. She can name some of them now. White archangel, viper’s bugloss, honeysuckle, fennel.
White and blue and purple and yellow, mixed in with half a dozen types of green, and black thorn.

She keeps walking where the road is lit with sunshine. And there is the church, with its wooden lych gate and its soft stone. The building’s closed again; that’s okay. She doesn’t want to go inside, it’s not that kind of comfort she needs. She just wants a soft green place.

The big yew tree calls her over. At this time of day the sun hits the trunk low down, where the branches’ shade gives way, and the bole of the wood billows out in rough cushions, twisted and grooved over itself. When she lays her hand on it the wood is warm.

There’s the blade, jammed into the wood. It doesn’t look like it hurts. The tree has grown a little lip around the black stone, almost as if it’s pulling the flint further in. Rebecca remembers something she saw in the Dover museum: a note against an ancient flint axe saying that in medieval times such artefacts were believed to be supernatural. Tiny old arrowheads were ‘elf arrows’. Perhaps it was in that time that the flint was bedded here, an amulet, the tree its sheath. Or earlier. And that even in the time before the Romans, people had believed the much older flints were magical. They had no idea of history. They had taken skulls and stone axes from ancient graves and used them as amulets; pierced and hung them. Now they lay under dust in museum cases. Gods in boxes with clenched closed fists, she thought. The world is full of dead gods locked away.

Time to go back over the tilt of the world: home.

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The early afternoon is hot and bright when she gets back to the house. She finds Joss in the gloomy lounge room. She is hunched up at the end of the couch, staring out the window where the trees stand in a daze of sunshine.

‘How’re you feeling?’
‘Okay. I slept too much.’
Rebecca sits. ‘Did you have some tea?’
‘Yep. Thanks for that.’
The room is cold, even though it’s so hot outside.
‘I’ve been for a walk.’
A wan smile. ‘Good for you.’

‘Went back to that church. Have you found it? The one down there—a way down to the left—’ She waves a hand. Joss shakes her head. ‘That tree I told you about—with the stone stuck in it. I think it’s an old flint. A knife or something. It’s like some magic totem or something. Wonderful.’
Joss wraps her arms around her knees. There are breadcrumbs on her lap.

‘Really.’

She looks down, smiling. ‘Well.’

‘Do you think it’s funny place, this?’ Joss speaks into her knees.

‘No. Yes. It’s not what I was expecting. You know, I wasn’t really that sure about coming, and I’m starting to think, now, that—’

‘Have you met any people around here?’

‘Only people in the village. They’re not very friendly.’

‘No one anywhere once you get out of the village, on this road. Don’t you think that’s strange?’

‘I guess. I’ve been a hermit.’

‘I don’t even see people walking down the path out here, just driving. All these fields, you never see any farmers. The whole place is empty.’

Rebecca is nervous of asking, but she must. ‘How did you meet this boy then?’

‘Out there. We met up and he asked me out.’

Rebecca has the feeling that she didn’t handle this morning quite as well as she might have. Start again. ‘So he’s nice?’

‘Yeah.’

‘But something’s wrong?’

‘No.’ Joss looks out the window. ‘I just don’t know where he is right now.’

That fretfulness to know, that possession. Rebecca remembers that. She remembers it from a few weeks ago when Mark left. Like a gulp in the throat always unswallowed.

‘He’ll be back. No?’

‘I guess. There’s something about him. I just don’t know—’

‘What?’

‘Anything much about him. He’s strange. He’s gorgeous,’ and she blushes.

‘But he comes and goes.’

Some fuckwit is messing with Joss. Rebecca says, ‘You don’t have to like him. Just because he’s there.’

Joss stares at her hands. She’s wearing jeans and a hoodie and she’s washed her hair so it hangs straight and fine over her ears. She looks like such a kid. There is a blur of down on her smooth cheek where it catches the sunlight. A small pimple beside her mouth. ‘I miss him.’

Rebecca snorts. ‘You saw him just this morning!’ She sober. ‘Are you okay, honey? I mean, really?’ Did it hurt, she wants to ask. Did you want it? Was it slow and sweet? I don’t think it was.

Joss nods. Not vigorously enough to satisfy Rebecca.
‘Just remember. You don’t have to do anything for him. If he’s not right. You wait. You have all the time in the world. Now,’ she says, ‘I’m going to read the paper in the garden and give you some peace. You come and talk if you want. And we can go out tomorrow, go to Canterbury and buy some crap we don’t need. I think actually we do need crap. Lots more of it. Definitely.’

She leaves Joss sitting there, pushing her hair behind her ears slowly, with those small fine fingers, that far-away gaze. In the garden, at the back of the house, she doesn’t hear the front door open and close.

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At the library, Joss finds a place next to a dozy young mother with a hectic child. Thankfully the child rambles away to the children’s corner and the mother heroically follows. Joss stakes her place, fetches books. Her eyes feel tight and the lids oily. She’s a little trembly for some reason; her shoulders hunched high.

Rivers. The river is the key, she thinks. Water is magic, of course. In the past weeks she’s instinctively avoided the river; feeling that it was a place beyond her, where she wasn’t meant to be. But it’s not the only body of water around.

Floods. The silting up of the bays. This village was on an island once: where the little river runs now was once a great channel. Water running underground, water soaking into the land, being engulfed, eroding its way back. Washing around the rim of this landscape, being forced away again. An infinitely slow violence.

Up on the shore here sledged the vessels of Romans, Saxons, Vikings, saints, refugees, invaders; those escaping and those hoping; the fugitive and the proud. This hem of land has received the first footfalls of many. What has it taken in turn?

Now she reads of the deaths.

Off the eastern shore hundreds of ships have been wrecked and thousands of men lost; naval battles have taken others; the smugglers, of course; boats lost during the wars, accidents on the Channel. The rivers of the county are mostly small now, clogged with silt, but they also once brimmed with activity. And for the profit, there must be tribute paid. The old people understood: if one death by water is avoided, another must take its place.

Stories of accidents by water, murder near water, execution by water. In this town, hundreds of years ago, thieves were put to death: the men buried alive in the dunes, the women drowned in the river. A young boy senselessly murdered by a young man on a bare river bank; other children disappearing, while playing near the river; a young woman slaughtered on the old road along the sand line, where her gravestone is still to be found, suffocated by weeds. One infamous night, a shipwreck stranded over a thousand men on the great sandbank off the shore, where
they waited, waterlogged and freezing, for help. But the local men preferred to
salvage the wreckage, and let all the men drown. Curses were put on the town that
night.

Joss reads a story about a shipwreck victim washed up on the beach further
along the coast and buried there. The Virgin, in the tale, appears to the parish clerk
and led him to the churchyard, every step of her springing up green with grass. She
would not have the body in her yard, she said. So it was dug up, and put in the river,
where it floated til it reached here. And immediately all miracles ceased in their
church, and the land where the body lay grew perpetually wet, but when they tried
to take him out again, the land would not let him go.

A man drowned in the reeds, and four hundred years later ‘The Rush Sermon’
is still given in his memory. A drowned island off the coast, reputed to be haunted.

“The druids attach particular importance to the belief that the soul does not
perish but passes after death from one body to another.” Caesar wrote in his Gallic
Wars. He told of clearings with saplings interlaced to keep the sacred boundary, a
supernatural silence without birdsong, a spring bubbling in the glade; the trees were
said to move. On festival nights the people lit bonfires, and raised stakes around the
fire, topped with severed heads: ghost fences. Not far from the village where she sits,
Joss reads with a shiver, the skulls of fourteen babies had been found, the little frail
cups of bone nestled tenderly between flints.

This black radiance thrills her more than she would like to admit. She had
known there was something very deep and very nasty here. She’d expected it; she’d
felt it, surely, in the eerie quiet of the roads and meadows?

And above all, she reads, they sacrificed to water. In the watery places the
gods were nearer, and so was danger: reeds caught the clumsy, bright reflections
drew the dreamers down. In those places the Otherworld was luminously close:
could you not see its silver sky, its grey ghostly trees if you bent to the surface of the
pool?

And so the old people would tie rags to the trees, or flowers bound with
wool, to adorn those gods who rustled the branches, and cast into the waters the
shiniest, the most precious objects of metal. The swords were ceremoniously blunted,
the daggers broken, the coins bent, before the lowering into water. And then, when
silver and bronze and iron wasn’t enough, when the threat was greater and the air
was soaked with divine terror, they offered not only heads, but whole bodies: the
maimed or mumbling, the weak and the marked and the crippled.

Some were killed in a choreography of violence: stabbed, slashed, throttled,
beaten. The triple death was eased by a final meal, of rye, perhaps, infected with
fungus, enough to make the victim hallucinatory or comatose: visions spangling his
gaze, the drugged limbs barely resisting the tethering; the leather band tied around his
arm, the flint axe bashing his defenceless skull; the garrotte a slow strangling; his head pulled back and the hard knife gashing soft flesh. Then he was given to the water: a bog, a well, a river or a pool. Sometimes the victim was stitched to the riverbed by wicker withies strung through the very flesh of his pierced arms. Or he was simply laid down. Or pushed, still dying, face-first into the bog. The noose was left around the throat, the body pinned down with stones and birch-branches; the bindings of ritual death remained.

They drowned their own to keep the waters bright.

The soul passed from one body to the next, after all: this brief death was only a pausing, a flicker through shade before the light returned. Unless the victim deserved to die. Then the water, a place between this world and the other, might keep him forever, static, neither living nor dead, unplaced, unpassing.

By making their offerings, some kind of balance was restored. And yet the waters, greedy, held these treasures for millennia, and still took more. And again and again, a young man meets his death by water. Must meet it.

‘The shelving, slimy river Dun,
Each year a daughter or a son.’

The dead in this country’s myths are unable to speak. That is how one knows, even if they walk, that they are still dead. They are sometimes attended by animals of the hunt, companions of the Otherworld: dogs.

Joss closes the last book, stands up, feels faint.

::

As the afternoon passes the weather is getting heavier. Rebecca notices how the sky is blurred with clouds, but the sun seems to glare down more hotly through the spaces between them. To the east, over the sea, there is a shadow, as if the sky itself were dipped in water and slowly staining. The wind has fluttered closed and the sound of birds and insects is intensely loud.

The lounge room door is closed and Rebecca guesses Joss is still on the couch. She must be exhausted. The room is cool and aqueous at this hour and if Joss weren’t in there Rebecca too would stretch out on the couch and have a nap. Such weight in the air. It feels as if the membranes of her veins are thinning. She walks up the stairs in the afternoon hush, quietly so as not to wake her sister, up to her room. She takes off her boots and jeans, slips under the sheet. Mark’s scent has gone. There’s only a pale flowery aroma of Joss, and that darker scent, that stranger smell. When she gets up she’ll change the sheets. It’s been weeks.

::
It is clear what she has to do: what she is a part of. Something huge and shimmering, bright with meaning, vast and full. Everything feels very certain, as in a dream. Or like sex.

Joss slips back into the house. Rebecca is asleep when she peeks in through her bedroom door. There is a breathlessness in her as she gathers what she needs: an old tee-shirt, a small water-bottle that she fills with wine, a trowel from the shelf near the back door, a bag of tea-light candles. Artefacts for a legend, she thinks: hardly the chalice and the sword, but they will do. She jams them all into a bag and runs out into the early evening.

::

The day is darkening early under its low skies and when she wakes Rebecca thinks of the evening ahead: something good on television, a comfy dinner of sausages and roast vegetables. The lounge room door is empty: Joss must have gone to her room. The open windows frame scenes of static, saturated green; outside, in the kitchen garden, every blade is still. It’s already six o’clock and Rebecca is hungry. She turns on the light in the kitchen, pours a glass of wine and gets to work.

An hour later, the food is ready and Rebecca calls up the stairs to Joss. Getting no response, she goes up and taps gently on Joss’s door. ‘Sweetheart? Are you hungry?’

She can tell by the silence that Joss isn’t in her room, either. She is not in the house at all, Rebecca realises; she must be on one of her walks. Bloody little bitch, says Rebecca aloud, Can’t she stay put? But she is full of renewed fondness for her sister, and she turns the oven off, slips the keys in her pocket and steps out the front door.

::

The road outside is green with twilight and feels warmer than ever. The nights this summer have generally been cool, even on the hottest days, but for the past two days the atmosphere feels as if the sky has clogged and the day’s heat has only massed. Beneath the grave, watchful trees the air is thick. Rebecca touches the flank of one as she passes, as if for reassurance. Then, looking down the road, away from the village, where Joss has usually headed on her expeditions, she notices that the hedgerows are fluttering with pale stream-like flowers. Going closer, she sees that they are thin strips of torn cloth wound roughly around the stems of thorn that prickle out of each hedge; she recognises the pattern of one of Joss’s t-shirts. Has she
gone completely mad? Why on earth would she be tying bits of clothing to the countryside? Rebecca fingers a scrap, casts a look around the roadway as if expecting to see Joss crazily strewing her clothes around. But there is nothing but the hedges clustering the roadsides, absolutely still in the close evening air, their blossoms closing up, and far ahead, the range of poplars, their leaves, too, quite motionless.

The rags disturb her. Joss fractures from her; she’s not familiar, she is someone quite separate, doing something unaccountable. Rebecca walks on, turning her head from side to side now, searching more urgently. When she gets to the poplars she looks past, to the hill where she once saw Joss sit, but it is empty, and darkening in the first moments of twilight. She can’t believe that she’s let this happen; that Joss has been spending days—weeks—wandering the countryside, without Rebecca knowing or even asking where or why. Something has been happening and something has gone wrong. Mother, she thinks. Oh mum, I never asked for this.

She heads across the field, hoping to catch a glimpse of her sister, but the expanse is as empty as she has always seen it. Aren’t there farmers to work this land? Where are the bloody people? She’s sweating as she toils across the lumpy ground. Under the stand of trees on the hillock’s crown she pauses to check the view. Down to one side the trees thicken into a wood—that must be the one marked on the map, she thinks—but last time she came upon Joss it was in a field. She doesn’t think her sensitive little sister would want to be in a wood at dusk.

Back onto the road. Beside it, spreadeagled upside down, is the body of a fox, its head crushed, a pink and grey mess. Only a few flies bother it. Rebecca looks away quickly from the horrible thing, obscurely frightened. Her belly heaves for a moment; she puts a protective hand against it.

She walks on. There’s the road turning ahead. It was around here, wasn’t it, that she’d seen Joss lying in the field? That time she was so defensive. She must have been with the boy, though Rebecca had never caught a glimpse of him. Oh, she’s so sly. Why didn’t she tell me, Rebecca thinks. Why did it all have to be such a secret?

She knows why, of course. Because at Joss’s age—even at Rebecca’s age, she can admit it—love and lust are like golden bubbles, held in cupped hands, swallowed down; they buoy you up and it takes only one brush against reality to threaten puncture, the bubble to burst, the glorious gold reduced to everyday dross. Because Joss has always had to make do, and close herself into her head, and because Joss, god bless her, deserves to be loved.

All the way up that track she strides, the light starting to fade now, to clot and grain. Rebecca is boiling hot and she wipes her face on her shirt. All the fields look the same, the same bronze crops of barley, some harvested to stumps and some
still standing, the same hedgerows alongside, the same impassive racks of trees along skylines...

Joss might be back at the house, perhaps she’s there, impatiently eating baked pumpkin off the oven tray, glaring at the door, waiting for her ridiculous irresponsible older sister to come home... Rebecca pauses for breath, and finds herself at a corner of a low flint wall. There, behind a screen of pine trees, is the church tower. She makes her way around to the lych gate, eases it open.

She searches the grounds for some kind of water; she’s desperately thirsty. A tap in a corner relieves the parching of her throat. She presses wet hands against her hot cheeks, but they only feel clammy a moment later. The churchyard is mad with the sound of crickets. The graves hummock the grass. Oh, where the hell is Joss? She thinks she’ll just go home, and hope to find her there—will ignore the apprehension like a belly-ache inside her, will work to the normal, expect it; watch a documentary or maybe a crime show. The two of them cozy on the couch. Hunger yawps inside her. She would give anything to be watching the Channel 4 news right now, the lamps on.

The yew tree, as she passes, seems darker and lower than ever, its branches creeping out above the ground, its tufts of needle-like leaves bristling crazily. A dry green dusty scent comes from it. For a silly moment Rebecca thinks Joss might be hiding in the tree’s hollow, that snug hidey-spot; it’s a ridiculous thought, but she ducks beneath the tree’s fringe of leaves and glances through dense shadows into the dark cavern of wood.

It is empty of course, and Rebecca’s fingers resting on the edge of it find another emptiness: a narrow slit, sharp with crumbled splinters where something has hacked at it. The stone is gone.

Absurdly, Rebecca looks on the ground, in case it has simply fallen out. But she knows better. How cheap, to come and remove this one precious thing. Vandals have no subtlety. Then she is outraged, and she realises it is on behalf, stupidly, of the tree. Injured, just for someone’s laugh, or trophy. Something stolen from this grand old relic, and all that still time disturbed. She finds herself stroking the fractured wood, smoothing splinters down, rubbing her fingers inside the aperture where the wood is smooth and silken from its long growth against the flint. A hot sense of sadness comes up in her throat. But she can’t spend time on a clammy summer’s dusk, consoling a tree. She has to find Joss; pushing off from the trunk where she has rested her weight, she wipes her way out through the branches and back out to where the damp sky is now beginning to obliterate the church tower.

::
The house is empty. She hadn’t left the lights on when she walked out; the rooms are quiet with shadows. Rebecca walks through quickly, flicking the light-switches, spooked. She washes her face, pours a glass of wine, takes a long gulp. She has put it down on the counter when she thinks to commit a trespass she’s never made before. Finally, maybe, she thinks as she heads up the stairs, cramming a piece of pumpkin in her mouth, I’m turning into a typical mother. Once more she puts her hand to her belly. If she weren’t so alert with nerves she’d have laughed.

Up in Joss’s room, she finds her diary.

::

One thing they never thought to buy for the house is a torch. She’s only halfway across the field when she realises she already needs to check the map. Her cigarette lighter, left in her back pocket, is the only thing she’s got. In the stillness of the air, it gives a steady flame. She’s on the right track, but it wasn’t clear from Joss’s diary which part of the river in the wood she meant; it meanders around, a thin little thing, more a creek than a river from the look of it. If she gets across this field, though, she’ll be amongst the trees, and then she need only follow their line to find the water.

It’s hard going, in the fading light. It’s hotter than ever, she’s sure. The air seems damp with dusk and warmth, and the trees ahead look darker than anything she’s entered in her life. What are we doing here, she thinks as she struggles over the weeds at the field’s edge. How did we get to this empty place? Madness. We don’t belong here. We don’t know a thing about a place like this.

Dry lightning, soundless, surprises her. Then thunder. Far from here. It seems cooler once she’s amid the trees, as if she’s walked into, invisible, a clot of fog. She had thought of ‘woods’ as peaceful plantations, the tame European trees well spaced with age, a fine bed of leaves beneath. This feels dense as an Australian forest; branches are broken and fallen, obstructing her path, there are swathes everywhere of ivy and grass, dry leaves are slippery beneath her feet.

But there, ahead, there are glimmers of white, and when Rebecca reaches it, the rag is as good as a torch to light the way. Joss has led her, after all.

::

Joss waits a long time. The woods are heavy in the thick weather, the trees seem to blur when she glances up at every small sound. The silence, however, is almost total. It is terribly hot in there. What sodden light there is fades around the little cool flares of the candles.
In the end she is not startled when he comes walking towards her. She stands up. She is ready.

He stops in front of her, by the bank of the river. He seems to ripple in the air, as the light ripples over the streaming water.

‘It’s all right,’ she says. ‘It’s all right now, I understand.’

He smiles, and reaches a hand out to take her wrist. His hand seems nothing but bones: he is so skinny, this flickering boy, and the smell of him is strong. It seems to rest on her tongue, bitter. Her tongue still hurts where he had bitten it here last night. She backs away slowly to avoid his touch.

‘You hurt me,’ she says. ‘Do you know that?’ She bends, picks up the bottle of wine, and staring at him pours it into the river beside her. ‘Is this right?’

The boy is frowning. Perhaps he’s forgotten the proper way, the right order. First the gesture, then the real offering. It be hard, of course. It’s nothing, unless you feel the loss.

He moves for her again: his hand grabs her wrist, yanks it downwards as he steps against her. She coils, twists awkwardly, shoves back. The resistance has caught him by surprise; he staggers backwards, almost losing his footing.

Joss steps forward in one quick, sure stride, and with spread hands pushes him again. She is hot with certainty. He falls, slipping so that he sprawls back on the wet slimy bank of the water, his hair spreading and darkening as it soaks. She is on him and thrusting his head beneath the water before his outstretched arms can raise him again. It is almost dark now.

::

By the time she has worked her way through to the river, the light is going fast. Rebecca is now more frightened of the dark than of what she might find; the darkness is already with her, making every inch of advance a fight with apprehension. Only occasionally does the dry lightning flare—it is more spectral than helpful, making the gloom deeper after every slice of light. But she is slowly learning that she can move in this strange place, she can put her hand out to feel her way when the shadows are too dense, the world doesn’t fall away in fateful cliffs or treacherous ravines. Her hearing sharpens, and her sense of smell; she feels like an animal, crouching in the safety of her instincts. From time to time she flicks the lighter on, but it shows only scattered shapes which don’t make any sense. One footstep after another, further in towards the sound of water.

When she finds Joss, she’ll kill her.

::
The flint knife is clumsy in her hand. It seems impossible that it’s real; that there is anything so solid in this world which seems liquid with sound and light, this silvery shadow-world that makes her blink as she crouches above the boy, with only a hot gold flare running up the core of her body and along her arm to where she holds the stone above his head, the other hand pushing his face away. Flick’s mouth under the water, gaping, his skin a dulled shine in the gloom: it all seems a mask. She deliberately pushes down on him with her groin as he bucks upwards, clamps his arm with one hand, twines her lower legs around his to anchor him down. He’s very strong as he thrashes under her, but he seems small again; much smaller than she is.

But he is so beautiful.

‘It has to hurt,’ she grunts. ‘You know it, you’ve done this before—it has to hurt or it doesn’t mean anything—’

She stares at him, and leans back. ‘Does it?’

He looks up at her. She waits for him to lunge up towards her. His mouth opens in a soundless appeal.

‘Doesn’t it?’

She starts to cry. She’s too tired, suddenly, to rise. But beneath the weight of tiredness she suddenly feels something lift her.

::

Finally, Rebecca finds herself lurching sideways as she slips on something. She must be at the bank of the creek now; she can smell wetness and hear the faint wash of moving water. Next to her are flashing gleams, shifting and passing as she moves her head. Treading very carefully on the uneven, slimy ground and clinging onto trees, she works her way along the bank.

When she sees them they seem, for a moment, like spirit lights, those flares of flaming gas said to hover eerily over marshes. She’s never seen one, but that’s what comes to mind. It’s with a cool, uncanny sense of familiarity, of already having been here, that she sees the candle flames set beside the river ahead, and knows that she’s found her.

The girl raises her head when she hears someone approaching. The look on her young face, smoky and half-lit by the candles, is a look Rebecca hasn’t seen since Joss was a little child. One could fall in love with someone from just that gaze, that supernatural softness, the utter innocence.

For a moment the sound of the river is very loud. Then it quietens.

‘Hello, my love.’ Rebecca steps out from the shadows and into the magic globe of candlelight. ‘Don’t get a fright. It’s just me.’
Joss stares at her, the look unchanging on her face but losing all of its wonder. Then she blinks. Rebecca comes closer, crouches beside where her sister is sitting under a tree. She puts her hand on the trunk to steady herself. She refuses to think about how frightened she is.

‘I came to tell you dinner’s ready.’ Rebecca laughs, a little loudly, looking around at the black and gold trees. A little distance away, a moment later, one of the candles wavers. ‘Maybe I should have brought it with me. We could have had a picnic. Isn’t this just lovely.’

Joss is cross-legged on the ground, her head bent again now. There’s a scent on her, unfamiliar, sweet and bitter at the same time: her clothes are wet through. She is holding the stone knife in her two palms. It’s bigger than Rebecca had expected, a hand-sized lump of black flint, chipped away on two sides to make a corrugated blade. The edges, where the scoops of stone are very thin, glitter as she turns it from side to side, glossy as water. The light almost shines through them. There is a smudge of dirt on one end.

There are forest sounds: something easing through undergrowth a little way away, the trees whispering, the water knocking and hushing.

‘You must think I’m mad.’ Joss whispers. She stares at the ground between her thighs.

‘Well.’ Rebecca eases herself down onto the ground. She absently smooths the dead leaves with her fingers. ‘I was worried.’

A pause. ‘Sorry.’

Joss continues to pass the stone from palm to palm in the soft light. Rebecca wipes sweat off her face. She looks out at the ring of light. It’s peaceful here, after all. Somewhere out of time, out of the world, safely enclosed by light. A little bubble of illumination; it reminds her of the floating flares she sees when she closes her eyes. This could be any moment in time, or all of them.

‘All this for a boy, huh?’
Joss nods, slowly. Then she shakes her head.
‘Well.’
‘Not just for him.’ She mumbles something.
‘Sorry?’
‘For me.’
The water passes them, unseen.
‘He didn’t come?’

Joss doesn’t say anything. She just turns the stone. Her hands, holding the heavy weight, look as young and square as a child’s. There is a stillness about her that Rebecca hasn’t seen before. A sadness, but something else. It is as if Joss has given something away, something she wanted; for the first time she has done, or had
something done to her, something that really hurt. Rebecca can feel the tension in Joss, that holding carefully a cup filled with feeling, the great poise of someone who has just learned something about herself and needs to carry it a distance away before setting it down.

In the distance there is a loud crack and rustle, as if a tree had lost a branch. Joss starts. She looks sideways at Rebecca, almost shyly, bites her lip.

‘Ready to go?’ Rebecca says. She puts out her hand.

Joss takes it and together they heave to their feet.

‘We’ll put this back.’ Rebecca touches the flint gently. Joss nods.

‘I didn’t realise it had gotten so dark,’ she says, wonderingly. Rebecca bends and picks up two of the little candles from the ground near the water, hands them to Joss and takes two herself.

‘Here. And now, my darling, can you find our way home?’

As they move away from the river, Rebecca following in Joss’s flame-flickering wake, she nearly wobbles into Joss as the girl stops. Joss looks back at the river. Tears glaze her eyes. ‘Adciu,’ she says. ‘Adciu.’ Then she turns away.

‘What?’

Joss walks on. Quietly she says, ‘It’s an old word. It means I see.’ Then she quickens her steps, untroubled by the tangles of ivy and the blackness all around them, and leads Rebecca out of the wood.

::

The next day they wake to the sound of water. Joss lies in her bed, feeling the rain run through her body as she stirs, as if every drop is washing her gently, soaking in through her skin, rinsing her very bones before seeping out again. She rests, unmoving, watching the water for a long time. She is only eyes looking, lungs breathing, no more: barely even thinking. When finally she moves her limbs, it feels as if they’ve been newly fitted, as if she’s never had a body before.

At the other end of the hall, Rebecca, too, lies in her bed and watches the glass blur and waver. In her sleep she’s dragged a coverlet over her and it rests upon her like a second skin. There’s a sense of great peace, after the night. Her bed is so warm, the air fresh and cool as it comes through the half-opened window. Rain spatters from time to time on the sill. A soft crush of thunder comes and goes. The air gets greener and greener and Rebecca imagines a tender mouth kissing hers, and kissing her again, deeply; she sighs as she thinks this, and cups one breast gently in her hand, a warm handful of water; she holds it and rolls onto her belly and begins to pulse, dreamily, against herself.
When they’ve shut the front door behind them, both of them think to take the lead. Joss sets off down the road towards the church, aware that this is, after all, really her road—it’s the path she’s taken more often than she can count, it was the beginning of all the secrets she discovered. But Rebecca knows that they’re going to her church, and she uses her long legs to cut just an inch or two into Joss’s head start.

They stride on like this, both of them suddenly and obscurely jealous of the track they’re taking, until Rebecca says, a little out of breath, ‘Why are we rushing?’ and slows. She isn’t feeling very well this afternoon. The rain finally pattered to a close, and the sky is a thinning blue. After the heat, the day is the temperature of blood, barely discernible.

Joss raises an eyebrow. ‘I wasn’t rushing.’

‘Let’s just take it easy. There’s no hurry.’

They walk on, side by side now, framed in the middle of the empty road by the hedgerows on either verge.

‘God, it’s pretty here. All this wildness.’ A daisy waggling from Rebecca’s lips.

‘What’s the date?’

‘First of August.’

‘Right.’

‘Why?’

‘No reason. I guess there’s a lot of summer still to go.’

‘Yeah. A lot of summer.’

They walk on, to the turn-off, up the side-road, to the churchyard. There’s a lorry parked outside the lych gate, as they walk up, and three men standing in the churchyard. Two of them have on neon orange vests, and the third is wearing a jumper, shirt and cords.

‘Shit.’

‘We’ll never sneak it back right now.’

They open the gate and wander around the nearest edge of the graveyard, browsing along the gravestones as if ambling around a gift-shop. They bend and slowly read the blurred epitaphs as they wait for the men to go. Joss puts her hand on Rebecca’s arm. ‘Look at this. John Caleb Kerrick. 1856-1870. Drowned at Soar. He has outsoared the shadow of this night.

‘That’s sad. Just a young guy. That’s Shelley, isn’t it? From Adonaïs?’ Rebecca frowns and closes her eyes in concentration. ‘“He has outsoared the shadow of this night; Envy and calumny and hate and pain Can touch him not, nor torture yet again. From the contagion of the world’s slow stain He is secure…” I forget the rest of it.’
Joss says nothing, only smiles sadly and moves away. She looks at no more graves, only trails her fingers against worn stone, the frail fronds of long grass as she wanders slowly around the yard.

Rebecca makes a slow circuit, still feeling that great sense of comfort from this place. The sunlight is fragile on the grass and the old grey stones She cranes her head to look at the church tower, and then glance at her friends, the two stone ladies. They haven’t changed, they still gaze out, one happy, one sad. She walks over to stroke their faces with a light finger. Then, following their blind gaze over her shoulder, she turns and she sees.

The men are gathered around the yew, and now she can see why. The bushy top of the tree, so broad and etiolated with its long reaching branches that hide the trunk, looked intact from the gate. But now she can see that its trunk has been wrenched out of the ground, the whole thing tipped over, devastated, ruined.

The branches now reach out, across the earth. She draws closer.

The roots of the yew are as fearfully convoluted as the branches; a paler brown, thickly tendrilled and fringed with tinier strands. One half of the root system is bared to the air where it has risen from the ground. The trunk has sagged and split a little.

One of the men in orange vests notices her. ‘Shocking mess,’ he says.

She stares, nodding.

‘Freak, must have been a complete freak. There was no report of winds in the village. But maybe one of those, what do they call them? Micro-bursts, innit. Pulled the whole poor darling right up. The mayor’s here, he’s upset all right. Bloody shame.’

Rebecca takes a step forward, touches a root as she has just touched the stone face by the door.

‘Over a thousand years old, this. So it’s said. There’s a legend, you know, that there’s a sword buried right in the heart of it. All sorts of stories for trees like these, of course. I’m a tree man, I’ve heard them all. Still, she was a beauty.’ He gives a whistle.

The man in cords says something and the tree man winks at Rebecca and moves away to continue the discussion on the other side of the tree.

Joss is beside her. Her mouth is open with dismay.

Rebecca lays a hand on the trunk, where it has split. She feels like crying.

‘I’m sorry,’ Joss says. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’

She walks around to the other side, stooping to look at where the hollow in the tree now gapes towards the ground. The sill of it, where the flint had been stowed, is all broken away. Bared shards of wood are shockingly raw.

‘I can’t put it back,’ Joss whispers.
From the other side of the huge trunk Rebecca says, ‘I know.’

‘What shall I do?’

Her sister walks around to meet her. Impulsively, Joss puts her arms around her. They rest against each other, breathe in, and out.

‘We’ll bury it.’ Rebecca speaks into the side of Joss’s neck.

‘Back there.’

Rebecca nods.

‘Will you come with me?’

Rebecca lets go and stands back. She gives her sister a weak smile. ‘Of course. Of course I will.’

::

As they walk through the field towards the river, Rebecca pauses. ‘Hang on. I’ve got to stop a minute.’

‘You look a bit pale.’

‘I know.’ She stands, holding her abdomen, her eyes closed, getting her breath.

‘Joss?’

‘Yeah?’

‘There’s something I should tell you.’ She opens her eyes. ‘Should have told you before, I guess. I know you know that last year I had an—’ she glances away. ‘An abortion. Well, now I’m going to have a baby.’

Joss’s face is almost as soft with surprise as it was soft with something else last night. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘No.’ Rebecca laughs. ‘No! I’m going to have a baby! A bloody baby!’ She cackles.

‘You’re insane! That’s wonderful.’ Joss throws her arms around her for the second time that afternoon and squeezes her tight. She scrubs her sister’s tummy with a rough hand. Rebecca crouches away, giggling.

‘Careful! I might puke.’

‘Sorry. But oh my god. You’re going to be a mother. Good grief.’ She makes a face of mock-horror. ‘No, seriously. I’m really happy for you, Beck. Does Mark—’ she grimaces. ‘Does Mark know?’

‘He does not. He hasn’t given me a chance.’

‘More fool him. We’ll raise it ourselves. It’ll be great. We’ll call it Godfrey,’ she starts to chant, ‘and it’ll live in the bathtub, and it’ll eat only boiled eggs and—’

‘Shut it…’

‘It’ll make an honest woman out of you at last.’
Rebecca makes a face. ‘We’ll see about that. Not everything in life is redeemable’

::

The wood, this afternoon, is gilded and lovely. Sunlight catches the edge of every shape, like gold illumination in a manuscript, a lustre that they walk through. The light makes a metallic filigree of Joss’s brown hair as she walks beside Rebecca. The ivy that smothered the place is a soft bedding now; the sound of birds makes the light seem to quiver.

‘I have no idea where we’re going,’ Rebecca whispers. It’s so hushed here. Their footsteps scuff the leaves below. ‘I don’t know how I found you last night.’

‘I know the way.’ She has grown straighter and more possessed of herself since they entered the trees. What kind of trees are they? Birch, thinks Rebecca. Birch and elder. Lovely princesses of the woods. Joss holds herself like a princess here, too. She seems unafraid.

There they are, at the water’s edge. There are a couple of blackened places where the candles were left behind. The water purls and slides silently between the banks. There is a sledged part of the bank, where it looks like something heavy has dragged across it, but the river mutters only over rocks. There is no sign, now, of the dead animals Joss was once brought to see. Perhaps they rotted, perhaps they were swept away, or were taken away and disposed of. It was a long time ago.

‘Where do you want to put it?’ Rebecca says, hoarse from the silence.

Joss hesitates. ‘I know I have to do it. But I hope someone finds it again some day. I hope it doesn’t get lost. It’s precious.’ She pulls the stone blade from her pocket. In the look she casts down on it is all the hot hope of her imaginings. She holds this piece of ancient time, frozen in the shape of a blade, in her small young hands. Then she kneels by the bank of the river where the soil is soft and bare, and scrapes away at dead leaves and pebbles. Rebecca kneels and joins her. They dig with their fingers, uncovering grit and softened leaves and thick, dark earth. When the hole is about a foot deep, Joss picks up the stone.

‘Should I say something?’ she says, looking up at Rebecca.

‘What would you want to say?’

‘Goodbye for now,’ Joss says, and lowers her face. She places the axe in its pit, pauses a moment. ‘Goodbye.’

When it has been covered over, she stands and looks steadily at her sister. ‘I feel better now,’ she says.

‘Give me another minute.’ From her pocket Rebecca takes a sprig of yew branch. It wasn’t easy to wrangle a piece off the tree; it was a tough material. She
doesn’t know if it will work; probably not. She was going to take it back to the house, but now she plants the little sprig in the earth above the stone. Better not just to bury something, she thinks. Better to let it start again.

She cranks herself upright and looks at the trees, the water, the muddled ground scattered with leaves and stones and dead twigs, the grainy close air, the golden light.

‘This is a strange place,’ she says. ‘Maybe Mark was right. Maybe you can still feel things in a place like this.’

Joss offers her a small smile. ‘Maybe.’

They give the river one last look, the bank with its little circle of darker earth and its twisted flag of green; the haze of condensation that has risen to fog the further trees, the wonderful stripes of light, the odd grace that has come down through the leaves.

‘We’re leaving soon, aren’t we,’ says Joss as they cross the field towards the road. In these late hours, every nub and bump of the shorn wheat and bone of chalky flint seems crowned with a cap of gold. ‘Back to Melbourne?’

Rebecca quirks a look at her. ‘Do you want to?’

‘I guess,’ Joss says, ‘I guess you won’t want to have the baby here. All alone. You’d want to go back to your friends. They helped you with me, didn’t they.’

‘Yeah, they did. God, they were wonderful.’

‘It’s like you’ve already been a mother, haven’t you? But with me, you didn’t get any choice. There wasn’t any choice.’

‘No, there wasn’t. But I never minded, Joss. You’re my sister. I love you, and we were lucky we had each other.’ She puts a hand on Joss’s arm. ‘That’s what mum and dad would have wanted.’

‘They’d be so happy for you now.’ And Joss finds tears in her eyes. ‘They’d be really, really happy.’

‘They’d be proud of us both, my love.’ Rebecca kisses her little sister on the cheek, swiftly.

‘Oh my god, your hormones are already completely out of control, aren’t they?’ says Joss, bright.

‘Do you want us to go home?’ Rebecca asks, bending to tie her shoelace. It’s not really coming undone, but she wants to stop. ‘I’ve been afraid that this place has been no good for you. And I don’t know when Mark’s coming back. It’s rough—’ and she sighs, ‘—but to be honest, even when he does, I’m not sure I want him. Who knows?’

‘I’m sorry. But I’m also glad. Does that make sense?’

‘So we can do whatever you want.’
‘I don’t know what I want. Let’s just go home and have one of your cups of tea for now.’

‘Jolly good then!’ says Rebecca in an awful English accent, and Joss smiles as they climb over the stile.
The water fills his body like a stain. Somewhere above is light and space. Here in the water everything is substance, everything is dense. It loads him, soaks and saturates. His skin is softening, his teeth are wet. Water washes in the hollow channel of his throat. His body is heavier than it has ever been on the earth, and yet it floats still, a little.

Flesh sinks, drifts like cold air, buckles and wavers, dissolves into darkness. The river is deep and chill, the current gentle. The drowned man is gentled here. Water turns in his deaf ears.

In a few days, his skin will be jelly. His hair will rise around his drooping head, and then, with time, detach. The flesh will loosen and sag around his limbs; the colour will become waxen, a pastel shade. His lips will shrink back from his teeth, so wet, his glistening teeth. Water will make him sodden, and yet he will rise. The body’s buoyancy, like the soul’s, will lift him.

He will rise, and then he must be buried again.
Darkness Visible: An exploration of recurrence

Part B

Breaking Bread with the Dead: Time fantasy, recurrence and The Owl Service

An exegesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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(BA Hons)

School of Creative Media
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August 2008
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Kate Holden

6 August 2008
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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

...What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

T. S. Eliot ¹

INTRODUCTION

Il mondo invecchia

et invecchiando intristrice.

The world grows old; and as it grows old it grows sad.

Torquato Tasso

We have an ambivalent attitude to les temps perdu—sometimes acknowledging, fetishising or celebrating it; sometimes placating, obliterating or rewriting it. A vast body of literature and criticism speaks for the pervasiveness of feeling about the continuing presence of the past. In this exegesis I will focus on a small but powerful sub-genre of fiction: time fantasy. The term time fantasy refers to works, usually categorised within children's fantasy literature, which have as their major narrative gambit a suggestion that time is not linear and progressive but elastic or cyclical, and that people, patterns, events or objects may travel both forward and backward through it.

Time fantasy includes narratives of time-travel, time-doubling, visitations of the supernatural in the form of ghosts, and, often, the suggestion that events that have occurred in the past retain a power strong enough to be repeated in the present. Time fantasy should perhaps be distinguished from fantasy, and children's fantasy in particular. Fantasy itself is a broad church of writing for both adults and children. Children's fantasy has often manifested as either High Fantasy, which involves a complete secondary speculative

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3 In a useful work on time fantasy, Maria Nikolajeva briefly examines some differences between ‘time fantasy’ and ‘secondary world fantasy’, which usually involves a more magical, exotic world. She notes “[a] close investigation of the narrative structure of various texts reveals that the principal feature of time fantasy, time distortion, most often expressed narratively by paralepsis (primary time standing still), is also present in the secondary world fantasy, as we have seen in the Narnia novels. On the other hand, what is believed to be the principal pattern of the secondary world fantasy, the passage between worlds, is most tangible in time fantasy.” She prefers to speak of primary and secondary chronotype (timespace), instead of difference between the types of literature. (133) Nikolajeva, M. (2000). From Mythic to Linear: Time in children's literature. Lanham, Md., & London, The Children's Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press.

Additionally, Sheila Egoff comments that “[d]espite its concentration on the troubles of its chief characters, this subgenre of fantasy has remained quite stable and conventional and indeed meshes with much of earlier fantasy in general. […] the young go ‘there and back again.’ However, their journeys are more difficult and dangerous than in the past; there are roads from innocence to experience, and so they leave their childhood behind them.” (289) Egoff, S. A. (1988). Worlds Within: Children's fantasy from the Middle Ages to today. Chicago and London, American Library Association.

Ann Lawson Lucas points out that High Fantasy appeared in British fiction not long after time fantasy; while science fiction reacted against the past by looking far to the future, High Fantasy, often drawing on Deep England and Arthurian legend, enshrined and reified the past. Thus time fantasy literature was one of the few speculative fantasy forms which maintained an association with modern realist fiction set in the contemporary world. (six) Lucas, A. L., Ed. (2003). The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers.
world (for example, Tolkien’s Middle Earth) or another type of fantasy, in which a real-world protagonist is transported by magical means into a secondary world. Time fantasy is perhaps best understood as a sub-set of this second type, but instead of a secondary, fantastical world, the protagonist visits another epoch by some manipulation of time; or a past time erupts into the present, et cetera. A strongly realist background for the primary world is often a characteristic feature. This sub-genre can also incorporate elements of the ghost story, realism, historical fiction, myth, speculative writing and horror.

Time fantasy exemplifies a preoccupation with haunting, featuring recurrence and repetition in both its concerns and its narratological structure. I will be specifically looking at a major work of the sub-genre, Alan Garner’s 1967 novel for young adults, *The Owl Service*, (awarded both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Award for children’s fiction) which suggests that an ancient myth may recur to impose its patterns on present-day protagonists.

Theorists and critics have long analysed the supernatural and myth as products of human psychology. Sigmund Freud’s short but influential essay ‘The Uncanny’ was one of the first to establish an analytics of haunting and the spectral as the return of the repressed, a figure directly related to the process of mourning. Subsequent critics have challenged or expanded Freud’s ideas. In Chapter 1, I will explore the poetics of haunting as a prelude to describing the ways in which they may be at work in time fantasy, and will proceed to a reading through Freud of *The Owl Service* as a specific example of the way time fantasy fiction embodies cultural and psychological anxieties about recurrence. Using Freud and post-Freudian criticism as a basis, I will suggest that time fantasy’s main devices (myth, time-travel and haunting) are allegories for the unease of human grief, uncertainty about the past, fear of death and ambivalence towards identity.

I will also examine myth and mythopoeics, their relation to time fantasy, and the particular significance of myth in *The Owl Service*. Chapter 2 discusses this phenomenon and reads Garner’s novel as an example of mythic recurrence. ‘Mythic time’ is often understood as ‘timeless’ or cyclical, and this attribute of temporality has implications for repetition and reiteration in ways different to that seen in a psychoanalytic model.

It is my view that time fantasy is a significant literary form, established now for over a century and still popular, featuring highly talented authors, and enacting a diverse range of negotiations with what are surely two of literature’s over-riding concerns: the effect of

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4 See this Introduction for a more detailed taxonomy of the sub-genre as a whole.

the past on the present, and its implications for identity and determination of behaviour. Although American, Canadian and Australian authors have contributed much to the sub-genre in the English-speaking world, British time fantasy remains dominant, and its tradition of drawing closely upon the myths and history of Britain makes it exemplary in its concerns, anxieties and strategies for invoking the symbiosis between past and present. The intelligence with which authors of British children’s time fantasy, such as Alan Garner, Penelope Lively, William Mayne, Robert Westall, Penelope Farmer, Susan Cooper and Nancy Bond, among others, have interrogated the cultural rhetoric of ‘the past’ with imaginative narratives suggests that for such writers, conservative mythologising of national history is less interesting than confronting the anxieties, ambiguities and multiple narratives of what may in fact be anything but a coherent past.

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6 According to critic Tess Cossett, time fantasy novels negotiate against ‘heritage’ as time fantasy “offers an openness to ‘other’ histories, rather than the potentially nationalistic search for roots; it problematizes the simple access to the past promised by the heritage site; it critiques empty reconstructions of the past; and because of the way it constructs childhood, it evades the dangers of nostalgia.” (244) Cossett, T. (2002). **“History from Below”: Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity.** *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26(2): 244-251.

The novel and the exegesis

_The object is the thing with which we construct our mourning._

Jean Baudrillard

This exegesis, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, is a complement to my own novel *The Sacrifice* although not a discussion of it. In both works I am interested in examining the power of the past to ‘repeat’ in the present, both in terms of human psychology and in the figurative sense of mythic return. Though I will not use my own novel as the primary text of the exegesis, a brief description will demonstrate how the academic part of my submission relates generically to the creative part.

In *The Sacrifice* two young Australian sisters go to stay in England in a richly historic coastal area. The elder, married sister, Rebecca, soon becomes engulfed in grief after her husband leaves them. The younger, Joss, is an impressionable teenager who becomes enthralled in fantasies of local history after meeting a strange young boy, Flick. She becomes convinced that he embodies the violent past of the area, and that the act of sacrifice is part of an ancient pattern that must be enacted. Through engagement with the landscape and remnants of history in the region, each sister comes to terms with loss and finds that even when something has been given up, something else may take its place. For Joss, the belief that history can compel the present is a comfort, even as it leads her towards disturbing experiences; for Rebecca, the past is an uncomfortable haunting from which she wishes to free herself. The novel is an attempt to narrate the enduring sense that the past pervades the present, in both benign and malign ways.

The novel is also both a homage to, and negotiation of, the conventions of the time fantasy sub-genre. In writing it I struggled to overcome ‘knowingness’ about the conventions and clichés of the sub-genre, and so made Joss self-conscious about her susceptibility to fantasising along such lines. The novel is intended as a challenge to such romanticising of British history, with an Australian protagonist who, though she fits many of the requirements of a time fantasy heroine, is led astray by the very constructions her reading has placed upon her experience of British folklore and landscape.

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9 See Part A of this submission.
In my exegesis, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, my main research questions are: What are some possible roles in time fantasy literature of recurrence and repetition? And what do they imply in terms of a narrative such as *The Owl Service*?

This inquiry naturally developed several minor research questions, as I sought frames through which to answer the question. The two chapters of my exegesis reflect these subsidiary queries: if I looked at the project of time fantasy and its apparent ‘nostalgic’ desire to revisit the past, what ideas did psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud offer concerning repetition and recurrence? What would result if I applied these ideas to a particular text? And if I then looked towards the temporal dimension of time fantasy, finding theories of mythic time, what did the concept of cyclical time and Eternal Return imply about repetition and recurrence? And again, how might I apply that idea specifically to Garner’s novel?

What I offer in this exegesis is a sketch of some possibilities for understanding the significance of recurrence and repetition in time fantasy fiction. A questioning of the fundamental significance of repetition throws light not only on the work of Alan Garner, but casts glints onto many other important aspects of modern cultural consciousness, anxiety, and aspiration.

The wherefores of time fantasy

*This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living.*

Don Delillo

Einstein’s discovery of the Special Theory of Relativity, the cultural disorientation following World War I, the birth of Modernism in art, and the inconceivable destruction of the Second World War and horror of the Holocaust all contributed to “a sadder, more doubting” as well as more energetic, complex, and ambivalent 20th century attitude to the past, and its relationship with the present.

At the same time as fantasy proper was gaining popularity as a modern literary genre, time fantasy carved out a conjunctive niche in British children’s literature. From roots in fairy tales such as *Rip Van Winkle*, Gothic fiction, fantasies such as H. G. Wells’s speculative

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fiction and Victorian and Edwardian magical tales for children, it developed most strongly in the years following World War II.\textsuperscript{12} The literary sub-genre of time fantasy has developed alongside modern consciousness of time and historicity, and took on its fairly well defined major forms in children’s literature since the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. These forms in many ways successfully articulate many of the apprehensions that pervade our era.

The Blitz in England left a destroyed landscape which was rapidly overbuilt, apparently erasing swathes of ‘Old England’ and arousing anxiety that ancient things were being disturbed, destroyed, or brought to light. Classics from this period include Philippa Pearce’s \textit{Tom’s Midnight Garden} and Lucy M. Boston’s \textit{Green Knowe} novels, which both contain a haunting sense of nostalgia. Humphrey Carpenter, in his study of the sub-genre, observes of the period between the 1950s and 1970s, that “the greater part of children’s fiction produced in this period has the same theme: the discovery or rediscovery of the past.”\textsuperscript{13} A frequent emphasis in many time fantasy novels is, for example, on the contiguity of past and present landscapes.

A development in the 1970s saw works in which the psychological dimensions of the story began to take the foreground.\textsuperscript{14} While conservative time fantasy (using many of the established tropes) is still being written today, the sub-genre has become, since the 1970s, more sophisticated and, in these works, more troubled by its own project.\textsuperscript{15} Simple transportation into another time has become an enmeshing in the implications of history; in many novels, including Alan Garner’s, rather than an isolated individual passing backwards in time, the past itself threatens to engulf the present, and the comforting

\textsuperscript{12} The sub-genre parameters Rudyard Kipling established with \textit{Pack of Pook’s Hill} (1906), in which children are visited by ‘ghosts’ of previous spirits and inhabitants of a Sussex site, were enhanced by Edith Nesbit in 1908 when, according to Ann Lawson Lucas, she invented the conventional time-slip novel as such in \textit{House of Arden}, by adding a country house to the Deep England landscape, and maintaining the trope of children with connection to their antecedents (153) Ibid. Nesbit was followed in this by several authors, notably by Lucy M. Boston with her \textit{Green Knowe} books (1954-1976). In Alison Uttley’s classic \textit{A Traveller in Time} (1939) the form was nuanced by having an outsider as protagonist, a visitor to an ancestral home who is transported back in time in order to further appreciate the history of the place. See also, for example, Philippa Pearce’s \textit{Children of Charlecote} (1989) and Penelope Lively’s \textit{The House in Norham Gardens} (1974) which both feature children exploring the history of old houses, a trope which continues to be used in contemporary time fantasy fiction.


Carpenter identifies three common ways in which this functions: (a) The past enables a child to realise that time cannot be halted, the child must grow up. (b) The past allows child to better understand or endure the present. (c) The past represents idyllic lost or imagined Britain and provides nostalgic escape from postwar austerity. (160) Cited in Lucas, A. L., Ed. (2003). \textit{The Presence of the Past in Children’s Literature}. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers.

\textsuperscript{14} Major examples include works by William Mayne such as \textit{Earthfasts} (1966) and \textit{The Battlefield} (1971), Lucy M. Boston’s \textit{Green Knowe} series, \textit{Tom’s Midnight Garden} by Pearce, Penelope Farmer’s \textit{Charlotte Sometimes} (1987), Garner’s novels \textit{The Owl Service} (1967) and \textit{Red Shift} (1973), many of Penelope Lively’s novels for children including \textit{The Driftway} (1972) and \textit{Astercrete} (1970), and Robert Westall’s \textit{The Wind Eye} (1976).

endurance of the past becomes a claustrophobic prescription. In this gambit the fantasy element is used more and more as a mechanism to allegorise or reflect real-world issues so that, for Alan Garner, increasingly “it is the psychological tensions of the protagonists that create the supernatural events.”

Typically, time fantasy novels feature some kind of slippage of ‘normal’, linear time—hence the often-used term ‘time-slip’ to describe works with an element of time-travel. Carpenter defines the most common model of post-war time fantasy novel: it is one that is likely to concern one or two children who stumble across some feature of history or mythology which concerns their own family or the place where they are living or staying [...] the children become drawn to it, usually at their own peril, and in consequence achieve some kind of spiritual, moral or intellectual growth.

**A taxonomy of time fantasy**

> A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.

Aristotle

Though it is a relatively small body of work, probably numbering in the low hundreds of titles, time fantasy moves through several conventional strategies, often retreading familiar scenarios. I offer a brief taxonomy of time fantasy as follows:

1. A person from the modern era travels back in time before returning to the present, having undergone some kind of revelation or maturing

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Another time fantasy author, Penelope Farmer, for example, draws a distinction between ‘extrovert’ and ‘introvert’ fantasy literature. I would infer that for Farmer, time fantasy often manifests a greater preoccupation with psychological and individual issues as opposed to High Fantasy’s “surf ace mechanics”. (238) Cited by Egoff, Ibid.


Tess Cosslett, in a study of time fantasy literature, also offers a summary of the sub-genre’s common tropes:

> “a deracinated child comes to stay in a new locality; a special place, often in conjunction with a special object, provides access to the past; an empathetic bond is formed with a child in the past; a connection is made between the past experience and the memory of someone still living; names, inscriptions and their decoding are important; the history that is accessed is the everyday life of an ordinary child; the subjectivity of the present-day child is an important element in the story; this child does some form of archival research to establish the truth of his or her experience of the past; the experience of the past becomes part of them of moving on, growing, accepting change, death and loss.” (245) Cosslett, T. (2002). “‘History from Below’: Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26(2): 244-251.

(a) through occupying the same place as a past person, or passing through a ‘magical portal’, by, for example, entering a wood or an abandoned place
(b) through the discovery of a ‘magical totem’, such as an ancient artefact;
often the disturbance of a long-buried item is the precipitating narrative device.

2. A person from the past appears in the present
   (a) as a ghost
   (b) as a time-traveller.

3. Some powerful force or ‘pattern’ of behaviour or relationships from the past, often malign, and threatening the stability or coherence of the present, appears in the present, via
   (a) an old story, for example a myth or a sequence of historical events, enacted in the modern era.
   (b) some kind of magical force.

4. A person in the modern era is made aware (often supernaturally) of something in the past that must be laid to rest or ‘put right’.

5. More than one time period exists simultaneously, the similarities or continuities becoming increasingly apparent.

This is a crude breakdown of possible scenarios, and as may be seen, these categories are not altogether exclusive—and in the work of many authors, are given many variations and elaborations. Mine is simply a suggested categorisation of conventions. Eleanor Cameron, by contrast, simplifies her taxonomy of time fantasy as follows:

1. the kind that incorporates legend in an intrinsic as opposed to incidental way, for example, *The Owl Service*.

2. the kind that explores the past, bringing history into the reader’s mind.

3. the kind that sits halfway between pure fantasy and science fiction, for example, Garner’s novel *Elidor* (1965), and William Mayne’s *Earthfasts* (1966).19

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**The Owl Service**

*Writing and archaeology have a great deal in common.*

Alan Garner20

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20 Quoted in Renner, B. (Date unknown). Interview with Alan Garner. elimae (Online journal).
Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service*, which I shall be using as my key case study, uses several of the above devices, such as the potency of place, but falls primarily into category 3 (a). Three teenagers, Alison, her step-brother Roger, and a servant’s son, Gwyn, have arrived in a remote Welsh valley for the summer with their parents. They discover a forgotten service of dinner plates, with a design that may be owls or flowers. Alison becomes apparently possessed by the magic held in the plates, while Gwyn, whose mother was originally from this valley, perceives that the three of them are re-enacting a tragic love-triangle established first in an ancient Welsh myth and then repeated through time by, among others, his mother and two other men. Pragmatic Roger resists this interpretation until he comes to recognise that the others’ belief in it, if not the reality, is the crucial issue. Class tension and male rivalry between Gwyn and Roger form the background for what seems in inexorable capitulation to the force of a lethal pattern. Whether the fundamental reality of the sequence of events is ultimately psychological or supernatural, Garner places the idea of recurrence in centre-focus, and examines its consequences and command.

Garner has never settled for simple resolutions or transparent narratives. He uses a style often pared down towards the cryptic and ambivalent, creating tautly written emotional power and complex characters, and a finally unresolved authorial attitude to the possession of the present by the past. He evokes both the past as an energy that transforms but never vanishes, and paradoxically, the agency of his protagonists to make their own choices. For Garner, recurrence and return are compulsively fascinating tropes, and he uses them within the conventions of time fantasy to form original and sophisticated fictions.

Methodology and Scope

_There has never been a scholar who really, as such, deals with phantoms. A traditional scholar does not believe in phantoms..._

Jacques Derrida

This exegesis is an exploration of one particular, if crucial, aspect of time fantasy: the roles of recurrence and return. I began researching this exegesis looking to comprehend the frisson I had experienced in reading time fantasy novels as a child. This frisson evidently emanated from the mysterious sense that time was not the strict plodding in a line that we usually imagine, but something that could resound and echo and open up mysterious

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possibilities. The ways in which time fantasy authors accessed this sense of the profound amplitude (and amplification) of time, and the consequent implications for identity and meaning, stayed with me from childhood and preoccupied me enough to want to write a novel in this sub-genre.

Exploring the implications and prerogatives of time fantasy’s project took me into many fascinating areas. Only a fraction of what I researched is presented in the final form of *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, but all of my reading informed the piece as it stands. My research process incorporated investigation into: the criticism and history of the conventions and history of children’s literature; time fantasy literature; children’s fantasy literature; historical fiction; fantasy literature and the fantastic; horror and Gothic literature; the supernatural and its expression in literature; *lieux de mémoire* and sites of memory; heritage and museology; nostalgia studies; post-colonial nostalgia; Australian studies; concepts of time and history; mythic time and the work of Mircea Eliade; the Eternal Return and recurrence; repetition in narratology, in post-Freudian theory of the morbid and the uncanny; Freud’s work; criticism of the work of Alan Garner; and a general background of modern literary theory.

Where possible I have used original quotations from my sources, rather than paraphrases. Any misinterpretation or mis-application of critics’ work is my own responsibility. The Bibliography includes further references consulted but not directly used in the body of this work.

Time fantasy literature, a multivalent form of fiction, touches upon all of the areas listed above. It is a rare, powerful sub-genre which expresses explicitly in its narratives and implicitly in its associations much of the anxiety and fascination modern culture has with what we think of as ‘the past’: a place which is not simple, but which shapes much about the present. It is important to acknowledge this truth in literature, and to cherish the intimations of endless return. As Boris Pasternak put it in *Doctor Zhivago*,

...now that the winter has killed everything and the living no longer conceal the dead, the past can be seen more clearly in snowy outline. \(^{23}\)

Review of Resources and Terms

‘Remember’ is emotionally the antonym of ‘dismember’.

Alan Garner

Innumerable novelists have written on the subject of time. Similarly, the literatures of the supernatural and of fantasy are vast. In relation to modern fiction written explicitly using time and recurrence as main subjects, I suggest that what seems like a minor sub-genre in its most evident form, time fantasy, is in fact more diffuse than is often recognised.

The range of critical work on the diverse issues included in this exegesis is of course immense. Here I will briefly identify some of the dominant elements examined in this exegesis, acknowledge some of their key theorists, and note my use of important terms.

TIME FANTASY. A sub-genre of children’s fantasy literature, capacious in its inclusion of everything from time-travel stories to those featuring supernatural resurrections of the past, and narratives such as Garner’s which suggest mythic return. The limits of the sub-genre are debated, falling as it does between the positions of ‘fantasy’, ‘ghost story’, and science fiction ‘time-travel’ (some critics prefer ‘time-slip’ to specifically denote those works in which a character apparently moves—usually backwards—in time to another era; I support this distinction, but will not be examining any ‘time-slip’ novels in this exegesis, and so use only the term ‘time fantasy’). It had its most significant period of development from around 1950-1980, but, since the recent resurgence of interest in children’s fantasy, has revived in popularity, and many older classic novels such as Garner’s have been reissued.

In children’s literature, the development of the sub-genre called time fantasy has given an important platform for explicit questionings about time, history and the supernatural. However, time fantasy has been largely overlooked in serious literary criticism: when it features it is usually briefly, as an addendum to fantasy, itself frequently viewed as a niche genre within the body of children’s literature, while adult works in this sub-genre of time

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25 I would cite, for example, authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, A. S. Byatt, Maureen Duffy and Adam Thorpe as some of Britain’s keenest novelists consciously presenting the problematics of time in their work. A. S. Byatt, herself a novelist who has used time and history as motifs in her work such as Possession, offers the following partial list of modern novelists who have also featured time as a major element in their works “for complex aesthetic and intellectual reasons: Golding, Burgess, Barnes, Carter, Swift, Coetzee, Calvino, Ransmayr, Winterson, Unsworth, Roberts, Warner, Caryl Phillips, Mo, Ackroyd, Carey, Feinstein, Fitzgerald, and Morrison.”. (p. 93) Byatt, A. S. (2000). On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays. London, Vintage.

In Australia, many writers including Gary Crew, Alexis Wright, Brian Castro, Antoni Jach and Gerald Murnane have deliberately ‘played’ with time in their work.
fantasy are almost entirely unreviewed in this light. There are a few books about children’s fantasy literature which feature a chapter on time fantasy: several essays and articles, for example in the Children’s Literature in Education journal; and the more detailed work of a very few authors (see below). I am not aware of any substantial critical works on adult novels of time fantasy. It may be that as adult literature, rather than the more commonly categorisable children’s literature, they are considered generally ‘literary’ rather than ‘genre’.

Children’s literature in general has its own gallery of recognised experts, such as Humphrey Carpenter, Eleanor Cameron and Colin Manlove. In the small body of critical work on time fantasy, Tess Cosslett, Valerie Krips and Ann Lawson Lucas provide useful analyses of the history, conventions and behaviour of the sub-genre, while David Rees, Kevin McCarron and others examine specific time fantasy authors such as Penelope Lively and Robert Westall. Others such as Gary Westfahl examine related topics such as the paradoxes of time in science fiction and fantasy literature. Criticism of the sub-genre of time fantasy, however, still lacks a master theorist.

Alan Garner’s work has attracted a surprising amount of critical attention, considering that he has worked substantially (if controversially) in the arena of young adult fantasy fiction. In criticism around Garner’s fiction, Neil Philip is the pre-eminent author, having written the only full-length work, while Kath Filmer-Davies and Charles Butler have written in detail about Garner in the context of several other time fantasy authors. In particular, Robyn McCallum has produced a detailed examination of time and subjectivity in Garner’s novel Red Shift, and Maria Nikolajeva has written on Garner’s use of time, applying theories by Domenic LaCapra and Mikhail Bakhtin. Other critics such as Carol Hellings, Brian Attebery, Tony Watkins and Robin Walsh have examined the significance of myth in his work. Garner himself has published The Voice that Thunders, a book of his essays and lectures.

REPETITION, RECURRENCE, RETURN. ‘Repetition’ and ‘recurrence’ are used, often as a coupled phrase, frequently in this exegesis. They are virtually synonymous, but I perceive ‘repetition’ as something more complicatedly associated not only with recurrence (a regular reiteration) but with the implications of duplication, displacement and compulsion, as is discussed in Chapter 1.

‘Return’ brings with it evocations of something that has been absent, rather than continuously present, and which now re-appears. It is most obviously associated in this work with the theory of the Eternal Return (see below).
Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Ricoeur, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Giles Deleuze, among others, have written now-canonical texts on repetition and time. It also figures as a dynamic in discussions of the Uncanny and the spectral.

THE UNCANNY. A term largely associated with the Gothic and the fantastic literature that emerged in the 18th century and has since evolved into a literary tradition. It is also used more broadly by theory in terms of cultural apprehension. The uncanny is a species of the ‘unnatural’ within the ‘natural’, but in his famous essay on the subject Freud variously identifies the crucial aspect of the uncanny as the appearance of something hidden which becomes visible, something that is frightening, or something that should be familiar, but is become strange.

Jacques Derrida and Frederic Jameson have examined the spectre in modern culture. Freud contributed a short but very influential essay on the subject of the uncanny, discussed by Nicholas Royle and others, while Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have further significantly developed the psychoanalytics of the spectral.

THE FANTASTIC. A specific branch of the literature of fantasy, though its definition, aptly perhaps, evades empirical statement. Structuralists Vladimir Propp and Tsvetan Todorov took an important step towards defining the fantastic, opening the way for critics of fantasy literature such as Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Sheila Egoff.

THE PAST. By this term I mean ‘time which has passed’, both in the sense of that which has previously occurred, and time past as it is understood as ‘history’. Theories interrogating these two parsings of the term are too complex to enter into in this exegesis.

NOSTALGIA. A term that usually signifies a wistful yearning for, and evocation of, the past. Theorists of nostalgia point out that this yearning is often for an imagined or manufactured ‘past’ as much as for the ‘real’ past. David Lowenthal, Anthony Kemp and Charles Maier are major critics on the subject of nostalgia.

ETERNAL RETURN. This is a term used most famously perhaps by Nietzsche, and later expounded by Mircea Eliade in his discussions of prehistoric religious cosmogonies and teleologies. It suggests that there is a powerful constant in the nature of time, one usually associated with mythic or religious ‘sacred’ time as opposed to earthly, ‘secular’ time, which is conceived of as linear and progressive. The theory of the Eternal Return proposes that time may recur in the service of reiterating the divine. It is variously regarded as positive and numinous, or over-determining and oppressive.
CHAPTER 1

REPETITION AND HAUNTING: THE OWL SERVICE

1.1 Introduction

The dead were and are not. Their place knows them no more and is ours today [...] The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once on this earth, once on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.

G. M. Trevelyan

Time fantasy has at its heart the idea that time is permeable, or elastic, and this idea raises important questions about the cultural psychology in which imagination desires events to occur not once, but again. This drive to the consolations (however ambivalent) of repetition is, as we shall see, a movement that runs through the phenomena of nostalgia, mourning, and religious ritual, and finds expression in narratives of mythic and supernatural return.

In this chapter I will be discussing the nostalgic response of time fantasy literature and introducing psychoanalytic theories of recuperation of the lost. I will examine Freud’s theory of the uncanny and the significance for him of repetition and recurrence (which by implication are present in literature of the fantastic such as time fantasy), and further theories of repression and haunting. I shall be using these Freudian analytical frames to offer a reading of Alan Garner’s The Owl Service.

1.2 Haunting the present

The Greek word for ‘return’ is ‘nostos.’ ‘Algos’ means ‘suffering.’ So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.

Milan Kundera

What kinds of anxieties produce a sense of haunting? British culture has long felt itself richly endowed—or burdened—with the volume of its past. Many works of 20th and 21st century British literature manifest a persistent discussion of what it means to live in an age of apparent modern amnesia; to lay modern Britain, with its new housing estates and self-conscious heritage industry, upon the “ancient fields.” Time fantasy is itself generated by a cultural impulse to ‘go back’, even as its narratives are concerned specifically with the sometimes dangerous consequences of doing so.

1.2.1 Haunting in literature

What's unfinished haunts one; what's unhealed haunts one.

Elizabeth Bowen

In a sense, time fantasy novels may be conceived as one of critic Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire (vessels of memory), sites where memory itself can be displayed and examined, conserved and reverenced (or laid to rest). In what Nora called “memory’s persistence and

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28 This is not a modern (nor, of course, exclusively British) phenomenon: Edmund Spenser’s Britain-as-Faerie and William Blake’s Albion-as-Jerusalem fantasies covet, as well as beware, the mythopoetic dimensions of British history. See (30) Butler, C. (2006). Four British Fantasists: Place and culture in the children’s fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper. Lanham, Maryland, Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

29 Charles Maier suggests that in the past hundred years changes to historiographical modes, a sense of the dispersal of agency and a “metastasis of discourse” have given remembrance a new authority: “memory, we can claim, has become the discourse that replaces history.” (142) Maier, C. S. (1993). “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on history, melancholy and denial.” History and Memory: Studies in representations of the past 5: pp. 136-151. “[T]he surfeit of memory,” he goes on to warn, “is a sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics. It testifies to the loss of a future orientation, of progress toward civic enfranchisement and growing equality.” (142) Ibid.


31 Nora: “lieux de mémoire thrive only because of their capacity to change, their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections (that is what makes them exciting).” Quoted in (64) Krips, V. (2000). The Presence of the Past: Memory, heritage, and childhood in postwar Britain. New York & London, Garland Publishing.


See also David Lowenthal’s writing and that of Charles Maier for further comments on nostalgia.
[...] its failure,” we often see in modern literature the ceaseless fingering of prosopopoeia—the speaking of the absent. Glennis Byron and David Punter describe the manifestation of prosopopoeia as it works in literature as “governed by the desire to make the absent, the dead, the abstract present and palpable.”

Children’s time fantasy literature, as we shall see, enacts over and over again an attempt to speak with the past; or to counsel warnings about how to do so; or to allay anxieties.

In *The Owl Service*, the force of a secluded Welsh valley and its ancestral beliefs comes up against the modern and the oblivious. School-leaver Gwyn returns with his mother to the Welsh valley in which she grew up. There he is thrown together with two other teenagers: Alison, the daughter of the wealthy English family that has engaged Gwyn’s mother Nancy as a housekeeper, and her step-brother Roger. Alison and Gwyn discover a service of dinner plates with a curious design: Alison perceives it as owls rather than the possible flowers, and quickly becomes fascinated. From the outset of the narrative, it is suggested that an ancient legend is being played out, and supernatural events ensue, apparently in accordance with an ancient legend of the magical maiden Blodeuwedd. This woman was ‘made’ from flowers by a wizard; conflict ensued between her husband Lleu Llaw Gyffes and her lover Gronw Pebyr—forming a love-triangle which it appears Gwyn, Alison and Alison’s step-brother Roger may repeat. This recurring constellation of behaviour, it is implied by the locals, especially a man called Huw Halfbacon, extends back past memory.

Each one of the protagonists has a different response to this intimation. Alison is anguishedly ‘possessed’; Roger is sceptical; Gwyn seems to accept it. At one point, Alison asks,

‘[...] why wasn’t it finished with long ago?’

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54 There is a scene of local women in the grocery store:

‘Is it to be the three of them again, Mrs Lewis-Jones?’

‘Yes. There’s the girl, too. Mister Huw says she’s made it owls.’

‘We must bear it,’ said Mrs Richards.

‘I don’t think it can be finished,’ said Gwyn. ‘I think this valley really is a kind of reservoir. The house, look, smack in the middle, with the mountains all round, shutting it in, guarding the house. I think the power is always there and always will be. It builds up and builds up until it has to be let loose—like filling and emptying a dam. And it works through people. I said to Roger that I thought the plates were batteries and you were the wires.’

‘If the force is in the plates,’ said Alison, ‘I’ve let it out, and everything’s right again. Oh, Gwyn, is it?’

‘No. That’s what frightens me. It’s not as quick as that. The force was in the plates, and in the painting, but it’s in us now. That’s where the pattern’s gone.’

For Garner in this novel, the past is energy—figured with the metaphor of electricity—and while ‘the past’ itself does not repeat, its structure and determination does. In this way a ‘simulation’ (Gwyn, Alison, Roger) takes the place of the previous simulation (their parents’ generation: Huw, Bertram, Nancy). The original legend is a story from The Mabinogion; it is the modern-world situation that is most real, but seems in danger of being displaced by metempsychosis (recollection of previous lives). The place and the pattern remain the same, and the magical power, but the past itself is being constantly displaced by its duplication (not replication) in the present. Garner, unlike many other time fantasy authors, is not interested in transportation to the past by time-travel; it is the way the past informs the present, even through apparent simultaneity, that is his most powerful concern: its haunting.

1.2.2 The claustrophobia of the past

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Dealing with the hidden, uneasily lying corpse of the past can be claustrophobic: “The revenge of the past is the memory of it,” says Dana Del George in her study of the supernatural in short fiction. A superfluity of history, or in Charles Maier’s phrase, a

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25 (142) Ibid.

26 Garner claims dryly in his essay ‘Inner Time’ that the novel “is an expression of the myth found in the Welsh Math nem Mathonwy, and is only incidentally concerned with the plight of first-generation educated illegitimate Welsh males. I labour the point because I am forced to accept that some readers will not differentiate between form and content. It is almost as if they are afraid to see.” However, the emphasis on realist immediacy forces focus on more than merely the repetition of myth. (110) Garner, A. (1997). The Voice that Thunder: Essays and lectures. London, Harvill Press.


“surfeit of memory”, may become a malign smothering. Maier raises “the question as to whether there might be something inauthentic and unhealthy about the canonization of memory [...] something neurasthenic and disabling,” while Charles Butler notes in a study of four British children’s fantasy authors that

the weight of tradition, both literary and historical, may be felt as oppressive [...] while a focus on Britain as a history-saturated land may tend to corral fantasy writers into a restricted set of all-too-familiar themes and forms, or to render the country a place of mere spectacle and imaginative tourism.

This is not simply the common contemporary ‘literature of exhaustion’ but one ‘haunted’, in the case of children’s fantasy literature, by its own conventions and antecedents. (Garner struggled in his early works to free himself of trite plot devices and self-consciousness.)

So prosopopoeia—being haunted—is both a consoling reflex response and an ambiguous, uneasy negotiation with a past that threatens to overwhelm. The ways in which the device of return and repetition are applied to fictions of the uncanny and the mythopoeic will be examined in greater detail below. It is worth remembering, as Deborah Esch puts it, that “in giving a face (prosopon) or the semblance of one [...] to an entity that lacks a literal visage, prosopopoeia serves as a guarantor of its existence.”

1.3. The return of the dead in psychoanalytic thought

That terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.

Roland Barthes


41 Nevertheless, time fantasy author Robert Westall sees the potential for a fruitful dialogue between the past and the present in children’s literature: “On the whole children don’t read historical novels anymore. They don’t seem to want to know what the seventeenth century said to the seventeenth, but they become quite interested in what the twentieth century might have to say to the seventh. I feel able, with research, to let the twentieth century talk to the seventeenth, and to see the seventh as an observer.” (65) c.f. http://www.norham.n-tyneside-sch.uk/westall/index.htm, 14/04/00 McCarron, K. (2001). ‘Robert Westall’s Frightening Fictions’. Frightening Fiction in Contemporary Classics of Children’s Literature series. K. Reynolds, G. Brenna and K. McCarron. London, Continum: pp. 53-91.


What is behind an author’s—or a culture’s—impulse to summon that which has passed? The passed, or past, beckons to us, and we return its wave again and again. Psychoanalytic criticism has suggested some reasons for why we call up the dead.

In a 20\textsuperscript{th} century preoccupied with reinvention, anxiety, ontological and epistemological crises, and scientific revelations about the pliability of time and the prospect of total global destruction, the temptation to regret the vanished past transcended cultural conservatism and became a pervasive refrain.\textsuperscript{44} Charles Maier argues that

\begin{quote}
[i]n the late twentieth century [...] memory, or so it might be argued, has become a strategy for survival, not for seduction. More precisely, memory has become a strategy to come to terms with survival.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

\subsection*{1.3.1 Nostalgia and melancholic recuperation}

Those arts which sustain anguish and the recovery from anguish within us, are the heirs of religion.

Georges Bataille \textsuperscript{46}

Perhaps nostalgia’s yearning for what is passed and gone has its roots in neurosis. As Laurence Lerner observes in his study of \textit{The Uses of Nostalgia}, “[c]ertainly the poetry of nostalgia is like mourning.”\textsuperscript{47} Before publishing ‘The Uncanny’ in 1919, Freud posited his theory of Melancholia (1917), which comes from an inability to resolve ambivalence to a lost object, thus casting a ‘shadow’ and producing the abject. Freud invoked a process of grieving, which if not properly pursued, can skew into morbid recuperation and replication of the lost object.\textsuperscript{48} He asserted that all love objects are loved ultimately because they

\begin{footnotes}
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evoke a previous loss. As we shall see below, the doubling, or repetition of the loved/lost one is a powerful trope in literature of the uncanny and supernatural.

The paradox at the heart of Freud’s Melancholia makes for an ambivalent interior attitude to the lost (e.g. the loss of the past). One part of the ego, Freud holds, mourns the lost; another hates the other part which has become abject in its powerless mourning, “abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.”

“‘She wants to be flowers, but you make her owls. You must not complain, then, if she goes hunting,’” says the wizard-figure Huw of the recurrent female figure in The Owl Service. Raising the past—in this case, a resurgent mythic force—invites a paradox, and a process that may heal or harm.

As I shall discuss in Chapter 2, the ethnographer of religion Mircea Eliade suggests that for prehistoric cultures, repetition by mimesis was a crucial function in a cosmological model that allowed individuals to access the divine (and thus legitimise their actions). Classical culture moved to develop a sophisticated application of religious propitiation, still often involving ritual and working within an economy of perpetual universal cycles and thus a consoling image of repetition. Mimesis, resemblance (for example, in the development of talismans which, by representing a feared demon, protect against it) and copying of ‘divine’ gestures were incorporated into culture, in a move that anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s dictum by legitimising reproduction and its object.

Fear of death, as Freud and generations of biologists observe, powerfully motivates the urge for reproduction. For Freud, citing his colleague Otto Rank, the figure of the Double is an

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52 In The Owl Service Garner applies this same kind of ambivalence to the workings of magic itself: ‘Suppose,’ said Gwyn. ‘Just suppose, a long time back, hundreds and hundreds of years, someone, somehow, did something in this valley. Suppose he found a way to control some power, or force, and used it to make a woman out of flowers. And suppose it went wrong—got out of hand—I don’t know. It got out of hand because it wasn’t neutral anymore. There was a brain behind it. Do you follow? Neutral like a battery, I mean. You can use it to explode a bomb or fry an egg: it depends on you.’

‘What is the power?’ said Alison.

‘I can’t explain,’ said Gwyn. ‘I once saw a nettle growing in an old garage floor in Aber. A pale little thing it was. It had split the concrete floor.’ (142) Ibid.

insurance against mortality, while the death drive involves repetition of an original identity to avoid a fatal short-circuit; a gambit which is both narcissistic, and, in fact, desirous of death. This *dual* strategy is possible if one considers that repetition creates a critical displacement: the original is replaced, obliterated. This accords with nostalgia theorist David Lowenthal’s observation that

> [a]s quickly as we have destroyed the past’s power in one way, however, we have reinstituted it in another. We preserve the idea of the past by making it ubiquitous, and, in the process, we reify it. [...] Our preservation of this past entails its persistent production.

Is it possible to invoke the past at all? Or can we only summon its spectre? Baudrillard, in his studies of cultural production and reproduction, notes that while postmodern culture possesses the ability to bring into sight those shadows previously on the margins, the search for the ineffable results merely in an endless series of simulations, perpetually deferring the possibility of grasping the elusive lost, until the simulacrum in fact takes the place of (is more real than) the real. If this is so, then the ‘production’ of the past is compromised not only by its ultimate evasion, but by the manufacture of simulacra which obscure any potential for ever finding the ‘real’ past, in what Byron and Punter call the “melancholy historiography” of our times.

Relinquishing time as it passes constitutes a kind of loss, which in some ways is akin to death; a response is required. In psychoanalytic terms, healthy progression is movement from mourning to remembrance or commemoration—thus freeing libidinal energies from the first lost object by reinvesting in a surrogate object, which may resemble the first. In other words, mourning is performed through a process of reproduction and repetition. It may be, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue in their essay ‘On the Theory of Ghosts’, that ghosts (and other kinds of spectres from the past, such as repeating myths) must be acknowledged as evidence of the “wounds of civilisation”, and apprehension must be transformed: “Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with

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the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.” 59

Time fantasy often concerns the ‘putting to right’ of an old wrong, the adjustment of repetition and the redress of culpability, in a kind of compulsive desire to undo the consequences of time and judgement. In The Owl Service, Huw Halfbacon finally explains his understanding of the recurring tragic pattern to Gwyn as redemption for a trespass against natural law, not by himself but his antecedent (which for Huw is effectively the same thing):

‘Here: in this valley: now. That is how the power is spent. Through us, within us, the three who suffer every time.’
‘But why, Huw?’
‘Because we gave this power a thinking mind. We must bear that mind, leash it, yet set it free, through us, in us, so that no one else may suffer. [...] She will be the worse for my fault, and my uncle’s fault and my grandfather’s fault, who tried to stop what can’t be stopped—him with the painting, him with the plates. We built the dyke of sand, and won a little space.’
‘So we’re in this mess because you ducked it.’
‘Yes.’
‘How?’
‘Oh, it is a story, and we have suffered for it no less than if we had faced our time.’ 60

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their psychoanalytic work on repression, acknowledge the timeless belief that spirits may return from the dead, and note the apprehensive fear that usually accompanies the idea of a ghost. The dead do not commonly rejoin the living, but try to draw the living towards death: “To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are destined to haunt”. In his ‘Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology’, Abraham agrees with Freud that ghosts are products of the living psyche, meant to objectify and exemplify some concealment in a living person’s life causing “the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. [...] What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others.” 61 It is the denial of the dead, who “cannot enjoy, even in death, a state


61 Unlike Freud, Abraham and Torok see this development not as a result of unsuccessful mourning, as it is not related to the loss itself; that would be result of melancholia or “those who carry a tomb within themselves.” Rather, it is an unnerving summoned out of the environment. (171) Abraham, N. and M. Torok (1994). The Shell and the Kernel. Renewals of Psychoanalysis Vol I. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
of authenticity,” not the dead themselves, or our mourning for them, that raises them. So ghosts—and one may read ghosts as simply the most explicitly literalised manifestation of ‘the past’—may be individual pathologies, or emanate from a broader social context.62

Garner himself has struggled with bipolar disorder and depression, and in fact suffered a nervous breakdown while observing the filming of *The Owl Service*. In his interviews he has discussed his belief in ‘engrams’, “a memory-trace, a permanent impression made by a stimulus or experience” (literally scarred into neural tissue).63 Garner seems to believe that these engrams can be passed through generations, an inheritance of psychic injury. For him, engrammatic memory creates a sense of “inner time”, which is “one-dimensional; or infinite”—a kind of memory bank which accesses the collective unconscious (and generates an intuition for myth).64 It is out of his own psychological truths that he creates his mythopoeia.65

The process of mourning (and laying to rest) a loved object—or in Garner’s conception, releasing the power of an engram—is complex, and not always benign. The frightening implications of repetition are noted by Derrida when he observes in a study of Freud that “repetition has the characteristics of the demonic.”66 For the psychoanalyst Schloimith Rimmon-Kenan, repetition is in fact “the first presence, the first ‘performance’ of the absence [of the lost object].”67 “Repetition is, then,” say Sarah Goodwin and Elizabeth Bronfen who quote Rimmon-Kenan, “a duplicitous rhetorical strategy, for what it enacts lies in the past.”68 Goodwin and Bronfen, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, extend

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Garner devotes much of his essay ‘Inner Time’ to a discussion of engrams, saying, “in neuro-physiology, an engram is the term for a hypothetical change in the protoplasm of the neural tissue which is thought by some to account for the working of memory. It is a memory-trace, a permanent impression made by a stimulus or experience.” This theory of neuropsychology/neurophysiology has recently been largely superceded but has had great influence. Garner additionally firmly distinguishes this understanding of engrams from that of Jungian or Scientological belief. (113) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.


In Neil Philip’s interpretation (in the only major critical text on Garner’s work), myth is seen “as the accumulation of man’s psychic traumas”, interpreted through the individual, in a process of exercising emotional pain through writing—by passing on the energy. (103) Philip, N. (1981). *A Fine Anger: A critical introduction to the work of Alan Garner*. London, Collins.


68 (105) Ibid.
Abraham’s suggestion in noting that the interest of mourners is, in fact, either to kill the
dead a second time as quickly as possible, or to preserve them for as long as possible in the
realm between living and dead. It is possible that this, too, is a motive of time fantasy: to
enclose the past safely between the covers of a book; or for the novels’ protagonists, to
‘manage’ the past, resolve it in some sense, and push it behind them forevermore. In any
case, whether a positive, organic multiplication or a frightening proliferation of threats,
the eternal process of recurrence both subdues the past and arouses it anew.

1.3.2 The uncanny, repetition and Doctor Freud

To make the invisible visible is uncanny.

Paul de Man

Written in 1919 as one of Freud’s works on cultural theory, and following a piece by Ernst
Jentsch, ‘The Uncanny’ is a short piece, much of which is taken up by, first, a
lexicographical analysis of unheimlich (literally, ‘unhomely’), the German word commonly
translated as ‘the uncanny’, and second, a reading of E. T. A. Hoffman’s short story ‘The
Sandman’. Following these two hermeneutic moments he discusses some aspects of the
uncanny, and lays out his model of it as representing the return of the repressed. He
ascribes much to this dynamic, and regression to infantile psychological states of fear and
desire—a primitive set of instincts and reactions that, by virtue of their very
primordiality, evoke feelings of uneasiness—indeed, feelings of the uncanny (the
‘unhomely’, that is, the uncivilised) and of terror and apprehension.

69 (106) Ibid.


71 Freud works through the etymology and lexicographical variations of unheimlich, adroitly showing that ‘unheimlich’
is in fact ultimately almost a synonym for its apparent antonym, heimlich. For further explanation see Freud’s essay.

72 The essay itself, Freud mentions, emerges from an instance of return, when he dug an old paper out his desk. (xliii)

It is worth noting that the topic of the uncanny features in the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein,
Heidegger, Lacan and Derrida, among others, and goes back to the Enlightenment and the Gothic, when as Nicholas
Royle mentions in his critique of Freud’s essay, “[t]he uncanny is a crisis of the proper [...] a crisis of the natural”. (1)

73 The uncanny, according to Freud, “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread.” (121)

It is only on the 23rd page of this essay that Freud cites Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as “something
that should have remained hidden and has come into the open.” (148) Freud, S. (2003). The Uncanny. London,

Yet this is crucial to his thesis, and is reiterated several times. For Freud, the uncanny is difficult to define.
He imposes rather oddly narrow limitations upon it, saying ingenuously towards the end of his essay that, “having
considered animism, magic, sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, unintended repetition and the castration
At the heart of the uncanny is the compulsion to return or revisit. As Royle says in his study of 'The Uncanny',

[r]epetition is a key aspect of the uncanny, as Freud’s essay makes clear. The uncanny [...] involves a kind of duplicity (both doubling and deception) within the familiar.  

Freud associates repetition with the death drive, an aspect of his thought not mentioned directly in 'The Uncanny' (as it first appeared in Beyond the Pleasure Principle the following year) but which haunts it silently. Repetition itself is not necessarily alarming (in fact we shall see that it can be positive), but among many things that are “frightening,” he says, there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that is repressed and now returns. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny, and it would be immaterial whether it was itself originally frightening or arose from another effect. [My italics]

The Owl Service offers genuinely frightening episodes: the book flying viciously at Gwyn; Lleu’s spear flying towards Roger by the riverbank; columns of flame threatening Gwyn in the night-time woods and the sheep dogs herding him back into the valley. These events are not merely macabre but raise a frisson by their intimation that something has returned, and with malignity.

In addition to the fear of the primitive, we have also, according to Freud, a fear of automatism and of compulsion. Again, the impression of supernatural possession in The Owl

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For Freud, apparently, it is a defining characteristic of the uncanny to frighten (although he also notes that the common association of the uncanny with “death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” means that “here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it.”) (148) Freud, S. (2003). The Uncanny. London, Penguin Books.
Service: Alison, wearing sunglasses to hide her eyes, suddenly denies knowledge of the dinner plates and, when challenged by Gwyn, reacts with uncharacteristic threat, causing her copy of *The Mabinogion* to attack Gwyn:

Gwyn lashed out with his foot and kicked the book from Alison’s hands. It landed yards away, splayed on the grass.

No one moved. There was silence. Then, ‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Alison said.

‘You shouldn’t have done that.’ Her knuckles were white on the edge of the deck chair. Her neck was thrust forward. ‘You shouldn’t have done that.’

Yet we are persistently compelled to repeat the invoking of phantoms and of frisson. “In the unconscious mind,” says Freud,

we can recognize the dominance of a compulsion to repeat, which proceeds from instinctual impulses. This compulsion probably depends on the essential nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life […] anything that can remind us of this inner compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny. [My italics]

It is not so surprising, Freud says, “that the primitive fear of the dead is still so potent in us and ready to manifest itself if given any encouragement.” It is out of a deep ancestral behaviour that we make our spectres. This recurrence of ancient instincts is itself a reiteration of our fear of repetition, and our compulsion to perform it, always laying our dead to rest. So it is the unwitting, repetitious, instinctual and atavistic impulse to summon the past that disturbs us. The presence of the dead among the living is, for Freud, an indication that something has gone awry. And this, for Freud, is part of the generation of art.

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Freud also notes that “In another set of experiences we have no difficulty in recognizing that it is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of ‘chance’.

(144)

78 (149) Ibid.

79 This relates to Freud’s theory of Mourning and Melancholia. If the process of mourning, according to Freud, is one of laying to rest (finally killing off) the dead, then the pathological perversion of this process becomes one of constant deferred interment of the dead; in fact, the iteration of their resurrection within ourselves or as hysterically summoned spectres.

80 Garner, in his discussion of engrams and psychic hurt, comments on how he came to perceive the links between his characters’ emotional injuries in *The Owl Service*, and his own psyche. “My experience does show,” he says, “that a writer of fiction, willy-nilly, plants encapsulated engrams in his characters, and that disorientation, leading to symptoms that resemble madness, can be induced when the engram is made present simultaneously in inner and outer time.” (115) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.
It is also, for all the apprehension and unease attached to it, part of the generation of recurrence and continuity:

Our conclusion could then be stated as follows: the uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed.  

Garner claims all his novels are about myths: not stuffy “retellings” but “reanimations”, and he himself is “a transmitter, not an archivist”.  

He turned to myth, says Neil Philip, “because of a concern, central to his writing, with the patterning of life, and with the relationship of the present to the past.” Garner’s themes have, in Philip’s words, “the need to recreate and recapture the past, not out of any feeling of nostalgia but to validate and define the present, and to make possible a rooted, not a rootless, future.”

1.3.3 Recurrence and multiplication

*The past is never dead. It’s not even past.*

William Faulkner

In their work on mourning processes, critics Goodwin and Bronfen suggest that repetition does not just imply a return to a previous point, in the sense of retrieving something lost, reiterating or relating a past event. Repetition also implies a plurality of events, a sequence of actions that relate to each other through resemblance. […] The repeated event, action, or term always contradicts its predecessor because, though similar, they are never identical; and though recalling the unique, singular, and original quality of the former event, the second emphasizes that it is *more than one*, a multiple duplicate, occurring at more than one site. Repetition describes a longing for identity between two terms even as it stages the impossibility of literal

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identity. [...] Repetition not merely imitates but also reproduces something new out of an earlier body.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus proliferation (and perhaps) its association with lack of control is a haunting consequence of reproduction, evoking the many selves that are available to us, the many realities we experience, and the spectral traces of all of these made inevitably manifest even as we seek to lay them out of sight, and as they displace themselves.

For Garner in \textit{The Owl Service}, proliferation is both a mark of the endurance of the past (as the ancient pattern plays out with trio after trio of lovers, generation after generation), and a sign of things behaving against nature. The plates which Alison and Gwyn find, and from which she traces her model owls (rather than the more benign possible flower motif), are difficult to keep track of, and eventually shatter spontaneously into fragments. A copy of \textit{The Mabinogion}, the Welsh myth compendium which contains the relevant legend, attacks Gwyn supernaturally and its pages explode over his fleeing body (“Not only had the leaves disintegrated, but the paper itself was in shreds.”\textsuperscript{86}). And, in the final lines of the novel’s crisis, the abundance of feathers that seems a sign of Alison’s capitulation to a tragic destiny becomes a rain of flowers:

Something touched Roger’s hand. He started to brush it away, but there were too many. He looked up.

‘Hello, Ali.’

And the room was full of petals from skylight and rafters, and all about them a fragrance, and petals, flowers falling, broom, meadowsweet, falling, flowers of the oak.\textsuperscript{87}

In the nature of this re-appearance is the crucial aspect of the return; in the return, there is a specific form of proliferation: doubling. If for Freud the experience of walking down a street in Italy and then, to his perplexity, finding himself shortly afterwards walking down the same street, was an experience of the uncanny, then it is natural that his thought in this essay extends to discussion of the Double and his colleague Otto Rank’s work on the subject.\textsuperscript{88} Freud explains that “[t]he double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, ‘an energetic denial of the power of death’, and it


\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.

seems likely that the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body.” When the ‘infantile’ phase of doubling changes, “having once been an assurance of immortality, it [doubling] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.”

‘Well, when I picked up the top plate, I came over all queer. A sort of tingling in my hands, and everything went muzzy—you know how at the pictures it sometimes goes out of focus on the screen and then comes back? It was like that: only when I could see straight again, it was different somehow. Something had changed.’ [said Gwyn]

‘Like when you’re watching a person who’s asleep, and they wake up,’ said Roger. ‘They don’t move, nothing happens, but you know they’re awake.’

‘He slipped when he touched the plate, and he went all shadowy. Just for a second it didn’t look like Gwyn.’ [said Alison]

‘It’s the darkest part of the loft,’ said Roger.  

Freud goes on to say that

a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations. [My italics]

This approaches a prescient description of the metempsychotic precept of The Owl Service, which possesses a powerful sense of the uncanny and the disturbing, not least through its intimation of the proliferation of selves. Each of the three protagonists multiplies in identity, so that Gwyn is also his father Huw, and the mythical Lleu Llaw Gyffes (and, somehow, also a fourth figure from the legend, the wizard Gwydion): “it comes to the same thing”; Alison is Nancy and also Blodeuwedd; Roger the lover Bertram, and Gronw. While their physical features may differ, they may also combine, so that the

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89 (142) Ibid.
mysterious figure in Roger’s enlarged photograph previously evoked as Lleu, is identified by Alison as Gwyn. Gwyn himself confuses Alison with a female body glimpsed at night in the wood. And Alison, succumbing to the enchantment of the legend, gazes at her apparent reflection in an improbably distant water surface:

I’m up here, and down there, thought Alison. Which is me? Am I the reflection in the window of me down there? 93

Rank’s work “explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death.” 94 At the heart of our fear is that of both estrangement from ourselves, and of the object (the dead)—worse, these fears combined with ourselves as dead object. 95 The particular attraction of the uncanny to the doubling or repeated leads Maurice Blanchot to draw an analogy between ‘corpse’ and ‘image’: both are ‘uncanny’ in that they suspend stable categories of reference and position in time and space. [...] The cadaverous presence is such that it simultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world nor entirely absent from it, the cadaver thus mediates between these two incompatible positions. Uncanniness emerges because the corpse, resembling itself, is in a sense its own double. It has no relation to the world it appears in except that of an image. Thus the chiasmic relation: the corpse as uncanny image/the image uncannily as corpse. 96

‘The water was glittery,’ said Alison, ‘but I could tell it was me—my colour of hair, and face, and—well, it just was.’

‘You saw a blonde reflected in the water,’ said Gwyn. ‘Her hair came down on either side of her face and she was fair-skinned. That’s all you can be sure of.’

‘You’re confusing me,’ said Alison. ‘I was trying to tell you about feeling happy, and you go and make it all ordinary with your angles and mirrors. [...] No,

93 (119) Ibid.
95 While the reader’s sympathetic identification is directed towards Gwyn, whose perspective dominates the narrative, there are moments in which he is observed from the point of view of other characters, and becomes unsettlingly opaque to the reader.
no, no, no, no, no, no—’ Alison turned her face to the rocks of the cairn. ‘Don’t talk like that. [...] Help me, Gwyn.’

This uncanny repetition of ourselves, as *eidolons* (images or phantoms of a person), or in the form of an estranged other self, is a fundamental aspect of the recurrence dynamic.

1.3.4 Escaping the past

*Truly Time is a vast Denful of Horrour, round about which a Serpent winds and in the winding bites itself by the Tail. Now, now is the Hour, every Hour, every part of an Hour, every Moment, which in its end does begin again and never ceases to end: a beginning continuing, always ending.*

Peter Ackroyd

Doubling has implications for the doctrine of independent will. As Freud observes,

embodied in the figure of the double [...] in addition there are all the possibilities which, had they been realized, might have shaped our destiny, and to which our imagination clings, all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will.

This opening up of possibilities in the double relates also to the capacity of myth to close off possibilities with its over-determining force. Gwyn’s mother is haunted by events in her youth: events that seemed predestined as a recurrence of the ancient myth. For Gwyn’s mother Nancy, to angrily deny the existence of her once-lover Huw, her long-dead suitor Bertram, and to forbid her son to engage with the fatal pattern is a willing amnesia;

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98 Two ominous examples from literary biography, indeed, are poets Gerard de Nerval who, just prior to his suicide, reported meeting his double; and Shelley, whose double allegedly appeared to him in a vision just before his death by drowning, asking ‘How long do you mean to be happy?’ Sightings of the Double are often linked in folklore to imminent death.


Avery Gordon mirrors this, indeed, noting that “the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope.” (63) Gordon, A. F. (1997). *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
but she cannot relinquish her memories, even to enable survival; and she has returned to the valley. As Gwyn says,

‘My Mam hates the place, but she can’t get rid of it, see? It feels like every night of my life’s been spent listening to Mam in that back street in Aber, her going on and on about the valley.’

She is damaged by the past. And when we last see her, as she ultimately abandons her son to his ‘fate’, she erases herself as she leaves the valley:

She turned but did not stop. She walked backwards up the road, shouting, and the rain washed the air clean of her words and dissolved her haunted face, broke the dark line of her into webs that left no stain, and Gwyn watched for a while the unmarked place where she had been, then climbed over the gate.

Nancy leaves; Gwyn stays, but only after, claustrophobic at the thought of repeating history and confronted with the identity of his father Huw, he rebels against his mother and the ‘pattern’ set for him.

‘My Dad ran away,’ said Gwyn. ‘I shan’t. I don’t want to end up like him—or you.’

Gwyn wants to change his destiny: a working class youth, he is struggling to obtain an education and achieve independence. He is quick, however, to perceive the mythical pattern in which he feels bound, and apparently is almost elated at times, even as he warns the others of the implications. In the end, in fact, it is Gwyn’s inability to overcome past hurts that renders him helpless to save Alison and escape his role. Huw, too, has struggled and capitulated:

‘We are not free,’ said Huw. ‘We have tried too many times to be free. No lord is free. My grandfather tried, my uncle tried, and I have tried to end it, but it has no end.’

And yet, at the conclusion of the novel, it is Roger the conservative sceptic who is able to transform the myth for the first time even as Huw despairs:

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102 (212) Ibid.
103 (206) Ibid.
104 (101) Ibid.
‘He is hurt too much she wants to be flowers and you make her owls and she is at the hunting—’

‘Is that it?’ said Roger. ‘Is that all it is? As easy as that?’

‘—and so without end without end without end—’

‘Hey, Ali, did you hear?’ Roger brushed the feathers aside. ‘You’ve got it back to front, you silly gubbins. She’s not owls. She’s flowers. Flowers. Flowers, Ali.’\textsuperscript{105}

The consequences of this transformation are left unstated; with the appearance of flowers and Alison’s redemption the novel ends.

If the hidden—or the myth—returns, replicating itself in the presence (or in the very body) of the living, then the uncanny is beginning to inhabit us; it is, finally, becoming not the eldritch whistle in the wilderness, but ‘homely’.

[...] the sky dropped lower, hiding the barren distances, crowding the hills with ghosts, then lifting, and [Gwyn] looked again. Nothing.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. (223)

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. (176)
CHAPTER 2
REPETITION AND MYTH: THE OWL SERVICE

2.1. Introduction

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same dian or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead)

...so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

T. S. Eliot

Time fantasy in general, and Alan Garner’s work in particular, often draws deeply on Britain’s mythical heritage. Myth presents the opportunity to employ classic narrative structures (for example, the tragic love-triangle); to evoke the profundity of history; to reference a powerfully resonant signifier of the past; and to imply a dimension of timelessness. Garner, who might echo Nietzsche’s yearning for “a horizon ringed about with myths,” frequently acknowledges his fascination with the dynamic potential of myth, including its potential to ‘recur’ in the form of anakuklosis, ‘Eternal Return’. This concept, made famous by Nietzsche and later by ethnographer Mircea Eliade, suggests that time, in the sacred or mythical dimension, is not linear as secular time is, but elastic, cyclical, or diffuse. At the heart of it is the mechanism of repetition and recurrence: what happens once, in sacred time, happens always.

Having discussed some of the psychoanalytic models for recuperation and recurrence, in this chapter I shall be examining the significance of myth in British time fantasy, repetition in myth and concepts of mythic time, and looking at their special implications in The Owl Service.


2.2 Myth redivivus

The lover of myths, which are a compound of wonders, is, by his being in that very state, a lover of wisdom.

Aristotle 109

“I should like to define ‘myth,’ “ says Alan Garner, “as the dream-thinking of the people. Dream. And thinking.”

Once you are involved with the culture of dreaming, then you are also involved with time. And that results [...] in considering learning to be a process of remembering. It was the same for the Ancient Greeks, who as usual had a word for it: ‘anamnesis’. 110

If remembering and forgetting are productive engines of modern culture, then the form of remembering enacted in mythopoeic writing is one of the more powerful available to us as it accesses both the global and the timeless. Literature of the modern era has confronted new unease about the loss or sacrifice of the past, and the advantages and prerogatives of turning away from it, versus the loss of the succour of memory. Myth possesses the privileges of spaceless eternity; it is always available, whether re-enacted, re-formed or revived in modern guise. It is commonplace to declare that modern life, vacuous and amnesiac, hungers for master narratives and ancestor-knowledge. Nietzsche made the point in his The Birth of Tragedy:

Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us (Umsichammeln) of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb? 111

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110 (150) Ibid. Anamnesis is usually translated as remembering (recollection) rather than creating. However, it is distinguished from mnemonic, memory.

The British heritage of myth draws most profoundly upon its Celtic legacy: parables, fables and narratives which have survived in oral tradition and in documents such as the Welsh *Mabinogion*. Celtic myth, while apparently particular to the British Isles and northern Europe, possesses the universal resonance of myths everywhere. While it is infused with a sense of magic and supernatural, it is also often grounded in very human stories, and possesses an apparently inexhaustible reservoir of literary potential.

### 2.2.1 Alan Garner and myth

We have to find parables; we have to tell stories to unriddle the world.

*Alan Garner* 112

In what sounds like an interpretation of collective unconscious, Garner describes myth as “a recycling of energy [...] It has passed through unknown individual subconscioussesses, until it has become almost pure energy.” 113 So forms of the supernatural or mythic have irrigated channels of literature up to the present day, bringing readers to “the point at which,” in Italo Calvino’s words, “something not yet said, something as yet only darkly felt by presentiment, suddenly appears and seizes us and tears us to pieces, like the fangs of a man-eating witch.” 114 The enduring popularity of the horror genre and the renaissance of interest in the supernatural and mythology confirm, as Garner comments on his own creative inspiration, “the need to recreate and recapture the past, not out of any feeling of nostalgia but to validate and define the present, and to make possible a rooted, not a rootless, future.” 115

In an essay titled ‘The Death of Myth’ Garner suggests that myth (used generically, with subdivisions into fantasy, folklore and fairy tale) may be handled in three ways:

1. The writer may translate existing texts and material.
2. The writer may retell and rebuild using translations.
3. The writer may reabsorb and transmute the elements of the myth.

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Garner asserts that he chooses the third, “which is the hardest.” He further asserts that while his novels are all about myths, they are not ‘retellings’, which he says are “stuffed trophies on the wall”, but “reanimations”. The myths, he says in fact, are not selected by him, but rather “choose” him. The writer of mythopoeics, according to Garner, produces “distilled and violent truth”, “spiritual gelignite,” working with myth which “contains crystallised human experience and very powerful imagery.” For him, myth is natural energy, directed and carefully handled by a writer (in fact, he uses the image of a trapped electrical charge as a metaphor for pent-up power across time in The Owl Service, and, in another novel, Elidor, as a means for magic to be transmitted).

Neil Philip’s critical study of the works of Alan Garner notes that “[m]yth is the crucible in which Garner’s thinking about time has been fired. [...] Once the connection had been made strongly enough, a Stone Age axe or a painted hand were sufficient to reactivate it. In Garner’s work, myth and its relation to the present ‘secular’ age have been two of its most defining elements. He has a reverential and yet ambivalent relationship with myth. Much of his work is set in his native Cheshire, a place where his family has lived for many generations, and he is preoccupied with the significance of continuity, its power over people and the ways in which its patterns recur (and transform).

Garner found in Eliade’s theory of the Eternal Return a framework to develop fiction “in which sequential, causal, ‘historical’ time is set against and enlarged by a ‘mythological’ concept of time as elastic, cyclic, recoverable.” It is the conflict between the static (or stable) and the fluid (or perilous), and negotiation with time that pervades Garner’s work.

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120 Garner observes, in an essay concerning the importance of the Alderley Edge area in Cheshire, where he has always lived and closely researched its history and geology, that “[a]s a result of gained knowledge, for me the Edge both stopped, and melted, time.” (13) Garner, A. (1997), The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures. London, Harvill Press. Garner’s early novels, The Weirdstone of Brisingamen and The Moon of Gomrath, were in the tradition of High Fantasy for young readers, combining knowledge of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology with the conventions of ‘magic portals’ and adventurous child protagonists in what is often described as Tolkien-esque, rather self-conscious children’s fantasy. With subsequent novels, such as Elidor and The Owl Service, Garner concentrated his narratives more closely upon the intersection between myth and life, and depicted progressively older protagonists.
In Garner’s words, “the form of myth is concrete”: it is most satisfyingly realised through embodiment in a real story.\(^{122}\) Butler quotes Garner on the amplification of secular experience through access to an enlargening mythopoeia: “the story can achieve universal rather than particular significance only insofar as it partakes of the myth.”\(^{122}\) Garner states that the most difficult task is to make the reader absorb myth in order to make it relevant. “This absorption, if it works,” he says,

is the most positive form for the myth to take, because the life of the myth is handed forward. It doesn’t matter if the story changes, since what we take to be the original story is no more than the earliest form that we have. When it works, the writer is a transmitter, not an archivist.\(^{124}\)

“Are we, then, lost: condemned to feed our imaginations with only the most secular level of myth, nailed to linearity?” Garner asks. “We are not. Can we write the world? We can; if we are willing to pay.”\(^{125}\) He sees the power that remains in the modern; his characters iterate the undiminished potency of old patterns. He presents the violence, pitilessness and ambiguity of myth; at the same time he dissects the anguish of modern experience and identity, using myth as a diagnostic tool to examine contemporary ailments. In the bleaker of his works, such as *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift*, neither the old world nor the new is a restful, stable place. It is meanness of experience that he excoriates above all. A kind of poetry is his solution: one that resonates with the echoes of time.

Philip observes that although Garner’s use of myth has evolved throughout his career, “it has always been used to sharpen our perception of emotional, intellectual or spiritual potentials which are either crushed or ignored in a materialistic, vicarious society.”

Garner turned to myth because of a concern, central to his writing, with the patterning of life, and with the relationship of the present to the past. Gradually, the myth receded, as he found stories which would hold the charge which in the first two books is supplied by the folklore, not the characters [...]. As his career has

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122 “I am using the word ‘myth’ not as meaning ‘fiction’ or ‘unhistorical’ but as a complex of story that, for various reasons, human beings see as demonstrations of the inner cause of the universe and of human life. Myth is quite different from philosophy in the sense of abstract concepts. The form of myth is concrete always, yet it holds those qualities that demand of the human mind that it recognise a revelation of the function behind the world.” (27) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.


proceeded he has concentrated more and more on the central pattern, approaching his themes directly rather than obliquely through the mediation of myth.\textsuperscript{126}

For Garner, writing is a muscular, difficult conflict, as is well documented in his interviews. Carol Hellings describes how “in transforming a myth, or distorting dimensions in time, he brings himself almost to the point of mental collapse in his attempts to free himself to a point where he can ‘tap energy’.”\textsuperscript{127} Garner himself observes that, “although I have no specific religious belief, working it out is a religious experience, almost an act of forgiveness.”\textsuperscript{128}

Ultimately, for Garner, myth is a profound dynamic which has everything to do with contemporary identity and place. “Myth,” he says, “is not entertainment, but rather the crystallisation of experience”; further, “[m]yth encapsulates the nearest approach to absolute truth that words can speak.”\textsuperscript{129}


\textsuperscript{128} Quoted in (67) Ibid.

2.3 Mythic time

Now these things [myths] never happened, but always are.

_Sallustius_ [130]

There is a long tradition of cultures, going back to the most primordial, which have understood that time as it applies to mythic or religious consciousness is not like the time experienced by quotidian mortal reality. In his book on the myth of the Eternal Return, Mircea Eliade discusses the ways in which ancient (primarily Indo-European) cultures formulated a double concept of time: linear, secular chronology; and a more diffuse, infinite ‘singularity’ of sacred time, which may be entered at any point, for they are all the same. Repetition is the core of this access: and repetition ensures that comprehension or belief in cyclical time is at the heart of myth.

Two types of time are commonly delineated in most cultures with a strong socio-religious consciousness: sacred and secular time. These are not always, but very often identifiable with the Greek terms _kairos_ and _chronos_. Greek thought includes a double understanding of time: linear time is _chronos_; eternal, mythic time, with its cycles and totality, is _kairos_.

(Crucially, _kairos_ is reversible, an aspect which has relevance for literature preoccupied with putting the dead to rest and confronting the Uncanny. The dead can be unslain—or disinterred. [131])

Plato, in his _Politicus_, explains that time, as it moves the celestial spheres and measures their revolutions, is “the moving image of unmoving eternity.” Thus in Greek thought, with both mythic _kairos_ and linear _chronos_ at work, nothing is ever lost or gained in the universe; no event is unique but has occurred countless times and will go on occurring forever; and thus the essence of perfection, the still point of these ceaseless cycles, is immobility and immutability themselves. [132] The implication of this _metacosmesis_ (periodic renewal of the world) is that everything will come around again; and so as long as the mechanisms are maintained and the balance kept, all will be well in this fatalistic paradigm. [133] Celtic

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[131] The myth of a returning god or hero is the most universal: death followed by resurrection. See the legends of Jesus Christ and King Arthur, and also fairy tales like Snow White.


[133] How are we to escape the circles of habit and inevitability and make a new world—one which enables individual agency—without any possibility of breaking out of historicity and without breaking history itself? Nietzsche warned of a distorting historical fever—that history could become an excuse not to act and not to accept the fullness of life.
culture, upon which much time fantasy relies, has a similar appreciation of godly time and
the possibility of eclipsing linear time. In Eliade’s words, for the ancients “[t]he past is but
a prefiguration of the future.” This construction is echoed by Alan Garner when he says
“[f]rom within us, from our past, we find the future answered and the boundary met.”

Mythic time can be not only a diffuse, embracing golden age, but also a prison of
determination. (This is an implication that Garner works seriously in his fiction, as I shall
discuss below.) This troubling of paradise recalls the ambivalence of the uncanny, with its
simultaneous yearning to recover the lost, and its apprehension of the spectre. Texts which
enact the turning of mythic time into ‘adult’, linear time evoke through their realistic tone
a more psychologically complex landscape, encompassing conflict, ambiguity and
disappointment—the loss of enchantment. Children’s fantasy literature often features
protagonists in puberty who are reluctant to mature and lose their childhood grace. The
stories thus frequently portray rites of passage. This movement, notes Joseph, also draws us
through ‘adulthood’ towards death. If death is usually considered the close of a story,
then in works that summon any aspect of the uncanny, its return of the dead, and the
possibility that in mythic time death is not the end, we see two opposing dynamics at work.
It is out of this tension that some of the most effective children’s fantasy literature obtains
its impact.

Cited in (140) Maier, C. S. (1993). ‘A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on history, melancholy and denial.” History and

He acknowledges Eliade’s influence on his thought, and refers in one lecture to “the late Professor Mircea
Eliade, in whose precision of discourse I have often found my instincts to be defined.” (55) Garner, A. (1997). The
Children’s Literature and The Children’s Literature Association, E. L. Keyser and J. Pfeiffer. New Haven and
2.3.1 Mythic time and narrative

*Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred.*

Mircea Eliade

Fiction, including time fantasy, is story-telling: tales which may be read again and again: *in illo tempore,* ‘once upon a time’ is how many tales start. Maria Nikolajeva observes that story-telling itself is a ritual act, “a re-enacting of recurrent mythical events,” echoing Garner’s comment that

in the telling of a special truth, we are entering a different time, a different space, an eternity that, by the telling, is perpetually being created here and now. The clock may be ticking, but we, while listening to the story, are in sacred time.

Eliade too makes the observation that

[m]ore strongly than any of the other arts, we feel in literature a revolt against historical time, the desire to attain to other temporal rhythms than that in which we are condemned to live and work. One wonders whether the day will come when this desire to transcend one’s own time—personal, historical time—and be submerged in a ‘strange’ time, whether ecstatic or imaginary, will be completely rooted out. As long as it persists, we can say that modern man preserves at least some residues of ‘mythological behaviour’. 

We know myth best, these days, through text. Mythic narratives, however, continue to permeate our paradigms, and our compulsion to retell myth seems never to abate. Myth’s ability to transcend time does not lessen, nor its narrative tense become more ‘perfect’; in fact, as we move away from its origins, this quality only becomes more potent and the tense remains ‘present continuous’.


2.3.2 Childhood time

The child lives in a mythical, paradisal time.

Mircea Eliade

“The circular character of narrative time in archaic thought,” suggests Nikolajeva, “has been reflected in children’s novels because the Arcadian time of individual childhood is similar to the mythical time of the childhood of humankind.” For children, time is not yet fully paced out; for very small children, as perhaps for archaic (especially for prehistoric) humans, there is little concept of linear time. It is appropriate that children’s and adolescents’ literature forms one of the most evident platforms for examining the workings of myth, since it is in the dreamy, apparently eternal introversion of childhood that time has its most plasticity. For Valerie Krips, in the economy of time fantasy literature

[r]esurrection implies change: the child of the second golden age, rising from the ashes of the first, will remake what is to be remembered of childhood, refiguring the site of memory.

But more ominously Freud perceives that (in Hugh Haughton’s words),

141 (77) Ibid.


Noting that it is critical for the purposes of her study “that contemporary Western children’s fiction is written from a philosophical viewpoint based on linear time, which has a beginning and an end, and recognizes every event in history as unique”, she divides all children’s literature into 3 categories, according to their representation of temporal structure:

1. An irreversible, linear flow (Collapse)
2. A recurrent, reproducible pattern (Utopia)
3. Something in between (Carnival).


This identification of recurrent, that is, mythic time as Utopian derives for Nikolajeva from the Arcadian dreaminess of both childhood and primordial experience. In a review of Nikolajeva’s book, Michael Joseph summarises one implication of these models, in relation to what they suggest about fate or individual place in history: “In Arcadian literature, personal development is inconceivable; in Carnival literature, it becomes a tantalizing possibility; and in Collapse, it figures as the preeminent element, the purpose or consolation of suffering.” (222)


The Owl Service, with its recurrent, reproducible pattern, seems to fit into Nikolajeva’s Utopian model. A character like Gwyn strains towards change but ultimately is unable to totally achieve it; his anguish forms an important element of the novel. Yet at least one of the protagonists appears to profoundly change at the book’s climax. Roger’s apparent change of heart was criticised by some reviewers as implausible, but one might argue that it is his germinal affection for Alison that triumphs, rather than Roger undergoing a fundamental development. Charles Butler comments that Roger must change himself, not just Alison’s vision, through sacrifice and pity, into someone who can see flowers instead of owls. (74) Butler, C. (2006). Four British Fantasists: Place and culture in the children’s fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper. Lanham, Maryland, Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

childhood is where the repressed, archaic pre-Enlightenment world of primitive religion, returns in perpetually re-invented home-made forms, forcing us in some sense to repeat or recapitulate such primal myths as those of Oedipus or Moses, and such beliefs as animism and ‘the omnipotence of thoughts’.  

2.3.3 Novelistic time and synchrony

I think that the fact that we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history is one reason why so many novelists have taken to it.

A. S. Byatt  

In her book on subjectivity in adolescent fiction, Robyn McCallum reviews the ideas of Domenick LaCapra, who in his work on novelistic time, and drawing on antecedents in Structuralist thought such as Gérard Genette, distinguishes ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ dimensions of time. As McCallum explains it, “[diachrony] designates movement over time involving change; synchrony ‘stops’ time at a given moment and displays its ‘sameness’ or ‘nowness’.”

Diachrony and synchrony are two ways in which to experience time imaginatively. Myth, and its recurrence, is one way to inhabit both simultaneously. Novelistic time is another interaction between these two dimensions. Synchrony is, as McCallum points out, the dominant mode of modernist literature, with its focus on multiple viewpoints of the same event, and recurrence with change. And this adeptness with multiples and alternatives is...

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147 KAIROS can be integrated with CHRONOS through rituals, rites and festivals—as repetition. In contemporary literature, it is also sometimes used for carnivalesque or parodic purposes. (5) Nikolajeva, M. (2000). From Mythic to Linear: Time in children’s literature. Lanham, Md., & London, The Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press.


McCallum observes that the prevailing tradition in literature at least up to the early 20th century was that of diachrony, with a linear narrative structure depicting consequent events. (This exegesis is not the place to deeply investigate theories about narrative time. See, inter alia, the works of Paul de Man and Paul Ricoeur.) McCallum further relates synchrony/diachrony to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope: a term which represents “the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” Quoted in (184) McCallum, R. (1999). Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The didactic construction of subjectivity. New York and London, Garland Publishing, Inc.

Nikolajeva, according to McCallum, is the only critic to apply chronotope theory to children’s literature. Like Bakhtin, she uses it mostly to differentiate between genres, seeing a historical shift in children’s literature from...
only heightened in post-WWII literature. Alan Garner is preoccupied in his fiction and criticism with the points at which the two types of time intersect. Myth, for him, following Eliade, is out of time, “sacred time” or “inner time”; mythic time is “where everything is simultaneously present.”

As McCallum says in discussion of Garner’s Red Shift and a novel by Jill Paton Walsh,

The use of narrative and discursive repetitions in novels such as Unleaving and Red Shift disrupts linear and teleological concepts of time associated with diachronic dimensions of time, and implies instead cyclical concepts of time. These are linked in Unleaving with personal memory and in Red Shift with mythic or collective memories.

In Garner’s The Owl Service both Gwyn and Roger experience something at the same time (Gwyn ‘flickers’ as he picks up the owl service plates; Roger senses a spear being thrown at him), though these episodes are presented separately in the narrative, and each from the protagonist’s (third-person) perspective.

Something flew past [Roger], a blink of dark on the leaves. It was heavy, and fast, and struck hard. He felt the vibration through the rock, and he heard a scream.

‘And you came straight up from the river,’ said Gwyn. ‘Didn’t you? Work it out, man. We both felt something, and it must have been near enough at the same time.’

For Jean Baudrillard,

The tense of the mythological object is perfect: it is that which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is ‘authentic.’ The antique is always, in the strongest sense of the term, a ‘family portrait’: the immemorialization, in the concrete form of an object, of a

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former being—a procedure equivalent, in the register of the imaginary, to a suppression of time.\textsuperscript{152}

In other words, mythic time performs what a fictional work also attempts, retrospectively compressing, elasticising and fracturing time as it is portrayed in a narrative. In his study of the mythopoeic, Eleazar Meletinsky notes that

in the modern novel, mythological time has come to substitute historical or ‘objective’ time, since action and events, no matter how specifically they are grounded in time, are presented as manifestations of eternal prototypes. The universal time of history is thus metamorphosed into mythical ahistoric time.\textsuperscript{153}

“Time,” suggests Neil Philip, “is Garner’s most consistent theme, and at the root of all his thinking about it lies the idea that what is important of human life endures, and does not decay.”\textsuperscript{154} In The Owl Service Alison, becoming ‘possessed’ by the spirit of Blodeuwedd, tries to describe her disorientation to Gwyn:

‘Nothing’s safe any more. I don’t know where I am. “Yesterday”, “today”, “tomorrow”—they don’t mean anything. I feel they’re here at the same time: waiting.’

‘How long have you felt this?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Since yesterday?’
‘I don’t know. I don’t know what “yesterday” was.’
‘And that’s what’s frightening you?’
‘Not just that,’ said Alison. ‘All of me’s confused the same way. I keep wanting to laugh and cry.’

‘Sounds dead metaphysical to me,’ said Gwyn.\textsuperscript{155}

But Gwyn himself has become aware of time’s plasticity:

And Gwyn began to play with time, splitting a second into minutes, and then into hours—or taking an hour and compressing it to an instant. No hurry.

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His concentration was broken once, when he was alarmed by the quick drumming of hoofs, but the next moment he grinned as a motorcycle swept along the road. Its headlamp spun shadows in his face.

Kick start!156

And he comes to suggest to Roger that the events playing out are not diachronic but synchronic.

‘Not haunted,’ said Gwyn after a while. ‘More like—still happening?’

Later, Alison, alone on the mountainside, also comes to sense this:

Still: nothing changes here. Rocks and bracken. It could be a thousand years ago.157

This sense of timelessness is both invigorating and vertiginous:

‘How long has this been happening?’ said Gwyn. He held the rusted fragments of a dagger in its sheath.

‘There’s no saying. But we of the blood must meet it in our time, and we bring here what we have.’

‘I didn’t understand,’ said Gwyn. ‘I’m all numb inside.’

‘I know.’158

Above all, according to his own claims, in his writing Garner is interested in pursuing the possibilities of “the revelation of a truth in a dimension of timelessness.”159

2.4 Myth and repetition

Falling towards nothing
Again and again and again and again and again...

The Cure, ‘A Forest’

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156 (85) Ibid.

The sound of the motorbike, it is implied, is that of Bertram’s fatal ride after Huw had sabotaged his vehicle years before. The noise recurs throughout the novel. The sound of hoofs suggests Lleu Llaw Gyffe’s own fatal ride to kill his rival by the riverbank.

157 (73 and 128) Ibid.

158 (193) Ibid.

Eleazar Meletinsky reflects on the implication for repetition in a narrative of mythic time in which nothing happens ‘once’, but ‘always’:

Besides mythification as an instrument by which narratives are structured, other elementary structures are used – repetition, for example. [...] the leitmotif, the repeated quoting of phrases, the explaining of a motif through entire scenes, and the contrapuntal link that exists between these motifs.\

Repetition, of course, is a device deeply associated with epic and archaic literary forms. Maria Nikolajeva has followed Garner’s interest in Eliade’s treatment of prehistoric time and its plasticity in her study of mythic time in fantasy. Like Meletinsky, she notes that one of most interesting narrative devices in texts concerning mythical time is their ‘iterative frequency’: telling once about an event which has taken place several times; as opposed to singular, or retelling a single event again and again, sometimes from different perspectives.\n
As with his subsequent novel, the even more explicit Red Shift, Garner uses The Owl Service to create a powerful narrative frisson out of just this phenomenon: the apparent intersection of (at least) three periodic re-enactments of the ‘same’ event.

One of Garner’s central concerns, in Neil Philip’s words, is “with patterning, with repetitive cycles of experience, which he has explored by structuring his stories around myths and legends.” Garner’s employment of repetition (narratological and thematic) comes not only from his increasingly stylised means of expression, but from his deep concern with the economies of myth. “The story,” Garner himself asserts, “is the medium through which the writer interprets the reality; but it is not the reality itself. The story is a symbol, which makes a unity of the elements, hitherto seen as separate, that combine uniquely in the writer’s vision.”

Charles Butler also comments:

[p]erhaps the simplest way to consider the intersection of linear and mythical time in Garner’s fiction is through his regular use of the trope of repetition. [...] In each case, the books deal with situations, actions, and perceptions that occur at separate

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points in time but that share a mythic identity that obliterates time’s distance. As the repeated refrain of Red Shift has it: ‘The distance is gone from between us!’\(^{164}\)

The Owl Service, as already observed, has at its heart the apparent repetition of a particular pattern, and while tropes, motifs and characterisations are evidently presented as repetitions, so too are some phrases and images. Alison’s reflection in the water is interpreted as the face of Blodeuwedd; a silhouette glimpsed in Roger’s photo of the riverbank where Lleu Llaw Gyffes is suggested to have stood in previous photos is identified by Alison as Gwyn. Phrases such as “I don’t know” appear repeatedly.\(^{165}\) Gwyn, on comprehending what Huw tells him of the timeless pattern, says, “‘I felt I could blow that house up just by looking at it’”; Roger, a few pages later and perhaps at the same moment in time, says, “‘This house: I feel I could put a bomb under it.’”\(^{166}\)

Repetition implies continuity, and in the novel this is presented as either consoling, or prescriptive:

‘Have you noticed how you can hear the river, even though it’s so far off?’ said Gwyn. ‘And the motorbike going up the pass? Sound rises. Listen to that river. It’s what lasts. Wherever you go you can think of that noise, and you know what you hear in your head is in the valley at the same moment. It never stops. It never stopped since it began. It was the last sound Lleu Llaw Gyffes heard before he was killed. Gronw heard it in his turn. We hear it now.’

‘Gwyn—’

‘Shh. Don’t be frightened. Listen.’

‘Don’t you people round here talk about anything else?’ said Roger. ‘You’d think it was the only thing that’s ever happened in this valley.’

Whirr [went his camera].

‘That is right,’ said Huw.

Click.

‘Finished,’ said Roger.\(^{167}\)

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\(^{165}\) For example, ‘She is the lady,’ said Huw.

‘So?’

‘And she has come.’

‘What does that mean?’


\(^{166}\) (196 and 198) Ibid.

\(^{167}\) (140 and 75) Ibid.
For many critics, including Jungians, and Structuralist theorists such as Vladimir Propp, myths are universal structures, which in Terry Eagleton’s words “have a quasi-objective collective existence, unfold their own ‘concrete logic’ with supreme disregard for the vagaries of individual thought, and reduce any particular consciousness to a mere function of themselves.”

In his fiction Garner examines the burden of myth’s endless reiteration, and its over-determining disabling of free will. This echoes Nietzsche’s development of thought on the Eternal Return in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. “And must we not return and run in that other lane out before us,” he asks, “that long weird lane—must we not eternally return?” Nietzsche calls the idea of Eternal Return “horrifying and paralyzing,” and says that its burden is the “heaviest weight” imaginable.

Certainly, Garner is cognisant of the oppressive potential of the past, as well as the very human ways in which this impulsion may also console, define and propel its subjects. One possible reading of *The Owl Service* is as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of credence in the past’s influence, or of the wrong interpretation of it. Not only does Alison ‘choose’ to see a pattern in the first place, but she sees malign owls instead of flowers in the plates’ design:

‘It’s dead clever the way she traces the patterns out so it fits together,’ [said Roger].

Gwyn, pursuing Alison through night-time woods, is beset by apparently spectral flames, and in panic remembers what Huw has told him:

This is where Huw’s old feller went mad. Get me out of here. Get me out of here.

The flames are revealed to be marsh-gas, but Gwyn’s sensitised imagination has figured them as supernatural, malevolent avatars of the legendary past herding him against his will. On the other hand, Roger’s father, the glib and parvenu Clive, too easily dismisses the past:

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Eagleton cites Vladimir Propp’s canonical work on the seven main narratives of folk tale.


171 (88) Ibid.
‘Why did he stand there and let it happen?’ said Roger.
‘Because he killed the husband the same way earlier to take the wife.’

‘Tit for tat,’ said Clive. ‘These old yarns, eh? Well, I must be off.’

And Gwyn’s mother Nancy combats the force of the past, first by denying or silencing her memories of it, and then physically, if impotently, by attacking an artefact of it (the stuffed owl shot by her lover Bertram):

Nancy lashed about her at the paper models which winged in the air around the leaping woman and the dead bird that filled the room and stuck to her wet clothing and even to her skin and to her hair. […] Nancy was fighting the swirled dust.

Of The Owl Service, Charles Butler remarks:

To ignore the past leads to willful ignorance and charlatanism, both apparent in the attitudes of Roger and Clive [Roger’s father]; to see it as wholly determinant of the present may lead to a helpless fatalism, increasingly evident in Huw and even Gwyn. In The Owl Service, as in many of Garner’s books, we find a complex negotiation taking place between the desire for autonomy, on the one hand, and the shaping power of parents, environment, and place, on the other.”

Nevertheless, Garner seems to present the force of the past as something that cannot be denied. Gwyn’s resistance to completing the ‘pattern’, and his refusal to offer Alison forgiveness (or to finally attack Roger as Lleu once attacked Gronw) at the conclusion of the novel leaves him excluded from the novel’s final moments.

‘You are the three. You have made this together,’ said Huw.
‘I’m not doing anything for them. I’ve finished.’

As noted, the phrase ‘I’ve finished’ recurs in variations throughout the novel from Gwyn, Roger and Huw. And yet neither Gwyn nor Huw is able to finish his part in the drama.

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172 (44) Ibid.
173 (203) Ibid.
176 In his essay ‘Philately & The Postman’ Garner parses Christ’s last word, tetelestai, usually translated as ‘It is finished’. Interestingly, he suggests that implicit in the word is also a sense of ‘Now I can begin again.’ (138) Garner, A. (1997). The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures. London, Harvill Press.
Garner’s ambivalent message seems to be that one must challenge the dictates of the past, but they must be also acknowledged.

For Garner, myth, with its eternal truths, lies at the heart of his vocation to speak the truth:

The story that the writer must reveal is no less than the truth. And by ‘truth’ I mean the fabrication through which reality may be the more clearly defined. [...] The job of the storyteller is to speak the truth; but what we feel most deeply cannot be spoken in words. At this level only images connect. And so story becomes symbol; and symbol is myth.  

Towards the novel’s conclusion Garner offers an acute image of the natural force of pattern, in the marks left in a dusty room by Alison’s paper model owls, which have eerily clustered around the stuffed owl Bertram shot during his courting of Nancy. Roger at first thinks that Alison has put the paper owls there, but then he sees that the dusty floor is undisturbed but for trails left by the owls’ supernatural passage:

“it was a pattern that had the balance and precision of iron filings in the field of a magnet or of petals in a flower, and the magnet or the heart of the flower, from which all lines started and to which all lines came.”

In the present continuous tense of myth, the paradigms of the past have enormous force. Their terribilità is compelling; their timelessness may make evasion through even modern faith in individual agency impossible. They threaten, in Garner’s work, to coerce the present. And yet myth’s endurance and pervasiveness is also a consolation, a framework to remind us that even in an age of apparent obliterating amnesia we are profoundly connected to our ancestors, that individual anguish is not singular, and that human experience is, after all, a great truth that may sing through millennia in resonant refrain.
CONCLUSIONS

Through art, we are able to break bread with the dead, and without communion with the dead a fully human life is impossible.

W. H. Auden

The main research question posed by Breaking Bread with the Dead concerned the possible roles in time fantasy of recurrence and return. Their significance proves to be multivalent. These elements can signify consoling or claustrophobic inevitability, either supporting us in the modern era with cognisance of our antecedents and linking us to an overarching humanity, or coercing the present into a compulsive re-enactment of past pathologies. They can provide a frame upon which to pin a particular narrative, using the common time fantasy conceit that there are parallels between past and present events (awareness of which may propel a protagonist into maturity), or be fundamentally integrated into the form of the narrative itself, as repetitions and reiterations serve a deliberate and reinforcing stylistic purpose. They can intimate vastness (a numinous sense of time’s infinity) or be applied to the particular in a specific narrative focus. In time fantasy, recurrence and repetition function as morbid restorations, mechanisms of mythic eternity, and ceaseless reminders that no single event exists in isolation.

“Melancholy too is fugal or double-tracked; it involves an experience and the experiencing of experience,” remarks Charles Maier in an essay on the surfeit of memory. One way to experience and re-experience melancholy, loss and nostalgia is through literature, that prism of reality. In time fantasy literature we see ambivalence to the past; wariness and apprehension of the past; nostalgic yearning for the past; and, above all, reverence of the power of the past and its endurance. The melancholy attendant on reviving something lost and passed is enacted in time fantasy, but so is the eternal attempt to learn from history, esteem the present, and ground ourselves for the future.

It is possible to see in time fantasy a ratification of nostalgia, a groping backwards into a contrived version of the past to draw it more comfortably into the present. This may be a recuperative gesture, a pathological response to post-War loss and historical anxiety. Or it may be a sophisticated negotiation of modern ambivalence to heritage, one that


acknowledges the evasiveness of ‘the past’ (or ‘pasts’) and displays the problematics of approaching it. What is drawn out of the past in late time fantasy is, more often than not, a disruptive shadow, not an arcadian idyll.

For psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud and Nicolas Abraham, the summoning of spectres comes from a compulsion to return—whether to complete a process of mourning or to act out primitive, repressed childhood anxieties. The sense in much time fantasy of a past which presses claustrophobically upon the present suggests that this is very much an oeuvre of haunting. The past may visit unbidden, in the form of a ghost, a disorder of present-day life, or a reiterated, forceful pattern of behaviour. Protagonists of these fictions must confront their own ambivalence, their own sense of identity or will, and their own place in history. For the characters in The Owl Service, the legend of Blodeuwedd may determine their destinies, but they are shaped equally by their own histories, and more than one type of mysterious force must be allayed before they are free. Haunting can be a troubling and destructive experience, even if the spectres are ultimately laid to rest, but it may be necessary. As Avery Gordon points out, for any protagonist (or reader), “the ghost is nothing without you.”

Return and recurrence are a fundamental engine of haunting. The dead who lie quietly in their graves can provide no narrative. But return is also a redemptive, transcendent dynamic in the world of myth. The hero who overcomes death is saved—and a saviour. In the world of mythic time, nothing is ever “finished” or lost; an over-arching dimension of sacred (or “mythic” or “inner”) time allows us to elude mortality and find, again and again, a world, in Mircea Eliade’s words, “uncontaminated by time and becoming.” In The Owl Service myth is a threat, but it is also a great truth, and its power to return is not only undeniable but illuminating. For Gwyn, Alison and Roger, as well as the reader, its touch is that of the numinous, the vast, and the eternal. It is both inhuman, and very much a tribute to the endurance of humanity.

In The Owl Service, recurrence and return form the main premise of the novel, even as it apparently portrays a modern realist scenario of young adults grappling with personal tensions. The novel successfully evokes a Welsh myth to suggest, first, that the relationships and conflicts between Gwyn, Alison and Roger embody a timeless human pattern: the love triangle. Its allusion that such a pattern is profoundly ancient offers the possibility of a capitulation to inevitability, yet the narrative consistently presents

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opportunities for the protagonists to challenge this idea. Garner uses repetition of phrases, images of doubling and confusion of identity to emphasise his concern with the power of reiteration. In the conclusion of the novel, however, it is individual decision that provides the agency for overcoming the engine of recurrence. Garner believes deeply in the continuity of the past within the present; he speaks of it as a “truth”, but he seems to conceive of repetition as a form that, although it may appear to mechanically and endlessly reproduce itself, in fact may transfigure with every replication towards a new edition of “truth”.

There are, time fantasy suggests, no single moments. What was yesterday’s legend may be today’s haunting; what is today’s decision may be drawn backwards in time to become yesterday’s history; what is performed today may be tomorrow’s spectre. Time is an element in which we swim, not walk. So return and recurrence are not only pathology, but an immutable aspect of human experience. As avatar of the past, the returning myth or ghost may be a threat, but it is also a consolation. As eternal form, the myth or ghost may be a crushing presence, but in time fantasy it is also a parable about human truth, one from which we may learn much. In Alan Garner’s words,

Literature exists at every level of experience. It is inclusive, not exclusive. It embraces; it does not reduce, however simply it is expressed. [...] We have to find parables; we have to tell stories to unriddle the world.\textsuperscript{183}

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Darkness Visible: An exploration of recurrence

Part B

Breaking Bread with the Dead: Time fantasy, recurrence and The Owl Service

An exegesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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Design and Social Context Portfolio
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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Kate Holden
6 August 2008
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Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.

W. H. Auden
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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

...What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

T. S. Eliot

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INTRODUCTION

Il mondo invecchia
et invecchiando intristrice.

The world grows old; and as it grows old it grows sad.

Torquato Tasso

We have an ambivalent attitude to les temps perdu—sometimes acknowledging, fetishising or celebrating it; sometimes placating, obliterating or rewriting it. A vast body of literature and criticism speaks for the pervasiveness of feeling about the continuing presence of the past. In this exegesis I will focus on a small but powerful sub-genre of fiction: time fantasy.

The term time fantasy refers to works, usually categorised within children’s fantasy literature, which have as their major narrative gambit a suggestion that time is not linear and progressive but elastic or cyclical, and that people, patterns, events or objects may travel both forward and backward through it.

Time fantasy includes narratives of time-travel, time-doubling, visitations of the supernatural in the form of ghosts, and, often, the suggestion that events that have occurred in the past retain a power strong enough to be repeated in the present. Time fantasy should perhaps be distinguished from fantasy, and children’s fantasy in particular. Fantasy itself is a broad church of writing for both adults and children. Children’s fantasy has often manifested as either High Fantasy, which involves a complete secondary speculative world (for example, Tolkien’s Middle Earth) or another type of fantasy, in which a real-

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3 In a useful work on time fantasy, Maria Nikolajeva briefly examines some differences between ‘time fantasy’ and ‘secondary world fantasy’, which usually involves a more magical, exotic world. She notes “[a] close investigation of the narrative structure of various texts reveals that the principal feature of time fantasy, time distortion, most often expressed narratively by paralepsis (primary time standing still), is also present in the secondary world fantasy, as we have seen in the Narnia novels. On the other hand, what is believed to be the principal pattern of the secondary world fantasy, the passage between worlds, is most tangible in time fantasy.” She prefers to speak of primary and secondary chronotype (timespace), instead of difference between the types of literature. (133) Nikolajeva, M. (2000). From Mythic to Linear: Time in children’s literature. Lanham, Md., & London, The Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press.

Additionally, Sheila Egoff comments that “[d]espite its concentration on the troubles of its chief characters, this subgenre of fantasy has remained quite stable and conventional and indeed meshes with much of earlier fantasy in general. [...] the young go ‘there and back again.’ However, their journeys are more difficult and dangerous than in the past: there are roads from innocence to experience, and so they leave their childhood behind them.” (289) Egoff, S. A. (1988). Worlds Within: Children’s fantasy from the Middle Ages to today. Chicago and London, American Library Association.

Ann Lawson Lucas points out that High Fantasy appeared in British fiction not long after time fantasy; while science fiction reacted against the past by looking far to the future, High Fantasy, often drawing on Deep England and Arthurian legend, enshrined and reified the past. Thus time fantasy literature was one of the few speculative fantasy forms which maintained an association with modern realist fiction set in the contemporary world. (xix) Lucas, A. L., Ed. (2003). The Presence of the Past in Children’s Literature. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers.
world protagonist is transported by magical means into a secondary world. Time fantasy is perhaps best understood as a sub-set of this second type, but instead of a secondary, fantastical world, the protagonist visits another epoch by some manipulation of time; or a past time erupts into the present, et cetera. A strongly realist background for the primary world is often a characteristic feature. This sub-genre can also incorporate elements of the ghost story, realism, historical fiction, myth, speculative writing and horror.4

Time fantasy exemplifies a preoccupation with haunting, featuring recurrence and repetition in both its concerns and its narratological structure. I will be specifically looking at a major work of the sub-genre, Alan Garner’s 1967 novel for young adults, *The Owl Service*, (awarded both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Award for children’s fiction) which suggests that an ancient myth may recur to impose its patterns on present-day protagonists.5

Theorists and critics have long analysed the supernatural and myth as products of human psychology. Sigmund Freud’s short but influential essay ‘The Uncanny’ was one of the first to establish an analytics of haunting and the spectral as the return of the repressed, a figure directly related to the process of mourning. Subsequent critics have challenged or expanded Freud’s ideas. In Chapter 1, I will explore the poetics of haunting as a prelude to describing the ways in which they may be at work in time fantasy, and will proceed to a reading through Freud of *The Owl Service* as a specific example of the way time fantasy fiction embodies cultural and psychological anxieties about recurrence. Using Freud and post-Freudian criticism as a basis, I will suggest that time fantasy’s main devices (myth, time-travel and haunting) are allegories for the unease of human grief, uncertainty about the past, fear of death and ambivalence towards identity.

I will also examine myth and mythopoeics, their relation to time fantasy, and the particular significance of myth in *The Owl Service*. Chapter 2 discusses this phenomenon and reads Garner’s novel as an example of mythic recurrence. ‘Mythic time’ is often understood as ‘timeless’ or cyclical, and this attribute of temporality has implications for repetition and reiteration in ways different to that seen in a psychoanalytic model.

It is my view that time fantasy is a significant literary form, established now for over a century and still popular, featuring highly talented authors, and enacting a diverse range of negotiations with what are surely two of literature’s over-riding concerns: the effect of the past on the present, and its implications for identity and determination of behaviour.6

4 See this Introduction for a more detailed taxonomy of the sub-genre as a whole.


6 According to critic Tess Cosselett, time fantasy novels negotiate against ‘heritage’ as time fantasy ‘offers an openness to ‘other’ histories, rather than the potentially nationalist search for roots; it problematizes the simple access to the
Although American, Canadian and Australian authors have contributed much to the sub-genre in the English-speaking world, British time fantasy remains dominant, and its tradition of drawing closely upon the myths and history of Britain makes it exemplary in its concerns, anxieties and strategies for invoking the symbiosis between past and present. The intelligence with which authors of British children’s time fantasy, such as Alan Garner, Penelope Lively, William Mayne, Robert Westall, Penelope Farmer, Susan Cooper and Nancy Bond, among others, have interrogated the cultural rhetoric of ‘the past’ with imaginative narratives suggests that for such writers, conservative mythologising of national history is less interesting than confronting the anxieties, ambiguities and multiple narratives of what may in fact be anything but a coherent past.

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The novel and the exegesis

The object is the thing with which we construct our mourning.

Jean Baudrillard

This exegesis, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, is a complement to my own novel *The Sacrifice* although not a discussion of it. In both works I am interested in examining the power of the past to ‘repeat’ in the present, both in terms of human psychology and in the figurative sense of mythic return. Though I will not use my own novel as the primary text of the exegesis, a brief description will demonstrate how the academic part of my submission relates generically to the creative part.

In *The Sacrifice* two young Australian sisters go to stay in England in a richly historic coastal area. The elder, married sister, Rebecca, soon becomes engulfed in grief after her husband leaves them. The younger, Joss, is an impressionable teenager who becomes enthralled in fantasies of local history after meeting a strange young boy, Flick. She becomes convinced that he embodies the violent past of the area, and that the act of sacrifice is part of an ancient pattern that must be enacted. Through engagement with the landscape and remnants of history in the region, each sister comes to terms with loss and finds that even when something has been given up, something else may take its place. For Joss, the belief that history can compel the present is a comfort, even as it leads her towards disturbing experiences; for Rebecca, the past is an uncomfortable haunting from which she wishes to free herself. The novel is an attempt to narrate the enduring sense that the past pervades the present, in both benign and malign ways.

The novel is also both a homage to, and negotiation of, the conventions of the time fantasy sub-genre. In writing it I struggled to overcome ‘knowingness’ about the conventions and clichés of the sub-genre, and so made Joss self-conscious about her susceptibility to fantasising along such lines. The novel is intended as a challenge to such romanticising of British history, with an Australian protagonist who, though she fits many of the requirements of a time fantasy heroine, is led astray by the very constructions her reading has placed upon her experience of British folklore and landscape.

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9 See Part A of this submission.
In my exegesis, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, my main research questions are: *What are some possible roles in time fantasy literature of recurrence and repetition? And what do they imply in terms of a narrative such as The Owl Service?*

This inquiry naturally developed several minor research questions, as I sought frames through which to answer the question. The two chapters of my exegesis reflect these subsidiary queries: if I looked at the project of time fantasy and its apparent ‘nostalgic’ desire to revisit the past, what ideas did psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud offer concerning repetition and recurrence? What would result if I applied these ideas to a particular text? And if I then looked towards the temporal dimension of time fantasy, finding theories of mythic time, what did the concept of cyclical time and Eternal Return imply about repetition and recurrence? And again, how might I apply that idea specifically to Garner’s novel?

What I offer in this exegesis is a sketch of some possibilities for understanding the significance of recurrence and repetition in time fantasy fiction. A questioning of the fundamental significance of repetition throws light not only on the work of Alan Garner, but casts glints onto many other important aspects of modern cultural consciousness, anxiety, and aspiration.

**The wherefores of time fantasy**

*This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living.*

Don Delillo ¹⁰

Einstein’s discovery of the Special Theory of Relativity, the cultural disorientation following World War I, the birth of Modernism in art, and the inconceivable destruction of the Second World War and horror of the Holocaust all contributed to “a sadder, more doubting”¹¹ as well as more energetic, complex, and ambivalent 20th century attitude to the past, and its relationship with the present.

At the same time as fantasy proper was gaining popularity as a modern literary genre, time fantasy carved out a conjunctive niche in British children’s literature. From roots in fairy tales such as Rip Van Winkle, Gothic fiction, fantasies such as H. G. Wells’s speculative

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fiction and Victorian and Edwardian magical tales for children, it developed most strongly in the years following World War II. The literary sub-genre of time fantasy has developed alongside modern consciousness of time and historicity, and took on its fairly well defined major forms in children's literature since the mid-20th century. These forms in many ways successfully articulate many of the apprehensions that pervade our era.

The Blitz in England left a destroyed landscape which was rapidly overbuilt, apparently erasing swathes of 'Old England' and arousing anxiety that ancient things were being disturbed, destroyed, or brought to light. Classics from this period include Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and Lucy M. Boston's *Green Knowe* novels, which both contain a haunting sense of nostalgia. Humphrey Carpenter, in his study of the sub-genre, observes of the period between the 1950s and 1970s, that “the greater part of children's fiction produced in this period has the same theme: the discovery or rediscovery of the past.” A frequent emphasis in many time fantasy novels is, for example, on the contiguity of past and present landscapes.

A development in the 1970s saw works in which the psychological dimensions of the story began to take the foreground. While conservative time fantasy (using many of the established tropes) is still being written today, the sub-genre has become, since the 1970s, more sophisticated and, in these works, more troubled by its own project. Simple transportation into another time has become an enmeshing in the implications of history; in many novels, including Alan Garner's, rather than an isolated individual passing backwards in time, the past itself threatens to engulf the present, and the comforting

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12 The sub-genre parameters Rudyard Kipling established with *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906), in which children are visited by 'ghosts' of previous spirits and inhabitants of a Sussex site, were enhanced by Edith Nesbit in 1908 when, according to Ann Lawson Lucas, she invented the conventional time-slip novel as such in *House of Arden*, by adding a country house to the Deep England landscape, and maintaining the trope of children with connection to their antecedents (153) Ibid.

Nesbit was followed in this by several authors, notably by Lucy M. Boston with her Green Knowe books (1954-1976). In Alison Uttley's classic *A Traveller in Time* (1939) the form was nuanced by having an outsider as protagonist, a visitor to an ancestral home who is transported back in time in order to further appreciate the history of the place. See also, for example, Philippa Pearce’s *Children of Charlecote* (1989) and Penelope Lively’s *The House in Norham Gardens* (1974) which both feature children exploring the history of old houses, a trope which continues to be used in contemporary time fantasy fiction.


Carpenter identifies three common ways in which this functions: (a) The past enables a child to realise that time cannot be halted, the child must grow up. (b) The past allows child to better understand or endure the present. (c) The past represents idyllic lost or imagined Britain and provides nostalgic escape from postwar austerity. (160) Cited in Lucas, A. L., Ed. (2003). *The Presence of the Past in Children’s Literature*. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers.

14 Major examples include works by William Mayne such as *Earthfasts* (1966) and *The Battlefield* (1971), Lucy M. Boston’s *Green Knowe* series, *Tom’s Midnight Garden* by Pearce, Penelope Farmer’s *Charlotte Sometimes* (1987), Garner’s novels *The Owl Service* (1967) and *Red Shift* (1973), many of Penelope Lively’s novels for children including *The Driftway* (1972) and *Aстercote* (1970), and Robert Westall’s *The Wind Eye* (1976).

15 See Gary Crew’s *Strange Objects* for a post-modern example of ambivalence towards history and identity which deliberately plays with the ‘reliability’ of historical documentation and the conceit of return to the past. Crew, G. (1991). *Strange Objects*. Melbourne, Mammoth Australia.
endurance of the past becomes a claustrophobic prescription. In this gambit the fantasy element is used more and more as a mechanism to allegorise or reflect real-world issues so that, for Alan Garner, increasingly “it is the psychological tensions of the protagonists that create the supernatural events.”

Typically, time fantasy novels feature some kind of slippage of ‘normal’, linear time—hence the often-used term ‘time-slip’ to describe works with an element of time-travel. Carpenter defines the most common model of post-war time fantasy novel: it is one that is likely to concern one or two children who stumble across some feature of history or mythology which concerns their own family or the place where they are living or staying [...] the children become drawn to it, usually at their own peril, and in consequence achieve some kind of spiritual, moral or intellectual growth.

A taxonomy of time fantasy

A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.

Aristotle

Though it is a relatively small body of work, probably numbering in the low hundreds of titles, time fantasy moves through several conventional strategies, often retreading familiar scenarios. I offer a brief taxonomy of time fantasy as follows:

1. A person from the modern era travels back in time before returning to the present, having undergone some kind of revelation or maturing

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Another time fantasy author, Penelope Farmer, for example, draws a distinction between ‘extrovert’ and ‘introvert’ fantasy literature. I would infer that for Farmer, time fantasy often manifests a greater preoccupation with psychological and individual issues as opposed to High Fantasy’s “surface mechanics”. (238) Cited by Egoff, Ibid.


Tess Cosslet, in a study of time fantasy literature, also offers a summary of the sub-genre’s common tropes: “a deracinated child comes to stay in a new locality; a special place, often in conjunction with a special object, provides access to the past; an empathetic bond is formed with a child in the past; a connection is made between the past experience and the memory of someone still living; names, inscriptions and their decoding are important; the history that is accessed is the everyday life of an ordinary child; the subjectivity of the present-day child is an important element in the story; this child does some form of archival research to establish the truth of his or her experience of the past; the experience of the past becomes part of them of moving on, growing, accepting change, death and loss.” (245) Cosslett, T. (2002). “‘History from Below’: Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity.” The Lion and the Unicorn 26(2): 244-251.

(a) through occupying the same place as a past person, or passing through a ‘magical portal’, by, for example, entering a wood or an abandoned place
(b) through the discovery of a ‘magical totem’, such as an ancient artefact; often the disturbance of a long-buried item is the precipitating narrative device.

2. A person from the past appears in the present
   (a) as a ghost
   (b) as a time-traveller.

3. Some powerful force or ‘pattern’ of behaviour or relationships from the past, often malign, and threatening the stability or coherence of the present, appears in the present, via
   (a) an old story, for example a myth or a sequence of historical events, enacted in the modern era.
   (b) some kind of magical force.

4. A person in the modern era is made aware (often supernaturally) of something in the past that must be laid to rest or ‘put right’.

5. More than one time period exists simultaneously, the similarities or continuities becoming increasingly apparent.

This is a crude breakdown of possible scenarios, and as may be seen, these categories are not altogether exclusive—and in the work of many authors, are given many variations and elaborations. Mine is simply a suggested categorisation of conventions. Eleanor Cameron, by contrast, simplifies her taxonomy of time fantasy as follows:

1. the kind that incorporates legend in an intrinsic as opposed to incidental way, for example, *The Owl Service*.
2. the kind that explores the past, bringing history into the reader’s mind.
3. the kind that sits halfway between pure fantasy and science fiction, for example, Garner’s novel *Elidor* (1965), and William Mayne’s *Earthfasts* (1966).  

*The Owl Service*

*Writing and archaeology have a great deal in common.*

Alan Garner

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20 Quoted in Renner, B. (Date unknown). Interview with Alan Garner. elimae (Online journal).
Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service*, which I shall be using as my key case study, uses several of the above devices, such as the potency of place, but falls primarily into category 3 (a). Three teenagers, Alison, her step-brother Roger, and a servant’s son, Gwyn, have arrived in a remote Welsh valley for the summer with their parents. They discover a forgotten service of dinner plates, with a design that may be owls or flowers. Alison becomes apparently possessed by the magic held in the plates, while Gwyn, whose mother was originally from this valley, perceives that the three of them are re-enacting a tragic love-triangle established first in an ancient Welsh myth and then repeated through time by, among others, his mother and two other men. Pragmatic Roger resists this interpretation until he comes to recognise that the others’ belief in it, if not the reality, is the crucial issue. Class tension and male rivalry between Gwyn and Roger form the background for what seems in inexorable capitulation to the force of a lethal pattern. Whether the fundamental reality of the sequence of events is ultimately psychological or supernatural, Garner places the idea of recurrence in centre-focus, and examines its consequences and command.

Garner has never settled for simple resolutions or transparent narratives. He uses a style often pared down towards the cryptic and ambivalent, creating tautly written emotional power and complex characters, and a finally unresolved authorial attitude to the possession of the present by the past. He evokes both the past as an energy that transforms but never vanishes, and paradoxically, the agency of his protagonists to make their own choices. For Garner, recurrence and return are compulsively fascinating tropes, and he uses them within the conventions of time fantasy to form original and sophisticated fictions.

**Methodology and Scope**

*There has never been a scholar who really, as such, deals with phantoms. A traditional scholar does not believe in phantoms…*

Jacques Derrida 22

This exegesis is an exploration of one particular, if crucial, aspect of time fantasy: the roles of recurrence and return. I began researching this exegesis looking to comprehend the frisson I had experienced in reading time fantasy novels as a child. This frisson evidently emanated from the mysterious sense that time was not the strict plodding in a line that we usually imagine, but something that could resound and echo and open up mysterious

possibilities. The ways in which time fantasy authors accessed this sense of the profound amplitude (and amplification) of time, and the consequent implications for identity and meaning, stayed with me from childhood and preoccupied me enough to want to write a novel in this sub-genre.

Exploring the implications and prerogatives of time fantasy’s project took me into many fascinating areas. Only a fraction of what I researched is presented in the final form of Breaking Bread with the Dead, but all of my reading informed the piece as it stands. My research process incorporated investigation into: the criticism and history of the conventions and history of children’s literature; time fantasy literature; children’s fantasy literature; historical fiction; fantasy literature and the fantastic; horror and Gothic literature; the supernatural and its expression in literature; lieux de mémoire and sites of memory; heritage and museology; nostalgia studies; post-colonial nostalgia; Australian studies; concepts of time and history; mythic time and the work of Mircea Eliade; the Eternal Return and recurrence; repetition in narratology, in post-Freudian theory of the morbid and the uncanny; Freud’s work; criticism of the work of Alan Garner; and a general background of modern literary theory.

Where possible I have used original quotations from my sources, rather than paraphrases. Any misinterpretation or mis-application of critics’ work is my own responsibility. The Bibliography includes further references consulted but not directly used in the body of this work.

Time fantasy literature, a multivalent form of fiction, touches upon all of the areas listed above. It is a rare, powerful sub-genre which expresses explicitly in its narratives and implicitly in its associations much of the anxiety and fascination modern culture has with what we think of as ‘the past’: a place which is not simple, but which shapes much about the present. It is important to acknowledge this truth in literature, and to cherish the intimations of endless return. As Boris Pasternak put it in Doctor Zhivago,

...now that the winter has killed everything and the living no longer conceal the dead, the past can be seen more clearly in snowy outline. 23

Review of Resources and Terms

‘Remember’ is emotionally the antonym of ‘dismember’.

Alan Garner

Innumerable novelists have written on the subject of time. Similarly, the literatures of the supernatural and of fantasy are vast. In relation to modern fiction written explicitly using time and recurrence as main subjects, I suggest that what seems like a minor sub-genre in its most evident form, time fantasy, is in fact more diffuse than is often recognised.

The range of critical work on the diverse issues included in this exegesis is of course immense. Here I will briefly identify some of the dominant elements examined in this exegesis, acknowledge some of their key theorists, and note my use of important terms.

TIME FANTASY. A sub-genre of children’s fantasy literature, capacious in its inclusion of everything from time-travel stories to those featuring supernatural resurrections of the past, and narratives such as Garner’s which suggest mythic return. The limits of the sub-genre are debated, falling as it does between the positions of ‘fantasy’, ‘ghost story’, and science fiction ‘time-travel’ (some critics prefer ‘time-slip’ to specifically denote those works in which a character apparently moves—usually backwards—in time to another era; I support this distinction, but will not be examining any ‘time-slip’ novels in this exegesis, and so use only the term ‘time fantasy’). It had its most significant period of development from around 1950-1980, but, since the recent resurgence of interest in children’s fantasy, has revived in popularity, and many older classic novels such as Garner’s have been reissued.

In children’s literature, the development of the sub-genre called time fantasy has given an important platform for explicit questionings about time, history and the supernatural. However, time fantasy has been largely overlooked in serious literary criticism: when it features it is usually briefly, as an addendum to fantasy, itself frequently viewed as a niche genre within the body of children’s literature, while adult works in this sub-genre of time fantasy are almost entirely unreviewed in this light. There are a few books about children’s


25 I would cite, for example, authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, A. S. Byatt, Maureen Duffy and Adam Thorpe as some of Britain’s keenest novelists consciously presenting the problematics of time in their work. A. S. Byatt, herself a novelist who has used time and history as motifs in her work such as Possession, offers the following partial list of modern novelists who have also featured time as a major element in their works “for complex aesthetic and intellectual reasons: Golding, Burgess, Barnes, Carter, Swift, Coetzee, Calvino, Ransmayr, Winterson, Unsworth, Roberts, Warner, Caryl Phillips, Mo, Ackroyd, Carey, Feinstein, Fitzgerald, and Morrison.”. (p. 93) Byatt, A. S. (2000). On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays. London, Vintage.

In Australia, many writers including Gary Crew, Alexis Wright, Brian Castro, Antoni Jach and Gerald Murnane have deliberately ‘played’ with time in their work.
fantasy literature which feature a chapter on time fantasy: several essays and articles, for example in the *Children’s Literature in Education* journal; and the more detailed work of a very few authors (see below). I am not aware of any substantial critical works on adult novels of time fantasy. It may be that as adult literature, rather than the more commonly categorisable children’s literature, they are considered generally ‘literary’ rather than ‘genre’.

Children’s literature in general has its own gallery of recognised experts, such as Humphrey Carpenter, Eleanor Cameron and Colin Manlove. In the small body of critical work on time fantasy, Tess Cossette, Valerie Krips and Ann Lawson Lucas provide useful analyses of the history, conventions and behaviour of the sub-genre, while David Rees, Kevin McCarron and others examine specific time fantasy authors such as Penelope Lively and Robert Westall. Others such as Gary Westfahl examine related topics such as the paradoxes of time in science fiction and fantasy literature. Criticism of the sub-genre of time fantasy, however, still lacks a master theorist.

Alan Garner’s work has attracted a surprising amount of critical attention, considering that he has worked substantially (if controversially) in the arena of young adult fantasy fiction. In criticism around Garner’s fiction, Neil Philip is the pre-eminent author, having written the only full-length work, while Kath Filmer-Davies and Charles Butler have written in detail about Garner in the context of several other time fantasy authors. In particular, Robyn McCallum has produced a detailed examination of time and subjectivity in Garner’s novel *Red Shift*, and Maria Nikolajeva has written on Garner’s use of time, applying theories by Domenic LaCapra and Mikhail Bakhtin. Other critics such as Carol Hellings, Brian Attebery, Tony Watkins and Robin Walsh have examined the significance of myth in his work. Garner himself has published *The Voice that Thunders*, a book of his essays and lectures.

REPETITION, RECURRENCE, RETURN. ‘Repetition’ and ‘recurrence’ are used, often as a coupled phrase, frequently in this exegesis. They are virtually synonymous, but I perceive ‘repetition’ as something more complicatedly associated not only with recurrence (a regular reiteration) but with the implications of duplication, displacement and compulsion, as is discussed in Chapter 1.

‘Return’ brings with it evocations of something that has been absent, rather than continuously present, and which now re-appears. It is most obviously associated in this work with the theory of the Eternal Return (see below).
Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Ricoeur, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Giles Deleuze, among others, have written now-canonical texts on repetition and time. It also figures as a dynamic in discussions of the Uncanny and the spectral.

THE UNCANNY. A term largely associated with the Gothic and the fantastic literature that emerged in the 18th century and has since evolved into a literary tradition. It is also used more broadly by theory in terms of cultural apprehension. The uncanny is a species of the ‘unnatural’ within the ‘natural’, but in his famous essay on the subject Freud variously identifies the crucial aspect of the uncanny as the appearance of something hidden which becomes visible, something that is frightening, or something that should be familiar, but is become strange.

Jacques Derrida and Frederic Jameson have examined the spectre in modern culture. Freud contributed a short but very influential essay on the subject of the uncanny, discussed by Nicholas Royle and others, while Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have further significantly developed the psychoanalytics of the spectral.

THE FANTASTIC. A specific branch of the literature of fantasy, though its definition, aptly perhaps, evades empirical statement. Structuralists Vladimir Propp and Tsvetan Todorov took an important step towards defining the fantastic, opening the way for critics of fantasy literature such as Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Sheila Egoff.

THE PAST. By this term I mean ‘time which has passed’, both in the sense of that which has previously occurred, and time past as it is understood as ‘history’. Theories interrogating these two parsings of the term are too complex to enter into in this exegesis.

NOSTALGIA. A term that usually signifies a wistful yearning for, and evocation of, the past. Theorists of nostalgia point out that this yearning is often for an imagined or manufactured ‘past’ as much as for the ‘real’ past. David Lowenthal, Anthony Kemp and Charles Maier are major critics on the subject of nostalgia.

ETERNAL RETURN. This is a term used most famously perhaps by Nietzsche, and later expounded by Mircea Eliade in his discussions of prehistoric religious cosmogonies and teleologies. It suggests that there is a powerful constant in the nature of time, one usually associated with mythic or religious ‘sacred’ time as opposed to earthly, ‘secular’ time, which is conceived of as linear and progressive. The theory of the Eternal Return proposes that time may recur in the service of reiterating the divine. It is variously regarded as positive and numinous, or over-determining and oppressive.
CHAPTER 1
REPETITION AND HAUNTING: THE OWL SERVICE

1.1 Introduction

The dead were and are not. Their place knows them no more and is ours today [...] The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once on this earth, once on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.

G. M. Trevelyan

Time fantasy has at its heart the idea that time is permeable, or elastic, and this idea raises important questions about the cultural psychology in which imagination desires events to occur not once, but again. This drive to the consolations (however ambivalent) of repetition is, as we shall see, a movement that runs through the phenomena of nostalgia, mourning, and religious ritual, and finds expression in narratives of mythic and supernatural return.

In this chapter I will be discussing the nostalgic response of time fantasy literature and introducing psychoanalytic theories of recuperation of the lost. I will examine Freud’s theory of the uncanny and the significance for him of repetition and recurrence (which by implication are present in literature of the fantastic such as time fantasy), and further theories of repression and haunting. I shall be using these Freudian analytical frames to offer a reading of Alan Garner’s The Owl Service.

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1.2 Haunting the present

*The Greek word for ‘return’ is ‘nostos.’ ‘Algos’ means ‘suffering.’ So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.*

Milan Kundera

What kinds of anxieties produce a sense of haunting? British culture has long felt itself richly endowed—or burdened—with the volume of its past. Many works of 20th and 21st century British literature manifest a persistent discussion of what it means to live in an age of apparent modern amnesia; to lay modern Britain, with its new housing estates and self-conscious heritage industry, upon the “ancient fields”. Time fantasy is itself generated by a cultural impulse to ‘go back’, even as its narratives are concerned specifically with the sometimes dangerous consequences of doing so.

1.2.1 Haunting in literature

What’s unfinished haunts one; what’s unhealed haunts one.

Elizabeth Bowen

In a sense, time fantasy novels may be conceived as one of critic Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire (vessels of memory), sites where memory itself can be displayed and examined, conserved and reverenced (or laid to rest). In what Nora called “memory’s persistence and

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28 This is not a modern (nor, of course, exclusively British) phenomenon: Edmund Spenser’s Britain-as-Faerie and William Blake’s Albion-as-Jerusalem fantasies covet, as well as beware, the mythopoetic dimensions of British history. See (30) Butler, C. (2006). *Four British Fantasists: Place and culture in the children’s fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper*. Lanham, Maryland, Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

29 Charles Maier suggests that in the past hundred years changes to historiographical modes, a sense of the dispersal of agency and a “metastasis of discourse” have given remembrance a new authority: “memory, we can claim, has become the discourse that replaces history.” (142) Maier, C. S. (1993). *A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on history, melancholy and denial.* History and Memory: Studies in representations of the past 5: pp. 136-151.

[“T]he surfeit of memory,” he goes on to warn, “is a sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics. It testifies to the loss of a future orientation, of progress toward civic enfranchisement and growing equality.” (142) Ibid.


30 Nora: “lieux de mémoire thrive only because of their capacity to change, their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections (that is what makes them exciting).” Quoted in (64) Krips, V. (2000). *The Presence of the Past: Memory, heritage, and childhood in postwar Britain*. New York & London, Garland Publishing.


See also David Lowenthal’s writing and that of Charles Maier for further comments on nostalgia.
[...] its failure,” we often see in modern literature the ceaseless fingering of prosopopoeia—the speaking of the absent. Glennis Byron and David Punter describe the manifestation of prosopopoeia as it works in literature as “governed by the desire to make the absent, the dead, the abstract present and palpable.”

Children's time fantasy literature, as we shall see, enacts over and over again an attempt to speak with the past; or to counsel warnings about how to do so; or to allay anxieties.

In *The Owl Service*, the force of a secluded Welsh valley and its ancestral beliefs comes up against the modern and the oblivious. School-leaver Gwyn returns with his mother to the Welsh valley in which she grew up. There he is thrown together with two other teenagers: Alison, the daughter of the wealthy English family that has engaged Gwyn's mother Nancy as a housekeeper, and her step-brother Roger. Alison and Gwyn discover a service of dinner plates with a curious design: Alison perceives it as owls rather than the possible flowers, and quickly becomes fascinated. From the outset of the narrative, it is suggested that an ancient legend is being played out, and supernatural events ensue, apparently in accordance with an ancient legend of the magical maiden Blodeuwedd. This woman was 'made' from flowers by a wizard; conflict ensued between her husband Lleu Llaw Gyffes and her lover Gronw Pebyr—forming a love-triangle which it appears Gwyn, Alison and Alison’s step-brother Roger may repeat. This recurring constellation of behaviour, it is implied by the locals, especially a man called Huw Halfbacon, extends back past memory.

Each one of the protagonists has a different response to this intimation. Alison is anguishedly ‘possessed’; Roger is sceptical; Gwyn seems to accept it. At one point, Alison asks,

‘[...] why wasn't it finished with long ago?’

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Prosopopoeia was parsed in its more macabre sense by Pierre Fontanier, writing in 1821, as “staging [...] the absent, the dead, supernatural beings [...] to make them act, speak, respond; or at least to take them for confidants, witnesses, guarantors, accusers, avengers, judges.” Quoted by Eric Savoy, 'Spectres of abjection: The queer subject of James’s 'The Jolly Corner’” in (169) Byron, G. and D. Punter, Eds. (1999). Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography. Houndsmills and London, Macmillan Press.

Savoy goes on to note that “If, in the paranoid Gothic, the ghost is the prosopopeial allegorisation of the split subject, then Paul de Man’s assertion that ‘prosopopoeia is hallucinatory, [for] to make the invisible visible is uncanny’ (De Man, 1986: 49) suggests not only that prosopopoeia is always already a Gothicised trope, but also that this trope is imbricated in a complex psychoanalytic of melancholia’s need to figure forth the haunting other.” (170) Ibid.

34 There is a scene of local women in the grocery store:

‘Is it to be the three of them again, Mrs Lewis-Jones?’

'Yes. There's the girl, too. Mister Huw says she's made it owls.'

'We must bear it,' said Mrs Richards.

'I don’t think it can be finished,’ said Gwyn. ‘I think this valley really is a kind of reservoir. The house, look, smack in the middle, with the mountains all round, shutting it in, guarding the house. I think the power is always there and always will be. It builds up and builds up until it has to be let loose—like filling and emptying a dam. And it works through people. I said to Roger that I thought the plates were batteries and you were the wires.’

‘If the force is in the plates,’ said Alison, ‘I’ve let it out, and everything’s right again. Oh, Gwyn, is it?’

‘No. That’s what frightens me. It’s not as quick as that. The force was in the plates, and in the painting, but it’s in us now. That’s where the pattern’s gone.’

For Garner in this novel, the past is energy—figured with the metaphor of electricity—and while ‘the past’ itself does not repeat, its structure and determination does. In this way a ‘simulation’ (Gwyn, Alison, Roger) takes the place of the previous simulation (their parents’ generation: Huw, Bertram, Nancy). The original legend is a story from The Mabinogion; it is the modern-world situation that is most real, but seems in danger of being displaced by *metempsychosis* (recollection of previous lives). The place and the pattern remain the same, and the magical power, but the past itself is being constantly displaced by its duplication (not replication) in the present. Garner, unlike many other time fantasy authors, is not interested in transportation to the past by time-travel; it is the way the past informs the present, even through apparent simultaneity, that is his most powerful concern: its haunting.

1.2.2 The claustrophobia of the past

*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Dealing with the hidden, uneasily lying corpse of the past can be claustrophobic: “The revenge of the past is the memory of it,” says Dana Del George in her study of the

35 (142) Ibid.

36 Garner claims dryly in his essay ‘Inner Time’ that the novel “is an expression of the myth found in the Welsh *Math y Mathonwy*, and is only incidentally concerned with the plight of first-generation educated illegitimate Welsh males. I labour the point because I am forced to accept that some readers will not differentiate between form and content. It is almost as if they are afraid to see.” However, the emphasis on realist immediacy forces focus on more than merely the repetition of myth. (110) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.

supernatural in short fiction. A superfluity of history, or in Charles Maier’s phrase, a “surfeit of memory”, may become a malign smothering. Maier raises “the question as to whether there might be something inauthentic and unhealthy about the canonization of memory [...] [something] neurasthenic and disabling.” while Charles Butler notes in a study of four British children’s fantasy authors that

the weight of tradition, both literary and historical, may be felt as oppressive [...] while a focus on Britain as a history-saturated land may tend to corral fantasy writers into a restricted set of all-too-familiar themes and forms, or to render the country a place of mere spectacle and imaginative tourism.

This is not simply the common contemporary ‘literature of exhaustion’ but one ‘haunted’, in the case of children’s fantasy literature, by its own conventions and antecedents. (Garner struggled in his early works to free himself of trite plot devices and self-consciousness.)

So prosopopoeia—being haunted—is both a consoling reflex response and an ambiguous, uneasy negotiation with a past that threatens to overwhelm. The ways in which the device of return and repetition are applied to fictions of the uncanny and the mythopoeic will be examined in greater detail below. It is worth remembering, as Deborah Esch puts it, that “in giving a face (prosopon) or the semblance of one [...] to an entity that lacks a literal visage, prosopopoeia serves as a guarantor of its existence.”

1.3. The return of the dead in psychoanalytic thought

That terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.


41 Nevertheless, time fantasy author Robert Westall sees the potential for a fruitful dialogue between the past and the present in children’s literature: “On the whole children don’t read historical novels anymore. They don’t seem to want to know what the seventeenth century said to the seventeenth, but they become quite interested in what the twentieth century might have to say to the seventeenth. I feel able, with research, to let the twentieth century talk to the seventeenth, and to see the seventeenth as an observer.” (65) c.f. http://www.norham.n-tyneside-school.uk/westall/index.htm, 14/04/00 McCarron, K. (2001). ‘Robert Westall’s Frightening Fictions’. *Frightening Fiction in Contemporary Classics of Children’s Literature series*. K. Reynolds, G. Brenna and K. McCarron. London, Continuum: pp. 53-91.

What is behind an author’s—or a culture’s—impulse to summon that which has passed? The passed, or past, beckons to us, and we return its wave again and again. Psychoanalytic criticism has suggested some reasons for why we call up the dead.

In a 20th century preoccupied with reinvention, anxiety, ontological and epistemological crises, and scientific revelations about the pliability of time and the prospect of total global destruction, the temptation to regret the vanished past transcended cultural conservatism and became a pervasive refrain. Charles Maier argues that

[i]n the late twentieth century [...] memory, or so it might be argued, has become a strategy for survival, not for seduction. More precisely, memory has become a strategy to come to terms with survival.

1.3.1 Nostalgia and melancholic recuperation

Those arts which sustain anguish and the recovery from anguish within us, are the heirs of religion.

Georges Bataille

Perhaps nostalgia’s yearning for what is passed and gone has its roots in neurosis. As Laurence Lerner observes in his study of The Uses of Nostalgia, “[c]ertainly the poetry of nostalgia is like mourning.” Before publishing ‘The Uncanny’ in 1919, Freud posited his theory of Melancholia (1917), which comes from an inability to resolve ambivalence to a lost object, thus casting a ‘shadow’ and producing the abject. Freud invoked a process of grieving, which if not properly pursued, can skew into morbid recuperation and replication of the lost object. He asserted that all love objects are loved ultimately because they

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evoke a previous loss. As we shall see below, the doubling, or repetition of the loved/lost one is a powerful trope in literature of the uncanny and supematural.

The paradox at the heart of Freud’s Melancholia makes for an ambivalent interior attitude to the lost (e.g. the loss of the past). One part of the ego, Freud holds, mourns the lost; another hates the other part which has become abject in its powerless mourning, “abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.”

“She wants to be flowers, but you make her owls. You must not complain, then, if she goes hunting,” says the wizard-figure Huw of the recurrent female figure in The Owl Service. Raising the past—in this case, a resurgent mythic force—in invites a paradox, and a process that may heal or harm.

As I shall discuss in Chapter 2, the ethnographer of religion Mircea Eliade suggests that for prehistoric cultures, repetition by mimesis was a crucial function in a cosmological model that allowed individuals to access the divine (and thus legitimise their actions). Classical culture moved to develop a sophisticated application of religious propitiation, still often involving ritual and working within an economy of perpetual universal cycles and thus a consoling image of repetition. Mimesis, resemblance (for example, in the development of talismans which, by representing a feared demon, protect against it) and copying of ‘divine’ gestures were incorporated into culture, in a move that anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s dictum by legitimising reproduction and its object.

Fear of death, as Freud and generations of biologists observe, powerfully motivates the urge for reproduction. For Freud, citing his colleague Otto Rank, the figure of the Double is an insurance against mortality, while the death drive involves repetition of an original identity to avoid a fatal short-circuit; a gambit which is both narcissistic, and, in fact,

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52 In The Owl Service Garner applies this same kind of ambivalence to the workings of magic itself:
   ‘Suppose,’ said Gwyn. ‘Just suppose, a long time back, hundreds and hundreds of years, someone, somehow, did something in this valley. Suppose he found a way to control some power, or force, and used it to make a woman out of flowers. And suppose it went wrong—got out of hand—I don’t know. It got out of hand because it wasn’t neutral anymore. There was a brain behind it. Do you follow? Neutral like a battery, I mean. You can use it to explode a bomb or fry an egg: it depends on you.’
   ‘What is the power?’ said Alison.
   ‘I can’t explain,’ said Gwyn. ‘I once saw a nettle growing in an old garage floor in Aber. A pale little thing it was. It had split the concrete floor.’ (142) Ibid.
desirous of death. This dual strategy is possible if one considers that repetition creates a critical displacement: the original is replaced, obliterated. This accords with nostalgia theorist David Lowenthal’s observation that

[a]s quickly as we have destroyed the past’s power in one way, however, we have reinstituted it in another. We preserve the idea of the past by making it ubiquitous, and, in the process, we reify it. […] Our preservation of this past entails its persistent production.

Is it possible to invoke the past at all? Or can we only summon its spectre? Baudrillard, in his studies of cultural production and reproduction, notes that while postmodern culture possesses the ability to bring into sight those shadows previously on the margins, the search for the ineffable results merely in an endless series of simulations, perpetually deferring the possibility of grasping the elusive lost, until the simulacrum in fact takes the place of (is more real than) the real. If this is so, then the ‘production’ of the past is compromised not only by its ultimate evasion, but by the manufacture of simulacra which obscure any potential for ever finding the ‘real’ past, in what Byron and Punter call the “melancholy historiography” of our times.

Relinquishing time as it passes constitutes a kind of loss, which in some ways is akin to death; a response is required. In psychoanalytic terms, healthy progression is movement from mourning to remembrance or commemoration—thus freeing libidinal energies from the first lost object by reinvesting in a surrogate object, which may resemble the first. In other words, mourning is performed through a process of reproduction and repetition. It may be, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue in their essay ‘On the Theory of Ghosts’, that ghosts (and other kinds of spectres from the past, such as repeating myths) must be acknowledged as evidence of the “wounds of civilisation”, and apprehension must be transformed: “Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with

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the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.” 59

Time fantasy often concerns the ‘putting to right’ of an old wrong, the adjustment of repetition and the redress of culpability, in a kind of compulsive desire to undo the consequences of time and judgement. In The Owl Service, Huw Halfbacon finally explains his understanding of the recurring tragic pattern to Gwyn as redemption for a trespass against natural law, not by himself but his antecedent (which for Huw is effectively the same thing):

‘Here: in this valley: now. That is how the power is spent. Through us, within us, the three who suffer every time.’

‘But why, Huw?’

‘Because we gave this power a thinking mind. We must bear that mind, leash it, yet set it free, through us, in us, so that no one else may suffer. […] She will be the worse for my fault, and my uncle’s fault and my grandfather’s fault, who tried to stop what can’t be stopped—him with the painting, him with the plates. We built the dyke of sand, and won a little space.’

‘So we’re in this mess because you ducked it.’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘Oh, it is a story, and we have suffered for it no less than if we had faced our time.’ 60

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their psychoanalytic work on repression, acknowledge the timeless belief that spirits may return from the dead, and note the apprehensive fear that usually accompanies the idea of a ghost. The dead do not commonly rejoin the living, but try to draw the living towards death: “To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are destined to haunt”. In his ‘Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology’, Abraham agrees with Freud that ghosts are products of the living psyche, meant to objectify and exemplify some concealment in a living person’s life causing “the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. […] What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others.” 61 It is the denial of the dead, who “cannot enjoy, even in death, a state

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61 Unlike Freud, Abraham and Torok see this development not as a result of unsuccessful mourning, as it is not related to the loss itself; that would be result of melancholia or “those who carry a tomb within themselves.” Rather, it is an unnerving summoned out of the environment. (171) Abraham, N. and M. Torok (1994). The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis Vol I Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
of authenticity,” not the dead themselves, or our mourning for them, that raises them. So ghosts—and one may read ghosts as simply the most explicitly literalised manifestation of ‘the past’—may be individual pathologies, or emanate from a broader social context.62

Garner himself has struggled with bipolar disorder and depression, and in fact suffered a nervous breakdown while observing the filming of The Owl Service. In his interviews he has discussed his belief in ‘engrams’, “a memory-trace, a permanent impression made by a stimulus or experience” (literally scarred into neural tissue).63 Garner seems to believe that these engrams can be passed through generations, an inheritance of psychic injury. For him, engrammatic memory creates a sense of “inner time”, which is “one-dimensional; or infinite”—a kind of memory bank which accesses the collective unconscious (and generates an intuition for myth).64 It is out of his own psychological truths that he creates his mythopoeia.65

The process of mourning (and laying to rest) a loved object—or in Garner’s conception, releasing the power of an engram—is complex, and not always benign. The frightening implications of repetition are noted by Derrida when he observes in a study of Freud that “repetition has the characteristics of the demonic.”66 For the psychoanalyst Scholomith Rimmon-Kenan, repetition is in fact “the first presence, the first ‘performance’ of the absence [of the lost object].”67 “Repetition is, then,” say Sarah Goodwin and Elizabeth Bronfen who quote Rimmon-Kenan, “a duplicitous rhetorical strategy, for what it enacts lies in the past.”68 Goodwin and Bronfen, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, extend


64 Garner devotes much of his essay ‘Inner Time’ to a discussion of engrams, saying, “in neuro-physiology, an engram is the term for a hypothetical change in the protoplasm of the neural tissue which is thought by some to account for the working of memory. It is a memory-trace, a permanent impression made by a stimulus or experience.” This theory of neuropsychology/neurophysiology has recently been largely superceded but has had great influence. Garner additionally firmly distinguishes this understanding of engrams from that of Jungian or Scientological belief. (113) Garner, A. (1997). The Voice that Thunder: Essays and lectures. London, Harvill Press.

65 Garber says all his characters are himself, through time and maturity: “All the characters that have any vitality in them are archetypes.” Quoted in (66) Hellings, C. (1979). “Alan Garner: His use of mythology and dimensions in time.” Drama: Journal of School & Children’s Librarianship 15(2): pp. 66-73.


68 (105) Ibid.
Abraham’s suggestion in noting that the interest of mourners is, in fact, either to kill the dead a second time as quickly as possible, or to preserve them for as long as possible in the realm between living and dead. It is possible that this, too, is a motive of time fantasy: to enclose the past safely between the covers of a book; or for the novels’ protagonists, to ‘manage’ the past, resolve it in some sense, and push it behind them forevermore. In any case, whether a positive, organic multiplication or a frightening proliferation of threats, the eternal process of recurrence both subdues the past and arouses it anew.

1.3.2 The uncanny, repetition and Doctor Freud

To make the invisible visible is uncanny.

Paul de Man

Written in 1919 as one of Freud’s works on cultural theory, and following a piece by Ernst Jentsch, ‘The Uncanny’ is a short piece, much of which is taken up by, first, a lexicographical analysis of unheimlich (literally, ‘unhomely’), the German word commonly translated as ‘the uncanny’, and second, a reading of E. T. A. Hoffman’s short story ‘The Sandman’. Following these two hermeneutic moments he discusses some aspects of the uncanny, and lays out his model of it as representing the return of the repressed. He ascribes much to this dynamic, and regression to infantile psychological states of fear and desire—a primitive set of instincts and reactions that, by virtue of their very primordiality, evoke feelings of uneasiness—indeed, feelings of the uncanny (the ‘unhomely’, that is, the uncivilised) and of terror and apprehension.
At the heart of the uncanny is the compulsion to return or revisit. As Royle says in his study of ‘The Uncanny’,

[r]epetition is a key aspect of the uncanny, as Freud’s essay makes clear. The uncanny [...] involves a kind of duplicity (both doubling and deception) within the familiar.\(^{74}\)

Freud associates repetition with the death drive, an aspect of his thought not mentioned directly in ‘The Uncanny’ (as it first appeared in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* the following year) but which haunts it silently. Repetition itself is not necessarily alarming (in fact we shall see that it can be positive), but among many things that are “frightening,” he says, there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is *something that is repressed and now returns*. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny, and it would be immaterial whether it was itself originally frightening or arose from another effect. [My italics] \(^{75}\)

*The Owl Service* offers genuinely frightening episodes: the book flying viciously at Gwyn; Lleu’s spear flying towards Roger by the riverbank; columns of flame threatening Gwyn in the night-time woods and the sheep dogs herding him back into the valley. These events are not merely macabre but raise a frisson by their intimation that something has *returned*, and with malignity.

In addition to the fear of the primitive, we have also, according to Freud, a fear of automatism and of compulsion. Again, the impression of supernatural possession in *The Owl Service*: Alison, wearing sunglasses to hide her eyes, suddenly denies knowledge of the dinner plates and, when challenged by Gwyn, reacts with uncharacteristic threat, causing her copy of *The Mabinogion* to attack Gwyn:

\(^{74}\) (40) Royle, N. and A. Bennett (2004). *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Harlow, Pearson Education Limited.


For Freud, apparently, it is a defining characteristic of the uncanny to frighten (although he also notes that the common association of the uncanny with “death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” means that “here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it.”) (148) Freud, S. (2003). *The Uncanny*. London, Penguin Books.
Gwyn lashed out with his foot and kicked the book from Alison’s hands. It landed yards away, splayed on the grass.

No one moved. There was silence. Then, ‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Alison said.

‘You shouldn’t have done that.’ Her knuckles were white on the edge of the deck chair. Her neck was thrust forward. ‘You shouldn’t have done that.’

Yet we are persistently compelled to repeat the invoking of phantoms and of frisson. “In the unconscious mind,” says Freud,

we can recognize the dominance of a compulsion to repeat, which proceeds from instinctual impulses. This compulsion probably depends on the essential nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life [...] anything that can remind us of this inner compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny. [My italics]

It is not so surprising, Freud says, “that the primitive fear of the dead is still so potent in us and ready to manifest itself if given any encouragement.” It is out of a deep ancestral behaviour that we make our spectres. This recurrence of ancient instincts is itself a reiteration of our fear of repetition, and our compulsion to perform it, always laying our dead to rest. So it is the unwitting, repetitious, instinctual and atavistic impulse to summon the past that disturbs us. The presence of the dead among the living is, for Freud, an indication that something has gone awry. And this, for Freud, is part of the generation of art.

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Freud also notes that “In another set of experiences we have no difficulty in recognizing that it is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of ‘chance’.

38 (144)

39 (149) Ibid.

70 This relates to Freud’s theory of Mourning and Melancholia. If the process of mourning, according to Freud, is one of laying to rest (finally killing off) the dead, then the pathological perversion of this process becomes one of constant deferred interment of the dead; in fact, the iteration of their resurrection within ourselves or as hysterically summoned spectres.

80 Garner, in his discussion of engrams and psychic hurt, comments on how he came to perceive the links between his characters’ emotional injuries in *The Owl Service*, and his own psyche. “My experience does show,” he says, “that a writer of fiction, willy-nilly, plants encapsulated engrams in his characters, and that disorientation, leading to symptoms that resemble madness, can be induced when the engram is made present simultaneously in inner and outer time.” (115) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.
It is also, for all the apprehension and unease attached to it, part of the generation of recurrence and continuity:

> Our conclusion could then be stated as follows: the uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed.\(^8\)

Garner claims all his novels are about myths: not stuffy “retellings” but “reanimations”, and he himself is “a transmitter, not an archivist”.\(^8\) He turned to myth, says Neil Philip, “because of a concern, central to his writing, with the patterning of life, and with the relationship of the present to the past.” Garner’s themes have, in Philip’s words, “the need to recreate and recapture the past, not out of any feeling of nostalgia but to validate and define the present, and to make possible a rooted, not a rootless, future.”\(^8\)

### 1.3.3 Recurrence and multiplication

*The past is never dead. It’s not even past.*

William Faulkner\(^8\)

In their work on mourning processes, critics Goodwin and Bronfen suggest that repetition does not just imply a return to a previous point, in the sense of retrieving something lost, reiterating or relating a past event. Repetition also implies a plurality of events, a sequence of actions that relate to each other through resemblance. […] The repeated event, action, or term always contradicts its predecessor because, though similar, they are never identical; and though recalling the unique, singular, and original quality of the former event, the second emphasizes that it is *more than one*, a multiple duplicate, occurring at more than one site. Repetition describes a longing for identity between two terms even as it stages the impossibility of literal


identity. [...] Repetition not merely imitates but also reproduces something new out of an earlier body.\(^85\)

Thus proliferation (and perhaps) its association with lack of control is a haunting consequence of reproduction, evoking the many selves that are available to us, the many realities we experience, and the spectral traces of all of these made inevitably manifest even as we seek to lay them out of sight, and as they displace themselves.

For Garner in *The Owl Service*, proliferation is both a mark of the endurance of the past (as the ancient pattern plays out with trio after trio of lovers, generation after generation), and a sign of things behaving against nature. The plates which Alison and Gwyn find, and from which she traces her model owls (rather than the more benign possible flower motif), are difficult to keep track of, and eventually shatter spontaneously into fragments. A copy of *The Mabinogion*, the Welsh myth compendium which contains the relevant legend, attacks Gwyn supernaturally and its pages explode over his fleeing body (“Not only had the leaves disintegrated, but the paper itself was in shreds.”\(^86\)). And, in the final lines of the novel’s crisis, the abundance of feathers that seems a sign of Alison’s capitulation to a tragic destiny becomes a rain of flowers:

Something touched Roger’s hand. He started to brush it away, but there were too many. He looked up.

‘Hello, Ali.’

And the room was full of petals from skylight and rafters, and all about them a fragrance, and petals, flowers falling, broom, meadowsweet, falling, flowers of the oak.\(^87\)

In the nature of this re-appearance is the crucial aspect of the return; in the return, there is a specific form of proliferation: doubling. If for Freud the experience of walking down a street in Italy and then, to his perplexity, finding himself shortly afterwards walking down the same street, was an experience of the uncanny, then it is natural that his thought in this essay extends to discussion of the Double and his colleague Otto Rank’s work on the subject.\(^88\) Freud explains that “[t]he double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, ‘an energetic denial of the power of death’, and it


\(^87\) (224) Ibid.

seems likely that the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body.” When the ‘infantile’ phase of doubling changes, “having once been an assurance of immortality, it [doubling] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.”

“Well, when I picked up the top plate, I came over all queer. A sort of tingling in my hands, and everything went muzzy—you know how at the pictures it sometimes goes out of focus on the screen and then comes back? It was like that: only when I could see straight again, it was different somehow. Something had changed.’ [said Gwyn]

‘Like when you’re watching a person who’s asleep, and they wake up,’ said Roger. ‘They don’t move, nothing happens, but you know they’re awake.’

‘He slipped when he touched the plate, and he went all shadowy. Just for a second it didn’t look like Gwyn.’ [said Alison]

‘It’s the darkest part of the loft,’ said Roger.

Freud goes on to say that

a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations. [My italics]

This approaches a prescient description of the metempsychotic precept of The Owl Service, which possesses a powerful sense of the uncanny and the disturbing, not least through its intimation of the proliferation of selves. Each of the three protagonists multiplies in identity, so that Gwyn is also his father Huw, and the mythical Lleu Llaw Gyffes (and, somehow, also a fourth figure from the legend, the wizard Gwydion): “it comes to the same thing”; Alison is Nancy and also Blodeuwedd; Roger the lover Bertram, and Gronw. While their physical features may differ, they may also combine, so that the mysterious figure in Roger’s enlarged photograph previously evoked as Lleu, is identified by Alison as Gwyn. Gwyn himself confuses Alison with a female body glimpsed at night in the wood.

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90 (142) Ibid.
And Alison, succumbing to the enchantment of the legend, gazes at her apparent reflection in an improbably distant water surface:

I’m up here, and down there, thought Alison. Which is me? Am I the reflection in the window of me down there? 93

Rank’s work “explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death.” 94 At the heart of our fear is that of both estrangement from ourselves, and of the object (the dead)—worse, these fears combined with ourselves as dead object. 95 The particular attraction of the uncanny to the doubling or repeated leads Maurice Blanchot to draw an analogy between ‘corpse’ and ‘image’: both are ‘uncanny’ in that

they suspend stable categories of reference and position in time and space. […] The cadaverous presence is such that it simultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world nor entirely absent from it, the cadaver thus mediates between these two incompatible positions. Uncanniness emerges because the corpse, resembling itself, is in a sense its own double. It has no relation to the world it appears in except that of an image. Thus the chiasmic relation: the corpse as uncanny image/the image uncannily as corpse. 96

‘The water was glittery,’ said Alison, ‘but I could tell it was me—my colour of hair, and face, and—well, it just was.’

‘You saw a blonde reflected in the water,’ said Gwyn. ‘Her hair came down on either side of her face and she was fair-skinned. That’s all you can be sure of.’

‘You’re confusing me,’ said Alison. ‘I was trying to tell you about feeling happy, and you go and make it all ordinary with your angles and mirrors. […] No, no, no, no, no, no, no—’ Alison turned her face to the rocks of the cairn. ‘Don’t talk like that. […] Help me, Gwyn.’ 97
This uncanny repetition of ourselves, as *eidolons* (images or phantoms of a person), or in the form of an estranged other self, is a fundamental aspect of the recurrence dynamic.  

1.3.4 Escaping the past

*Truly Time is a vast Denful of Horrour, round about which a Serpent winds and in the winding bites itself by the Tail. Now, now is the Hour, every Hour, every part of an Hour, every Moment, which in its end does begin again and never ceases to end: a beginning continuing, always ending.*

Peter Ackroyd  

Doubling has implications for the doctrine of independent will. As Freud observes,

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embodied in the figure of the double [...] in addition there are all the possibilities which, had they been realized, might have shaped our destiny, and to which our imagination clings, all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will.
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This opening up of possibilities in the double relates also to the capacity of myth to close off possibilities with its over-determining force. Gwyn’s mother is haunted by events in her youth: events that seemed predestined as a recurrence of the ancient myth. For Gwyn’s mother Nancy, to angrily deny the existence of her once-lover Huw, her long-dead suitor Bertram, and to forbid her son to engage with the fatal pattern is a willing amnesia; but she cannot relinquish her memories, even to enable survival; and she has returned to the valley.

As Gwyn says,

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'My Mam hates the place, but she can’t get rid of it, see? It feels like every night of my life’s been spent listening to Mam in that back street in Aber, her going on and on about the valley.'
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1. Two ominous examples from literary biography, indeed, are poets Gerard de Nerval who, just prior to his suicide, reported meeting his double; and Shelley, whose double allegedly appeared to him in a vision just before his death by drowning, asking ‘How long do you mean to be happy?’ Sightings of the Double are often linked in folklore to imminent death.


5. Avery Gordon mirrors this, indeed, noting that “the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope.” (63) Gordon, A. F. (1997). *Ghostsly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.

She is damaged by the past. And when we last see her, as she ultimately abandons her son to his ‘fate’, she erases herself as she leaves the valley:

She turned but did not stop. She walked backwards up the road, shouting, and the rain washed the air clean of her words and dissolved her haunted face, broke the dark line of her into webs that left no stain, and Gwyn watched for a while the unmarked place where she had been, then climbed over the gate.

Nancy leaves; Gwyn stays, but only after, claustrophobic at the thought of repeating history and confronted with the identity of his father Huw, he rebels against his mother and the ‘pattern’ set for him.

‘My Dad ran away,’ said Gwyn. ‘I shan’t. I don’t want to end up like him—or you.’

Gwyn wants to change his destiny: a working class youth, he is struggling to obtain an education and achieve independence. He is quick, however, to perceive the mythical pattern in which he feels bound, and apparently is almost elated at times, even as he warns the others of the implications. In the end, in fact, it is Gwyn’s inability to overcome past hurts that renders him helpless to save Alison and escape his role. Huw, too, has struggled and capitulated:

‘We are not free,’ said Huw. ‘We have tried too many times to be free. No lord is free. My grandfather tried, my uncle tried, and I have tried to end it, but it has no end.’

And yet, at the conclusion of the novel, it is Roger the conservative sceptic who is able to transform the myth for the first time even as Huw despairs:

‘He is hurt too much she wants to be flowers and you make her owls and she is at the hunting—’

‘Is that it?’ said Roger. ‘Is that all it is? As easy as that?’

‘—and so without end without end without end—’

102 (212) Ibid.
103 (206) Ibid.
104 (101) Ibid.
‘Hey, Ali, did you hear?’ Roger brushed the feathers aside. ‘You’ve got it back to front, you silly gubbins. She’s not owls. She’s flowers. Flowers. Flowers, Ali.’

The consequences of this transformation are left unstated; with the appearance of flowers and Alison’s redemption the novel ends.

If the hidden—or the myth—returns, replicating itself in the presence (or in the very body) of the living, then the uncanny is beginning to inhabit us; it is, finally, becoming not the eldritch whistle in the wilderness, but ‘homely’.

[...] the sky dropped lower, hiding the barren distances, crowding the hills with ghosts, then lifting, and [Gwyn] looked again. Nothing.
CHAPTER 2
REPETITION AND MYTH: THE OWL SERVICE

2.1. Introduction

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead)

...so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

T. S. Eliot

Time fantasy in general, and Alan Garner's work in particular, often draws deeply on Britain's mythical heritage. Myth presents the opportunity to employ classic narrative structures (for example, the tragic love-triangle); to evoke the profundity of history; to reference a powerfully resonant signifier of the past; and to imply a dimension of timelessness. Garner, who might echo Nietzsche’s yearning for “a horizon ringed about with myths,” frequently acknowledges his fascination with the dynamic potential of myth, including its potential to ‘recur’ in the form of anakuklosis, ‘Eternal Return’. This concept, made famous by Nietzsche and later by ethnographer Mircea Eliade, suggests that time, in the sacred or mythical dimension, is not linear as secular time is, but elastic, cyclical, or diffuse. At the heart of it is the mechanism of repetition and recurrence: what happens once, in sacred time, happens always.

Having discussed some of the psychoanalytic models for recuperation and recurrence, in this chapter I shall be examining the significance of myth in British time fantasy, repetition in myth and concepts of mythic time, and looking at their special implications in The Owl Service.

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2.2 Myth redivivus

_The lover of myths, which are a compound of wonders, is, by his being in that very state, a lover of wisdom._

Aristotle 109

“I should like to define ‘myth’,” says Alan Garner, “as the dream-thinking of the people. Dream. And thinking.”

Once you are involved with the culture of dreaming, then you are also involved with time. And that results […] in considering learning to be a process of remembering. It was the same for the Ancient Greeks, who as usual had a word for it: ‘anamnesis’. 110

If remembering and forgetting are productive engines of modern culture, then the form of remembering enacted in mythopoeic writing is one of the more powerful available to us as it accesses both the global and the timeless. Literature of the modern era has confronted new unease about the loss or sacrifice of the past, and the advantages and prerogatives of turning away from it, versus the loss of the succour of memory. Myth possesses the privileges of spaceless eternity; it is always available, whether re-enacted, re-formed or revived in modern guise. It is commonplace to declare that modern life, vacuous and amnesiac, hungers for master narratives and ancestor-knowledge. Nietzsche made the point in his _The Birth of Tragedy:_

Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us (Umsichammeln) of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb? 111

The British heritage of myth draws most profoundly upon its Celtic legacy: parables, fables and narratives which have survived in oral tradition and in documents such as the


110 (150) Ibid. Anamnesis is usually translated as remembering (recollection) rather than creating. However, it is distinguished from _memne, memory._

Welsh *Mabinogion*. Celtic myth, while apparently particular to the British Isles and northern Europe, possesses the universal resonance of myths everywhere. While it is infused with a sense of magic and supernatural, it is also often grounded in very human stories, and possesses an apparently inexhaustible reservoir of literary potential.

### 2.2.1 Alan Garner and myth

> *We have to find parables; we have to tell stories to unriddle the world.*
>
> Alan Garner 112

In what sounds like an interpretation of collective unconscious, Garner describes myth as “a recycling of energy […] It has passed through unknown individual subconsciousnesses, until it has become almost pure energy.”113 So forms of the supernatural or mythic have irrigated channels of literature up to the present day, bringing readers to “the point at which,” in Italo Calvino’s words, “something not yet said, something as yet only darkly felt by presentiment, suddenly appears and seizes us and tears us to pieces, like the fangs of a man-eating witch.”114 The enduring popularity of the horror genre and the renaissance of interest in the supernatural and mythology confirm, as Garner comments on his own creative inspiration, “the need to recreate and recapture the past, not out of any feeling of nostalgia but to validate and define the present, and to make possible a rooted, not a rootless, future.”115

In an essay titled ‘The Death of Myth’ Garner suggests that myth (used generically, with subdivisions into fantasy, folklore and fairy tale) may be handled in three ways:

1. The writer may translate existing texts and material.
2. The writer may retell and rebuild using translations.
3. The writer may reabsorb and transmute the elements of the myth.

Garner asserts that he chooses the third, “which is the hardest.”116 He further asserts that while his novels are all about myths, they are not ‘retellings’, which he says are “stuffed

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trophies on the wall”, but “reanimations”. The myths, he says in fact, are not selected by him, but rather “choose” him.¹¹⁷ The writer of mythopoeics, according to Garner, produces “distilled and violent truth”, “spiritual gelignite,” working with myth which “contains crystallised human experience and very powerful imagery.”¹¹⁸ For him, myth is natural energy, directed and carefully handled by a writer (in fact, he uses the image of a trapped electrical charge as a metaphor for pent-up power across time in *The Owl Service*, and, in another novel, *Elidor*, as a means for magic to be transmitted).

Neil Philip’s critical study of the works of Alan Garner notes that “[m]yth is the crucible in which Garner’s thinking about time has been fired. […] Once the connection had been made strongly enough, a Stone Age axe or a painted hand were sufficient to reactivate it.”¹¹⁹ In Garner’s work, myth and its relation to the present ‘secular’ age have been two of its most defining elements. He has a reverential and yet ambivalent relationship with myth. Much of his work is set in his native Cheshire, a place where his family has lived for many generations, and he is preoccupied with the significance of continuity, its power over people and the ways in which its patterns recur (and transform).¹²⁰

Garner found in Eliade’s theory of the Eternal Return a framework to develop fiction “in which sequential, causal, ‘historical’ time is set against and enlarged by a ‘mythological’ concept of time as elastic, cyclic, recoverable.”¹²¹ It is the conflict between the static (or stable) and the fluid (or perilous), and negotiation with time that pervades Garner’s work.

In Garner’s words, “the form of myth is concrete”: it is most satisfyingly realised through embodiment in a real story.¹²² Butler quotes Garner on the amplification of secular

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¹²⁰ Garner observes, in an essay concerning the importance of the Alderley Edge area in Cheshire, where he has always lived and closely researched its history and geology, that “[a]s a result of gained knowledge, for me the Edge both stopped, and melted, time.” (13) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.

¹²¹ Garne[r’s early novels, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, were in the tradition of High Fantasy for young readers, combining knowledge of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology with the conventions of ‘magic portals’ and adventurous child protagonists in what is often described as Tolkien-esque, rather self-conscious children’s fantasy. With subsequent novels, such as *Elidor* and *The Owl Service*, Garner concentrated his narratives more closely upon the intersection between myth and life, and depicted progressively older protagonists.

¹²² “I am using the word ‘myth’ not as meaning ‘fiction’ or ‘unhistorical’ but as a complex of story that, for various reasons, human beings see as demonstrations of the inner cause of the universe and of human life. Myth is quite different from philosophy in the sense of abstract concepts. The form of myth is concrete always, yet it holds those qualities that demand of the human mind that it recognise a revelation of the function behind the world.” (27) Garner, A. (1997). *The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures*. London, Harvill Press.
experience through access to an enlargening mythopoeia: “the story can achieve universal rather than particular significance only insofar as it partakes of the myth.” Garner states that the most difficult task is to make the reader absorb myth in order to make it relevant. “This absorption, if it works,” he says,

is the most positive form for the myth to take, because the life of the myth is handed forward. It doesn’t matter if the story changes, since what we take to be the original story is no more than the earliest form that we have. When it works, the writer is a transmitter, not an archivist.

“Are we, then, lost: condemned to feed our imaginations with only the most secular level of myth, nailed to linearity?” Garner asks. “We are not. Can we write the world? We can; if we are willing to pay.” He sees the power that remains in the modern; his characters iterate the undiminished potency of old patterns. He presents the violence, pitilessness and ambiguity of myth; at the same time he dissects the anguish of modern experience and identity, using myth as a diagnostic tool to examine contemporary ailments. In the bleaker of his works, such as The Owl Service and Red Shift, neither the old world nor the new is a restful, stable place. It is meanness of experience that he excoriates above all. A kind of poetry is his solution: one that resonates with the echoes of time.

Philip observes that although Garner’s use of myth has evolved throughout his career, “it has always been used to sharpen our perception of emotional, intellectual or spiritual potentials which are either crushed or ignored in a materialistic, vicarious society.”

Garner turned to myth because of a concern, central to his writing, with the patterning of life, and with the relationship of the present to the past. Gradually, the myth receded, as he found stories which would hold the charge which in the first two books is supplied by the folklore, not the characters […] As his career has proceeded he has concentrated more and more on the central pattern, approaching his themes directly rather than obliquely through the mediation of myth.

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For Garner, writing is a muscular, difficult conflict, as is well documented in his interviews. Carol Hellings describes how “in transforming a myth, or distorting dimensions in time, he brings himself almost to the point of mental collapse in his attempts to free himself to a point where he can ‘tap energy’.” Garner himself observes that, “although I have no specific religious belief, working it out is a religious experience, almost an act of forgiveness.”

Ultimately, for Garner, myth is a profound dynamic which has everything to do with contemporary identity and place. “Myth,” he says, “is not entertainment, but rather the crystallisation of experience”; further, “[m]yth encapsulates the nearest approach to absolute truth that words can speak.”

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128 Quoted in (67) Ibid.

2.3 Mythic time

Now these things [myths] never happened, but always are.

Sallustius

There is a long tradition of cultures, going back to the most primordial, which have understood that time as it applies to mythic or religious consciousness is not like the time experienced by quotidian mortal reality. In his book on the myth of the Eternal Return, Mircea Eliade discusses the ways in which ancient (primarily Indo-European) cultures formulated a double concept of time: linear, secular chronology; and a more diffuse, infinite ‘singularity’ of sacred time, which may be entered at any point, for they are all the same. Repetition is the core of this access: and repetition ensures that comprehension or belief in cyclical time is at the heart of myth.

Two types of time are commonly delineated in most cultures with a strong socio-religious consciousness: sacred and secular time. These are not always, but very often identifiable with the Greek terms kairos and chronos. Greek thought includes a double understanding of time: linear time is chronos; eternal, mythic time, with its cycles and totality, is kairos. (Crucially, kairos is reversible, an aspect which has relevance for literature preoccupied with putting the dead to rest and confronting the Uncanny. The dead can be unslain—or disinterred.)

Plato, in his Politicus, explains that time, as it moves the celestial spheres and measures their revolutions, is “the moving image of unmoving eternity.” Thus in Greek thought, with both mythic kairos and linear chronos at work, nothing is ever lost or gained in the universe; no event is unique but has occurred countless times and will go on occurring forever; and thus the essence of perfection, the still point of these ceaseless cycles, is immobility and immutability themselves. The implication of this metacosmesis (periodic renewal of the world) is that everything will come around again; and so as long as the mechanisms are maintained and the balance kept, all will be well in this fatalistic paradigm. Celtic culture, upon which much time fantasy relies, has a similar appreciation of godly time and

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131 The myth of a returning god or hero is the most universal: death followed by resurrection. See the legends of Jesus Christ and King Arthur, and also fairy tales like Snow White.


133 How are we to escape the circles of habit and inevitability and make a new world—one which enables individual agency—without any possibility of breaking out of historicity and without breaking history itself? Nietzsche warned of a distorting historical fever—that history could become an excuse not to act and not to accept the fullness of life. Cited in (140) Maier, C. S. (1993). “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on history, melancholy and denial.” History and Memory: Studies in representations of the past 5: pp. 136-151.
the possibility of eclipsing linear time. In Eliade’s words, for the ancients “[t]he past is but a prefiguration of the future.” This construction is echoed by Alan Garner when he says “[f]rom within us, from our past, we find the future answered and the boundary met.”

Mythic time can be not only a diffuse, embracing golden age, but also a prison of determination. (This is an implication that Garner works seriously in his fiction, as I shall discuss below.) This troubling of paradise recalls the ambivalence of the uncanny, with its simultaneous yearning to recover the lost, and its apprehension of the spectre. Texts which enact the turning of mythic time into ‘adult’, linear time evoke through their realistic tone a more psychologically complex landscape, encompassing conflict, ambiguity and disappointment—the loss of enchantment. Children’s fantasy literature often features protagonists in puberty who are reluctant to mature and lose their childhood grace. The stories thus frequently portray rites of passage. This movement, notes Joseph, also draws us through ‘adulthood’ towards death. If death is usually considered the close of a story, then in works that summon any aspect of the uncanny, its return of the dead, and the possibility that in mythic time death is not the end, we see two opposing dynamics at work. It is out of this tension that some of the most effective children’s fantasy literature obtains its impact.

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He acknowledges Eliade’s influence on his thought, and refers in one lecture to “the late Professor Mircea Eliade, in whose precision of discourse I have often found my instincts to be defined.” (55) Garner, A. (1997). The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures. London, Harvill Press.

2.3.1 Mythic time and narrative

Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred.

Mircea Eliade\textsuperscript{137}

Fiction, including time fantasy, is story-telling: tales which may be read again and again: \textit{in illo tempore}, ‘once upon a time’ is how many tales start. Maria Nikolajeva observes that story-telling itself is a ritual act, “a re-enacting of recurrent mythical events,”\textsuperscript{138} echoing Garner’s comment that

in the telling of a special truth, we are entering a different time, a different space, an eternity that, by the telling, is perpetually being created here and now. The clock may be ticking, but we, while listening to the story, are in sacred time.\textsuperscript{139}

Eliade too makes the observation that

[j]ore strongly than any of the other arts, we feel in literature a revolt against historical time, the desire to attain to other temporal rhythms than that in which we are condemned to live and work. One wonders whether the day will come when this desire to transcend one’s own time—personal, historical time—and be submerged in a ‘strange’ time, whether ecstatic or imaginary, will be completely rooted out. As long as it persists, we can say that modern man preserves at least some residues of ‘mythological behaviour’.\textsuperscript{140}

We know myth best, these days, through text. Mythic narratives, however, continue to permeate our paradigms, and our compulsion to retell myth seems never to abate. Myth’s ability to transcend time does not lessen, nor its narrative tense become more ‘perfect’; in fact, as we move away from its origins, this quality only becomes more potent and the tense remains ‘present continuos’.


Garner observes his belief that “[b]y reciting a myth, the storyteller remembers a creation, and, by remembering, is a part of that creating.” (155) Garner, A. (1997). \textit{The Voice that Thunders: Essays and lectures}. London, Harvill Press.


2.3.2 Childhood time

The child lives in a mythical, paradisal time.

Mircea Eliade

“The circular character of narrative time in archaic thought,” suggests Nikolajeva, “has been reflected in children’s novels because the Arcadian time of individual childhood is similar to the mythical time of the childhood of humankind.” For children, time is not yet fully paced out; for very small children, as perhaps for archaic (especially for prehistoric) humans, there is little concept of linear time. It is appropriate that children’s and adolescents’ literature forms one of the most evident platforms for examining the workings of myth, since it is in the dreamy, apparently eternal introversion of childhood that time has its most plasticity. For Valerie Krips, in the economy of time fantasy literature

[r]esurrection implies change: the child of the second golden age, rising from the ashes of the first, will remake what is to be remembered of childhood, refiguring the site of memory.

But more ominously Freud perceives that (in Hugh Haughton’s words),

141 (77) Ibid.


Noting that it is critical for the purposes of her study “that contemporary Western children’s fiction is written from a philosophicial viewpoint based on linear time, which has a beginning and an end, and recognizes every event in history as unique”, she divides all children’s literature into 3 categories, according to their representation of temporal structure:

1. An irreversible, linear flow (Collapse)
2. A recurrent, reproducible pattern (Utopia)
3. Something in between (Carnival).


This identification of recurrent, that is, mythic time as Utopian derives for Nikolajeva from the Arcadian dreaminess of both childhood and primordial experience. In a review of Nikolajeva’s book, Michael Joseph summarises one implication of these models, in relation to what they suggest about fate or individual place in history:

“In Arcadian literature, personal development is inconceivable; in Carnival literature, it becomes a tantalizing possibility; and in Collapse, it figures as the preeminent element, the purpose or consolation of suffering.” (222)


The Owl Service, with its recurrent, reproducible pattern, seems to fit into Nikolajeva’s Utopian model. A character like Gwyn strains towards change but ultimately is unable to totally achieve it; his anguish forms an important element of the novel. Yet at least one of the protagonists appears to profoundly change at the book’s climax. Roger’s apparent change of heart was criticised by some reviewers as implausible, but one might argue that it is his germinal affection for Alison that triumphs, rather than Roger undergoing a fundamental development. Charles Butler comments that Roger must change himself, not just Alison’s vision, through sacrifice and pity, into someone who can see flowers instead of owls. (74) Butler, C. (2006). Four British Fantasists: Place and culture in the children’s fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper. Lanham, Maryland, Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

childhood is where the repressed, archaic pre-Enlightenment world of primitive religion, returns in perpetually re-invented home-made forms, forcing us in some sense to repeat or recapitulate such primal myths as those of Oedipus or Moses, and such beliefs as animism and ‘the omnipotence of thoughts’.  

2.3.3 Novelistic time and synchrony

I think that the fact that we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history is one reason why so many novelists have taken to it.

A. S. Byatt  

In her book on subjectivity in adolescent fiction, Robyn McCallum reviews the ideas of Domenick LaCapra, who in his work on novelistic time, and drawing on antecedents in Structuralist thought such as Gérard Genette, distinguishes ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ dimensions of time. As McCallum explains it, “[diachrony] designates movement over time involving change; synchrony ‘stops’ time at a given moment and displays its ‘sameness’ or ‘nowness’.”

Diachrony and synchrony are two ways in which to experience time imaginatively. Myth, and its recurrence, is one way to inhabit both simultaneously. Novelistic time is another interaction between these two dimensions. Synchrony is, as McCallum points out, the dominant mode of modernist literature, with its focus on multiple viewpoints of the same event, and recurrence with change. And this adeptness with multiples and alternatives is

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147 Kairós can be integrated with chronos through rituals, rites and festivals—as repetition. In contemporary literature, it is also sometimes used for carnivalesque or parodic purposes. (5) Nikolajeva, M. (2000). From Mythic to Linear Time in children's literature. Lanham, Md., & London, The Children's Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press.


McCallum observes that the prevailing tradition in literature at least up to the early 20th century was that of diachrony, with a linear narrative structure depicting consequent events. (This exegesis is not the place to deeply investigate theories about narrative time. See, inter alia, the works of Paul de Man and Paul Ricoeur.)


Nikolajeva, according to McCallum, is the only critic to apply chronotope theory to children's literature. Like Bakhtin, she uses it mostly to differentiate between genres, seeing a historical shift in children's literature from simple, logical chronology structures towards “sophisticated” (i. e. polyphonic) texts with complex chronotope. This is given also a gendered interpretation. For Nikolajeva, ‘male’ texts are often dominantly linear in their treatment of time, and space is open; ‘female’ texts see time as circular and space as closed and confined. (98) Nikolajeva, M. (2000). From Mythic to Linear Time in children's literature. Lanham, Md., & London, The Children's Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press.
only heightened in post-WWII literature. Alan Garner is preoccupied in his fiction and criticism with the points at which the two types of time intersect. Myth, for him, following Eliade, is out of time, “sacred time” or “inner time”; mythic time is “where everything is simultaneously present.” 149

As McCallum says in discussion of Garner’s Red Shift and a novel by Jill Paton Walsh,

The use of narrative and discursive repetitions in novels such as Unleaving and Red Shift disrupts linear and teleological concepts of time associated with diachronic dimensions of time, and implies instead cyclical concepts of time. These are linked in Unleaving with personal memory and in Red Shift with mythic or collective memories. 150

In Garner’s The Owl Service both Gwyn and Roger experience something at the same time (Gwyn ‘flickers’ as he picks up the owl service plates; Roger senses a spear being thrown at him), though these episodes are presented separately in the narrative, and each from the protagonist’s (third-person) perspective.

Something flew past [Roger], a blink of dark on the leaves. It was heavy, and fast, and struck hard. He felt the vibration through the rock, and he heard a scream.

‘And you came straight up from the river,’ said Gwyn. ‘Didn’t you? Work it out, man. We both felt something, and it must have been near enough at the same time.’ 151

For Jean Baudrillard,

The tense of the mythological object is perfect: it is that which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is ‘authentic.’ The antique is always, in the strongest sense of the term, a ‘family portrait’: the immemorialization, in the concrete form of an object, of a

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In other words, mythic time performs what a fictional work also attempts, retrospectively compressing, elasticising and fracturing time as it is portrayed in a narrative. In his study of the mythopoeic, Eleazar Meletinksy notes that in the modern novel, mythological time has come to substitute historical or ‘objective’ time, since action and events, no matter how specifically they are grounded in time, are presented as manifestations of eternal prototypes. The universal time of history is thus metamorphosed into mythical ahistoric time.\footnote{(275-6) Meletinsky, E. M. (1998). \textit{The Poetics of Myth}. New York and London, Garland Publishing, Inc.}

“Time,” suggests Neil Philip, “is Garner’s most consistent theme, and at the root of all his thinking about it lies the idea that what is important of human life endures, and does not decay.”\footnote{(16) Philip, N. (1981). \textit{A Fine Anger: A critical introduction to the work of Alan Garner}. London, Collins.} In \textit{The Owl Service} Alison, becoming ‘possessed’ by the spirit of Blodeuwedd, tries to describe her disorientation to Gwyn:

‘Nothing’s safe any more. I don’t know where I am. “Yesterday”, “today”, “tomorrow”—they don’t mean anything. I feel they’re here at the same time: waiting.’

‘How long have you felt this?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Since yesterday?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what “yesterday” was.’

‘And that’s what’s frightening you?’

‘Not just that,’ said Alison. ‘All of me’s confused the same way. I keep wanting to laugh and cry.’

‘Sounds dead metaphysical to me,’ said Gwyn.\footnote{(96) Garner, A. (1967). \textit{The Owl Service}. London, William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd.}

But Gwyd himself has become aware of time’s plasticity:

And Gwyn began to play with time, splitting a second into minutes, and then into hours—or taking an hour and compressing it to an instant. No hurry.
His concentration was broken once, when he was alarmed by the quick drumming of hoofs, but the next moment he grinned as a motorcycle swept along the road. Its headlamp spun shadows in his face.

Kick start!156

And he comes to suggest to Roger that the events playing out are not diachronic but synchronic.

‘Not haunted,’ said Gwyn after a while. ‘More like—still happening?’

Later, Alison, alone on the mountainside, also comes to sense this:

Still: nothing changes here. Rocks and bracken. It could be a thousand years ago.157

This sense of timelessness is both invigorating and vertiginous:

‘How long has this been happening?’ said Gwyn. He held the rusted fragments of a dagger in its sheath.

‘There’s no saying. But we of the blood must meet it in our time, and we bring here what we have.’

‘I didn’t understand,’ said Gwyn. ‘I’m all numb inside.’

‘I know.’158

Above all, according to his own claims, in his writing Garner is interested in pursuing the possibilities of “the revelation of a truth in a dimension of timelessness.”159

2.4 Myth and repetition

Falling towards nothing

Again and again and again and again and again and again…

The Cure, ‘A Forest’

156 (85) Ibid.

The sound of the motorbike, it is implied, is that of Bertram’s fatal ride after Huw had sabotaged his vehicle years before. The noise recurs throughout the novel. The sound of hoofs suggests Lleu Llaw Gyffe’s own fatal ride to kill his rival by the riverbank.

157 (73 and 128) Ibid.

158 (193) Ibid.

Eleazar Meletinsky reflects on the implication for repetition in a narrative of mythic time in which nothing happens ‘once’, but ‘always’:

Besides mythification as an instrument by which narratives are structured, other elementary structures are used – repetition, for example. […] the leitmotif, the repeated quoting of phrases, the explaining of a motif through entire scenes, and the contrapuntal link that exists between these motifs.  

Repetition, of course, is a device deeply associated with epic and archaic literary forms. Maria Nikolajeva has followed Garner’s interest in Eliade’s treatment of prehistoric time and its plasticity in her study of mythic time in fantasy. Like Meletinsky, she notes that one of most interesting narrative devices in texts concerning mythical time is their ‘iterative frequency’: telling once about an event which has taken place several times; as opposed to singular, or retelling a single event again and again, sometimes from different perspectives. As with his subsequent novel, the even more explicit Red Shift, Garner uses The Owl Service to create a powerful narrative frisson out of just this phenomenon: the apparent intersection of (at least) three periodic re-enactments of the ‘same’ event.

One of Garner’s central concerns, in Neil Philip’s words, is “with patterning, with repetitive cycles of experience, which he has explored by structuring his stories around myths and legends.” Garner’s employment of repetition (narratological and thematic) comes not only from his increasingly stylised means of expression, but from his deep concern with the economies of myth. “The story,” Garner himself asserts, “is the medium through which the writer interprets the reality; but it is not the reality itself. The story is a symbol, which makes a unity of the elements, hitherto seen as separate, that combine uniquely in the writer’s vision.”

Charles Butler also comments:

Perhaps the simplest way to consider the intersection of linear and mythical time in Garner’s fiction is through his regular use of the trope of repetition. […] In each case, the books deal with situations, actions, and perceptions that occur at separate

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points in time but that share a mythic identity that obliterates time’s distance. As the repeated refrain of *Red Shift* has it: ‘The distance is gone from between us!’  

*The Owl Service*, as already observed, has at its heart the apparent repetition of a particular pattern, and while tropes, motifs and characterisations are evidently presented as repetitions, so too are some phrases and images. Alison’s reflection in the water is interpreted as the face of Blodeuwedd; a silhouette glimpsed in Roger’s photo of the riverbank where Lleu Llaw Gyffes is suggested to have stood in previous photos is identified by Alison as Gwyn. Phrases such as “I don’t know” appear repeatedly. Gwyn, on comprehending what Huw tells him of the timeless pattern, says, “I felt I could blow that house up just by looking at it’”; Roger, a few pages later and perhaps at the same moment in time, says, “This house: I feel I could put a bomb under it.”

Repetition implies continuity, and in the novel this is presented as either consoling, or prescriptive:

‘Have you noticed how you can hear the river, even though it’s so far off?’ said Gwyn. ‘And the motorbike going up the pass? Sound rises. Listen to that river. It’s what lasts. Wherever you go you can think of that noise, and you know what you hear in your head is in the valley at the same moment. It never stops. It never stopped since it began. It was the last sound Lleu Llaw Gyffes heard before he was killed. Gronw heard it in his tum. We hear it now.’

‘Gwyn—’

‘Shh. Don’t be frightened. Listen.’

‘Don’t you people round here talk about anything else?’ said Roger. ‘You’d think it was the only thing that’s ever happened in this valley.’

Whirr [went his camera].

‘That is right,’ said Huw.

Click.

‘Finished,’ said Roger.

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165 For example, ‘She is the lady,’ said Huw.

‘So?’

‘And she has come.’

‘What does that mean?’


166 (196 and 198) Ibid.

167 (140 and 75) Ibid.
For many critics, including Jungians, and Structuralist theorists such as Vladimir Propp, myths are universal structures, which in Terry Eagleton’s words “have a quasi-objective collective existence, unfold their own ‘concrete logic’ with supreme disregard for the vagaries of individual thought, and reduce any particular consciousness to a mere function of themselves.”

In his fiction Garner examines the burden of myth’s endless reiteration, and its over-determining disabling of free will. This echoes Nietzsche’s development of thought on the Eternal Return in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. “And must we not return and run in that other lane out before us,” he asks, “that long weird lane—must we not eternally return?” Nietzsche calls the idea of Eternal Return “horrifying and paralyzing,” and says that its burden is the “heaviest weight” imaginable.

Certainly, Garner is cognisant of the oppressive potential of the past, as well as the very human ways in which this impulsion may also console, define and propel its subjects. One possible reading of *The Owl Service* is as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of credence in the past’s influence, or of the wrong interpretation of it. Not only does Alison ‘choose’ to see a pattern in the first place, but she sees malign owls instead of flowers in the plates’ design:

‘It’s dead clever the way she traces the patterns out so it fits together,’ [said Roger].

Gwyn, pursuing Alison through night-time woods, is beset by apparently spectral flames, and in panic remembers what Huw has told him:

This is where Huw’s old feller went mad. Get me out of here. Get me out of here.

The flames are revealed to be marsh-gas, but Gwyn’s sensitised imagination has figured them as supernatural, malevolent avatars of the legendary past herding him against his will. On the other hand, Roger’s father, the glib and parvenu Clive, too easily dismisses the past:

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171 (88) Ibid.
‘Why did he stand there and let it happen?’ said Roger.
‘Because he killed the husband the same way earlier to take the wife.’
‘Tit for tat,’ said Clive. ‘These old yarns, eh? Well, I must be off.’172

And Gwyn’s mother Nancy combats the force of the past, first by denying or silencing her memories of it, and then physically, if impotently, by attacking an artefact of it (the stuffed owl shot by her lover Bertram):

Nancy lashed about her at the paper models which winged in the air around the leaping woman and the dead bird that filled the room and stuck to her wet clothing and even to her skin and to her hair. [...] Nancy was fighting the swirled dust.173

Of *The Owl Service*, Charles Butler remarks:

To ignore the past leads to willful ignorance and charlatanism, both apparent in the attitudes of Roger and Clive [Roger’s father]; to see it as wholly determinant of the present may lead to a helpless fatalism, increasingly evident in Huw and even Gwyn. In *The Owl Service*, as in many of Garner’s books, we find a complex negotiation taking place between the desire for autonomy, on the one hand, and the shaping power of parents, environment, and place, on the other.”174

Nevertheless, Garner seems to present the force of the past as something that cannot be denied. Gwyn’s resistance to completing the ‘pattern’, and his refusal to offer Alison forgiveness (or to finally attack Roger as Lleu once attacked Gronw) at the conclusion of the novel leaves him excluded from the novel’s final moments.

‘You are the three. You have made this together,’ said Huw.
‘I’m not doing anything for them. I’ve finished.’175

As noted, the phrase ‘I’ve finished’ recurs in variations throughout the novel from Gwyn, Roger and Huw.176 And yet neither Gwyn nor Huw is able to finish his part in the drama. Garner’s ambivalent message seems to be that one must challenge the dictates of the past, but they must be also acknowledged.

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172 (44) Ibid.
173 (203) Ibid.
For Garner, myth, with its eternal truths, lies at the heart of his vocation to speak the truth:

The story that the writer must reveal is no less than the truth. And by ‘truth’ I mean the fabrication through which reality may be the more clearly defined. [...] The job of the storyteller is to speak the truth; but what we feel most deeply cannot be spoken in words. At this level only images connect. And so story becomes symbol; and symbol is myth.177

Towards the novel’s conclusion Garner offers an acute image of the natural force of pattern, in the marks left in a dusty room by Alison’s paper model owls, which have eerily clustered around the stuffed owl Bertram shot during his courting of Nancy. Roger at first thinks that Alison has put the paper owls there, but then he sees that the dusty floor is undisturbed but for trails left by the owls’ supernatural passage:

“it was a pattern that had the balance and precision of iron filings in the field of a magnet or of petals in a flower, and the magnet or the heart of the flower, from which all lines started and to which all lines came.”178

In the present continuous tense of myth, the paradigms of the past have enormous force. Their terribilità is compelling; their timelessness may make evasion through even modern faith in individual agency impossible. They threaten, in Garner’s work, to coerce the present. And yet myth’s endurance and pervasiveness is also a consolation, a framework to remind us that even in an age of apparent obliterating amnesia we are profoundly connected to our ancestors, that individual anguish is not singular, and that human experience is, after all, a great truth that may sing through millennia in resonant refrain.

177 (27) Ibid.
Breaking Bread with the Dead: Conclusions
CONCLUSIONS

Through art, we are able to break bread with the dead, and without communion with the dead a fully human life is impossible.

W. H. Auden

The main research question posed by Breaking Bread with the Dead concerned the possible roles in time fantasy of recurrence and return. Their significance proves to be multivalent. These elements can signify consoling or claustrophobic inevitability, either supporting us in the modern era with cognisance of our antecedents and linking us to an overarching humanity, or coercing the present into a compulsive re-enactment of past pathologies. They can provide a frame upon which to pin a particular narrative, using the common time fantasy conceit that there are parallels between past and present events (awareness of which may propel a protagonist into maturity), or be fundamentally integrated into the form of the narrative itself, as repetitions and reiterations serve a deliberate and reinforcing stylistic purpose. They can intimate vastness (a numinous sense of time’s infinity) or be applied to the particular in a specific narrative focus. In time fantasy, recurrence and repetition function as morbid restorations, mechanisms of mythic eternity, and ceaseless reminders that no single event exists in isolation.

“Melancholy too is fugal or double-tracked; it involves an experience and the experiencing of experience,” remarks Charles Maier in an essay on the surfeit of memory. One way to experience and re-experience melancholy, loss and nostalgia is through literature, that prism of reality. In time fantasy literature we see ambivalence to the past; wariness and apprehension of the past; nostalgic yearning for the past; and, above all, reverence of the power of the past and its endurance. The melancholy attendant on reviving something lost and passed is enacted in time fantasy, but so is the eternal attempt to learn from history, esteem the present, and ground ourselves for the future.

It is possible to see in time fantasy a ratification of nostalgia, a groping backwards into a contrived version of the past to draw it more comfortably into the present. This may be a recuperative gesture, a pathological response to post-War loss and historical anxiety. Or it may be a sophisticated negotiation of modern ambivalence to heritage, one that acknowledges the evasiveness of ‘the past’ (or ‘pasts’) and displays the problematics of


approaching it. What is drawn out of the past in late time fantasy is, more often than not, a disruptive shadow, not an arcadian idyll.

For psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud and Nicolas Abraham, the summoning of spectres comes from a compulsion to return—whether to complete a process of mourning or to act out primitive, repressed childhood anxieties. The sense in much time fantasy of a past which presses claustrophobically upon the present suggests that this is very much an oeuvre of haunting. The past may visit unbidden, in the form of a ghost, a disorder of present-day life, or a reiterated, forceful pattern of behaviour. Protagonists of these fictions must confront their own ambivalence, their own sense of identity or will, and their own place in history. For the characters in *The Owl Service*, the legend of Blodeuwedd may determine their destinies, but they are shaped equally by their own histories, and more than one type of mysterious force must be allayed before they are free. Haunting can be a troubling and destructive experience, even if the spectres are ultimately laid to rest, but it may be necessary. As Avery Gordon points out, for any protagonist (or reader), “the ghost is nothing without you.”  

Return and recurrence are a fundamental engine of haunting. The dead who lie quietly in their graves can provide no narrative. But return is also a redemptive, transcendent dynamic in the world of myth. The hero who overcomes death is saved—and a saviour. In the world of mythic time, nothing is ever “finished” or lost; an over-arching dimension of sacred (or “mythic” or “inner”) time allows us to elude mortality and find, again and again, a world, in Mircea Eliade’s words, “uncontaminated by time and becoming.”  

In *The Owl Service*, recurrence and return form the main premise of the novel, even as it apparently portrays a modern realist scenario of young adults grappling with personal tensions. The novel successfully evokes a Welsh myth to suggest, first, that the relationships and conflicts between Gwyn, Alison and Roger embody a timeless human pattern: the love triangle. Its allusion that such a pattern is profoundly ancient offers the possibility of a capitulation to inevitability, yet the narrative consistently presents opportunities for the protagonists to challenge this idea. Garner uses repetition of phrases,  


images of doubling and confusion of identity to emphasise his concern with the power of reiteration. In the conclusion of the novel, however, it is individual decision that provides the agency for overcoming the engine of recurrence. Garner believes deeply in the continuity of the past within the present; he speaks of it as a “truth”, but he seems to conceive of repetition as a form that, although it may appear to mechanically and endlessly reproduce itself, in fact may transfigure with every replication towards a new edition of “truth”.

There are, time fantasy suggests, no single moments. What was yesterday’s legend may be today’s haunting; what is today’s decision may be drawn backwards in time to become yesterday’s history; what is performed today may be tomorrow’s spectre. Time is an element in which we swim, not walk. So return and recurrence are not only pathology, but an immutable aspect of human experience. As avatar of the past, the returning myth or ghost may be a threat, but it is also a consolation. As eternal form, the myth or ghost may be a crushing presence, but in time fantasy it is also a parable about human truth, one from which we may learn much. In Alan Garner’s words,

> Literature exists at every level of experience. It is inclusive, not exclusive. It embraces; it does not reduce, however simply it is expressed. [...] We have to find parables; we have to tell stories to unriddle the world.\(^\text{183}\)

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Darkness Visible: An exploration of recurrence

Part A

The Sacrifice

A novel submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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August 2008
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Kate Holden

6 August 2008
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This novel is entirely imaginary, but I have based the historical and folkloric references on material found in the wonderful local history section in the library of Deal, on the east coast of Kent in the UK, and in the local history museum of nearby Sandwich. I extend my thanks to the anonymous volunteer custodian of the museum. The village of the novel is an imagined combination of Deal and Sandwich. Old Soar is the real name of a nearby village.

I have consulted more history books, documentaries and folklore collections than I can list, but one crucial text was Mircea Eliade’s *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954). I learned much of Celtic religion and history from books such as *The Celtic Realms* (2000) by Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, and *Celtic Myths* (1993) by Miranda Green. The quote on p. 30, ‘Grief is stronger than the sea…’ is taken from ‘Exiles of the Sons of Uisliu’, an early Irish saga, found in Dillon and Chadwick’s book. I was also inspired by many time fantasy novels, particularly Penelope Lively’s *Astercote* (1970), Nancy Bond’s *Country of Broken Stone* (1984), and Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service* (1967).

Several wonderfully generous friends and colleagues read drafts and offered invaluable criticism: Tegan Bennett Daylight, Mandy Brett, Laurie Clancy, Christine Darcas, Michael Heyward, and my mother, Margot Holden, who copy-edited the manuscript for me.

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The story of the flint in the tree may seem like a novelist’s excessive fancy, but if one goes to the churchyard at Ringwould, Kent, one may see a yew tree estimated at over thirteen hundred years old, split and hollowed as the tree in my book is, and in the lintel of the bark, a very old and mysterious stone embedded there. Long may it reside and keep its secrets.
Dedicated to my sister, Jenny Holden.

A sacrifice, for example, not only exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god ab origine, at the beginning of time, it also takes place at that same primordial mythical moment; in other words, every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it. All sacrifices are performed at the same mythical instant of the beginning; through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended. [...] there is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of “history”; and he who reproduces the exemplary gesture thus finds himself transported into the mythical epoch in which its revelation took place.

Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*
PROLOGUE

There are rivers in England that call to passers-by. They want a drowning. Every year, three years, seven years. Someone must come and be lost. It’s time.

_The hour is come but not the man._

A wailing, a mewing; a shriek, a sob. The river’s voice. A man might stop, stare, listen. His friends will notice, or perhaps he’s alone. A woman, on her way to bring her man’s dinner in the field; a drunk on his way home from the pub; a child listening to the moan.

_The hour is come but not the man._

The river is not one to spill its banks and grab. The victim must come willingly. He must step, deliberately, nearer. Down to the bank, down to the shining water. Or, better, if he runs. Into the shallows, deeper into the current, the chill around his knees, his waist. His organs shrinking from the cold, his heart hot, mouth open.

Deeper still.

Then the water will rush down, fast, singing, and take him. Holy, offered, precious, gone.

There was once a man who stood frozen beside the river and when his friends urged him to walk on with them, did not shake his head or laugh or come, but remained standing, watching the river with a strange smile. And when his friends shook him he began to run. He rushed to the water—but his friends seized him, and took him to a church, to prevent him taking to the depths, and left him there locked inside, to come to no harm. And when they opened the church door in the morning there he was, on the floor beneath the holy water font, all the holy water all over his face, his lips wet and his breath gone.

_The hour is come but not the man._

How the river calls, calls, calls.
Part One
Joss lies in bed early in the morning. She’s always wanted an upstairs room; the breathy delight of looking out of an open window, looking down. At home in Australia, living with her older sister Rebecca and Rebecca’s husband Mark in their rented house, she’d been stuck out the back in a little room next to the laundry.

This new room of hers, now, is emptier than she’s ever known. She had to leave most of her books in Australia, crammed into a storage cubicle. We’ll send for them, Rebecca had said. Her little mattress on the floor. Briefly she misses her collection of books with a mental pain like a hunger cramp.

But there’s a grace in emptiness too. A kind of clarity. Perhaps she’ll never fill this room.

The light of the early morning creeps across the mattress on the floor. It’s only five thirty. Jet-lag. She’s awoken as instantly, vividly, as if someone had touched her and spoken her name. The first thing she is aware of thinking is Yes.

The house is quiet but she can hear the trees, and seagulls flourishing themselves in the clean air. The building hides in its little cowl of land. Joss imagines the rooms below, empty since Mark’s ex-wife Diana went to hospital to die, their stillness, the sun and light washing in and out of them, the doors unopened, the window-frames settling more snugly in their sills. Perhaps the house was surprised when Joss and Rebecca and Mark arrived last night. Perhaps it was sleeping. The house doesn’t feel hostile. Perhaps this morning it too awoke and said Yes.

In Australia Joss never knew when someone would walk past her door. Now she writhes slowly against her sheets and ploughs a hand down to between her thighs. It’s new, this secret. It took her a long time to master it. At first she’d felt like a fool, sweating and grimacing and fiddling away in search of something she’d only heard about. Don’t you do it? the girls at school asked her. Of course, she’d said. The first few times it didn’t work. But her fingers have learnt their tricks. The first time it was like being drenched in water, the surprise of it. Every muscle rigid with shock, and then a relaxation more profound than she’d ever known. Oh yes, she’d thought, and made it happen again.

She’s not especially pretty, thin, or fit. Her pants are tight in the seat and thighs, her arms are from time to time speckled with spots. She doesn’t get a lot of attention from boys, but that’s fine with her. The boys she knew at school stank. In class the room was loud with the sound of mouth-breathing from slack jaws. Touching any of those boys would be like sitting in dirty bath-water.
Though there was Sam in her class. He hid his face beneath dark hair, his berry cheeks and bright eye. He’d talk to her, peeping up sideways through his hair, droll and clever. She’d liked Sam. But his hand, when he’d taken hers on the night of the school concert, was damp, and she’d smelt something different on him, a sharp, body-ish smell, dark and unexpected: not-Sam. There was a moment when she knew she was meant to kiss him, and she’d felt her heart cramming her ribs, had faltered, and let those tremendous seconds pass. The next morning the feeling she’d had was, most of all, relief. Then it was too late.

She brings Sam’s smile to mind, but it won’t adhere, it sags away. Her fingertip circles, slowly, luxuriously. The thing that fascinates her is the images that do flush up in her mind’s eye. A cavern scooped from her, a well dropping. An arched bow of thin wood, as she rises on the backs of her heels, her belly tight now, the bed hard beneath her shoulders as her head thrusts backwards and her thighs tense rigid. Her fingers work and work at her flesh, tiring; she concentrates on finding the thread of tension, stringing it through every tendon. She sees an opened mouth, she sees water, a glimmering, a bared throat, a head tipped back, her own face, she sees herself engulfed. More and more urgently, almost with panic, she jabs her fingers at herself—a hot hand of blood is laid across her brow—something collapses inside her, she thinks she will plunge through the bed; she bucks and coils, holding her breath, holding her breath; she’s drowning.

She lets go. All over her, sweat and relief.

Has she made a sound? Is that a footstep?

It’s nothing. The house composes itself around her once more. Joss lies there, giggling silently, smoothing her clever hands down her hips.

Anything is possible here.

::

Mark has gone out, to buy milk and bread and some basic groceries so they won’t starve. He got up early, when Rebecca was still floundering in sleep, and went into town. She heard him say, ‘I’m sure I remember where *everything* is.’ Then she had plunged back into sleep so dark it bruised.

Being alone in the new house is good. It’s still morning, but Joss isn’t up; how quiet it is here. Rebecca runs her fingers along the windowsill of the bedroom, looks at the old lock on the sash. The wood beneath the paint is soft with age.
She’s weary. They’ve come across the world, switching time-zones and seasons, all that long ploughed way over the seas, picking up the car at Heathrow, the long dreamlike drive to the house as dusk stained out the daylight.

Joss walks down the hall to the bathroom and shuts the door in Rebecca’s face and Rebecca just stands there a moment in the passageway. Her younger sister is not a precious teenager in general, but she can emit resistance like a fume. It’s hard to know what will set her off. Joss seems to hold her head one muscle more tightly since she turned fifteen. Within the bathroom the shower turns on, full. The water-tank clanks and hisses. Rebecca goes to the front door, opens it, pauses on the threshold.

The house is in a declivity, about a hundred metres wide; around it the land rises, so the house seems half-sunk in the earth. Rebecca has asked Mark for the reason for this strange hunkering, but he didn’t know. ‘It was Diana’s house,’ he said. ‘It suited her, to be a bit hidden away.’

It faces the road, shaded by a tunnel of trees where the road turns in front of the gate. Beyond that, to the right, is a thicket of trees and past that, further around, above the rising of the ground, Rebecca can see the gold of a field.

A seagull strays across the sky. They are near the sea, but not in sight of it. It’s very quiet. There’s a burger wrapper lying by the verge. The road-sign, black letters on white, points in one direction to the village and a windmill, and, to the other in green and white, to Canterbury. On the way in, the other evening, she saw another sign labelling this a Pilgrim’s Way.

Rebecca looks out on it all now in a kind of amazement. Then she shuts the door and goes upstairs.

The bags lie, bulked with clothing, on the bedroom floor. Some of Diana’s furniture is still here; she had spent the last months of her life in hospital, and her family has removed the personal belongings and cleaned the dust from the sills, but the bed remains, a dresser and some tables and chairs. For now, Joss is sleeping on a mattress on the floor in her room at the end of the hall. Not quite like a furnished house: but there’s still the sense of Diana in the way the bed is tucked into an awkward corner of the room, the dresser of beautiful teak balancing it across the room. Rebecca sits on the bed.

That’s enough, she says, and stands to begin unpacking. Outside, through the window, she can see the field baking gold, and the line of dark trees edging it at the horizon. The shapes are so mild here, the horizon is close.

::
Mark returns with milk and bread and a look of exhilaration on his face.

‘I can’t believe how little the place has changed,’ he says, placing the plastic bag on the table and pulling out a newspaper and a map of the town. ‘I got you this, so you can see where everything is, but I’ll show you around. Oh god, it’s strange being back. Ten years! It feels like no time.’ When they all arrived at the house the other night, Rebecca had seen Mark’s lips tighten and still with each room they entered. Once these were his rooms, too.

Mark’s work as a geo-physicist involves scanning the earth with electronic equipment that takes mysterious signals of depth and density from below the surface. Each stratum, or buried object, is revealed to his equipment as a stain or wriggle on a white screen. Clusters, blurs and concentrations of substance. As a younger man in Britain he’d used this in the archaeological field, helping to decipher remnants of old settlements submerged below grassy fields, but in Australia, he turned his work towards surveying for property development on vacant lots. He can see at a glance when there is a blockage to be cleared, an unsuspected flow of water, or a hidden dump of things left behind to get in the way of the bulldozers.

He married Rebecca two years ago. She hadn’t expected it of herself, to be a bride for crying out loud, and to this man with his hair in a dark cowl around his skull and his slightly dry skin. But he had put his lean hand on her arm, and stood very close, and she felt a tremor of relief that ran through her and out again before she had a chance to turn her feminist glare on it, and she said, smiling gently, ‘You’re ridiculous, marrying a stringy chick like me.’ And then it was done. Besides, she’d felt, at thirty, more like a middle-aged woman. It was eight years since her parents died in a car crash; she’d proved that she could survive, could take care of things. She was tired of being alone. And there was her little sister Joss, needing a second kind-of parent, to think of. She hadn’t expected that either but there she’d been, since twenty-two, mother to her own sister, struggling alone. And five years before all of that, she’d been an only child. She wasn’t sure, at times, whether the feeling that still spread amply in her belly was shock, dismay, or pride.

After some toast Mark is poking about upstairs and Rebecca opens the back door to find a walled garden, soft pink bricks holding a cup of warmth and light. It is calm and quiet here, sprung with ivy and flowering weeds, more weeds feathery all over the beds within. In one corner an old fruit tree is espaliered against the wall, its brittle dark branches puffing out thick white blossom. The over-grown grass is still wet with dew even so late in the morning and in the clean morning light it glitters like tinsel. The sun is frail on her face. In Australia such a direct sun on the face would prickle and burn,
she’d be looking for shade, she’d be making sure Joss had a hat. Here the sun only warms, it doesn’t penetrate. Her bones feel light as pumice.

There is no one to see and for comfort Rebecca slips a finger inside her underpants and lays her hand on her belly. Like a young child does. The sweet comfort is good. She just rests her hand there, quietly. The morning is like a breath exhaled.

A tickle, a shock; Joss is teasing her face with a frond. Rebecca damps down the sudden smack of panic, pulls her hand out of her pants and smiles. ‘All right there?’ She scratches her nose.

Joss is ignoring the hand. ‘It’s amazing.’

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ Rebecca says, rubbing where the tickle remains on her cheek. The sight of her sister seems inordinately reassuring here. She had drifted into feeling quite strange. ‘I’m really glad you came.’

‘I had no choice!’ But Joss is smiling, ‘There was a horrible boy at school who was always asking me out, I had to escape. It was either that, or stab him and flee anyway.’

‘All the way to England. Can you believe we’re in England?’

Joss sits, balancing on a stray fallen brick, looking up at the pale blue sky. ‘The sky seems lower.’ She looks around at the garden, the unfamiliar wildflowers. ‘It’s like a book.’

‘Ridiculous,’ Rebecca agrees. ‘Nearly revolting.’

‘It’s like walking into some kind of dream. All the times I’ve seen England on TV, and here it is. I was expecting football hooligans and everyone whining; you know, rain. This is great.’

‘It’s hot,’ Rebecca says, ‘who’d have thought?’ The skin on her arms is flushed.

‘Well.’ Joss dusts her bottom free of brick-dust. ‘Think I’ll leave you in peace.’ She strides off.

In some places the vegetation is as high as a girl, but there are still faint seams in the chaos, where a planting bed is limned with bricks.

It was like a plot in a children’s book when Mark returned from the lawyers two months ago. Back in her childhood Rebecca had read many a tale of children sent away to houses in the English countryside, or irresponsible parents buying old tumbledown castles, where secrets lay and adventures awaited. As a child she’d yearned for such a thing to happen, but now it dismays her. Rebecca had not known what to say when Mark told her Diana had left him the house. His hands, pulling the cap off a pen, pushing it back on, as he faced her across the living room, the sound of the seven o’clock news starting on the television.

‘Didn’t she have anyone else to leave it to?’

THE SACRIFICE

© Kate Holden 2008
'It was ours. It was all in her name, after the divorce, but—it was ours once. She knew I’d want it back.’

A pause.

‘Do you?’

Mark twirled the hard end of the pen into his palm. ‘It’s there.’

‘So far away,’ Rebecca murmured.

‘Australia was far away to me once. And if I’d never come here, I wouldn’t have met you.’

‘Can we think about it?’

‘I still can’t believe she’s dead.’

‘I said, can we think about it.’

His hands seemed raw and aged, the knuckles red. He rubbed a finger into his eye. ‘It’s there. You know we should go.’

It wasn’t as if it was hard to give up the cramped house she and Mark and Joss shared in Melbourne but every day as she boxed up her belongings for storage, put another part of herself away, judged what little she’d need, it had seemed unreal. It’s true that Mark would be happier. She’d picked up homesickness in him from time to time over the years—as his mother back in England grew older, as he began to grow older himself. He’s had ten years in Australia and it’s only fair to turn about. She remembers the surprise of the first time he had reminded her of all he’d given up to be in Melbourne.

‘But you love it here! You always say you’re glad not to be back in grisly old England.’

‘Yes. It’s just… Sometimes you have to go back. It’s not right, not to go back.’

She hopes she’ll find a new way of living—find a job, find a school for Joss. It seems enormous, starting up a whole new life. ‘Choice is sacrifice,’ she remembered her father telling her once. ‘For everything you gain, you’ve let something else go.’ She swallows down the gulp of anxiety. The sun is warm on her teeth. She presses the back of one hand to the wall behind her, the rough scrape of it against knuckle, and waits. It is just stone. But Rebecca feels that it is real, and that’s enough for now. Maybe soon she’ll feel real too.

The silence is like glass. She thinks that surely it isn’t possible to be so alone here. There’s always someone watching her, or it has always felt like it. She moves carefully, always, because of that. A certain selfconscious set to her mouth. Now, apart from Joss, singing to herself somewhere in the weeds and Mark, upstairs, there is no one. Rebecca
wonders how long it will take, in this isolated place, before she relaxes. She shuts her mouth and closes her eyes again, just in case someone sees.

There’s the sound of weeds brushing stone, hushed as hair, someone breathing out, and then no more sound.

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This coast is one long, gently wavering strip of shingle and marsh, where reeds grow sparsely among pebbles almost down to the water, where the land appears as flat as the sea beside it. Marsh flattens the contours of the land, and banks of shingle have shoved up beneath the rich green grass of this lip of England. It is a very old place, and in the way the sea has deposited more land over centuries, also a new one.

The house is on the outskirts of an old town jammed up against the eastern shore. It was once a handsome town, renowned for its port and pride: kings and queens embarked here, houses were snug with imported luxuries, and the wharf was bright with gilded poops. It is still pretty, still proud, but the river silted up and the sea withdrew its custom long ago. Now it is sleepy, a quaint old village really, where tourists wander in little quiet groups and its young people walk resentfully through the little medieval streets, banging their hands idly against the old lurching timbers and squealing loudly, for the echo.

Mark takes them for a walk around town. It’s the first day. He leads them through the little streets, past the river thick with reeds and the battered little fishing boats idling at the quay, past pubs called The King’s Head and The Greene Man. Joss stops to marvel at a wooden gargoyle craning out from a corner. Her sister smiles at her curiosity and Joss walks on quickly.

The shops of the high street are mostly plain Georgian with blank brick walls and small doorways, or cake-icing Victorian. A greeting card store, the usual chain outlets, Woolworth’s, an old-fashioned bakery and butcher’s, another pub. There are baskets hanging from many of the windows, filled with bright flowers. Joss squeals when she sees a thatched roof and a tile scratched with the house’s date.

‘1590! Look at how old that is!’ She stares at it in wonder.

Mark walks ahead, with the ostentatiously casual pace of the guide. Rebecca and Joss linger to look in the shop windows, as if they’d never seen hardware supplies, cheap women’s clothing, ugly lampshades before.

‘The village church,’ says Rebecca. ‘Oh what a cliché.’ It looks just like the dark stone churches at home, with a severe dark pointed steeple and thick stone lintels, but in
Melbourne they’re no more than a hundred years old, pastiches of the real thing in England. This might be hundreds. It is cobbled all over with lumps of dark rock like growths.

‘There’s a better one near our place.’ Mark takes her arm. The footpath is narrow and it’s hard to walk together. A car goes past, very fast and loud, with a shaven-headed young man at the wheel. He turns a raw face to stare as the car plunges past.

‘There’s your next boyfriend,’ Rebecca tells Joss.

‘Oh, shut up.’

They have coffee at a table outside a pub, watching the locals. The street is busy, the people utterly ordinary. Joss keeps chanting examples of the flat, sing-song accent under her breath to amuse the others. ‘They all sound so wistful,’ Rebecca says. ‘As if they expect to be slapped.’ No one takes any notice of the new citizens. Mark points out that there are no Asians or black people to be seen.

The village is called Soar. ‘Funny word for a place, isn’t it,’ he says to Joss. ‘It’s an old Norman word. Means something like “grief”, but that’s just the countryside being poetic for you.’

They walk out of the village again, taking the long way home through some of the outer roads. For all its flatness, the land seems to change constantly. There are, after all, little shallow hummocks and grooves. To one side of the road, towards the coast, the land drops a little where the sea has slowly deposited silt and shingle to make a soft fertile strand between the old shoreline and the new. Lines of dark trees hem the meadows and roads, fresh green in these early days of summer. The fields are pale, the crops already ripening in vast neon blankets of yellow. There are hedgerows everywhere, springy with wildflowers and stalks. Three massive concrete cooling towers of the power station, pale as dust and smoothly shaped, rise out of the horizon not far away, almost beautiful in their sculpted simplicity, serene and pale as if shaped from clouds. The sky above is vast and flattened, as if caught in a panoramic photograph, its clouds skewed sideways.

‘It’s so much greener than home,’ Rebecca says. She’s thinking of the parched straw on the nature strips, even during the autumn they’ve just left.

She has an unsettled feeling, as if her thoughts are floating like a dish on top of water. Not quite stabilised. This is the first time she’s been out of Australia and it seems impossible, implausible, that reality can be so concrete in a place she’s never been. She would rather like to be back in their little bedroom in Melbourne, where everything was where she’d put it, the very paint on the walls smelt like her. That room, where she lived for two years: she can see it so vividly in her mind but already framed, like a painting. A
still life, because that room is now dismantled and everything packed away or given away or thrown away, and now she herself is away, far. The house they’ve come to live in is bigger, and charming, with its jumble of rooms and softer light in the windows, and she knows she’s lucky, but that morning she had awoken for the first time in the new place and all she could think was: I’ve never slept in an upstairs room before, there’s too much air beneath my bed. Like a tree house, but without the close cage of branches around her.

‘The Roman fort,’ Mark says, pointing across to the towers. ‘Just in front of that. The first proper fort they made, and the last one they sailed from centuries later.’

‘How Famous Five,’ Rebecca says absently. ‘Joss, you’ll have to go and have a ‘scramble’ around there with your ‘chums’.’

‘Picnics, lashing of ginger beer, smugglers, spies...’ Joss says, trailing a hand along a hedgerow.

‘Actually Soar was a real smuggling town,’ Mark says. ‘And there was a huge depot here in the First World War. Sending supplies to Flanders, bringing the bodies back.’

‘I guess it’s so close,’ Rebecca says.
‘St Augustine landed just next to those towers, and the Vikings.’
‘I should hope so.’
‘Henry the Eighth built the castle...’
‘Least he could do.’ The corners of her mouth are turning up mischievously.
Mark perseveres. ‘Famous shipwrecks, secret stuff going on in the second war, Lord Nelson, all the battle ships just off the coast...’

‘Sounds just like home.’
They unlock the front door and walk into the house with the unfamiliar smell.
‘Time for a cuppa,’ says Mark, and his voice is already more English than ever.

::

Mark sits in one of the stiff-backed wooden chairs in the lounge room. Rebecca next to him, hands in her lap, cup of tea on the floor. The movement of the trees outside keeps catching her eye; she pulls the rings off her fingers, nervously, twirls them around and around in her fingertips.

The room is oddly half-furnished: a table, two dining chairs, an old wire magazine rack. Nothing else, dust hanging in the air. Diana’s relatives have plundered the house of all the comfortable items.
Joss is sitting on the table, where she has been writing her diary. Face fierce and intent, she writes from time to time: clearly their advent to England has provoked an entry. Perhaps she’s taking notes from what Mark is saying, as he gives another of his awkward little lectures.

The pre-historic settlers came here, he says. He went to the museum in London, years and years ago, and he still remembers how simple were the oldest things. ‘Flint tools. And wood. Big branches of yew that they found in the bogs. You could still make a table from them. Just those two things, so simple and durable.’

‘There are things just as old in Australia,’ Rebecca observes.

‘Not quite!’ Mark is amused. ‘Aborigines arrived in your country 50,000 years ago, more or less. A long time, I know. But imagine. This place—this very spot where your chair is—has been inhabited for many times that, an inconceivable number of years…’ Rebecca wants to say something about Australia, Mark can’t simply make these sweeping statements, and anyway, he’s wrong; but he talks on. ‘The Celts were here, too. Later.’

Joss looks up. All her life she’s read mythology, history books. To her, ‘Celtic’ means Stonehenge, druids, mistletoe, mysterious rites at dawn. ‘The Saxons, the Normans, the rest,’ Mark goes on.

‘Tell me Celtic stuff.’

‘They were pretty frightening,’ Mark says. ‘Mysterious, very poetic. Obsessed with sacrifice. I remember reading something gruesome about it once. They’d cut the heads off children and hung them from hooks, a whole ghastly row of them. They put the heads of their enemies in the trees.’

Rebecca raises an eyebrow. She’s been gazing absently at the trees outside the house, their softness, solidity, the felted darkness of them massed around the building. She has been feeling something for these trees she doesn’t know, a kindliness. They’re animals to her, animals with quiet memories, sitting there, moving and immovable.

‘…or they murdered young men and left them in the bogs and the wells. And god, they were vicious. They didn’t just kill a man; they drugged him, hit him with a stone axe, strangled him, cut his throat and pushed him in the water.’

‘Why?’ Joss is fascinated.

‘They were very careful about nature, I suppose. They wanted to propitiate the gods. Keep the balance right. Nature gods are the most powerful, you know. These Celts were here in a dark place. It was all forest around here then. All forest, right down to the sea. A huge carpet of trees, it would have been terribly dark and scary. You’d think all sorts of things in a place like that. I’d have been putting things at the foot of trees too, if
they’d only not crush me. The Romans called it Silva Anderida, “the wood where no one lives’.

‘I love that,’ Joss says. ‘I like the big ones. Oaks? With the leaves like hands?’

Mark smiles. ‘Quercus. Isn’t that a wonderful word? Quercus. I looked it up, when I was planting the garden with—’ That quick check to his emotions. ‘The trees weren’t all native, of course. They came over from Europe too. Migrants, like everything else. That idea that England has always been ‘England’ is just bullshit. And they still come, you know. There are trees here, now, that people brought back from Japan, Russia, America. Even Australia. There are gum trees here.

‘People, maybe people in Australia think of England as always being British, these goodly blond stout people, at least until the last forty years. My gran used to hate the idea of outsiders. But the country’s always been a mix, people coming and going. And this part, this has been the starting-place for so much of Britain. It was on the coast just here that Julius Caesar turned up’

‘He might have walked right past this house,’ Joss says.

Rebecca is listening, but she’s not really engaged. It’s a long time since she thought of history, except her own. In Australia, she’s heard, it’s said that the indigenous people go into the future with their faces pointing at the past. She doesn’t know quite what that means. The future has always been unreal to her: a haze barely worth peering at. But the past is no clearer, or more enticing. Really, she sometimes thinks in cranky moments, the past is all best swept away. What’s that quote? History is a lie agreed upon. In Australia, it’s complicated, thinking about history. Whose history, who can tell it, and all the really old, ancient history of the country tied up in land and memories and stories that she doesn’t even know, or know who to ask. She has no Aboriginal friends to ask. And it seems wrong to learn their stories out of books. They’re not book stories, after all.

‘Don’t you think, Rebecca?’

Her thoughts are with the trees now, how they hem the house, how they make her feel safe. Joss is leaning forward, though, rapt. Mark talks on.

‘This road—did you see the sign? It’s a very old one. The freeway we took down here from London: part of that is Watling Street, the old Roman highway. A lot of the roads around here were used by the Saxons, and they followed the old Roman ‘ways’. God knows if they were used even before then. A road is a road. If it’s a good way, people will always use it.’

‘We’re sitting on history,’ Joss says.

‘We certainly are.’
‘In Australia... I know it’s a very old place. But it always feels like, like there was no one there before. I don’t mean that ‘terra nullius’ stuff we did at school. I don’t mean that it doesn’t count, what went on before the whites. More just... There’s nothing to say there were people living where our house is. I know they were there, but...’ Joss says. She flaps her hands. ‘I can’t wait to see something really old.’

Mark laughs. He’s pleased that someone is interested. All this history he has in this place, this country, and he’s never spoken of it. All the facts and stories inside him. In Australia he’d usually confined himself to appreciating the modern lifestyle and mocking the nation’s ignorance. He glances over to Rebecca. ‘And you? Are we going to find you prettily decorating the trees with heads?’

‘I’ll find something,’ she says. ‘Just watch me.’ She looks at him steadily.

Mark turns away and Joss goes back to her diary, writing furiously now, and Rebecca watches Mark thinking of the past, his face motionless, as she crams her rings on and off her fingers.

::

When she was a little girl, Joss sat in her backyard and dug for treasure. Maybe the local tribes had walked across this land; maybe lived right here. But there was no trace in the buffalo grass. All that was unimaginable, in that pale suburb where the gum trees grew in straight lines along roadsides. She dug up broken glass and tattered plastic; in the dusk she put her child’s fingers in the soft black earth and felt the hollow scoop of something small and hard, something with sharp edges; a bird’s skull, she thought. Or, with a terrible thrill, that of a human? But when she pulled it out, gleaming like bone in the twilight, it was only a crushed old piece of plastic. There was no point in digging further. This was only a back garden in a suburb that had sprung up fifty years earlier. Anything older had left no trace.

She had hidden in the school library, and held soft old paperbacks in her little hands, held them right up close to her face, absorbing the scent of the doughy paper, the ink illustrations, the quaint chapter titles. She walked home from school through the blasted heat of a summer afternoon, the gum trees rasping with their bark hanging limp like peeled wallpaper, and she tugged at the bark, but when it came away there was no message written there, no secret door behind. In the low-ceilinged, yellow brick cottage she shared with Rebecca and Mark, she dreamed of attics and towers. She wanted a horse’s skull, a magic portal, a stone circle in which to stand and be transformed. The bare boards of the backyard fence were not standing stones.
Imagination glosses everything if you try hard enough, a gloss that can set like varnish.

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Once the meagre unpacking has been done, and the house canvassed, and the village visited, there is an uncertain pause. The second day, Mark, Rebecca and Joss sit in the kitchen.

‘Well, I should show you the sights,’ Mark says. He sounds a little apprehensive, as if he’s just realised that having brought the women all this way, he’s somewhat responsible. He looks the part of a capable pater familias, with his crisp mouth and straight spine, but in reality he has always hung back from taking too much on himself.

‘There’s a castle,’ he offers now. ‘And the Roman fort. And there’s a little museum in the village.’

‘No?’ Rebecca says. ‘Gosh!’

He gives her a sharp, hurt look. ‘You don’t have to come. I only thought it might be nice. Joss will like it.’

‘I think it’s going to rain.’

Mark makes a face at Joss, and she rolls her eyes, but they keep sipping their tea and Rebecca turns a page of the newspaper.

‘I’ll come, of course. Though as you see I’m flat-out busy.’ She tries to make it into a joke.

‘Where’s the castle?’ Joss asks.

‘Down the coast a bit. There are a few of them. Some of them are in better state than others. Dover Castle is the really spectacular one, so that’s where we’ll go.’


‘No singing,’ puts in Rebecca. ‘No singing allowed.’ Joss pokes her tongue at her. She has a weakness for old songs.

They drive down the coast, on a curving road that seems to pass no other villages, only near-identical fields, bright yellow and green. The road rises and then dips just before they get to Dover and there, on a high promontory against the horizon, is the castle. Its flags flutter, its stern grey battlements look neat as Lego.

‘Is it real?’ Joss queries.

‘Very.’
They park, pay the large fee for entrance, and walk in through the massive stone gate. The walls are terrifyingly thick and high, studded, like the village church they’d seen, with black eggs of flint. They are informed that the tea room will close at four.

‘What did you think?’ Mark asks two hours later as they tramp back down the drive to the car park.

‘It’s huge,’ Rebecca says, stretching her back.

‘Pretty cool,’ Joss offers. She had insisted on exploring every nook, every oubliette and dank hole and staircase. ‘It’s like a toy, though. All those little fancy painted signs: ‘The Keep’, ‘The King’s Room’. And it’s so perfect, it doesn’t seem like it had ever been used.’

‘It’s just amazingly well preserved. You think things are only historic if they’re damaged?’

‘No…’ She pauses for thought. ‘But it’s good to see something to show that people have been there. If it’s too clean, you know: it looks like a display home. None of the taps actually run water.’

They have lunch in Dover, a grim, stained town plastered along the base of the cliffs which are, to Joss’s approval, actually white, and topped with bright green grass. The town is cluttered on one side by the immense docks, and on the other it is squeezed against implacable rock. This, Mark tells them, is the edge of the great chalk downs that make up the geology of the county.

‘Did you know,’ says Joss, bright with knowledge, ‘that chalk is made of dead things?’

‘I did not know that,’ says Rebecca. ‘How macabre.’

‘Millions of them, all packed down and mineralised.’ She glances at Mark to see that she’s got the right term. ‘It was all under water once, you know. Now we’re sitting on a bed of a zillion tiny little dead bugs.’

There is a little museum in the town, and Mark, deciding to deliver the best of local history all at once, chivvies the other two in there.

Among the cases of old railway tickets, lumpy flint knives, scraps of Roman armour and Civil War paraphernalia, the thing that captivates Joss is a small, crudely made terracotta oil lamp. Rebecca finds her staring at it through the glass. The case isn’t well lit, and Joss is crouched to see better.

‘Something you’d like to take home?’

‘Look at that.’ Joss points. ‘See how it’s black where the flame was? Someone actually lit that. Like, two thousand years ago.’

‘Not a model-home oil lamp, then.’
Joss scowls. ‘No.’

‘I wasn’t having a go at you!’ Rebecca calls, but Joss has already moved on stiffly to the next room where a grinning mannequin is modelling some rigid fabric, a Saxon costume.

‘Had enough?’ Mark says, coming up a while later to where Rebecca is dully staring at a collection of Second World War evacuation posters.

‘Evacuate me from here,’ she says, putting her arm around his waist. ‘I can’t take too much of this all in one go. I end up feeling old.’

‘It’s important to get a feel for the place.’

‘I know. But it’s just as Heritage to want a good old cup of tea, right?’

He hesitates; kisses the top of her head. ‘Poor thing. We’ll take you home.’

Joss wanders up, looking cheerier. ‘Cool stuff,’ she says.

Mark pushes the door open for them to leave. ‘We English are obsessed with oldness. Obsessed! I looked in the newsagents in town. There are three magazines of local history. You’re going to have more history here than you know what to do with. You should go to the library.’

Joss really is enthralled by all this talk of history. Rebecca wishes she could be as happy to be here, that she too had something to be looking forward to. Australia hovers in her mind, a bright-lit kite, an airiness, the colour yellow and the burning blue of the sky. She has left what she knows and she doesn’t yet know what she has gained instead.

‘Since you’d be in school in Melbourne, and here you are at a loss until next term starts—why don’t you make that a project? Find something about the history down here, and write it up for me. It’ll be interesting, sweetie.’

‘That’ll keep me off the streets,’ Joss remarks. ‘You’ll be glad of that.’

‘Find one thing,’ Mark suggests. ‘Do some reading, find one thing that gets you going, and trace it all the way through. Find the continuity. There’s got to be something you can use.’

They get back to the car. Mark and Joss talk about the castle and the artefacts all the way home. Joss is satisfactorily impressed, and Mark animated with pride. Rebecca sits and looks out the window; the best bit of the day, she thinks, is driving past the fields, the horizon steady, the green flickering from dark to light, from yellow to blue, a subtle peace out there as the car moves her through it, heading towards the sea.

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'Have you seen the cups? They’ve all disappeared!' Rebecca calls up the stairs.

‘There were only two anyway,’ Mark replies from the bedroom. ‘Plastic ones under the sink.’

Life in this house really is like camping out. ‘I can’t find anything,’ she mutters. She drinks her tea out of a glass jar she finds in the pantry.

Mark comes down. ‘Where’s our miss?’

‘Around somewhere.’ She sips awkwardly from the jar, the thread for the lid unfamiliar against her lips. ‘I hope she’s all right here. She seems happy so far. It’s just such a huge jolt, this new world. I’m still trying to catch up myself.’

‘What have we done, that’s what you’re thinking?’ He leans against the table. ‘Where on earth have we come to? How are we going to eat? Will we have to hunt in the woods? Come on mate, it’s early days yet.’

She flicks him a glance. ‘We’ll have to find her a school. Some other kids to meet. She was pretty brave about there being no internet, but you know how she lives online. We didn’t even set up her phone to work here. I know she’s a loner, but I don’t want her to feel completely shut off.’

He looks at her, something hovering behind his firm mouth. ‘She’ll be fine.’

‘She couldn’t even bring her guitar. Her books. Most of her clothes…’

‘Listen.’ He doesn’t move to comfort her, but his voice lowers. She knows to pay attention to this voice. It’s a voice that promises to take care of things. Sometimes she wishes the assumption hadn’t been made that things needed taking care of for her. She thought when they married that Mark would be a support, but it looks like she found a father-figure instead. How trite, how weak. Her friends might have been correct to watch her bridal walk with the sceptical smiles she suspected they’d hidden from her. How easy it is for her to play the child, even after all these years of growing. But how good it is to be looked after.

‘Joss is busy finding out about the place where she lives now. She’ll find things to do instead of talking to all those pathetic people online. She’ll have to go out into the real world now. She might learn something new.’ Mark comes over now, and touches her shoulder. She doesn’t move closer, or shrug him off. A faintness of despair comes over her. She wanted things to be different here, but now they’re just strange.

He moves away again.

‘Brave new world,’ she says. ‘I’m sure you’re right.’
In the library in town, old men belch over newspapers, a young Slav man talks quietly, urgently into a mobile phone, there are young mothers with prams at the bank of computers devoted to internet use. A truck passes outside; someone is surreptitiously eating crisps, the smell of onion and cheese sour in the artificial air of the building.

Joss is here to get more books for the endless reading at night. She’d said she’d learn about the area, and, dutiful girl, she is doing so. There’s a lot to read; Mark wasn’t joking when he said the people here were obsessed with the past. Although when Joss had asked at the library counter for local history and, trying to be friendly, said to the librarian, ‘You live in a really interesting place,’ the woman had gazed at her, pebble-eyed, and said only that she was from Nottingham and didn’t really know anything about history.

Joss is very young and she doesn’t know much about time but she understands that she feels more secure when she can find her place in it. This year is so different to last year at school; whoever she was when she was twelve feels remote as a ghost. For her, the wide valleys of ‘history’ have always been a landscape, marked out with recognisable moments like strata, like the layers of soil and rock that Mark had shown her on his scans, the deposits and wrinkles where cultures have folded themselves over and over, like a man turning earth. The richest loam for her is the very distant, mysterious past: myths, legends: stories which take her somewhere on the line between knowing and not-knowing, the places where, secretly, ‘maybe’ becomes ‘might be’. Now she is here, it’s as if she’s been given a shovel and invited to dig.

::

Bound on three sides by water, this corner of Britain is claustrophobic with itself. The past violence of the place can’t be denied, but it is well hidden. What are now miles of peaceful fields, bland and identical beneath their crop of yellow rape and barley, have been battlefields, roads, places where people lived and passed. There are the usual ghost stories, and tales of murder, tales of smuggling and shipwreck and piracy. There’s a ring of beech trees, built on the ruins of a Roman temple; the legend tells Joss that the Devil appears if you run around the circle seven times on a dark night. There are the Countless Stones, another circle, which cannot be numbered no matter how often one tries. The area is jammed with stories, with histories silting up on each other. Used to a room in suburban Melbourne, Joss looks up from her book and realises that the Countless Stones are only an hour’s bus-ride away. The church down the road from Mark’s house was built by the first Normans; the sky above the house was reamed by
German fighter planes. It’s all a little hard to believe. A kind of vertigo of the imagination.

So, summoning her courage, on her way home she walks past the house and keeps going. A ridiculous thought crosses her mind that, like some kind of Huckleberry Finn, she should have some bread and cheese tied up in a handkerchief; she giggles. To be honest, she’s a little apprehensive of going out into the countryside alone. All she’s known is suburbia, and the occasional bushwalk in the hills outside Melbourne organised by her school. Mark and Rebecca weren’t ones to go far afield; they prefer cafés and markets. Joss wonders if she should take a map with her, but after all, she’s not going far. This is just an exploratory wander. It’s not like the bush, where you can get hurt.

It’s bright out here, bright and quiet.

She swings quickly down the road, her footsteps loud on the asphalt, a different sound on the rough gravel or untidy grass of the verge. A profusion of vegetation, feathered and fronded with blossoms and thick tangled stems blocks her view on either side; the only thing is to follow the road wherever it leads. She knows that eventually it connects with a big road towards Canterbury, but that’s a long way away. She’s certainly not going to walk to Canterbury; whatever 40 miles is, it’s probably a very long way. Though, she thinks, in a way she feels like a pilgrim. A pilgrim to the places she’s yearned for in her imagination. Wherever they actually are. Judging from the impenetrable hedgerows, Olde Englande is going to be forever blocked off from her.

She’s just about to give up and turn back when the hedgerows relent and there’s a gap; beyond, a field and above her head, a sign pointing into the field, saying *Footway*. She’s not sure what this means, but she thinks Mark’s mentioned the old footpaths that cross the countryside regardless of roads. ‘Old ways’ he’d say. ‘No one can quite wipe them out.’  Looking, she can see a thin seam in the crop, a delicate low feathery stuff.

She walks in, feeling conspicuous and prepared at any moment for an irate farmer to charge out of the hedgerow shouting at her. But there is no one, and she walks cautiously along the seam, which is a kind of path, feeling rather Biblical as she stands amid what looks like some kind of corn. Alien corn? she thinks. Something to do with exile? How appropriate.

On the other side of the field there’s a stand of trees. She reaches it, and rests a moment under the shade. So, she thinks. I’ve made it in.

Now what? It’s not like old Enid Blyton or whatever, some wizard isn’t going to come down from the tree and tell her something. It feels weirdly like that might happen, though.
Pale clouds cover the hot sky. She stands and squints through a hedgerow, wandering her hand through the soft grass and honeysuckle tendrils, to see the field on the other side, some kind of different crop this time, burnt yellow. There’s a big windbreak of trees on the other side.

A crack of thunder comes over. Joss looks up. The sky is shadowed, with big sultry clouds barging into the light grey. Wind shuffles the hedgerows. She stands there, looking at the field. A weird brightness; thunder crushes again.

A drop of water hits her face. A drop. A drop. Then the rain shouts down.

She stands there, thrilled. Water in the creases of her closed eyelids, running down her face, soaking her hair. Water thrashes on the ground.

Joss opens her eyes, grinning against the streaming rain. On the other side of the hedgerow she sees a movement. A boy, cream and gold, flickering past the high fronds of vegetation, the delicate flowers. He’s running across her vision on the other side of the field, fast, fast—he runs to one side and she can’t see him anymore.

The rain is overwhelming, and there’s another flare of lightning. I should get to shelter, she tells herself, and stands there still, looking to the right to where her house is, the direction the boy ran. The country is all hers and she stands there, marvelling at how empty air can be so full.

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‘So these,’ Mark says, ‘are the grand ladies.’

He and Rebecca walk that evening under the shade of the huge trees that cloak the entrance to the house. The trunks remind Rebecca of thighs, smoothly muscled; above, the leaves are large, a lustrous fluttering green.

‘I suppose they were a lot smaller when you were here,’ she says.

‘Well, only because I was a giant of a man back then,’ he says, smiling. ‘No. They were just the same. Just the same. Aren’t they lovely?’ The leaves cast myriad shadows on the still-damp road, shifting like water, in patterns of gold and bronze. ‘As Gerald Manley Hopkins said, God bless dappled things.’

They’re strolling out, after an early dinner. Mark promised to take her for a perfectly safe walk, ‘No boring monuments, no scary social challenges...’ Rebecca threw him a look. ‘We’ll just walk around a bit. Then you can teach Joss how to recognise a yew, and other useful things.’

‘We do have trees in Australia, you remember. Even some of these.’
'Yes. But these are trees.'

They walk towards the village, down towards the sea. They do not hold hands, but they walk in step, from habit.

Rebecca pushes her hair off her face. ‘We’ll have to get the place set up soon. I feel naked without all my junk. I must be more materialistic than I thought. When you lived here the house was full of stuff, I suppose.’ She hesitates, but Mark’s hand hasn’t tightened on hers, or removed itself. ‘Does it feel weird, being back here?’ she goes on. ‘I suppose it’s like you’ve never been away?’

‘Mmm. Yes.’ He looks at the road just ahead of him, as he always does when he’s walking. ‘It’s as if time has tucked around itself, in a way. Have you ever gone back to a place you knew well before? It’s the most uncanny thing. You, who you are now; you almost feel like… a ghost or something. The house is the same, the countryside’s the same—though I lived here before they started planting this horrible rapeseed everywhere, that bright yellow stuff you see. And I feel like I should be different, after all this time, but I’m not. Or I am and I can’t see it? Sometimes I feel like I’m going to walk into the room and see Diana there. Because I wasn’t here when she died, she’s more real to me alive, than dead. And then it’s you, instead.’

‘I can see why that would be a nasty shock.’ She’s trying for joking, but it comes out a little sour.

Mark doesn’t notice. ‘Perhaps there’s two of me now, the one from before, and the one now, superimposed.’

‘Hmm.’ Mark’s not usually this fanciful.

‘It’s an odd feeling.’

The light, at nine in the evening, is simply darkness bleached pale. The road rises a little, rounds a corner, passes the service station and the pub, takes them between more fields and then between houses. The village, at this hour, is almost entirely quiet. Televisions can be heard in the lounge rooms that stand right on the high street. Rebecca isn’t used to walking down a street and peering in a window to someone’s living room. A car comes along, but takes a corner and disappears. There are a few middle aged couples at a table outside one of the old pubs, but they’re mostly musing silently on their pints. Rebecca doesn’t suggest they stop for a drink. All the shops are closed. They walk on.

‘Did you love it here, before?’

‘I did.’ He’s walking steadily, with a rangy, loping stride, a walk that will take him far and fast. She always loved Mark for walking as fast as she. ‘I thought this place
had a real atmosphere. It meant something, to be where things had started. Even to me, coming from the Midlands, it seemed old.’

‘I don’t feel that. It’s just a place to me. It has fields and houses and trees, but I don’t feel any—’

‘—We’re very proud of oldness, the English.’

‘—echoes. Echoes!’ She laughs. ‘And I used to be really romantic, believe in ghosts, all that. If there were something, I’d like to think I’d notice. I just don’t feel it here. Maybe it hasn’t been long enough.’

He looks at her. They’ve neared the beach, and the wind comes up against their faces as they pass down the last narrow street before the broadness of sea and sky.

‘I don’t believe in ghosts,’ he says. ‘I think things have a spirit of place, though. I do. I can feel it all around me here.’ He points at a plaque screwed into the side of a bench along the promenade. ‘Look at this.’

From this place generations of sea-men launched the lifeboats which brought Soar the gratitude of many.

In the memory of all souls lost at sea, and with the heartfelt prayers of those saved. 1936.

‘But that’s what I mean,’ he goes on. ‘Because you can read as much as you like about this place, for example, even every plaque on every wall in this town, and you still won’t get the feeling of—what is it, resonance?—that I can feel walking in the fields—that understanding that someone else has walked here long ago; as strongly as if they stood beside me. Some things persist.’

‘I just don’t get it. Do you think it’s because I’m Australian?’

‘Do you?’

‘I hope not. I have ancestry, I have an understanding of time as much as anyone from Europe—I think. But I must say, I don’t feel as if I’m walking in anyone’s footsteps. I’ve spent most of my life trying to get over the past.’

‘But look at me. I thought I could, and now…’

They are trudging down onto the shingle. Ahead the beach is soaked in shadow, and the water comes slowly, the tide going out little by little. The pebbles on which they walk are shiny and dark with water still.

‘Maybe, what you’re talking about, it’s a bit like the Dreamtime. Aborigines don’t feel that it’s history. To them, it’s all happening right now, because the land endures, and the stories endure, and it’s all still Dreamtime, to the old ones at least. If you believe it, time can disappear. I wish I had that, sometimes. Mum and dad could still be alive,
even though they’d also be dead. I could be the person I used to be, as well as who I am now. If you could have everything at once...’ She grimaces.

‘But perhaps that’s too much for a person to take on alone. That’s what I’m saying, I guess.’

A seagull comes idling overhead, holds its position on an invisible breaker of air.

‘I hope you can come to love this place,’ Mark says.

She stands and looks out over the water. It’s beautiful, but the loneliness of the expanse disturbs her a little. All the lines between sea and sky are collapsing. She’s glad she’s got Mark to break the force of the fresh breeze, and she moves further into the shelter of his body. She wipes hair out of her eyes.

‘I’m sure I will. It’s hard for me, this thing about Diana—’

‘Don’t think about her.’

‘Well, you do. I know you do.’

‘Let the dead rest,’ Mark says, looking out to the horizon. ‘Let the dead bury the dead.’

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Joss opens up her laptop. As soon as the screen flashes into light she relaxes. It was a blow to find that there was no internet connection here. For a moment she panicked. What would she do with all her time? Normally at home Joss lived online. She was a bit of a gamer, and had a blog, the usual stuff. All of that is snatched away here; the idea of a house without a connection is shocking. But she’s brought her files, and she brings up one of the landscapes she was working on before they left. At fifteen, she is expert enough with a visual editing program to be employable. Hours, she’s put into this: composing an imaginary terrain of mountains and valleys, haunted by a foggy sun and sheened with a kind of supernatural glow, the obscured turrets of a castle in the distance. She stares at the landscape, which she had invented to suit a certain mood—a kind of wistfulness, a kind of wishing. It’s beautiful, and she knows that back in Australia it meant the world to her. But here she has hopes of finding something like this, for real.

She gets up and goes back to her pile of library books. She’s a good student, she makes notes, and is working through chronologically. There are things familiar to her from all the fantasy books she’s read back in Australia: special stone knives, magical wells and springs, groves of trees. There are wonderful quotes from old poems. ‘Grief is stronger than the sea, if you could understand it,’ says one. Water is a big thing. Water
was special. They were very careful to respect it, and to give to it. Archaeologists have found all sorts of things at the bottom of rivers and wells: swords, jewellery, flint tools and even bones. Joss likes rituals. She likes the idea of this.

She reads about how just near the village there is a field where there was a manor house, formerly a castle, and before that there was a Saxon church, which was built in the ruins of a Roman temple, which was apparently put on top of a Celtic shrine. It was a shrine to a god called Teutates, who liked cutting throats. Joss draws her lips back. It seems that cutting throats was a big thing. All those bog bodies strangled, sliced and drowned.

She reads on, about the Celtic love of shape-shifting, and immortality, that souls can travel from one body to another, and how dogs are the symbols of death and the underworld. The old people paid a lot of attention to things that moved between the two. Perhaps that was why water was so important: it came out of the deep of the earth, it moved. It couldn’t be held tight.

That old world enthrals her. It sounds strange, a little sinister, very organised. You knew that they had understood something, some deep dark truth. In a frightening world, it was important to keep the balance right.

::

Mark’s thigh lies heavy against hers and Rebecca is aware of his groin cushioned soft behind her buttocks. He is so heavy with sleep and she is tight and awake. His breath goes on, one long exhale and another. She is awake. Sweat sticks them together; she longs to shift and be released, to disturb her husband, to make something happen. She thinks of him inside her, and her belly tenses. The night is so densely silent, except for his breathing. Her own throat makes no sound but it is open with restlessness. The room doesn’t have enough air.

There’s a hotness in her, a child’s petulant confusion. This was Mark and Diana’s bedroom, was she lithe and lovely here? Diana, with her quick blonde hair and her English refinement and this house, all hers. Diana would have stared at this ceiling, past Mark’s face, with an expression of ecstasy. Diana would have had a younger, stronger Mark. His neck uncreased, his mouth supple. Grief twists inside Rebecca. She would like to curl up and cry.

It’s been a mistake to come here, she’s a fool. Mark, too, is thinking these days of Diana, she is sure. A hot memory.

She whimpers aloud. Hold me, comfort me, wake.
Abruptly she writhes and turns. Mark stirs and then places his hand over her shoulder, sleepily pushing her away as he rolls to the other side. Now he curls away from her, and she presses up again, fitting to the snug of his spine, the front of her thighs against the back of his. Her arm falls around his ribs, the hand flattens against his belly. She appears to be sleeping but she’s not, her hand presses, senses. Lowers to where Mark’s penis waits, takes it in her palm.

Her fingers are clever, her whole body is aware; invisibly, as she softly teases the hot sticky flesh, the muscles of her legs flex and quiver. If he would just wake, and turn.

He breathes.

She massages more firmly, vehemently, until there’s stiffness and her palm is full of a hard thing, she’s using her whole hand now, it’s incredible that he doesn’t wake. Her breath comes more hoarsely against the ball of his shoulder, she can feel it on her face. She is getting wet.

‘What are you doing?’ A whisper. Her hand falls still.

‘Is that okay?’

His hips don’t move. He sighs.

She keeps massaging him, half-furtive, half-provocative. She lets him feel her open-mouthed breathing, her hips pulsing slowly against his thigh.

Mark’s hand pushes at her shoulder. He’s telling her to turn on her side, the other side. Obedient, she goes. He pulls at her leg, raises it in the air. A shameful flush of gratification heats her face, turned to the door. Mark’s face is in her hair, a hand grasps her shoulder, pulls her taut. He fumbles with fingers within her cleft, puts himself at her entrance. She moans, gladly, into the pillow.

But when he’s inside, her body arced between his prick and his hand, it’s just flesh, not what she wanted after all. Her body feels inert as mud. She keeps her head turned, and she knows Mark has his eyes closed. He slumps back to sleep after, and she lies there, her head thrown back, eyes open, not thinking anything at all except, ashamed.

::

Mark holds his hand out, the next morning, as Joss is dumping toast crusts in the bin. He has his rucksack on, is heading out. ‘Coming?’

‘What?’

‘Not ‘what?’— ‘pardon’.’ He cocks his head at her. ‘I’m going for a walk. Do you want to come along for a bit?’
She is a little shy. In Melbourne she had usually avoided being alone with Mark—not unwilling, exactly, but there was a freight of caution. She was always afraid of being too young, too foolish and mute with him. He is a smart man, and Joss wants to be a smart girl, but on the occasions back home when he’d driven her to the dentist, or Rebecca was out with her friends and the two of them had had an evening together, talk was a little clumsy, swung heavily with a weight of awkwardness. They spoke shyly, not quite looking straight at each other. They spoke of schoolwork, books, history; safe things. Matters on which it didn’t matter if their gazes skittered, if words stumbled a little, if there were pauses.

Joss blinks, pleased now. ‘Sure.’

The road outside is gilt with morning sunshine. A fresh cool breeze stirs the trees, but the countryside is quiet. Joss inhales, settles into a steady pace next to Mark’s. They walk in silence for a little while, away from the sea, along the curve of the road.

Joss finds herself relaxing. The air is so light, her legs feel young and strong. Birds call out from the trees, calls she’s never heard before.

‘I know it’s a bit of a wrench,’ Mark says. ‘We’ve just abducted you from school—I suppose you’ll be missing your friends.’

‘I don’t really have many friends there.’ She trails her fingers through the fronds of a hedgerow. ‘I’m a sad loner.’

‘Me too.’ He pauses. ‘To be honest, I’m glad to escape.’ He inhales, lets it out.

‘Are you?’

‘I’m not really the convivial type. Happiest with a field on either side, the sky above. Real man of the land.’ He pats his chest, laughs at himself. Joss giggles.

‘The kind that sits in the corner of a pub, making faces at everyone?’

‘That’s it. Cap pulled down low, pipe in the corner of my mouth.’ His smile grows. ‘People say I killed my brother, but they never found the body, out there in the bog.’

‘You wear nothing but old woolly stuff.’

‘I smell like dogs.’

Joss is giggling. ‘But you have a passionate affair with the barmaid. It’s a tale of forbidden romance, and no one knows, but she’s young, with firey red hair, and you love her—’ She stops.

He glances at her, amused. ‘Yes, a secret love.’

She walks on, a little unsure. ‘Yeah.’

The road seems to just go on ahead of them; she can see it appearing at the rise of a hill beyond.
'Joss?' She looks at him. 'Have you got a boyfriend?'
She doesn’t reply.
'Bite early for you?'
'Boys are rubbish.'
Mark laughs. ‘Indeed. You’re probably right to leave them alone. Horrible beasts. Not anyone on your blog?’
‘That’s all girls.’
‘I remember when I was fifteen. Terrified of girls. My parents had given me the idea that if I slept with a girl, I had to marry her. And they were so vicious! The girls I knew—and I went to a boys’ school, so I didn’t get to see them often—they were so tall and perfect and looked like they’d have your head off with a hockey-stick as soon as look at you.’ He chuckles. Joss wishes he’d stop talking about this. ‘The first girl I kissed tasted of orange juice. She didn’t even like me, she only felt sorry for me, I think. Her name was Madeleine, though, and I thought that was the most romantic thing in the world. Madeleine, in a pink dress, her beautiful knees.’ He smiles at the road in front of him. Then at Joss. She doesn’t know what to say.
‘Have you kissed anyone, Joss?’
She shakes her head.
‘Would you like to?’
Her steps faster on the road, she feels for a moment the relief that they’ll be there soon, and then she remembers that they’re still walking away from the house.
‘Kissing’s not so bad,’ he says from somewhere far away.
There’s a terrible sensation in her chest, as if something is flaking and shedding.
‘It isn’t, you know.’
They are passing under trees, the shade is cool. Her face feels wrong.
‘Well.’ He puts his hands in his pockets.
She must make herself say it; she coughs, slows, doesn’t look at him. ‘Can we go back?’
Mark swivels where he stands. ‘Of course.’
They walk back to the house, not speaking. Joss is aware that on her face is a small half-smile, of nervousness and also, a terrible kind of satisfaction.

::

In Melbourne there was a rhythm to things: they would eat out once a week, watch television most evenings, or have friends over for dinner: routines that swept them...
through year after year, rarely at a loss. Even when Mark entered their lives, not much changed. Joss had her homework, her online friendships, and whatever fad of interest she was going through, like the guitar she sporadically played.

Here the evenings are stiff things, and they all feel in a rush to have them over with. The light, in early summer, lingers on and on. It is not even quite dark when they clear the table from dinner and go to their rooms to read. Reading is the only thing to do, and each of them sits, isolated by a sheath of lamplight, in their bedrooms, disappearing into worlds other than this.

Dinner is late, and the house is still light, with the pale grey haze of the day’s fading outside. Rebecca goes to the garden for a cigarette afterwards. The birds scream in the trees. All the flowers are closing up.

‘It’s so peaceful here.’ she says to Mark, who’s come to lean against the doorway behind her.

There’s silence.

‘It’s very pretty.’

Her belly is tight, she hates it when he forces banality from her like this. She lets out a stream of smoke.

‘I’m buggered. I think I’ll go to bed.’ A hand rests on her shoulder briefly, and then is lifted away.

‘See you in there, love,’ she says, as the door snaps shut. He always keeps the doors shut, and the windows, even in summer when she wants to throw them open. What’s the point of summer if the windows are closed? Freshers and fuggers, someone had told her. Men all seemed to be fuggers.

How long has she been nervous of him?

::

In the bath, Joss sticks her legs out of the water. In the uncanny silence of the bathroom, every time she raises a hand to wipe her hair from her face, the noisy trickle echoes and then deadens. Her heartbeat is slow and heavy under the hot water. She’s reading about prehistoric people, and their careful placating, their diligent care of their gods.

The ancient people, according to this book, saw the world divided into two: the holy, and the other. Normal time, normal experiences could enter holiness by repeating the acts of the gods. In a sense everything was holy: eating, fighting, sex, birth, death. But only if it were done conscientiously, with the deliberation due to something sacred.
To eat was to consume the world as the gods had; to fight was to enact an epic conflict between hosts of primordial deities. Without sanctification, cosmos was merely chaos.

There’s something about this shadowy macabre which makes sense to her. Ritual and reason, the mad logic of the ancients. A sense of balance and equity. Up and down, to and fro: the constant comforting of fretful gods, the fearful, cynical offerings. To life, the people brought death. For death, they spoke to themselves of eternal life. Always the offering, the sacrifice. Joss wonders. Are they the same thing?

She had practised her own made-up little rites once: the careful placing of stones in a gutter to make a shrine; always the biggest stone last, the key. The hoarding of detritus, for fear of losing the one piece of scrap paper which might reveal the magic map. The furtive pouring out of a glass of Mark’s wine in the back garden, for deities on the other side of the world. Always leaving something on her plate, as she’d read in a fable, against bad luck inflicted for greed. Never watching someone pass out of sight. That would mean you’d never see them again. Superstitions she barely noticed, though she enacted some of them still.

And for the old people, to imitate the gods was to reanimate them. Spirits of the trees, spirits of water, spirits of a shrine, they were present and living in the moments when humans did again the things that the gods did: ‘did’ become ‘does’ and time itself was vanquished. For when an act was made sacred, then again the god performed it; holy time was no-time, and the instant became eternal. Space and history didn’t exist; only the recurrence, only the endless now, with each birth, each death, each sacrifice. All of them pressing together: the momentless folding in of time.

Joss is struggling with this. The steam has made her sleepy; she heaves her other leg out of the water and lets it rest on the side of the green enamelled bath. The idea of no-time radiates in her at this moment: she feels unreal, as if she has always been in this enclosed, silent room with the candlelight wavering on water made metal by shadows; the Joss who went to high school in Melbourne, who walked those streets, saw those people, is gone, as a dream; this is a dream, here; every morning she awakes and bemusedly, contentedly agrees to it. She knows she passes from moment to moment, along with the world, but for her there is only the instant, and that, too, baffles her.

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Rebecca stands outside the kitchen door in the walled garden, after getting up for a pee. She is too alert to go back to the bedroom where Mark has just dropped off to sleep. She thinks she might have a cigarette and look out at the darkness. But outside it is very
black, blacker than she is used to in the street-lit nights of suburbia in Melbourne, and
the body of darkness that stands beyond the door makes her halt still on the doorstep.
The kitchen light is on, and a curve of illumination paves the steps before her. Past that,
however, the whole world has disappeared. No pale outlines, nothing. The sounds are
more vivid than she likes. A night-bird chuckles, there is a strange repetitive clanging
somewhere in the distance, a creature rattles twigs, the trees make a noise like the sea,
always coming closer, never arriving. Stupid superstitious fears about sudden grabbing
hands and looming faces come to her, as if she were a child. Smoking more and more
quickly, she finds herself retreating. She looks out into the darkness, because to not look
at it is more disturbing. The curious thing about light, she thinks, is that the stronger it is,
the more it creates its own fugitives in shadows. Then she finishes the cigarette and
shuts the door, turns the light off and walks quickly through the shadowed house, where
the shadows are deep enough to be, in fact, the world.

::

It’s muggy today, close, as if someone has hands pressed over her cheeks, and the
window glass is so cool against her hot face. She opens her eyes, and there’s something
there. Outside. There’s a person in the front garden below. He’s small, standing just
inside the wall, looking up at her. A blond, thin boy, tanned dark as honey, a little
younger than she is. She can tell from the skinniness of his limbs, the size of his elbows.
Wearing khaki pants and a green shirt. He’s smiling at her.

Joss moves back from the window. He waves. She comes nearer again, a hesitant
smile on her face, though surely he can’t see her expression hidden in the dark of the
house. He’s still smiling, with his lips closed, looking steadily at her from across the
yard. Joss waves, a little wave, her fingers closing again quickly over her palm.

Then he turns and hops easily over the wall. Joss watches as he walks to the
shade of the trees in the road outside and vanishes.
Part Two
They’ve been in the house for over a week. The early summer air moves around them so lightly they barely feel it. Joss has already stopped remarking every day ‘It’s only three days since we left Australia, it’s only five days...’

Mark goes out every day, walking. Suddenly he seems terribly British and competent. Rebecca thinks there’s something fuddy-duddy about his earnestness. He comes home in the early evenings and collapses. ‘Did you take any photos?’ she asks. He hasn’t asked her to go with him. She hasn’t invited herself.

‘Just notes.’ He stands up wearily to put his boots outside. ‘I’m having a beer.’

He seems intent on getting out of the house where he’d lived once with Diana; but he brought them here. He wants to speak of her, but keeps his memories private. It is as if, nostalgic for the past, he finds the reality of what remains more alarming than comforting. He looks like a man who is feeling things, but cannot begin to utter them.

There’s a forbidding distance about him these days. The more she tries to reach him, the cooler his politeness seems. The kitchen is where they meet most often, since they barely speak in bed these days; they exchange their terse pleasantries, they eat, with Joss, they cast glances at each other when the other is staring into a bowl of food. When he speaks, it’s in a low voice, tiredly, as if Rebecca has asked him to recall some trivial detail of an old life. ‘I suppose so,’ is a phrase he uses too often. It makes Rebecca want to mock him. But she doesn’t speak this new terse language, she cannot find the steadiness in it from which to tell him what his distance is doing to her.

His memories of Diana taint the house invisibly, a fug.

‘Love you,’ she says, in bed at night, smiling. Trying yet again. She curls towards him.

‘I’m very fond of you,’ he says, but he rolls away and goes to sleep.

She’s settling in, she supposes. Rising late in the morning, drinking her tea slowly in that lovely quiet garden. Watching the sky, and the trees heaving in the breeze. The weather’s warming into June, pure and fresh; there are more and more wildflowers growing in the weeds. Occasionally she bends and yanks out some fronds, in a gesture towards gardening, but she likes the rough profusion of it, the garden is a good place to hide.

This morning she ambles up the path to one of the old sheds that sag at the back of the garden. Crooked slate tiles teetering towards the edge of a sloped roof; peeling paint walls. The door is wooden and opens with a tug: no lock. The scent inside is of rotten wood and stone dust, hot air captured in a small place, musty and familiar. It smells like her father’s shed, when she was a child. Oh, Dad. She remembers him for a
moment. How she misses him and her mother. They lay light hands on her shoulders and are gone again.

In the shed there is the usual jumble of cast-off household stuff. A radiator, a broken deck chair, some tins of paint and a shower curtain, cracked and brittle with age, over something larger. Rebecca pulls it off. A bike.

Years since she’s ridden a bike. She drags it out, tosses one thigh over the saddle. The tires are a little slack but otherwise seem fine. It’s a little too low for her, and she places her feet on the pedals, pushes one forward cautiously. In the long grass the traction is good. Weeds hiss at the spokes of the bike as she trundles it out the front gate.

This a freedom Rebecca hasn’t expected. One hesitant push with her foot and she spins off down the road. Lightness and ease rush through her. One long thigh shoves down on the pedal, then the other, and she’s amongst the fields. Down the slight hill she goes and goes.

It is an oddly comforting feeling, to be following Mark into this land, seeing the things he’s been seeing. If she can’t do it with him, she can come after him. It makes her feel closer, as if she’s seeing through his eyes; as if he’s somehow inside her.

She could ride forever, like this, past the blank bright fields. Past a thatched-roof cottage, past an old coaching-inn; a dog barks from a garden. There are no people to be seen. One after the other junctions appear and random turns are taken: it all looks the same, whichever direction she goes but there are signposts, she’ll find her way back. Suddenly it doesn’t seem to matter after all. She sings to the cows as she passes them and they look up with their calm intelligent eyes. The sun is blazing and she’s sweating, but there’s no overwhelming heat. She’s proud of the wet under her arms, damp on her back. ‘One of these mornings,’ and she inhales, ‘you’re going to rise up singing…’ In the tunnels of trees through which the road passes, the air is cool and green.

She stops the bike on long stretches, when it takes her up high, and across the rim of trees she can see the sea and closer, the fields. They are all full of that crop she doesn’t recognise; of course, she wouldn’t recognise any at home, either. Stalks a couple of feet high, fringed with pale yellow fronds on either side. The field looks soft, like a thick carpet. This is a kind of corn or barley perhaps. There’s a plume of cloud on the horizon that might be smoke. Imagine if it were smoke, a settlement burning. For a moment she forgets to concentrate and there it is, a possibility of imagination. Someone has stepped here, in this field, people have walked and died here. It’s calm. Thoughts flush away.
The trees, close and far, are her great delight. They are markers here, she orients by them, pays attention. The endless twisted silhouettes of them: she’s never seen this kind of beauty before. Laced about with ivy, filigree leaves, a hundred shades of green and grey, they are so different to the ghostly eucalypts of Australia and even to the staid European trees she’s known at home.

Rebecca is one of those people who loves the bush in Australia, but never goes to it. Somehow there was never time to go camping, or for more than one jaunt to the hills a year. Absurd, really, when being in the tangled cocoon of vegetation has always soothed her. An odd kind of soothing, because it seemed a consolation despite itself. There was something alien about the bush; it belonged to other people. She always felt like an intruder; bush walking, those few times, she had often taken the position at the rear of the line of walkers, so she could sometimes pause and look behind, at where the trees were carefully ignoring her passage, lowering their eyes before the hikers disappeared out of sight and the bush could ease again. She respected its privacy, that was what was consoling about it; it respected hers.

Here the trees range along hill-tops, wreathing their perfect dark limbs against each other, substantial and still delicate, grave and beautiful. A harmony of forms which holds her rapt. As she passes the hedgerows she thinks hawthorn, birch, lime, chestnut, oak. The names come to her from memories wrapped up in comfort and the cosiness of a childhood bed.

Coming up a hill on the way home, panting, the bike heavy in her arms as she stands on the pedals, there’s field enclosed within a hem of trees, dark, fir-like, cool. She thinks she’ll pull in there, sit in the gully between the barley and the trees. As she yanks the bike through the opening she notices flies.

Feathers under the tires. Ripped, a wing-bone, dirty grey and white, a dank smell. Where she was planning to rest there is a mess of bird carcasses, smashed and torn, matted, crushed. There are dozens of small white and dirty bodies and a rank smell.

She wheels out again in revulsion.

The day is bright like a glass of wine. She can leave the dead place far behind in only a minute.

But at the top of the next hill, heading back towards the coast and home, she pauses, sweaty and breathless now, and looking to one side sees a meadow, like any other, except that Mark is in it, standing there in the middle of the long grass. He has his head in his hands. His shoulders are bent.

She is about to call out when she sees how he shakes.
He seems a stranger, this man crying alone in a field. Very quietly, she puts a foot on a pedal and pushes off.

::

While he talks, she looks at the details of his face. It’s a good face, firm and characteristic: the neat nose, slightly veined now with age, the dark brows, the thin firm lips, the elegant planes of his cheeks. The kind of face one might see in a regimental portrait, or a university don’s hall. Rebecca remembers, vaguely, loving the tender plateaux of young men’s cheeks, the little creases beside their soft mouths, the fragile skin at the corner of their eyes. But to her, this is what beauty has come to look like.

And love is looking closely, and never flinching; only, ever, looking more closely, less and less afraid.

He turns the side of his face to her now because he cannot seem to address her directly. She has the sudden urge to tell him not to be ridiculous, not to be so fucking British and stiff. Oh Mark, she says inside, You really are turning into—what would you call it? A chump.

But then he turns to her and she can only notice how frail his skin has become, how the light catches in his eyelashes, as he says, ‘It’s a long way.’

She hasn’t been listening closely. He was talking about his mother, up in the middle of the country, and how ill she’s been, it’s been so many years and how she might not be around for much longer, she’s over 80 now. They’re not close, Mark and his family, and after ten years overseas he’s become simply a name to his mother, a voice on the phone and a collection of old school-books in her house. But he has begun talking about her since they arrived, and obviously it was only a matter of time before they all trooped up to some godforsaken industrial town and paid their respects. It might be good to get out of this place. Her whole body feels stiff, as if all she’s done is lie in bed.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘When’ll we go? Next week? Joss has to start school soon.’

He looks at her and almost without thought she realises: he hates me.

‘I don’t think so,’ he says, very distinctly. ‘I know you’re not stupid. But you’re not listening.’

‘What?’

‘I’m trying to tell you.’ He makes to take one of her hands; pulls his hand back. His voice is formal, with a note of caution that is only patronising. ‘I’ll say it slowly. Rebecca. I do care for you. You know I do. But I’m going to have to go away. For a while. I don’t know when I’ll be back. I..’
She sits very still. Something flushes through her, a rinse of shock. And the immediate wash, following, of familiarity. Oh, she knew it. Just as when her parents died suddenly, and she thought, most of all: How stupid I was to think I would avoid that.

‘You’re going away on your own?’
‘It’s being here. I am sorry. I thought I could stick it. This house, it’s just too much. I’ve got to get away for a bit. And…’
She stares at him.
‘And you. I need some time alone.’
Her pulse, slowing, is the only thing that moves her. She can feel herself, swaying minutely in her chair, once a second, with the rhythm of her heart.
‘You arsehole.’
‘What?’
‘You—’ She fights for control, to breathe. ‘You’re going to leave? You’re just picking up and moving on now? What do you mean, you have to go away for a bit? Are you coming back? What do you mean, ‘and you’? ’ She slaps his arm, messily. It comes out a weaker blow than she meant. She slaps him again, harder. ‘Fuck!’
‘Rebecca…’
‘Jesus Christ.’ She’s trembling.
Mark is clenched tight with resentment. ‘I knew you’d make it difficult. Get hysterical. I just need some time for myself. This is hard.’
‘Go fuck yourself.’
‘Fine. Fine.’
They sit there for a few moments. Rebecca cannot make herself look at him. Breath is a bubble in her throat, caught and painful. She has no idea what expression her face is making.
‘Look, I didn’t want to upset you. But I have to do what’s best for me. You demand a lot, you know. At this point, I just don’t know if I can give it anymore.’
Rebecca speaks quietly. ‘I thought maybe... maybe we might try again. Mark?’ She doesn’t know where this thought has come from but suddenly it opens in her: a cup of light.
Now he stares. ‘What on earth are you talking about?’
‘I know I wasn’t ready last year. We decided together, but I know really it was me who wanted to get rid of it. But now I’m thinking, and it could be really great, you know—you, and me and Joss, and a little baby...’
‘I’m going tomorrow,’ Mark says. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll keep in touch. Don’t fall apart, Rebecca. For Christ’s sake.’

He gets up, awkwardly, from the little narrow old chair, and Rebecca watches as he walks out of the room. His footsteps are loud on the stairs. She sits in her seat for a minute before she begins to breathe hard, pressing her fists against her sternum, beating her fist against the heart.

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Joss is out, and Mark has gone. When he put his arms around Rebecca in farewell this morning before driving off, she felt every inch of space that he carefully held between them. A formal embrace. She could barely look at him, but as the car disappeared around the corner she watched it out of sight, found herself leaning forward.

Now Rebecca flinches through the rooms of the house. Outside the sun is shining, inside the house is chill. Her bare feet don’t seem to meet the floor surely. She finds she is walking with her head meekly held forward, penitent. Under her heart, right there beneath her breastbone, is pain. It feels as if an anvil is swinging, straining the muscles from which it hangs. It aches and aches.

She puts on her boots, jams a packet of cigarettes in her pocket, and walks out the door.

The day’s brightness blasts her. There’s the sound of birdsong, and the trees against the house whisper. Everything in the world has been going on out here without her again.

She takes the path from the front gate, turns, and follows the outside of the garden wall to a nest of trees, wrapped in ivy, trying not to put her hand against any trunk or drape of leaves. There are spider webs, but only tiny delicate ones. She can’t see a path through the thickness of vegetation, but on the other side of it is the big field that lies behind the house. Rebecca wants to be in it. The crop has been shorn and the large pale yellow space is empty enough for Rebecca’s yearning. With an Australian’s fear of snakes and spiders, she gingerly picks her way over the rumpled ground, its lumps of ivy-covered stone and tussocks.

In the shadows on the other side of the glade, Rebecca pauses. Is she allowed to walk on the stubble? She feels watched. ‘For god’s sake, you fucking idiot.’ She strides out.

Underfoot the ground is clumpy with the drying crop stumps, and the scent of it is dusty and fresh. There are patches where stones—are they flints?—have been
ploughed up and some broken. Most of them are intact, however, lumpy and chalk-white as bones. Her boots make a loud sound as they crunch in the runnels of cleared ground. The sky is hazing with clouds, darkest to the east, but the sun is still shining.

It’s the middle of the field and she lies down suddenly. Flat on her back. There is the sound of stalks under her hair. The sky a great blue skin above. ‘So,’ she says aloud.

Her mouth makes the shape Mark’s does, when he’s holding something in. She can feel his expression on hers. It’s a comforting ghost. But all her words when she mumbles them in her mouth like a pebble taste only of water.

The sun is prickly hot. She can smell her own skin, feel the glossy heat covering her hair like a cap.

Back out onto the quiet road, and there are the signs: St Crispin’s. The white arrow points to her right. Rebecca hesitates, then swings down it with quick, cross steps. There is no one around; only one more house, on the corner, and no flicker of life behind the lace curtains there.

At a junction with a smaller road to the right there is another sign. This road is lined with aspens and they sough as she passes beneath their kind feathery shade. Five minutes’ walk around the base of a shallow hill and there’s the chunky steeple of the church, rising above a thick of greenery. She slows.

They’re almost all Norman around here, Mark had said. Churches. The Normans arrived on the south coast, not so far away, and they put up castles and churches. Sometimes they were shoved on top of older Saxon ones. The Normans wanted to put their stamp on things. And god, but they knew how to build. All made of the same stuff, see? And he’d gestured at the thick flint walls and square towers. Castles, churches, they all look the same. Indestructible.

This one is benign with quietness. It’s surrounded by a low flint wall; she runs her fingers along the chunky stone as she walks, until the tips go numb. There is a little wooden portal opening in the low wall, a structure on poles like the kind of roof put over a wishing well in children’s stories. Rebecca bends to read the faded yellow tourist information plaque by its side. The lych gate dates from the 1760s and forms the entrance to the Path of the Dead, along which bodies were borne for burial.

She steps through the gate.

There is grass and ivy everywhere, soft and forgiving, massed around the half-sunken gravestones that sprinkle the grounds. Clusters of them nearer the church itself. Inscriptions in old, elegant script like Book Antiqua on Rebecca’s laptop. Here lieth Sarah Wooton, relict of Samuel Wooton, who departed this life on y 20 Jan 1756. Rebecca notices some strange graves, with stone bodies, it seems, lying above the earth. Rounded
mummies, with a ball for a head and a tapering tube for a body, as if in their shrouds. There are two or three miniatures, the size of children.

She strolls, slowly, narrowing her eyes at the tombstones as she tries to decipher the eroded scripts. There are precious few she can read. No matter how grand the stone, how large and carefully inscribed, most of them have not endured two or three hundred years in legibility.

She nears the church itself, its flint-studded foundations warped to the uneven ground. The steeple rises, stiff and square, like a watchtower, square at the top, clad in ivy all over one side. Halfway up the façade of the church is a crumbling carved rosette with a round, projecting nub at the top. Looking lower, as the clouds topple the tower towards her, she notices more nubs, on either side of the door’s lintels. They are heads, she sees, almost life-size. The one on her left is a woman, wearing a cowl, her face smeared with time but still recognizable. She is smiling. Her companion on the other side is also a woman, also hooded, but her mouth is chipped out of shape, and her eyes have a sadder aspect. Rebecca stares at the two of them. They make her feel as if she’s welcome here. Three women, gazing peacefully at each other.

She wonders, briefly, where Diana is buried. This place looks as if no one’s come to worship here for years. Diana is probably in a modern cemetery, lined up alongside all the other shiny black marble bookmarks. Perhaps Mark has been to see; he didn’t say.

Rebecca has not been to a church service since her parents’ funerals ten years ago. And they were awful, stiff affairs. The priest got her mother’s name wrong, she remembers. Margaret, instead of Marguerite. And there were flowers everywhere, prissy arrangements, all the wrong colours. White and orange. She didn’t like the bare modern chapel, with its pale pine fittings and blank white ceiling. There was nothing grand or eloquent there. Only awkward people and too much space around her body, so she’d pulled little Joss closer to her, feeling the trembly warmth of her sister’s body, hating everything, wishing only for somewhere dark and small.

There are notices pinned up in the porch of the church, and on either side, an age-shiny wooden bench. The porch is stone, and it smells damp and old. On the sill of the inner door are scratches in the pale stone; little fine crosses. Another tiny label on the board draws visitors’ attention to them. Crusader Crosses, it says. It is believed that Crusaders, on their return to England, would blunt their swords on the lintel of the first church they saw, in thanksgiving for a safe homecoming. Rebecca draws her fingertip along one of the frail lines. What did they do when they departed in the first place, she thinks. Was
there a sharpening of swords? She likes the idea of marking an arrival. Perhaps she should do the same, somehow. Here I am.

She wouldn’t put it past Joss to have some little ritual. She’s good at things like that. After the funeral Joss, aged only five, had insisted that Rebecca and she stand in the back garden. Stand, said Joss. Here. Next to me. The two of them stood, in the buttery late light of the evening. Now bow, said Joss. This way. She turned to the left. And this way. Rebecca followed. They did a circle, bowing in every direction. Joss pointed up at the sky, to where two clouds were being tugged slowly towards the sunset. Now mum and dad know we’re sorry.

Maybe Joss has made her obeisance to this place already. She’s taking hold of England in a way Rebecca is resisting. Rebecca lays her palm on the cold yellow stone. Maybe she should try harder. Anything’s better than this mewling and listlessness. The wet cement in her heart. But oh, she thinks. How hard it is to give up that sweet grief too.

The dense wooden door to the church is locked. Well. She goes back out into the sunshine. There is a huge thick tree near the door, scrubby-looking, with tiny little dark leaves like needles. Its branches extend in every direction, long, twisted and fringed with smaller twigs. It’s grotesque, almost sinister; under the boughs, as she wanders closer and ducks her head to reach beyond where the branches curtsey right to the ground. The shade is cold, colder than the other air. It’s a messy tree, haphazard, not pretty, with stiff dead twigs bristling out in a chaos of shapes. But she sees the trunk and comes up to touch it. The bark is contorted, corrugated and dark, harsh as asphalt, but sheened as if with skin where the sun catches it. The little needle leaves make a fluttering, rushed sound.

Knotted and ridged, with columns of bark twining against each other; the trunk has split at one point. There is a hollow inside, and the bark edges there are glossy and round, like leather. Rebecca peers in. Cobwebs, a dry dusty scent. The hollow is big enough to sit in, if one weren’t afraid of spiders.

There is something about this tree that makes her feel good. It’s ugly but safe as its boughs drape down all around her. Yew trees, Mark had said. They’re for both life and death. Very common in churchyards, even when they’re older than the church itself. That tells you something. Some of them are more than a thousand years old. They live so long and they’re always green, people associated them with eternal life, that’s why they’re in graveyards. But they’re also poisonous. So, death. Very tidy symbols, aren’t they?
Something hard presses on Rebecca’s palm as she leans in to peer into the hollow. Wedged into one side of the wooden lip is a stone. A flint. Like a blade, like a handle. Strange. She tugs at it, but it feels stuck tight as a rivet. A knife in a tree.

Abruptly a little rotten wood crumbles away under her fingers. The flint loosens a little. Sunk so deep for so long, unchanging within a living, growing thing, like a chunk of time itself. She lets it go, sorry to have disturbed it.

She walks on, and out through the church gate again, feeling almost as if she’s trespassed. But she would like someday to come back. The weather is turning.

::

Joss spends the afternoon reading in bed, in her bright eyrie of a room, all the windows open and the hot smell of grass coming in.

Mark’s gone to visit his mother: Rebecca seems devastated, but Joss doesn’t really understand what’s happened. She figures she’ll be upset later, if that’s required; but for now, she’s feeling almost relieved. So she writhes into a more comfortable position on the bed and fingers the edges of the pages of a history book.

Below, in the house, there’s a distant sound, as if Rebecca is moving something, dragging some furniture around. Joss twirls her hair and takes another bite of her apple. She doesn’t, she realises, actually like sour apples, though she always chooses them.

::

He is there as she’s walking home a couple of hours later. Stiff from lying on her hot bed, Joss had walked a way down the road just to get some air, and then turned to go home. More fields, more road, more trees. Twilight, the birds loud in the trees across the fields, the hedgerows a pale spume on either side of her. Singing under her breath, swinging her arms. Hastening a little, not wanting to be caught in the dark. Joss is not used to being in a place without street lights, she wonders just how dark it will be out here in the fields. It would be blacker than anything she’s ever known. She starts to hurry.

The boy comes towards her in the gloom, down the road. He might not know her. But he’d waved, that time. A stranger on a road. He comes right up to her now, smiling. There is something about the way he walks, an odd little jerk: he limps.

He stops. She stops too. He grins at her.

‘Hi.’

He smiles more broadly.
They stand there, in the thick gloom, the sky streaked with grey and silver, huge clouds lazily taking up the world.

He cocks his head. He is only a boy, younger than she is, she thinks. ‘Do you live around here?’

He takes a hand out of his pocket and shakes it out by his side in a strange gesture, still smiling. Then he points across the field to her right, where there is a slight hillock crowned with trees.

‘Over there?’

He nods, thoughtfully.

‘You’re kind of quiet. You don’t talk much, do you.’

He laughs, and walks on. As he rolls away with his lopsided gait, he turns and smiles at her: a smile so fresh and knowing and fond, as if they are old friends, that she too grins and waves.

He is strolling away with his strange tight lurch, further down the road to the dark horizon, his hands in his pockets. Everything in the air is gathering in. She walks home quickly, smiling.

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Already the smell of Mark in the sheets is vanishing. But Rebecca carefully covers the sheet with the doona every morning when she gets up, like tucking a child into bed. She doesn’t want his scent to go. She knows it’s ridiculous—morbid—but she snuffles her face into his pillow at night, damps down the scent with wet eyes.

This is why he’s left, it’s her, it’s the shame of her, she was weak and stupid. She showed him everything. And he’s left, because how could anyone love her, so naked and hoping?

She knuckles herself into the bed. The trees are blowing against the house, in the dark. She hears Joss’s footsteps, going down the stairs to the bathroom.

Something about sex always simultaneously frightened and amused her: the frantic bucking, the absurd fleshiness of it all. Men so urgent and intent, their faces transformed and swollen with blood and their single-minded clamberg, their eyes staring beyond her. As if they were trying to squeeze themselves through a tiny hole, invisible, somewhere in the air behind her head. She’d often had to fight the urge to laugh; once, she began to giggle helplessly, and the young man she was with had stopped dead, and glared at her. Rebecca’s own body had embarrassed her, with its ungainly
reaching, the way it fought her as she, too, tried to swim through that narrow aperture of
pleasure into bliss.

For years she has known only Mark’s body, and the revelations of her own under
his touch. She has, for a long time, missed the moments when his gaze became hot as he
bent his face to hers.

Then, after sex one night last year, she had realised she’d forgotten to put in her
diaphragm. ‘Well,’ said Mark. ‘Perhaps you didn’t really forget.’ It wasn’t as if he asked
for a child. But Rebecca, at thirty-one, was at the age where she might consider one. And
when she had found she was pregnant, Mark waited for her to say ‘Oh, god, this is
awful’ before he said, ‘I guess it is.’

The termination hadn’t been so ghastly; what had seeped unhappily at Rebecca
as she lay in the recovery room was the knowledge that Mark, in the waiting room, was
mourning the loss of a child he had wanted. ‘Choice is sacrifice,’ she repeated
apprehensively to him later. He had simply smiled sadly, and taken her hand out from
under the pillow of their bed where they lay, and lain there, his face still and his eyes
closed, while Rebecca tried to see in the dimness whether there were really tears beneath
his lashes.

::

Joss corners Rebecca in the bathroom. ‘When am I going to get a real bed?’
‘Oh, shit.’
‘I know you think I like being a total rat, and I don’t really mind sleeping on the
mattress, but it’s a bit yucky.’

Rebecca’s hair is such a pale brown in the mirror that she looks, literally, washed
out. There are shadows, almost yellow, beneath her eyes. She’s lost weight from her face
so fast: Joss thinks she looks like a little kid, and at the same time, so much older than
she really is. Thirty-two looks like hell, she thinks.
‘Can we at least go and buy me a kind of bed?’
‘You just want to go into town and email your friends about what a revolting
time you’re having,’ says Rebecca. She goes back to plucking her eyebrows, but she gives
Joss quick, not unsympathetic glances in the reflection. ‘I don’t know what we’re doing,
mate. I know this is bullshit. But we’re here now, at least for the time being.’
‘Can we afford to make the place a bit more—’
‘Sure.’ Rebecca plucks at a hair. ‘Sure we can. Anyway,’ she says, frowning at her
reflection, ‘We’re grown women. We can fend.’
They go into the village, get a bus to Canterbury, and find some furniture. A fold-out bed for Joss, a desk for Rebecca, a couch, a television; some other small things to make life civilised. After a few weeks in the small realm of the house and its surroundings, the bigger town feels almost overwhelming: the stores pumping music, the young people in their bright clothes, the acerbic glares of the elderly. They spend an hour at a café simply gazing at passers-by. The consensus is that the mass of humanity is not, after all, worth pining for.

A van comes the next day and delivers everything. For a morning, Joss and Rebecca are invigorated, flushed with the pride of making the house theirs. ‘Fuck Mark,’ pants Rebecca, as she pulls the couch into place below a window. ‘This is what happens when he leaves me.’

Joss doesn’t say anything, but shoves the couch against the wall and wipes her cheek.

The most exciting moment is when they connect the television and the mellow tones of a BBC newsreader tell them that there was a massive traffic jam on the A25.

‘Lamps,’ Rebecca observes. ‘We forgot lamps. I hate overhead lights.’

But Joss has a stash of candles.

‘You are a little boho.’

‘Hobo, more like.’

‘I like this, you know,’ Joss says, later. ‘It’s kind of like camping. Like we’re an outpost of Australian civilisation in the wilds of savage Britain.’

‘Kind of like a reverse First Fleet?’

‘That’s it. They don’t realise it yet, these people, but we’re going to violate their women, steal their land, and make ourselves boss. They’ll be lucky if they get to keep their ancestral Jaffa Cakes.’ Joss takes another one.

‘You know, really, we’re like the ghosts of the colonies, come back to haunt the place.’

‘We must have had family here once. Do we know anyone?’

‘Well, we don’t have anyone here now. Not that I know of. But I remember mum telling me once that we’d come from convicts sent to Tasmania, and that they were smugglers. I wonder if they came from around here? Mark said something about smugglers, didn’t he?’
'That would be typical. I always thought you had a sly, kind of criminal look about you, Beck.'

'A rough tough cream puff, that’s me. A nasty pasty.'

'Yeah. All that bad-ass pastry stuff.'

But after a last cup of tea, Rebecca becomes silent again, and smokes a cigarette out in the garden with her lips pressed tight against tears. Joss says goodnight, but Rebecca doesn’t answer, and her sister goes to bed abruptly irritated, for what good is a sister if she’s not paying attention?

::

From her bed, Joss can smell cigarette smoke and hear Rebecca in the garden. She’s talking to Mark.

'And you, you never, god, you never tell me anything, you just make me sit and wait and wait like a fucking... You’re so stiff and righteous, keeping all your secrets, like Diana, what the hell was she like, you made it all sound so perfect and... Shit. I wanted you, I loved you so much, you bring me and Joss all this way and then you leave, you leave...'

::

Rebecca is growing accustomed to waking with her legs stretched across the bed. Luxuriously, they scissor back and forth in the warm cavern of sheets. Sleep rises off her like steam. And then she is awake, and she lies there very still for a moment, aloneness thudding in her throat.

Joss has been wandering, a new child it seems. Free and unafraid in the new country. Rebecca doesn’t know where she goes. ‘Oh, out,’ Joss says carelessly. She’s pulling her boots on in the kitchen when Rebecca sleepily walks in. ‘I just like it.’ Joss gives a short tug to the laces. She gets up, straightens her shorts, and leaves with a quick smile.

There on the kitchen dresser, forgotten, is one of Mark’s Ordnance Survey maps. Rebecca opens it. It all looks quite complicated, until she peers closer and realises that it simply represents everything in the countryside. Bridleways, manor houses, copses of trees, golf-courses, hamlets of a few houses. All are shown in tiny pictographs. There’s St Crispin’s, the church. Rebecca hadn’t realised the road outside curved so; nor that a
river was so close, and the Roman fort. Not far away is a small plot marked out in
dotted lines, with the label ‘Disused dump.’

There is nothing to do today, except for sitting in the garden, fondling fronds;
except for the washing; except for waiting for Mark. She has resolved to push the
thought of him out of her brain whenever it comes, with its taste of vinegar in her mouth.

After a moment’s thought, Rebecca grabs an apple, the keys, the map, and leaves
the house.

::

There’s her sister, far ahead on the straight of the road before it curves off again like a
blade into the distance. Joss swings down the road quickly. Rebecca ambles more slowly,
hovering by the hedgerows, ready to push herself furtively into their cover should Joss
turn around. It’s not that she’s following her, but she feels a bit foolish walking behind.
The white broderie flowers of Queen Anne’s Lace brush her face. The scent from the
hedges is sweet and powdery. She snatches a handful of daisies and valerian, rolls the
stalks in her fingers as she walks.

The road curves, there is a grove of trees—oaks, their stiff sturdy trunks and
friendly big leaves—and Joss is on a diagonal across the verge when Rebecca sees her.
Against the dry grass verge there is planted a windbreak of poplars shivering white in
the breeze, and beyond them a field. Joss, who always in her Australian life walked on
the footpath, superstitious of stepping on the cracks, is climbing the white wooden stile
of someone’s meadow and striding through the barley. Rebecca, hesitating as she
approaches, notices a sign: Footway. It points into the field. Perhaps she’ll follow Joss a
little, after all.

Once she has swung over the gate, she notices that the crop of barley is run
through with a track that bends the stems in a smooth line to the horizon. More trees up
there on the little hill. Out in the open, wary of being noticed, Rebecca pulls back, lingers
against the poplar trunks. The many leaves make a smooth susurration in the breeze.

Joss has reached the stand of trees on the hill They are bent low, more wrenched
and thick than the serene poplars. Rebecca sees her bend, take off her little satchel, plop
down and cross her legs. A silhouette dark against the bright day, pale against the dark
trees. Which is it? Rebecca squeezes her eyes shut, opens them. Joss sits, facing the field.
Rebecca shrinks back. Joss’s head is tilted, her legs spread carelessly.

She plaits her fingers, stretches them; then pulls weakly at one ankle—her sloppy
socks, thinks Rebecca.
Rebecca creeps around until she’s behind the poplars. This is like spying on herself, in the moments when, idle, she presses her blood-warm lips to the cool thick paint of the kitchen door frame, or finds herself absently swinging her hip against the hip of the table, just for the movement of it, the easy sway. Lonesome things. Joss is lonesome too. Not once has Rebecca asked how she feels about Mark leaving. Joss is all alone here. The realisation recalls the vinegar of hurt to Rebecca’s mouth.

She has been staring at the bark of the poplar and forgetting Joss, the field, the hill and the trees up there where her sister is sitting. This is mad. What’s wrong with her? She heaves off the tree’s support and turns back to the road.

::

Joss scratches her ankle and eases her spine. The fields below her lookout are shivering with yellow heat.

There’s a footstep behind her.

She jumps. Her heart a silly bird. Flush under the sweat on her face.

His face is brown, with clear skin over dark freckles, summer’s flush beneath. Black irises in hooded eyes. Joss thinks of the broken flints she saw at the church in town, eggs of stone embedded in the walls, broken off roughly, each surface bevelled a dozen different ways, each angle glossy as black water. His knuckles are torn, patches where the sunburned skin has rubbed off, pink against brown. He smells dankly of sweat. Like an animal. Joss breathes him in.

There is a flex inside her that is like the sweet panic of touching herself. She lets it wriggle inside her, voluptuously. She too is damp.

The boy looks right at her, smiling a little, his sharp teeth crooked at one corner. He squats, crosses his arms over his long thighs. His forearms are smooth and brown, but flawed here and there with small shiny scars. Joss stares at the fine blond hairs there, the thin sinews of his hands.

A boy. He is so beautiful she thinks she will burn.

She looks out over the field below their little eyrie, the dry green trees dissolving in the thick air into the distance. ‘It’s so pretty around here.’ Is it stupid to call this place pretty? He’s watching her. ‘I live over there.’ She points to the right.

He nods.

‘My sister’s husband got the house. We’ve just arrived. It’s, um, it’s really cool.’ Just how stupid is she making herself seem? She is stupid, stupid, stupid. ‘Where do you live exactly?’
He points to the left, towards a deep thick of trees that runs down and out of
sight, and beyond, where the land melts towards the sea. They can’t quite make out the
water from here, the horizon is too hazed, but it’s there, a pale rim.

‘You live with your parents?’

The corn-coloured hair over his forehead is spiky with sweat. He runs thin fingers
through it, pushes it back. There is a long scar on his temple, pale seam puckering the
skin, Joss is entranced.

She’s wet under the arms, pink in the face. It’s getting even hotter, but the sky has
clouded, cataract on a blue iris.

The boy is looking at her steadily, with his black eyes, simply staring. Then he
takes her hand and wrenches her to her feet. The bright world tunnels black for a
moment and then swerves back into focus. She feels trembly. He stands there and looks
at her, smiling, with serious eyes, intent.

‘What’s your name, anyway?’

He makes that odd gesture again, shaking his fingers out. ‘You don’t talk, do you.’ she says. ‘I’m going to just call you Flick. You kind of flicker.’ He still has her
fingers loosely held in his. ‘I’m Joss.’

He looks at her in silence. He clamps her fingers more tightly and tugs her hand,
as if wishing to lead her somewhere.

The wind comes up and all the trees around them flex towards the ground.
Leaves shake and shake.

‘Come on then. Show me.’

::

The woods are cool and damp after the sun. Thin young trees close around as she
follows Flick’s footsteps, his careful treading over mulch and twigs. She thinks they are
heading towards the sea, but she can’t be sure. He’s taken her, sometimes holding her
hand, sometimes walking ahead but always turning back with a secretive, conspiratorial
smile, encouraging her as they walk across fields, alongside windbreaks. The land
around had seemed flat, but Joss feels that she’s walking downhill. Everything is getting
dimmer and deeper and her hands are clammy as she follows Flick between the still,
silent trees. She can hear birds, distant, then one flusters out of a tree just ahead of
them, shrieking. The chinks of sky are white through the pale green millions of leaves
above. They walk in quiet.
Ivy cloaks many of the trees, where they are not scaly with lichen and moss. Small flowers spill in pools where the ground is clear: delicate white cups of silk, bulbs of dark indigo. The air smells of growth. There is no track, and they crunch through ferns and brambles. Joss accidentally brushes a craggy stalk of green with one finger; the sharp pain startles her. A nettle. She’s read about nettles.

There’s the sound of water somewhere nearby. Joss is thirsty. Flick is going ahead, his small, straight back, blond hair metallic in this gloom. Joss’s boots stumble. She stops.

‘Flick?’

He turns. There is a strangeness in his face. So fine and smooth, his child’s features, the polished planes of his cheeks, the silken skin of his lips. In the light beneath the trees he is gleaming like gold.

‘Flick? Where are we going?’ She is embarrassed to be faltering. Not brave enough, bookish girl, city girl, foreigner. Mark would scorn her. Perhaps she’s not ready for this adventure. Her finger is stinging sharply from the nettle. It’s getting late in the afternoon. She gives Flick a tentative smile. ‘Are we nearly there?’

He takes three steps back towards her. It’s strange how nervous she is of him, a boy younger than she is. She wishes he’d say something; what’s wrong with him? He stares into her eyes.

‘Yes, yes, I’m coming. I’m fine. It’s just—it’s just, I reckon I should be getting home—’

The trees hiss in a little breeze. How dark the irises of his eyes are. He takes her hand.

The way he yanks her forward, startles her. His small hand is very strong. Is he taller than she’d thought? She lurches ahead, finds her pace again. The scent of sweat from him is strong, bitter. He leads her to the side, towards the sound of water.

There is a little creek there, water running in glossy roundels over rocks. Joss steps forward, peers into the water. The light here is dim, shaded, and the trees are thick on the other side of the bank. The water is loud, running past, there’s no other sound now. Among the weeds trailing the banks is a clump of something, ragged and tattered. She glances up to Flick. He stands, looking into the water, smiling with pride.

‘Beautiful.’ Joss doesn’t know if this is it, if this is the place they’ve arrived. It’s a creek, where she hadn’t known there was one, but she doesn’t know anything about this country, should she be impressed? ‘Lovely.’

He gestures at the water.
She looks more closely at the round thing there. The water is curling around it, easing past, relentless. It seems the current is growing stronger, the sound of the water’s passage is becoming loud. The shape in the creek is fabric, a cowl of fabric torn at the top, and inside there is something leathery, pale. Something sinewed.

‘Oh, god!’ Joss jerks back.

The drowned dogs are like wood, stained and polished by the water. Their muzzles are lean, their flanks, where the skin appears over the smooth rippling surface, spongelike. The eyes of the dogs have pearled white.

Flick laughs.

Joss looks at him in horror.

‘Yours?’ He shrugs. She can’t stop staring at them. Their snouts all pushed together, a rope tied cruelly around the thin stiff legs.

She feels as if snails are crawling over her. ‘I don’t know why you—’ She bites off the words. He seems very strange now and Joss wishes she were home. This country is all wrong. Where are the spells and the fables? Where’s the magic? The creek stinks, she realises. Small bugs are festering around the dead animals, swarming in the water.

‘I have to go now.’ Her voice is shrill. She will just get home. She’ll find the way.

‘Thanks. Thanks for the walk.’

His hand is on her arm again. His hands seem bigger, the fingers reach all the way around her upper arm. He is taller than she is, surely he was not so large before? Not a child, a young man. His gleaming face comes near, she can smell his breath. She prickles all over.

His eyes close and he leans in, his other hand at the back of her head, he pulls her face forward, and his tongue is squirming at her lips, slithers between. Joss grunts. Her teeth part, her head goes back, she is kissing, she is kissing a boy, he tastes of metal and he’s right inside her mouth, he’s swallowing her. The world is a mouth.

He breaks the kiss and steps away.

Joss’s face is warm and wet and there is a cool smear of saliva on her chin. A loose smile on her face. She doesn’t know what to say, she is frightened. Her lips are cold.

He looks at her; walks away. Turns. A smile, perhaps scornful.

He turns again and ambles off through the quiet trees, further into the woods, towards the sea.

Joss stands and stands, and she doesn’t know what to do, which way to go, except back.
Joss wakes the next morning, and, slipping a hand along her upper arm as she rolls slowly into wakefulness, she finds a soft pain beneath her fingers. She throws back the light summer coverlet and sits up.

Four small bruises, the colour of moths, in a curved row along her bicep. *Flick.* Her mouth wets.

A kiss, her first kiss. She wasn’t expecting it, and it scared her. But now with her limbs loose and soft from sleep, a new feeling sits high in her throat as she looks down at the length of her smooth young body in the creamed morning light, she thinks that she isn’t really sorry; she will, instead, open her mouth for more.
Part Three
But when she sees him the next day the sight of him fills her veins with cold water. Joss pulls back into the hedgerow, out of sight of the boy coming towards her far ahead on the curving road. The twigs crunch and rasp loudly near her ears as she pushes into the prickled growth, but she can only hear her heart thumping. She cranes her head forward a little, peeps around the bend.

He has stopped. He knows she’s there. Joss flinches back into the hedge. This is ridiculous, but she knows only that she can’t see him, she cannot move towards him, will not meet the gaze she knows he’s casting back down the road. Something terribly frightened beats in her chest.

Why is she so fearful? There’s just something about him. Something hard and cold, for all his golden heat. There’s something in the way he was coming down the road, how he’s not coming any closer, but just standing there invisibly, his black eyes, his smell in her nostrils even from a distance.

She waits and then, more carefully, she peeps again. He has gone. The hedge is a spring; it pushes her back out into the road. She hurries back to the house.

::

‘Huh?’ Rebecca says absently.

Joss is stirring coffee on the kitchen counter. Her sister has been staring at the Ordnance Survey map.

‘I…’

‘Quiet, I mean,’ says Joss. ‘Should I be going to school?’

The days seem too open around them, without corners.

Rebecca says, ‘You seem busy.’ She’s still staring at the map, its busy green road lines and firm circles for towns.

‘Not really.’ Joss sits down, jogs her foot up and down.

They’ll have to enrol her in the local school, it should have been done ages ago. What a mess. It’s the long holiday now, but soon—will Rebecca and Joss still be here? What if Mark’s not coming back? What should they do? Inside her, Rebecca feels embers wearily flickering out.

‘Met any friends?’ Rebecca knows she sounds stupid. In Melbourne she and Joss could talk easily, about things going on, Joss’s homework, Rebecca’s friends who were all like aunties to Joss, laughing and lively; weekend afternoons in cafes, joints smoked by the adults under rattling gum trees in the back garden.
'No.'
'I'm sorry.'
Joss shakes her head, quickly.
The morning, outside, is flashy with sunshine. Joss tips up her mug, drains her coffee. Rebecca goes to the open kitchen door, lights a cigarette.
'Wonder what Mark’s doing,’ Joss says.
Rebecca inhales, smoke hot in her throat. ‘I couldn’t care less.’

::

They watch television together, eating off plates on their lap. Fried eggs and bacon and huge mugs of tea. The Wimbledon tennis is on: a posh-sounding commentator is lustily quoting Dylan Thomas. ‘Do not go gentle into that good night,’ he admonishes a failing player. Joss snorts and changes channel.

There’s a documentary, about Britain before the Romans. Footage of meadows and Stone Age monuments is saturated to bring out the resonance of colours, with unearthly greens; fields aflame with crimson poppies, bruised vast skies. Eerie Irish music plays. A historian with excited gestures and a scholarly little ginger moustache wades up coastal paths and down hillsides, explaining about how, in the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, the dead could return to the living world. It was the time when time stood still, or turned about: the apparition of the horse with its funeral associations, and the ritual combats and the mad sexual frenzies to assert the power of life and fertility in those black frozen days when the year turned on its pivot, and almost stopped.

‘Wow,’ says Joss. ‘I imagine it’s pretty exciting around here at Christmas time, then.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Rebecca says, reaching for a biscuit. ‘They block the whole high street off for the sexual frenzy.’

They sit and watch more. The historian visits an old church, blackened and stern. He tells them that enclosed within this Norman church is an older Saxon one, and below that, the foundations of a Roman temple, where, thrillingly, the skeleton of a child was found. And below everything, a prehistoric sarsen stone, blank and implacable as a giant tooth.

‘Now that’s cool.’

‘It looks a lot more fun on telly than real life. But you really love this stuff, don’t you? You can get hold of it,’ Rebecca dares say. There’s no knowing what will make Joss
prickle, of course; she’s got all the secrecy and perverse pride of a small child. Remarking on her predilections and obsessions has had doors slammed in Rebecca’s face before. But Joss is sleepy and comfortable, her legs resting across Rebecca’s lap.

‘Yeah, I guess. I like it. It’s like some safe world, some place I can just go, in my head.’

‘Do you have much feeling for... I don’t know. For the amount of time that’s passed here?’

‘I’m fifteen. I don’t even know what it’s like to be sixteen.’

They sit in silence. The news comes on, a brief update, and then a talent show. Everyone in the audience is pinkly sunburnt. The contestants are garish with fake tan.

‘It’s strange here. The stories aren’t really just stories anymore. They’re more real.’ Joss shifts sleepily.

‘I don’t know about that. It was all a long time ago, whatever that means. And you know, I keep thinking of that joke, about the American tourist arriving at Heathrow and asking a policeman, “Excuse me, could you direct me to your nearest pageantry?”’

Joss giggles. ‘I know, it’s a bit much sometimes. Good old Olde Englande. I’m such a sucker for it.’

‘Have you been reading much?’ Rebecca asks. Christ, she’d forgotten to ask.

‘Of course. I wouldn’t want to disappoint you when you’re going to hassle me all the time.’ It’s clear from Joss’s look that she’s noticed her sister’s entire lack of interest.

‘You’ll have to show me.’

‘Just old stuff. Just lots and lots of old stuff.’

‘I found something the other day,’ Rebecca says, shifting Joss’s legs a little. ‘A beautiful old tree in the churchyard, with a stone stuck in it. Some kind of old knife. It looked like something out of your old books.’

‘You’ve been to church?’

‘Mm. I thought I might get Born Again. In the love of Jesus.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘You’ll have to come and be baptised with me in the well. It’s a long drop, but they said it’s quite safe. You look like you could do with a wash, anyway.’

Joss is watching the television. It’s showing a picture of an up-ended ancient tree, its trunk buried in a marsh, its roots spread out to the air. ‘What?’

Rebecca pats her hand. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, I’m too much of a poor sinner to be let into a church. There was no one there. But the yard is nice. All those wonderful trees, witchy trees, it’s so peaceful there. I don’t hate everything, you know. Contrary to appearances.’
‘You’ll become some kind of mysterious woman of the wood,’ Joss says, standing and stretching. She reaches for their empty cups. ‘I’m going to turn into some Celtic princess and you’ll be the wise witch. I guess we could see that coming, couldn’t we.’

::

He comes to her again, in the road outside the house, as she’s on her way out. He stands on the other side of the low stone wall, where she saw him once through the window. Nervous, Joss doesn’t know where to look.

His hands in his pockets, his dirty hair blown sideways. He seems so small, his knobby elbows, his pure skin. Freckles dark beneath the tan across his nose. He jerks a shoulder back, raises his eyebrows. Come with me. There is metal in her mouth, but she says yes.

Down the shaded road, into the fields, across a pathway. Joss hesitates as they near a darkness of trees. The weather is brackish, murky. More thunderclouds on the horizon, the blue of the sky paling above. ‘I don’t want to go in there.’ She stops, well clear of the grove.

Flick watches her. Then he sits down and beckons her to do the same.

They sit in a runnel between barley stalks, where a footway passes through the crops. Already Joss is used to these; the old rights-of-way, across private farms and crossing highways. They’re marked with signs from time to time, but not always clear.

His darkness is gone; he’s easy with the day’s warmth. Joss will not speak of the kiss.

She waits, staring warily at him and then at her own bare knees, the dried barley stalks beneath. He does nothing, doesn’t attack her. Then their gazes drift off to the horizon, they sit in silence, and she lies back, and the sky pearls more, and she’s enormously aware of him sitting just beside her.

The crops blow and tick their dry leaves together in the warm breeze. Flick breathes; shifts occasionally, settles. Minutes and minutes dissolve. Joss is almost asleep. The air has grown damp and the sun has gone. Under her head the dried barley tatters rustle until she stops moving, and she lies there, concentrating on that silence, that stillness. The trees have quietened.

She has her eyes closed, she can’t even hear him breathing. Behind her eyelids she sees his face, so fine and clear, the burnt skin and the brown. The thought of him just near to her comes like a surge across her body, exciting as fear. Now that he’s here, she has to respond to him; this is real. What she feels, more than anything, is want. Then
again, she wishes nothing need happen; that there be no next moment, that they could lie like this forever, caught out of time.

He’s only a child, she reminds herself. But his grip was so hard, in the wood, his mouth so fierce. She imagines his skin hot, how hot he would be if only she could move and he would move and touch her. He has nakedness beneath his clothes.

Something shivers across her skin.

She opens her eyes a little and squints up at him kneeling over her. He is looking at her mouth, with a hard, adult gaze. He doesn’t move at all.

‘Flick?’

Heat is coming from him in a haze, or is it just the thick afternoon air? She twists awkwardly to rise, and his eyes are huge, staring at her now, his face has firmed, he is the only golden thing in this pale field, he is the only colour against the blank heavy sky. His hair is bright gold and the scar on his temple is crimson.

She kneels and she puts her hand on his arm. They look at each other. His gaze is almost fearful.

Joss lowers her head, and watches her hand stroking his arm. Her heart is beating so fast she think she is going blind. A plane passes somewhere lost in the hazy sky, sounding large as thunder.

When she lifts her head once more it is closer to his. She can see the fine hairs of his brows, the spangled iris of his dark eye, his chapped lips. She can taste his breath. She has a sensation that the air itself is pushing the two of them close together.

He murmurs, but too low to hear. She puts her mouth to his.

Lips meet, press.

Then he clamps her hard with his hand. Resistance becomes give, give becomes want.

A kiss like a fight, clumsy, scrambling. Their bodies push together in haste. Hands grasping, grabbing, restless, hungry. Joss barely knows what she’s doing, she pursues him, she grunts and flattens against him as he arches against her, both of them straining to climb each other, falling away and clambering harder. Her body has never made these movements before. Her throat has never made these sounds.

It is as if there’s water in her ears, she is drowning in this boy. Under her he writhes, twisting her, legs tough beneath hers, and something else hard, thin and hard against his belly. The fulcrum of her body pushes onto it, pushes onto it deliciously again. Her breath stops with need, her flesh empties. She’s nearing something, something frightening, wonderful.

There is distraction in the distance. A voice.

THE SACRIFICE

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Joss?
The boy clasping her. Joss tunnelling into him, silent and animal.
Her hearing clears, she is sweating, she lifts her head.
Rebecca, calling her. Joss opens her eyes.
Her sister is coming, looking for her, and Joss scrambles backwards, blinks away heat, scrubs her hair from her eyes, looks around.
There’s Rebecca, on the other side of a windbreak, a small figure. Joss gulps down her fright and looks at Flick.
He is gone. She is alone in a tunnel of pale reeds. There’s only Rebecca, coming closer, a dozen feet away, smiling.
‘What do you want? What do you want?’ Joss says. The words jerk out of her, she’s not aware, her face is flushed. She feels as if the humid air has lightened and her body is floating. It’s not possible that he could have gone like that.
Rebecca halts. Her face, confused, is loathsome at this moment. ‘What are you doing?’
Joss is hollow as a stalk. She gets up from the ground. ‘Nothing. Nothing!’
They walk home, Rebecca cautiously silent, Joss staring at the road. There is more space between them than there might be.

::

It takes two days for the new bruises to appear. Three fingerprints along the side of her throat. They rise on her skin, welts of memory. Joss hides them with her hair, rubs at them gently, with closed eyes.

::

The next day, Rebecca wakes thinking of taking the bike out again, but then she feels tired, and doesn’t. She’s been waiting for Mark to ring. The courage it’s taken, to wait, is enormous. All day every day, in fact, days and weeks, she has waited, and thought of him thinking of her, and how soon he’ll give in and call to say I was wrong, I’m coming home. But he doesn’t and doesn’t, and she’s so disappointed that sitting up in bed, simply imagining herself sitting up in bed alone, unwanted, she curdles into tears. It is early afternoon before she rises, leaden.

‘Jesus,’ she says when she walks into the kitchen. ‘What the fuck’s this?’
Joss, eating a boiled egg at the table covered in newspapers, looks at her. ‘What?’
'I suppose you haven't gone out to get milk, either.'

Joss stares.

'I'm really not in the mood for this,' Rebecca says, yanking out a chair and sitting at the table.

Joss is silent, but edges her book away from Rebecca, pretends to read.

'I can tell you're not reading.'

The younger girl doesn't say anything but inches her book even closer to the edge of the table.

'Your eyes aren't moving.'

'Go away,' Joss hisses. 'You're being a bitch.'

'Fuck.' Rebecca gets up and shoves the switch of the kettle on. Joss's chin becomes ugly.

'What's wrong with you?'

The sisters raise eyebrows at each other. 'Oh for god's sake,' Rebecca says. 'I'll have to put you in the naughty corner.' She jerks her head towards a nook where the tea-towels have been stashed. 'Fuck!' she says suddenly. As she sits down again she clenches her eyes closed. 'Sorry.'

Her sister scowls at her. 'You look like shit and you're being a total, total—'

'I am a bitch. I am the biggest bitch there ever was.' She glances at her sister. They sit in silence for a minute, Joss picking up egg crumbs with a fingertip. 'I'm sorry, I've been awful.'

'You've been very boring, yes.' A pause. 'What's going on with him?'

Rebecca tilts her head. 'He hasn't rung, but I got a postcard yesterday.' She takes it from the kitchen counter and hands it to Joss, puts her head down on the table again.

'Doesn't say much, does it.'

'He's never coming back. I guess.'

Joss gets up, pulls a mug out of the cupboard, puts a teabag in it. 'Don't say that.'

'I'm afraid it might be true.'

'Yes.' Joss switches the kettle on. 'But don't say it. Don't they always come back in the end?'

Her sister looks up at her. 'Only in books, my love.'

'Well, then.' Joss tilts her head towards her book. She pours boiling water.

There's no milk and Joss has forgotten the sugar, but Rebecca takes one slow sip after another. 'I can't believe I'm taking advice from a fifteen-year-old.'

'Shit up! How long are we going to wait?'
‘Well, we’re here now. Can’t afford to leave. We’ll have to stay until he kicks us out.’

‘I can’t imagine how you feel, you know. I don’t know anything about—about, you know, being married.’ Joss thinks she knows something of love. For the first time, she knows something about love. It’s too precious to talk about.

‘Me neither.’

‘Is it awful? This?’

‘Yes. Yes it is.’

Joss gets up, reaches out her arms, bends awkwardly to hug her sister. It’s the first time they’ve touched like this in a long time. They press into each other. Rebecca is warm and small. Flick, thinks Joss. I want his body. Is it wrong, to want him so much?

‘I’m okay.’

They disengage, step back again, embarrassed. Rebecca wipes her eyes. ‘This place. It makes me claustrophobic. You seem to like it.’

‘That’s because I’m a better person than you.’

‘Shut it.’ Rebecca knocks her sister in the arm.

But now Joss is thinking of Flick again, and says nothing. He’s pressed hard up inside her throat, and she’s nearly choking. There’s a new kind of loneliness, she is discovering, not to be caught having a secret.

:::

The beach slopes towards the water, ridged in banks where the receding tide has paused and thought, then dredged down. Her boots crunch firmly on the pebbles: small ones down the slope, bigger ones at the keel of each hollow.

She’s left all behind except water, stones and sky. Once the light thickens the fishing boats sit alone with their pennants fluttering. Everything is grey, soft, soft velvet, a little bluish, exquisite. Far off there’s a ship’s light shining scarlet, and there are a few lighter clouds still smearing the grey, but all else is peace. The sea withers and worries at the shore. Giving a little, with each handful of stones cast up; taking it back with long slow scrapes.

The water makes a low roar, slopping the last of its ebbing tide onto the finer pebbles along its edge. It has cleaned the basin of its passage and skitters with a kind of fatigue in long, messy curves, back and over itself, skimming, as if any moment it will subside altogether and rest. Every now and then, when she’s lulled herself with the
ceaseless rustle of it, there’s a bigger crunch and a heavier wave slumps down, like a sleeper throwing out a careless arm.

If she waits until it’s a little darker, she can scrabble up a handful of the stones and throw them, hard, against the rest by her feet. She can snatch up cold round pebbles and smash them down; tiny little sparks will jump off. Much of the beach is flint, that oldest of playthings; it’s hard but brittle, easily chipped if a blow hits it the right way. In a hundred pebbles there will be ten with their chalky white skins battered to reveal the glossy dark centre of each stone egg. Flash, flare—the sparks vanish instantly. It’s for the satisfaction of throwing that she does it, not the useless light.

She’s already left it late to leave on the walk home to the house down the dark road. Since when did she become so nervous of everything? Rebecca clamps her palm savagely over a sharp flint of stone until it hurts. Sitting down, she finds a tiny scrap of charcoal. On one flattened grey pebble, almost unthinking, she writes Here. On another, There. On a third, Me, and places it between the others.

The beach is dissolving further into a fog of greys and powdery blues, all edges vanishing. There is hardly any telling where the shore becomes sea. A little way away she can see the pale orange streetlights of the town. The afterburn of them makes the soaked blue of the shore even deeper.

So she’s lost her husband, it seems, and that baby that might have been. Her parents, long ago, and her old home. She sits on the shingle, aware that she, in her dark clothes, is the only solid object in this haze of grey: marked out, so utterly solitary in all the space around.

For years she had carried her mother’s laugh within her own, oddly released when she wasn’t expecting it; her father’s way of jamming his hands in his pockets and swaying gently from side to side as he talked. Her whole character is, she sometimes thinks, made up of the memories of those she’s known. One friend’s way with words, another’s opinions; all absorbed into her, all coming out again when she doesn’t expect it, when she thought those people long gone. Now that she’s alone, here in this country where, but for Joss, she knows no one, she wonders who she will be. And without the glints of others’ lights illuminating her, who’s to say she even exists?

She looks down at her thin hands, the darkness of her clothes; almost obscured in the growing dusk. Well, she has this. A sense of herself as discrete, whole and condensed as a glass marble, buried right down deep inside. Her strong hands, her straight body. The woman she has become, in this place, in this extraordinarily beautiful moment. Something solid, something true.
And, biting her lip, smiling, she says to herself, finally says it: *I think I might be pregnant.* She lets out a shout.

It’s late enough to see it now. She stoops, gathers a palmful of small flints, and throws them as hard as she can at the shingle. For one beautiful instant, flecks and sparks ring out bright. She does it again and again.

::

Flick, Flick. Joy burns inside her. She fancies his scent is still on her, her own breath smells like his, her skin. He’s coming out through her pores. At night, in the morning, she twists under the sheet, one hand between her thighs, thinking of his face, his hips, the way he breathed against her ear, fast and helpless. The way she had undone him. The pleasure is like a searing, it hurts, makes her body move to meet his phantom touch.

She tries to press bruises into her skin as he has done but her fingers leave no mark.

::

The packet from the pharmacy is easy to open. Rebecca’s hands are trembling as she unwraps the little plastic wand. Naked, she sits on the toilet. Outside the sky is just a haze of palest orange. It’s important to get the result on the day’s first pee; she had woken, impatient to find out, and now, in the glare of the bathroom fluoro, she urinates onto the plastic. She puts the wand aside, dries herself, averts her eyes.

If it’s two blue lines, if it’s two blue lines. She tries to envisage what the two lines will look like, how she will feel. If she could only jump ahead five minutes, and then scoot back plump with knowledge, but nothing actually irreversible.

In the mirror, as she waits, she anxiously regards her face. It’s too thin, and she looks older than she should; there are faint seams from nose to lips which have appeared in the seven weeks since she and Mark last made love, in the weeks since Mark left. They’ll fade if she’s pregnant, if her body and her face grow round. She practises a look in the mirror: the happy expectant mother. Slightly too smug. She practises dismay. In the reflection her eyes are unexpectedly forlorn.

The sky is going pink; it’s going to be hot again. Or does it mean rain? *Red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.* Her mother told her that; ridiculous. When did her mother ever care what happened to a shepherd?
It’s time. Sooner than she expected. She picks up the plastic wand, careful not to look at the aperture that will show the result. She covers that with her other hand. Looks at herself in the mirror. *One, two three.* She uncovers it and looks down.

*One, two.* Two lines. She is pregnant.

::

One moment she thinks of Flick, and there’s nothing. No feeling. Her body doesn’t cramp with want, she can’t even remember what he looks like. She blinks. There is a smear of gold in her mind, where Flick used to be, dissolving away.

She concentrates, remembers his fingers trembling on her shoulders when he kissed her, the curve of his neck as he walked ahead of her, the way he’d narrowed his eyes at her. There it is again, that cold flush, the hot pleasurable promise in her. He rises in her mind’s eye, is present in the angles of her body as she spreads her limbs and then curls them tight again. She can bring him back, he’s always in her, he’s too precious to let go now.

It’s been ages, but Joss remembers her landscapes. She borrows Rebecca’s laptop and lies on her bed on a hot, drowsy afternoon. Opening the program, she flicks through files she has collected of landscape features, looking for some she can stitch together into the right dream. She picks out an image of a shaded forest; another of sunlight. This she makes transparent, so that only glints of light stain the green glade. The trees aren’t quite right: she elongates them, makes them paler, more spectral. In the midst of the tableau she runs a river—she takes only the water of the original image, not the rocky banks—so that it streams through as subtly as light. She darkens the image, to bring out the shadows; raises the saturation of the green, adjusts the contrast, for drama; uses the light-casting tool to angle a strange glow from one corner. Lastly, tweaking the levels to blend it in perfectly, but blurring the outline so that it appears lustrous against the dark background, she pastes in the image of a naked man—a nude god. His marble body twists away from her; she warms the tone of his flesh to gild it. Thighs and torso show young muscle: his form is harmonious, boyish, but deliberately sexual. Joss conjures a shadow for him. The shadow absorbs the detail from the river glade; it’s soil-coloured, extended, reaching towards the viewer.

Joss compresses the layers, saves the file. She stares at the picture she has made. It is something, it’s beautiful, but it’s no longer enough.

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THE SACRIFICE

© Kate Holden 2008
A week of weather radiant as joy. The roadsides are splashed with frail scarlet poppies. Every day is a little hotter, a little more voluptuous than the last. It’s unbearable, alone.

Joss tears at her nails with her little teeth, uses all the hot water, changes channel restlessly, eats nothing but toast. She complains of the heat, throws the windows open to let it in, treks dust into the house. Rebecca doesn’t mind the dust—housecleaning is the last thing on her mind—but she flinches anew at the truculence thrown at her. She’d thought they were growing closer again. Eating dinner on their laps in front of the television, gentle goodnights in the passageway between their rooms. A little while of that, and then Joss’s cheer had suddenly become brittle, she had become impatient with Rebecca’s mild jokes. Sealing herself up over something. The quick glance of apology after a sharp remark, the inability to stop herself making it in the first place.

It seems as if, good sisters, they take turns being out of sorts. Turn and turn about.

Rebecca hasn’t told Joss about the pregnancy test. It is, for the moment, her little glow of a wonderful secret: flesh-coloured, deeply warm within her. Joss isn’t the only one feeling disturbed, however. Rebecca has begun already to feel tired, slack and sloppy, her belly aching and dreary nausea coating her sensations. But Joss isn’t helping. Her fretfulness is like someone scratching fingernails too lightly on bare skin.

How much does Rebecca remember of being fifteen? She recalls the fluttering joys of her teenage years with disdain: it had been books, boys, loathing for her unshaped, pudgy face, pride in her strong body. All of that long since forgotten. Her face is thin now, her body in her early thirties already beginning to thicken. She does not remember what she dreamed of half a lifetime ago.

Rebecca wonders whether Joss had a boyfriend in Australia. It would be typical of her to keep it a secret, in her awkward pride. There’s something virginal still about her: her clean face, her hair rough and long. She hasn’t that glittering selfconsciousness of a girl aware of her power. But there is a sheen to her skin, a way she has of smoothing her palms against her thighs as she sits. Rebecca has woken in the night aware that she is not the only one awake, and heard a muffled croon from Joss’s room. My darling, she thinks. When it comes, it will hit you like a bomb.

::

Four long days have passed since the barley field and Joss feels frayed with waiting. She’s been walking the roads, one alert step at a time under the dappled shade of trees,
along the endless hedgerows. They’re a mess of foliage, foamy white flowers and delicate pink ones, sometimes tiny forget-me-nots, orange daisies and a dozen types of green leaf all crowded together in banks of growth and twigs. She picks flowers and tries to make them into chains, but the stems split too easily and the chains fall apart in her fingers. Fretful, she throws the flowers behind her and walks on. Every moment she expects to see Flick, find his hot hand laid on her arm. The reality of him seems hard to pin in her mind; he’s become a shadowy thing of hard bones and golden skin, a flashing skewed smile, the river-light in his black irises. His scent, rich as a body’s secrets. The sound of him, breathing. Just thinking about his harsh helpless breathing, his body beneath her, she moans aloud, buckles at the waist in a billow of pleasure. She will do anything he wants, she will be radiant under his attention. Just let me put my hand on you, let me flatten against you. Bear me up, swallow me down.

Her mouth tastes of water, bitter and mineral with want. Where is he?

The road is empty, the trees restless as she is. Above, the sun glares and she realises she is also waiting for thunder, waiting for that sultry oppression in which Flick comes and sets her alight.

::

The evening is warm and drowsy as Rebecca walks home from the library. A late-afternoon summeriness, such as she remembers from her childhood, a kind of benevolence in the mildness of the light, the way it melts away on her face. She walks down the ugly high street with her hands in her pockets, the insides of her arms greeting the air. Stopping at a shop for a newspaper and milk, she enjoys the cooler air meeting the warmth of her skin. Outside, as she approaches the fields between the town and the house, she raises her face to the trees. A matt of trees, stitching sky to land in dense knots.

Growing always from the same place, in soil that’s been turned again and again for centuries. A rock in field tossed out of the way by one farmer, tossed again by his son, by his son, by his son, never moved very far. This field will have a name, an old name. It is reassuring, this great continuity.

For Aboriginal people, she heard once, trees, like the rest of the landscape, mark places and what has happened there. They are full of spiritual power, reservoirs of spirit, ignitable. When someone dies under a tree, he is called after the place. The tree is special; but when it too dies, its offshoot, perhaps from a seed drifted a little further
away, is still known by the same name; the dead person’s family might travel away; the memory of the dead dispersed and diffused, but surviving.

She had thought, when she was a little girl, that Europe was the place for her, not scant, brittle Australia. She’s changed; she came too late.

But she finds she has grown used to these textures and colours, this soft rustling, so different to the casuarinas and gums she’s known. It’s not that these trees are more beautiful. She loves the ragged dry things of the bush. That’s her habitat, not this. Here she feels foreign, for all that she has the same skin as the locals and perhaps those smuggler ancestors of hers might have known these same fields. It seems incredible that she has no family here, and not much of it in Australia either. Small bubbles of DNA, which have floated far from their origins, that’s her and Joss. Australia, with its own dizzy cliffs of time, its mystery, is her place. She envies Joss the liberty of her roamings; she herself feels clamped by this country, its history. Jammed in, choked. Her imagination can only take her so far; then it’s just an inert stone, the empty fields all around. No one speaks to her here. The voices are too many, too soft, too dead.

These trees, though: perhaps they’re the only things that call to her. These friendly beasts.

A tree is endurance. Wearing its breathing skin against all weathers and seasons. There is a great courage about trees, she thinks as she passes beneath a small glade along the road. The varieties here have stateliness. Poplars shaking and silvering. Lime trees, generous and at ease. Others which Rebecca cannot name. She recalls another of her mother’s sayings, a song about oaks.

*Three hundred years growing*

*Three hundred years standing*

*Three hundred years dying.*

Rebecca walks along, the sun cupping her head in its hot hand. She is smiling at the trees, brushing her hands against leaves, slowing under their shade. Inside her something is richly growing. Above her the trees surge and surge and surge in the wind.

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Here I am, says Flick. Here I am. And he tips his head back, to show the underside of his sweet throat, the elegant tendons, the golden skin. His brown hands, long and boned like wings. Don’t be scared, he says. It’s all okay, it’s okay, he whispers. I love you.
Behind Joss’s closed eyes, everything is golden. Like the bottom of a river in sunlight. And Flick comes swimming up out of it, towards her, smiling, and again and again he holds her and pushes her legs apart and the water runs right through her bones.

Lying alone under a tree on the edge of a field, she plays this dream over and over, drowsily, curling and flexing in half-sleep, smiling too.

::

Rebecca takes the library books to the lounge room. It is sunny in there; the brief minutes when the sun finds its way in through the thick windows.

She looks through the books: a guide to varieties. She feels stupid, still not to be able to recognise most of the most basic types. Looking through it quickly, she realises that she’s barely observed anything of details. She couldn’t say whether a birch tree has big leaves or small. Honestly, she may as well be blind for all the notice she’s taken.

She’d borrowed a book describing various famous old trees of Britain and another, of legends associated with trees. She flips through them. Naturally, British tree-lore is odd. The memory of the sanctity of trees in the pagan days has clearly not quite faded in the modern era. Rebecca reads of a ‘Wishing Tree,’ situated by the side of an old highway, its bark encrusted with coins pressed into it by passers-by with wishes for protection. Some of the coins date only to the Seventies. A huge old tree in the north of the country is known as the ‘Bleeding Yew,’ after it seeped crimson sap and a legend emerged that a holy man had once been hanged from it; of course, trees were also used as gibbets.

Rebecca remembers a story one of her friends had told her in Melbourne: ‘A true story,’ Sarah had said. About driving down a lonely country road at night, past an old tree once used as a gibbet, and seeing, flaring in the headlights, a pale figure walking down the middle of the road. ‘It was totally dark, that was the thing,’ she’d said. ‘And this person was all white, like a mummy. Swaddled in cloth. And when I drove past—quickly, I’m telling you, because there was something very, very weird about it—the thing that frightened me the most was that it had no face. No face at all.’

Rebecca is sure there is no shortage of ghost stories around here. There are the eldritch stories in this book: a yew which, if one stuck a pin in its bark and ran around it exactly twenty-four times at midnight, would allow a person to peer in through a window of the nearby church and see a vision of a woman murdering a baby. You can see that on any episode of a crime drama, thought Rebecca, without running around a tree like a lunatic.
The yew, with its resilient wood, was prized as the material out of which to cut great longbows with which to deal death, but its evergreen branches were also used in place of palms in religious ceremonies. Boughs of such symbols of eternal life were placed under bodies, as biers. And the power of trees to restore or repair life was undisputed. There were Miracle Trees of the Middle Ages, passing under which could cure disease, and others whose fruit and leaves were taken as an antidote to the Plague.

Perhaps the woods were creatures of life, but they, too, had begun to die. The woodlands of the county had ebbed and flushed through time. The Silva Anderida of Roman days was cut back for charcoal; Andreadsweald in the Saxon era had thickened once more, hollowed out only by settlers. During the Civil War a thousand years later, the trees burned away as fuel in homestead fires, but then grew again; the threat of Napoleonic invasion had them forming the keels of a hundred navy ships, holding cargoes and men safe above far-away waters. The last great woodlands of England were felled only seventy years ago, in the War, and now, as Rebecca had seen on Mark’s map, only minute little remnants stand. One of the largest, she reads, is not far from the house, down by the river. One of these days she will pay it a visit, in tribute.

She should go back to her yew tree in the churchyard. It had bent over her with such grace and solace, when she had needed grace and solace. No wonder the old people had worshipped them, and given them tribute. Perhaps, Rebecca thinks, the stone knife is like that. Someone put it there once, for something. How lovely. It seemed right, to give up one thing that you loved, to set a balance right.

She should like to give up her sadness. If only she could find some place that would want it.

::

Again, in the morning. A bruise on her leg, and another, a handspan away. Quiet as flowers, they are, blooming in the night. Joss smiles. It won’t be long now.

::

Rebecca finds herself picking up the phone. It’s the first time she’s used it; how odd. There isn’t anyone to call in England, and she’s been shy of confessing the situation to her friends at home. After the big send-off in Melbourne, it is too humiliating. As far as the people at home are concerned, she imagines, she’s simply disappeared. Out of sight, out of mind.
She’s still not ready to talk to her friends, to breach the silence. But she holds the phone, the back of her throat hollow with apprehension. In front of her is the number for Mark’s mother. She dials it, quickly, before she can think about what she’s going to say.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello? Mrs Cole? It’s Rebecca here.’

‘Who?’

‘Rebecca… Is Mark there?’

‘Oh, Rebecca. Yes, he’s here. How nice to hear from you, dear. I’ll fetch him.’

Sound of the phone being put down; mumbling voices; the phone is picked up.

‘Hello? Mark speaking.’

Appallingly, tears spring to Rebecca’s eyes. ‘Hi. It’s me.’

‘Oh. Hello.’

‘I thought I’d see how you’re going.’

‘I’m fine.’ He clears his throat. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine.’

She holds the phone slightly away from her head, she wishes she could just put it down and walk away quickly. Her voice is coming out thin and nervous.

‘We’re getting on okay. Joss is around somewhere. The house is still standing.’

‘Well, good.’ There is a pause. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t rung.’

‘That’s okay,’ Rebecca finds herself saying. ‘I guess you’ve been busy. How’s your mother?’

‘She’s well. It’s fantastic to see her. Do you know, she didn’t bat an eyelid when I turned up? Just told me to go down the street and buy more bread.’ He laughs.

‘That’s mothers for you. Hard to impress.’ If they’re going to have a jolly-jolly conversation, she’ll keep her end of it up. ‘Did she ask about me?’

‘Of course. I said you were busy getting the house sorted, and she said she’s looking forward to meeting you one day.’

Rebecca lets that one sit for a moment. ‘It’s nice to hear your voice.’

‘And yours.’ For a moment there, intimacy breathes on her face, she thinks he might say something, his voice has softened, hasn’t it, he’s eager to talk to her. For God’s sake, she thinks. But she’s smiling now.

‘Well, I’ll be in touch,’ she hears him say. ‘Say hi to Joss. All the best.’

It’s like a punch in the throat. She gathers herself. ‘You too. You too. Bye, Mark—’ but he’s already hung up. She puts the phone down, quickly, carefully, as if it’s hurting her. A moment later she’s in the walled garden, reaching for a cigarette and then
stopping herself. Her skin is goose-bumped. The baby—she’s glad now, she didn’t mention it.

She bends, wrenches a small plant out of the earth, and hurls it as hard as she can against the wall.

::

Joss flexes out of sleep. Fast, as if in fear. Her head is raised from the pillow before she opens her eyes. Blackness in the room, pewter light at the window. Nearly dawn. She can smell her own sweat; it lies as heavy on her as the sheet she kicks away.

Her heart is beating fast: has something happened? Outside the trees sough and rasp. She is naked at the window, her mouth half-open and soft with excitement.

Flick stands in the garden below. His chest is bare, his face dark in shadow. He raises one arm to her.

Joss yanks on clothes.

It is disturbing, walking in the black house. She misses a step on the way downstairs; her heart bangs.

Flick takes her hand. His palm is cool, dry; she clenches it between her fingers.

They walk out of the garden.

It’s a land of the underworld, this early morning twilight. There’s no sun at all yet, just a silkiness to the dark sky which suggests the night is nearly done. Joss can see the road pale beneath her, and stretching ahead. This old road, like a stream between tall banks. On either side the hedges are closer than in daylight: their tendrils of white flowers reach out to caress her as she passes. Flick is silent, holding her tightly by the hand, walking steadily. His limp is scarcely noticeable. Now it’s Joss who stumbles and hesitates. The wind is warm as water.

Down the road, around the corners, over the stile, across the field. In the middle of the field Joss stops for a moment, to tip her head back and look up at the sky. A sense of rapture comes over her. What a moment; so free. It’s like fever on her face. The wind brushes luxuriously over the barley around them: one, two, three heaves and then stillness. Flick strokes her arm, slowly. They smile at each other. She thinks she will melt when he touches his tongue to hers, soft as the wind.

He is taking her back to the river, of course. As they pass into the woods Joss is glad. She was startled, the first time, with the dogs and the savage kiss, Flick’s face strange with intent, the way he had changed. She had thought him a small boy then. Tonight he is as tall as her, his shoulders wide.
From him comes a sweet tang, as if he’s been running, the blood as quick in his skin as it stings hot under hers.

In the woods there are sounds. A crackle behind a tree, skittering above. Such darkness here where the sky above holds only the potential of light. Joss feels as if her body is weightless, in this watery dimness, the close air. Her hand reaches out to rest on slim trunks as they edge further in; the bark is the same temperature as her palm. She is breathing through her mouth; she tries privately to wet the dryness, thinking of the next kiss.

The river is noisy, as if the woods were all water. Joss’s hair feels tight on her scalp, now that the breeze no longer lifts it. Flick takes her by the upper arm; she squeezes it closer to her body, to let him feel the side of her breast. Now that it’s here, she is patient with the brimming in her, she lets it shiver at the edges.

They are at the river bank. In the gloom Joss sees only a dim glisten, tiny flares of light. She stands beside Flick as they stare at the darkness where the river moves.

‘I was hoping you’d—’

He pulls her down suddenly, and they’re on the ground, sprawling. He rakes his hands down the sides of her arms; she staggers onto her back.

His fingers are skimming her, she can barely feel them. The world has jerked sideways, she is unprepared. Flick above her feels unreal, is she asleep, who is touching her? It’s as if she’s lying washed with wind; her throat is a hollow, her head full of blood.

Flick moves quickly above her, ramming hard hands up beneath it against her ribs. He squeezes her breast with chapped fingers, it hurts. Still her mouth is stopped; by his, and then when he pulls it away for a moment, gasping, by an instinct that if she just keeps quiet, if she waits, he will calm, and—

He jams his tongue into her mouth again. His hands are wrenching at her pants, he pulls them over her hips, uncaring of how she is squeezed and pinched. How heavy he is, his weight tilts and slithers over her but never eases. He’s making a guttural noise, his mouth is messed with saliva; her face is wet from it and if she could just free herself for a moment, have an instant to adjust, she’ll smile and hold him. She squirms, makes a sound.

He takes her hand, which has been loosely resting on his back, and pushes it down on the ground above her head.

This is sex, this is how it goes, this is what she’s been burning for, why is it so ugly?
She is helpless as a doll. He sits back, then, and pulls his own trousers open. Her pants are ruched around her ankles, great clumps of cloth awkward there. Impatiently, he frees one foot, and shoves her knees up. A sharp scent. He is hard against her hip. The hair on her pubis rasps on his. She dare not look down. Everything is black with shadows, anyway.

The sensation of another’s flesh inside her. It’s difficult. He pushes, clumsy. She can hear breath tight between his teeth. It feels as if a blade is parting her inside, bloodily separating wings of flesh. She has her jaw clenched. Her hands grip his shoulders, she pulls down, brings her knees up higher, he’s invading her. She fights through. She did not know she had so much heat in her body, that anything could hurt so much. Then something slicks and eases inside her; the hard part is done.

Flick’s breath is harsh in her ear, he’s jammed up against her and she pulls him down, closer still. Her hands claw on his back, down to the curves of his buttocks, pressing in tightly; her legs rise and crush him in. It’s easier now, the passage of him, and percussion rings through her body with every thrust.

He squirms, then; writhes and rises, wringing something from her. He holds his breath, moves his head slowly from side to side against hers, his face is so hot. A groaning in his throat, echoed in hers, a long strange sigh. His pain almost breaks her heart, but then she opens her eyes and sees him looking at her calmly, dazed. With the blood still up in his cheeks his face is very young.

He lays his head down beside hers again and they are quiet.

Is there blood? wonders Joss. Was there blood?

She is very tired now. Flick’s body is heavy on hers, growing heavier, looser. She opens her eyes again. Above the treetops the sky is a cup upturned, filled with water that does not fall, glittering black-blue. For long moments she watches a smudge of cloud move, pale against the darkness, towards the tree above her. When she opens her eyes the cloud is on the far side of the tree.

Flick stirs and shifts, slumps off her to lie on the ground beside her. His face is turned to the sky like hers. She fumbles and finds his hand, holds it hot and damp.

‘I,’ she says. Her mouth is dried, her throat coughs. He turns his head, questioning. She moves her head a little, presses her lips against the softness of his neck for a moment, lingering. ‘I,’ but her voice fails again. She mouths the words silently into his throat. Love you.

He stares at the sky again, and shakes his head a little, as if to say, It’s not like that.
Joss feels a shiver run up her thighs as her skin cools in the air. She reaches out and finds a piece of her clothing, pulls it across her belly.

He has raised his head, leans on his elbow. He plaits his fingers with hers.

‘We did it together. You’ve given to me, too. Haven’t you?’

He makes a sound of assent. But his face is drawn in a frown.

She hesitates, slides a hand across his chest. All she wants, as the air chills her, is for his heat around her, an embrace, something to fit her back together again. Her hand, remote, strokes and pats him.

He makes a hissing noise, stills her hand.

‘Flick?’

He lies there, his eyes closed. Faster and faster come the huffs of breath from his nostrils.

‘Flick?’

She kisses his face. When she kisses his eyelids there is wetness beneath her lips.

‘Oh, don’t cry,’ she says stupidly.

They curl around each other, two small creatures in the dark.

He shakes his head gently against hers. His eyes press blind against her throat.

She is so satisfied, she realises, to find him needing her like this. He makes a small animal sound of misery.

Absently, Joss’s fingers paddle between her legs. She raises her hand to see it in the faint silvery light: the tip of her finger is dark with blood. Softly she runs it down Flick’s belly.

He says something then, suddenly. Something Joss can’t understand. He’s looking right into her eyes, intent. Then he pulls away, fast, and rises.

‘Don’t—’ says Joss, clutching for him. But he stands over her, naked and pale as wax.

Again, he says something. His voice sounds sad.

He runs to the river, and Joss hears a great splash, and then nothing.

In fright she scrambles to her feet. She cannot see the other bank clearly. There is nothing, not even a ripple in the smooth sluggish water. No shadow, no glimmering limb.

The trees say Hush. The sky comes down a little. Joss stands there, alone once more, the print of Flick’s skin on hers, too shocked to cry.

How much darker it is now.

::

THE SACRIFICE

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Every tree has a million leaves hanging heavy and each leaf scuffles only as she passes below. This dawn has become edged with unease, a strange stillness at the centre, disquiet shivering at the rim. Joss’s eyes dart about as she steps uncertainly through the woods. The sound of the river has gone, the sky has clouded and lowered. Without even starlight there is no path to follow, without Flick’s hand in hers she cannot walk straight. The dark is a negative left dazzling on the inside of her eyelids after the brightness before.

She loses track of time as she walks, setting her narrowed gaze on the next tree, the next, as their trunks mist up into vision before her. There is no lick of dawn in the woods. She is the only person awake in miles.

A pressure has been lifted; she’s like a wave which had been poised, travelling eerily static towards a shore, and now breaks.

Why did he leave her alone here? So solid, so present under her hand, his breath moist on her mouth. Oh, the sound of him. In the middle of a pace she stops and a cord snaps tight through her, her eyes water with the phantom of pleasure. It is different to the sensations she had actually had with him. Was it pleasure she had with him?

But he is always flitting away. It seems no sooner does Joss find him, clutch him a little harder, than he is gone again. Leading her into landscapes she cannot find her way home from. She stumbles on a rock buried in the dead leaves and bites her lip.

This darkness is tightening, not loosening.

She raises her face to the sky and holds herself, binds herself in tightly, holds to the small solidity of herself.
Part Four
‘Joss!’

Rebecca opens the kitchen door wider, listens. ‘Joss, that’s you, isn’t it?’

The front door slams, there are two footfalls, then silence. Rebecca can hear someone breathing hard, rough on the inhale.

‘Where have you been?’ Frowsty with the early hour, she comes down the hallway. ‘Don’t tell me you got up early for a walk in the bloody dawn! Have you been out all ni—’

Joss is standing inside the door, her eyelids closed tightly. She has her arms folded around herself and her hair is frayed with static and tangles.

‘Christ, what is it?’

Joss’s face is cold, Rebecca can feel the chill against her own cheek when she draws close in the embrace. Joss puts her head down on Rebecca’s shoulder and says nothing.

‘Come on. Let’s be British and have a rousing cup of tea.’ Rebecca is chemical with dread. What’s happened? Assault? Rape? Has she seen an accident? Been in one?

As she follows Joss into the kitchen Rebecca watches her sister. She fetches an old hoodie and puts it around her. The kettle boils, Rebecca pulls a cup down from the cupboard, turns on the light to banish the early morning bleakness, watches Joss. The younger girl pulls the hood over her head.

‘Why are you up so early?’ A mumble.

‘Expecting trouble.’ Rebecca’s smile is the brave wry smile of a parent. She had been restless all night, chewing on her fury with Mark.

‘Trouble?’ Joss’s head comes up, fearful.

‘You. You, you duffer. I didn’t realise I should be worried until I saw you come in, though. Where’ve you been?’ She pours milk. ‘And are you okay. Tell me. Are you all right?’

‘Tired. Cold. And—’

‘What?’

‘Lost track. Of time.’

‘And where have you actually been?’ She finds herself feeling the stern mother. But she’s watching Joss, how small her hands seem, the way she keeps shoving her hair behind her ear—Joss’s sleeve falls back and there’s a blue bruise and scrape on her wrist—

‘Jesus. What’s that?’ She snatches Joss’s arm. ‘What the hell is that? Did someone hurt you?’
Joss stares up at her, those eyes, the colour of a sky full of water, mumbles a word. She rubs the bruise thoughtfully. ‘No, no one hurt me.’

Rebecca sits down. ‘Just tell me.’

Joss drinks her tea, and talks. This is the first time Rebecca has heard the boy’s name but she knew, oh she should have known, there was a boy. Here, though. Out here in this new place, in the middle of nowhere. Some local kid, with pimples and a shaved head, his father’s mean jaw and a hoodie and runners. How could she have known? And Joss, out there in the dark with twigs in her hair and her wrist held tight.

‘Oh my darling.’

Joss flares. ‘He didn’t hurt me! He’s nice. He won’t hurt me. I’m not a child.’

Rebecca sits back.

‘It was just...’ Joss gathers herself. ‘It was just that he was with me, and it was all, oh, and then he just jumped up and left and I was walking home, I didn’t mind that he left, I mean, that was cool and I know the way, but it wasn’t the way, the right way— I think I got lost, and I saw things in the trees and time went all—’

‘Like when you were a kid, and we drove in the country at night and you swore you saw a man jump out of a tree...’

‘No!’

Rebecca puts her lips to her mug, even though it’s already drained.

‘And time was wrong.’

‘Okay.’ Tiredness, and disorientation, and the imagination of a teenager. Perhaps it’s been too much, coming here—it’s not like Joss was exactly normal back in Melbourne, no parents, brought up by her sister... and this place... She’s always lived too much in her head, that little box of wonders. Rebecca and Mark had even talked about it, a little, how Joss loved imagination and history, and England would be the perfect place where she could really dream and be herself. Maybe it’s gone wrong. They are living here, but not really living; just existing, suspended: no work, no school, in a house on the edge of a small town on the other side of the word. Abandoned. It’s total madness.

Joss rubs her lips meditatively against the rim of her cup, back and forth. Rebecca sits back, musing. ‘Did I ever tell you about Julian?’

Joss shakes her head.

‘He was the boy I thought I’d die for when I was your age. I’d never kissed a boy, never thought anyone liked me. And he was so, so gorgeous.’ He had had the kind of skin that flushed right up to his cheekbones when he was hot, as if he’d been slapped. His hands: Rebecca remembers looking at his hands on the one time she’d sat next to him on the bus, looking at them more closely, more marvellingly than she’d ever looked.
at anything. ‘I saw him being picked on by other boys. That’s how I knew I loved him. Because he was so clever and bright and the other boys hated him, and I saw his face as he walked away. All I wanted to do was tell him I understood. So I bought him a candle, a beautiful round red candle. I took it to school with me every day for a week before I got the courage to go up to him. I found him alone one day and I said, oh god, I can’t believe I did it, now—I said, “I bought you this” and rummaged in my bag and pulled out this damned candle and held it out. I may as well have just yanked up a bleeding chunk of my heart to offer him. He didn’t know what to do, he just took it and I walked away. He looked so embarrassed. And that was it. I couldn’t bear to talk to him again. We never were true loves, I was just an idiot.’

Joss glances up at her. ‘Is this meant to be a comforting story?’

‘Oh.’ Rebecca winces. ‘Well, I suppose so. Because the moral of the story, if there’s a moral, was that I wasn’t really an idiot. I looked like one and I felt like one at the time, but now that I think of it—it was a lovely thing I did. That candle, I mean. There wasn’t anything wrong with giving him a candle. It might have been just what he wanted. But I didn’t know how to give it, that was the problem. Maybe it just wasn’t the right time. Or he wasn’t the right person. He didn’t know what to do with it.’

There’s silence. A straying seagull squalls outside the window, briefly, then shears away disconsolately.

She sits back and sees the grey shadows under Joss’s eyes. ‘Come on. Come on and let’s get you to bed. Come in with me for once.’

Joss rises, creakily. The hood falls back from her face. ‘I’m tired. But thanks. Nice parable about the candle.’

Rebecca blinks in apology.

‘I’m joking.’

‘Sorry. Not exactly what you need.’ Rebecca realises she’s nervous. Nervous of Joss and her trouble and not knowing how to handle it. She puts a hand out towards Joss’s shoulder, lets it hover, puts it down on the thin bone.

‘I feel like I’m made of water,’ Joss says.

They go upstairs, and Rebecca leads Joss into her bedroom and pulls the covers back and curls around her. Joss’s bare legs are cold. Rebecca presses up against them, for warmth. ‘I’ll be here if you’re scared,’ she murmurs, and Joss shifts a shoulder, in impatience or acknowledgement, she can’t tell. A thick scent comes from Joss’s skin. Rebecca knows that smell. It’s the smell of touch, and nervous kisses, and a strange boy. It’s the rich seductive smell of sex. For a moment Rebecca experiences a kind of envy;
and then once more a low thrum of anxiety, and a great tiredness, and then the warm rolling of sleep.

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Later, when Joss wakes up, the bed is empty beside her and the sun comes glaring through the curtains. She lies there, curls tightly onto her other side, lets her body flex back into feeling. She runs a finger thoughtfully over her dry cool lips.

So she’s not a virgin anymore. That’s done.

She lies with that thought a while.

Something brims inside her skin: satisfaction. The darker memory moves into her mind. Joss wishes there weren’t that regret, spooling like cold dark water across her satisfaction. But there’s something in fear that’s satisfying, too.

It is done. She has had sex. She’s lain with a boy, under that magic of trees and night and the breathing of the river. Her body has opened and closed around another’s. Her mouth has tasted the peculiar flavour of desire. It is different to the pleasure she’s given herself; the way her body clenched and clamped at Flick. She had barely been able to breathe in the hot flush of it. Not what she expected. She was frightened, after all. Perhaps it’s always frightening. And it hurt so much. He didn’t care, that he hurt her, that there was no time for her to feel anything. What does that mean?

Enough that she was there, that she held Flick’s face hard in her hands as he stared in panic at her and then found the horizon he was looking for; enough that her skin was alive with feeling. The next time, she will move more slowly, she will kiss him with every beat of her hips against his, she will be the radiant horizon.

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There is another card from Mark in the post that morning. Will be here a while longer. Am thinking of you. Are you all right? Rebecca has a moment of glee; then anger. She thinks of Mark and she thinks of a heavy hand on her heart. How does he dare? Baggage, comes the word to her mind. A word for a woman.

It would serve him right if he returned and found the house empty, the milk sour in the fridge. She should take Joss away, that’s the other thing. This place is doing something to her; the bruises, the boy. Running wild. That was something she always wanted to do, herself. It scares her to see it in Joss.
She puts her shoes on and goes out, leaves a tea-bag in the bottom of a cup for Joss, the sugar-bowl next to it.

Out the door, into the hot blue and green morning. There’s a dry wind in the trees, stirring them. She thought of going into town and buy some pastries, a treat for Joss; but instead the road is brighter in the other direction and on impulse she takes off that way. Past the wildflowers: rowan, cow parsley, elderflower, hawthorn. She can name some of them now. White archangel, viper’s bugloss, honeysuckle, fennel. White and blue and purple and yellow, mixed in with half a dozen types of green, and black thorn.

She keeps walking where the road is lit with sunshine. And there is the church, with its wooden lych gate and its soft stone. The building’s closed again; that’s okay. She doesn’t want to go inside, it’s not that kind of comfort she needs. She just wants a soft green place.

The big yew tree calls her over. At this time of day the sun hits the trunk low down, where the branches’ shade gives way, and the bole of the wood billows out in rough cushions, twisted and grooved over itself. When she lays her hand on it the wood is warm.

There’s the blade, jammed into the wood. It doesn’t look like it hurts. The tree has grown a little lip around the black stone, almost as if it’s pulling the flint further in. Rebecca remembers something she saw in the Dover museum: a note against an ancient flint axe saying that in medieval times such artefacts were believed to be supernatural. Tiny old arrowheads were ‘elf arrows’. Perhaps it was in that time that the flint was bedded here, an amulet, the tree its sheath. Or earlier. And that even in the time before the Romans, people had believed the much older flints were magical. They had no idea of history. They had taken skulls and stone axes from ancient graves and used them as amulets; pierced and hung them. Now they lay under dust in museum cases. Gods in boxes with clenched closed fists, she thought. The world is full of dead gods locked away.

Time to go back over the tilt of the world: home.

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The early afternoon is hot and bright when she gets back to the house. She finds Joss in the gloomy lounge room. She is hunched up at the end of the couch, staring out the window where the trees stand in a daze of sunshine.

‘How’re you feeling?’
‘Okay. I slept too much.’
Rebecca sits. ‘Did you have some tea?’
‘Yep. Thanks for that.’
The room is cold, even though it’s so hot outside.
‘I’ve been for a walk.’
A wan smile. ‘Good for you.’
‘Went back to that church. Have you found it? The one down there—a way down to the left—’ She waves a hand. Joss shakes her head. ‘That tree I told you about—with the stone stuck in it. I think it’s an old flint. A knife or something. It’s like some magic totem or something. Wonderful.’
Joss wraps her arms around her knees. There are breadcrumbs on her lap.
‘Really.’
She looks down, smiling. ‘Well.’
‘Do you think it’s funny place, this?’ Joss speaks into her knees.
‘No. Yes. It’s not what I was expecting. You know, I wasn’t really that sure about coming, and I’m starting to think, now, that—’
‘Have you met any people around here?’
‘Only people in the village. They’re not very friendly.’
‘No one anywhere once you get out of the village, on this road. Don’t you think that’s strange?’
‘I guess. I’ve been a hermit.’
‘I don’t even see people walking down the path out here, just driving. All these fields, you never see any farmers. The whole place is empty.’
Rebecca is nervous of asking, but she must. ‘How did you meet this boy then?’
‘Out there. We met up and he asked me out.’
Rebecca has the feeling that she didn’t handle this morning quite as well as she might have. Start again. ‘So he’s nice?’
‘Yeah.’
‘But something’s wrong?’
‘No.’ Joss looks out the window. ‘I just don’t know where he is right now.’
That fretfulness to know, that possession. Rebecca remembers that. She remembers it from a few weeks ago when Mark left. Like a gulp in the throat always unswallowed.
‘He’ll be back. No?’
‘I guess. There’s something about him. I just don’t know—’
‘What?’
‘Anything much about him. He’s strange. He’s gorgeous,’ and she blushes. ‘But he comes and goes.’

Some fuckwit is messing with Joss. Rebecca says, ‘You don’t have to like him. Just because he’s there.’

Joss stares at her hands. She’s wearing jeans and a hoodie and she’s washed her hair so it hangs straight and fine over her ears. She looks like such a kid. There is a blur of down on her smooth cheek where it catches the sunlight. A small pimple beside her mouth. ‘I miss him.’

Rebecca snorts. ‘You saw him just this morning!’ She sobers. ‘Are you okay, honey? I mean, really?’ Did it hurt, she wants to ask. Did you want it? Was it slow and sweet? I don’t think it was.

Joss nods. Not vigorously enough to satisfy Rebecca.

‘Just remember. You don’t have to do anything for him. If he’s not right. You wait. You have all the time in the world. Now,’ she says, ‘I’m going to read the paper in the garden and give you some peace. You come and talk if you want. And we can go out tomorrow, go to Canterbury and buy some crap we don’t need. I think actually we do need crap. Lots more of it. Definitely.’

She leaves Joss sitting there, pushing her hair behind her ears slowly, with those small fine fingers, that far-away gaze. In the garden, at the back of the house, she doesn’t hear the front door open and close.

::

At the library, Joss finds a place next to a dozy young mother with a hectic child. Thankfully the child rambles away to the children’s corner and the mother heroically follows. Joss stakes her place, fetches books. Her eyes feel tight and the lids oily. She’s a little trembly for some reason; her shoulders hunched high.

Rivers. The river is the key, she thinks. Water is magic, of course. In the past weeks she’s instinctively avoided the river; feeling that it was a place beyond her, where she wasn’t meant to be. But it’s not the only body of water around.

Floods. The silting up of the bays. This village was on an island once: where the little river runs now was once a great channel. Water running underground, water soaking into the land, being engulfed, eroding its way back. Washing around the rim of this landscape, being forced away again. An infinitely slow violence.
Up on the shore here sledged the vessels of Romans, Saxons, Vikings, saints, refugees, invaders; those escaping and those hoping; the fugitive and the proud. This hem of land has received the first footfalls of many. What has it taken in turn?

Now she reads of the deaths.

Off the eastern shore hundreds of ships have been wrecked and thousands of men lost; naval battles have taken others; the smugglers, of course; boats lost during the wars, accidents on the Channel. The rivers of the county are mostly small now, clogged with silt, but they also once brimmed with activity. And for the profit, there must be tribute paid. The old people understood: if one death by water is avoided, another must take its place.

Stories of accidents by water, murder near water, execution by water. In this town, hundreds of years ago, thieves were put to death: the men buried alive in the dunes, the women drowned in the river. A young boy senselessly murdered by a young man on a bare river bank; other children disappearing, while playing near the river; a young woman slaughtered on the old road along the sand line, where her gravestone is still to be found, suffocated by weeds. One infamous night, a shipwreck stranded over a thousand men on the great sandbank off the shore, where they waited, waterlogged and freezing, for help. But the local men preferred to salvage the wreckage, and let all the men drown. Curses were put on the town that night.

Joss reads a story about a shipwreck victim washed up on the beach further along the coast and buried there. The Virgin, in the tale, appears to the parish clerk and led him to the churchyard, every step of her springing up green with grass. She would not have the body in her yard, she said. So it was dug up, and put in the river, where it floated til it reached here. And immediately all miracles ceased in their church, and the land where the body lay grew perpetually wet, but when they tried to take him out again, the land would not let him go.

A man drowned in the reeds, and four hundred years later ‘The Rush Sermon’ is still given in his memory. A drowned island off the coast, reputed to be haunted.

“The druids attach particular importance to the belief that the soul does not perish but passes after death from one body to another.” Caesar wrote in his *Gallic Wars*. He told of clearings with saplings interlaced to keep the sacred boundary, a supernatural silence without birdsong, a spring bubbling in the glade; the trees were said to move. On festival nights the people lit bonfires, and raised stakes around the fire, topped with severed heads: ghost fences. Not far from the village where she sits, Joss reads with a shiver, the skulls of fourteen babies had been found, the little frail cups of bone nestled tenderly between flints.
This black radiance thrills her more than she would like to admit. She had known there was something very deep and very nasty here. She’d expected it; she’d felt it, surely, in the eerie quiet of the roads and meadows?

And above all, she reads, they sacrificed to water. In the watery places the gods were nearer, and so was danger: reeds caught the clumsy, bright reflections drew the dreamers down. In those places the Otherworld was luminously close: could you not see its silver sky, its grey ghostly trees if you bent to the surface of the pool?

And so the old people would tie rags to the trees, or flowers bound with wool, to adorn those gods who rustled the branches, and cast into the waters the shiniest, the most precious objects of metal. The swords were ceremoniously blunted, the daggers broken, the coins bent, before the lowering into water. And then, when silver and bronze and iron wasn’t enough, when the threat was greater and the air was soaked with divine terror, they offered not only heads, but whole bodies: the maimed or mumbling, the weak and the marked and the crippled.

Some were killed in a choreography of violence: stabbed, slashed, throttled, beaten. The triple death was eased by a final meal, of rye, perhaps, infected with fungus, enough to make the victim hallucinatory or comatose: visions spangling his gaze, the drugged limbs barely resisting the tethering; the leather band tied around his arm, the flint axe bashing his defenceless skull; the garrotte a slow strangling; his head pulled back and the hard knife gashing soft flesh. Then he was given to the water: a bog, a well, a river or a pool. Sometimes the victim was stitched to the riverbed by wicker withies strung through the very flesh of his pierced arms. Or he was simply laid down. Or pushed, still dying, face-first into the bog. The noose was left around the throat, the body pinned down with stones and birch-branches; the bindings of ritual death remained.

They drowned their own to keep the waters bright.

The soul passed from one body to the next, after all: this brief death was only a pausing, a flicker through shade before the light returned. Unless the victim deserved to die. Then the water, a place between this world and the other, might keep him forever, static, neither living nor dead, unplaced, unpassing.

By making their offerings, some kind of balance was restored. And yet the waters, greedy, held these treasures for millennia, and still took more. And again and again, a young man meets his death by water. Must meet it.

‘The shelving, slimy river Dun,
Each year a daughter or a son.’
The dead in this country’s myths are unable to speak. That is how one knows, even if they walk, that they are still dead. They are sometimes attended by animals of the hunt, companions of the Otherworld: dogs.

Joss closes the last book, stands up, feels faint.

::

As the afternoon passes the weather is getting heavier. Rebecca notices how the sky is blurred with clouds, but the sun seems to glare down more hotly through the spaces between them. To the east, over the sea, there is a shadow, as if the sky itself were dipped in water and slowly staining. The wind has fluttered closed and the sound of birds and insects is intensely loud.

The lounge room door is closed and Rebecca guesses Joss is still on the couch. She must be exhausted. The room is cool and aqueous at this hour and if Joss weren’t in there Rebecca too would stretch out on the couch and have a nap. Such weight in the air. It feels as if the membranes of her veins are thinning. She walks up the stairs in the afternoon hush, quietly so as not to wake her sister, up to her room. She takes off her boots and jeans, slips under the sheet. Mark’s scent has gone. There’s only a pale flowery aroma of Joss, and that darker scent, that stranger smell. When she gets up she’ll change the sheets. It’s been weeks.

::

It is clear what she has to do: what she is a part of. Something huge and shimmering, bright with meaning, vast and full. Everything feels very certain, as in a dream. Or like sex.

Joss slips back into the house. Rebecca is asleep when she peeks in through her bedroom door. There is a breathlessness in her as she gathers what she needs: an old tee-shirt, a small water-bottle that she fills with wine, a trowel from the shelf near the back door, a bag of tea-light candles. Artefacts for a legend, she thinks: hardly the chalice and the sword, but they will do. She jams them all into a bag and runs out into the early evening.

::
The day is darkening early under its low skies and when she wakes Rebecca thinks of the evening ahead: something good on television, a comfy dinner of sausages and roast vegetables. The lounge room door is empty: Joss must have gone to her room. The open windows frame scenes of static, saturated green; outside, in the kitchen garden, every blade is still. It’s already six o’clock and Rebecca is hungry. She turns on the light in the kitchen, pours a glass of wine and gets to work.

An hour later, the food is ready and Rebecca calls up the stairs to Joss. Getting no response, she goes up and taps gently on Joss’s door. ‘Sweetheart? Are you hungry?’

She can tell by the silence that Joss isn’t in her room, either. She is not in the house at all, Rebecca realises; she must be on one of her walks. Bloody little bitch, says Rebecca aloud, Can’t she stay put? But she is full of renewed fondness for her sister, and she turns the oven off, slips the keys in her pocket and steps out the front door.

::

The road outside is green with twilight and feels warmer than ever. The nights this summer have generally been cool, even on the hottest days, but for the past two days the atmosphere feels as if the sky has clogged and the day’s heat has only massed. Beneath the grave, watchful trees the air is thick. Rebecca touches the flank of one as she passes, as if for reassurance. Then, looking down the road, away from the village, where Joss has usually headed on her expeditions, she notices that the hedgerows are fluttering with pale stream-like flowers. Going closer, she sees that they are thin strips of torn cloth wound roughly around the stems of thorn that prick out of each hedge; she recognises the pattern of one of Joss’s t-shirts. Has she gone completely mad? Why on earth would she be tying bits of clothing to the countryside? Rebecca fingers a scrap, casts a look around the roadway as if expecting to see Joss crazily strewing her clothes around. But there is nothing but the hedges clustering the roadside, absolutely still in the close evening air, their blossoms closing up, and far ahead, the range of poplars, their leaves, too, quite motionless.

The rags disturb her. Joss fractures from her; she’s not familiar, she is someone quite separate, doing something unaccountable. Rebecca walks on, turning her head from side to side now, searching more urgently. When she gets to the poplars she looks past, to the hill where she once saw Joss sit, but it is empty, and darkening in the first moments of twilight. She can’t believe that she’s let this happen; that Joss has been spending days—weeks—wandering the countryside, without Rebecca knowing or even
asking where or why. Something has been happening and something has gone wrong. Mother, she thinks. Oh mum, I never asked for this.

She heads across the field, hoping to catch a glimpse of her sister, but the expanse is as empty as she has always seen it. Aren’t there farmers to work this land? Where are the bloody people? She’s sweating as she toils across the lumpy ground. Under the stand of trees on the hillock’s crown she pauses to check the view. Down to one side the trees thicken into a wood—that must be the one marked on the map, she thinks—but last time she came upon Joss it was in a field. She doesn’t think her sensitive little sister would want to be in a wood at dusk.

Back onto the road. Beside it, spreadeagled upside down, is the body of a fox, its head crushed, a pink and grey mess. Only a few flies bother it. Rebecca looks away quickly from the horrible thing, obscurely frightened. Her belly heaves for a moment; she puts a protective hand against it.

She walks on. There’s the road turning ahead. It was around here, wasn’t it, that she’d seen Joss lying in the field? That time she was so defensive. She must have been with the boy, though Rebecca had never caught a glimpse of him. Oh, she’s so sly. Why didn’t she tell me, Rebecca thinks. Why did it all have to be such a secret?

She knows why, of course. Because at Joss’s age—even at Rebecca’s age, she can admit it—love and lust are like golden bubbles, held in cupped hands, swallowed down; they buoy you up and it takes only one brush against reality to threaten puncture, the bubble to burst, the glorious gold reduced to everyday dross. Because Joss has always had to make do, and close herself into her head, and because Joss, god bless her, deserves to be loved.

All the way up that track she strides, the light starting to fade now, to clot and grain. Rebecca is boiling hot and she wipes her face on her shirt. All the fields look the same, the same bronze crops of barley, some harvested to stumps and some still standing, the same hedgerows alongside, the same impassive racks of trees along skylines...

Joss might be back at the house, perhaps she’s there, impatiently eating baked pumpkin off the oven tray, glaring at the door, waiting for her ridiculous irresponsible older sister to come home... Rebecca pauses for breath, and finds herself at a corner of a low flint wall. There, behind a screen of pine trees, is the church tower. She makes her way around to the lych gate, eases it open.

She searches the grounds for some kind of water; she’s desperately thirsty. A tap in a corner relieves the parching of her throat. She presses wet hands against her hot cheeks, but they only feel clammy a moment later. The churchyard is mad with the
sound of crickets. The graves hummock the grass. Oh, where the hell is Joss? She thinks
she’ll just go home, and hope to find her there—will ignore the apprehension like a belly-
ache inside her, will work to the normal, expect it; watch a documentary or maybe a
crime show. The two of them cosy on the couch. Hunger yawps inside her. She would
give anything to be watching the Channel 4 news right now, the lamps on.

The yew tree, as she passes, seems darker and lower than ever, its branches
creeping out above the ground, its tufts of needle-like leaves bristling crazily. A dry green
dusty scent comes from it. For a silly moment Rebecca thinks Joss might be hiding in the
tree’s hollow, that snug hidey-spot; it’s a ridiculous thought, but she ducks beneath the
tree’s fringe of leaves and glances through dense shadows into the dark cavern of wood.

It is empty of course, and Rebecca’s fingers resting on the edge of it find another
emptiness: a narrow slit, sharp with crumbled splinters where something has hacked at
it. The stone is gone.

Absurdly, Rebecca looks on the ground, in case it has simply fallen out. But she
knows better. How cheap, to come and remove this one precious thing. Vandals have no
subtlety. Then she is outraged, and she realises it is on behalf, stupidly, of the tree.
Injured, just for someone’s laugh, or trophy. Something stolen from this grand old relic,
and all that still time disturbed. She finds herself stroking the fractured wood,
smoothing splinters down, rubbing her fingers inside the aperture where the wood is
smooth and silken from its long growth against the flint. A hot sense of sadness comes
up in her throat. But she can’t spend time on a clammy summer’s dusk, consoling a tree.
She has to find Joss; pushing off from the trunk where she has rested her weight, she
wipes her way out through the branches and back out to where the damp sky is now
beginning to obliterate the church tower.

::

The house is empty. She hadn’t left the lights on when she walked out; the rooms are
quiet with shadows. Rebecca walks through quickly, flicking the light-switches, spooked.
She washes her face, pours a glass of wine, takes a long gulp. She has put it down on the
counter when she thinks to commit a trespass she’s never made before. Finally, maybe,
she thinks as she heads up the stairs, cramming a piece of pumpkin in her mouth, I’m
turning into a typical mother. Once more she puts her hand to her belly. If she weren’t so
alert with nerves she’d have laughed.

Up in Joss’s room, she finds her diary.
One thing they never thought to buy for the house is a torch. She’s only halfway across the field when she realises she already needs to check the map. Her cigarette lighter, left in her back pocket, is the only thing she’s got. In the stillness of the air, it gives a steady flame. She’s on the right track, but it wasn’t clear from Joss’s diary which part of the river in the wood she meant; it meanders around, a thin little thing, more a creek than a river from the look of it. If she gets across this field, though, she’ll be amongst the trees, and then she need only follow their line to find the water.

It’s hard going, in the fading light. It’s hotter than ever, she’s sure. The air seems damp with dusk and warmth, and the trees ahead look darker than anything she’s entered in her life. What are we doing here, she thinks as she struggles over the weeds at the field’s edge. How did we get to this empty place? Madness. We don’t belong here. We don’t know a thing about a place like this.

Dry lightning, soundless, surprises her. Then thunder. Far from here.

It seems cooler once she’s amid the trees, as if she’s walked into, invisible, a clot of fog. She had thought of ‘woods’ as peaceful plantations, the tame European trees well spaced with age, a fine bed of leaves beneath. This feels dense as an Australian forest; branches are broken and fallen, obstructing her path, there are swathes everywhere of ivy and grass, dry leaves are slippery beneath her feet.

But there, ahead, there are glimmers of white, and when Rebecca reaches it, the rag is as good as a torch to light the way. Joss has led her, after all.

::

Joss waits a long time. The woods are heavy in the thick weather, the trees seem to blur when she glances up at every small sound. The silence, however, is almost total. It is terribly hot in there. What sodden light there is fades around the little cool flares of the candles.

In the end she is not startled when he comes walking towards her. She stands up. She is ready.

He stops in front of her, by the bank of the river. He seems to ripple in the air, as the light ripples over the streaming water.

‘It’s all right,’ she says. ‘It’s all right now, I understand.’

He smiles, and reaches a hand out to take her wrist. His hand seems nothing but bones: he is so skinny, this flickering boy, and the smell of him is strong. It seems to rest
on her tongue, bitter. Her tongue still hurts where he had bitten it here last night. She backs away slowly to avoid his touch.

‘You hurt me,’ she says. ‘Do you know that?’ She bends, picks up the bottle of wine, and staring at him pours it into the river beside her. ‘Is this right?’

The boy is frowning. Perhaps he’s forgotten the proper way, the right order. First the gesture, then the real offering. It be hard, of course. It’s nothing, unless you feel the loss.

He moves for her again: his hand grabs her wrist, yanks it downwards as he steps against her. She coils, twists awkwardly, shoves back. The resistance has caught him by surprise; he staggers backwards, almost losing his footing.

Joss steps forward in one quick, sure stride, and with spread hands pushes him again. She is hot with certainty. He falls, slipping so that he sprawls back on the wet slimy bank of the water, his hair spreading and darkening as it soaks. She is on him and thrusting his head beneath the water before his outstretched arms can raise him again. It is almost dark now.

::

By the time she has worked her way through to the river, the light is going fast. Rebecca is now more frightened of the dark than of what she might find; the darkness is already with her, making every inch of advance a fight with apprehension. Only occasionally does the dry lightning flare—it is more spectral than helpful, making the gloom deeper after every slice of light. But she is slowly learning that she can move in this strange place, she can put her hand out to feel her way when the shadows are too dense, the world doesn’t fall away in fateful cliffs or treacherous ravines. Her hearing sharpens, and her sense of smell; she feels like an animal, crouching in the safety of her instincts. From time to time she flicks the lighter on, but it shows only scattered shapes which don’t make any sense. One footstep after another, further in towards the sound of water.

When she finds Joss, she’ll kill her.

::

The flint knife is clumsy in her hand. It seems impossible that it’s real; that there is anything so solid in this world which seems liquid with sound and light, this silvery shadow-world that makes her blink as she crouches above the boy, with only a hot gold
flare running up the core of her body and along her arm to where she holds the stone above his head, the other hand pushing his face away. Flick’s mouth under the water, gaping, his skin a dulled shine in the gloom: it all seems a mask. She deliberately pushes down on him with her groin as he bucks upwards, clamps his arm with one hand, twines her lower legs around his to anchor him down. He’s very strong as he thrashes under her, but he seems small again; much smaller than she is.

But he is so beautiful.

‘It has to hurt,’ she grunts. ‘You know it, you’ve done this before—it has to hurt or it doesn’t mean anything—’

She stares at him, and leans back. ‘Does it?’

He looks up at her. She waits for him to lunge up towards her. His mouth opens in a soundless appeal.

‘Doesn’t it?’

She starts to cry. She’s too tired, suddenly, to rise. But beneath the weight of tiredness she suddenly feels something lift her.

::

Finally, Rebecca finds herself lurching sideways as she slips on something. She must be at the bank of the creek now; she can smell wetness and hear the faint wash of moving water. Next to her are flashing gleams, shifting and passing as she moves her head. Treading very carefully on the uneven, slimy ground and clinging onto trees, she works her way along the bank.

When she sees them they seem, for a moment, like spirit lights, those flares of flaming gas said to hover eerily over marshes. She’s never seen one, but that’s what comes to mind. It’s with a cool, uncanny sense of familiarity, of already having been here, that she sees the candle flames set beside the river ahead, and knows that she’s found her.

The girl raises her head when she hears someone approaching. The look on her young face, smoky and half-lit by the candles, is a look Rebecca hasn’t seen since Joss was a little child. One could fall in love with someone from just that gaze, that supernatural softness, the utter innocence.

For a moment the sound of the river is very loud. Then it quietens.

‘Hello, my love.’ Rebecca steps out from the shadows and into the magic globe of candlelight. ‘Don’t get a fright. It’s just me.’
Joss stares at her, the look unchanging on her face but losing all of its wonder. Then she blinks. Rebecca comes closer, crouches beside where her sister is sitting under a tree. She puts her hand on the trunk to steady herself. She refuses to think about how frightened she is.

'I came to tell you dinner's ready.' Rebecca laughs, a little loudly, looking around at the black and gold trees. A little distance away, a moment later, one of the candles wavers. "Maybe I should have brought it with me. We could have had a picnic. Isn't this just lovely.'

Joss is cross-legged on the ground, her head bent again now. There's a scent on her, unfamiliar, sweet and bitter at the same time: her clothes are wet through. She is holding the stone knife in her two palms. It's bigger than Rebecca had expected, a hand-sized lump of black flint, chipped away on two sides to make a corrugated blade. The edges, where the scoops of stone are very thin, glitter as she turns it from side to side, glossy as water. The light almost shines through them. There is a smudge of dirt on one end.

There are forest sounds: something easing through undergrowth a little way away, the trees whispering, the water knocking and hushing.

'You must think I'm mad.' Joss whispers. She stares at the ground between her thighs.

'Well.' Rebecca eases herself down onto the ground. She absently smooths the dead leaves with her fingers. ‘I was worried.’

A pause. ‘Sorry.’

Joss continues to pass the stone from palm to palm in the soft light. Rebecca wipes sweat off her face. She looks out at the ring of light. It’s peaceful here, after all. Somewhere out of time, out of the world, safely enclosed by light. A little bubble of illumination; it reminds her of the floating flares she sees when she closes her eyes. This could be any moment in time, or all of them.

‘All this for a boy, huh?’

Joss nods, slowly. Then she shakes her head.

‘Well.’

‘Not just for him.’ She mumbles something.

‘Sorry?’

‘For me.’

The water passes them, unseen.

‘He didn’t come?’
Joss doesn’t say anything. She just turns the stone. Her hands, holding the heavy weight, look as young and square as a child’s. There is a stillness about her that Rebecca hasn’t seen before. A sadness, but something else. It is as if Joss has given something away, something she wanted; for the first time she has done, or had something done to her, something that really hurt. Rebecca can feel the tension in Joss, that holding carefully a cup filled with feeling, the great poise of someone who has just learned something about herself and needs to carry it a distance away before setting it down.

In the distance there is a loud crack and rustle, as if a tree had lost a branch. Joss starts. She looks sideways at Rebecca, almost shyly, bites her lip.

‘Ready to go?’ Rebecca says. She puts out her hand.

Joss takes it and together they heave to their feet.

‘We’ll put this back.’ Rebecca touches the flint gently. Joss nods.

‘I didn’t realise it had gotten so dark,’ she says, wonderingly. Rebecca bends and picks up two of the little candles from the ground near the water, hands them to Joss and takes two herself.

‘Here. And now, my darling, can you find our way home?’

As they move away from the river, Rebecca following in Joss’s flame-flickering wake, she nearly wobbles into Joss as the girl stops. Joss looks back at the river. Tears glaze her eyes. ‘Adciu,’ she says. ‘Adciu.’ Then she turns away.

‘What?’

Joss walks on. Quietly she says, ‘It’s an old word. It means I see.’ Then she quickens her steps, untroubled by the tangles of ivy and the blackness all around them, and leads Rebecca out of the wood.

::

The next day they wake to the sound of water. Joss lies in her bed, feeling the rain run through her body as she stirs, as if every drop is washing her gently, soaking in through her skin, rinsing her very bones before seeping out again. She rests, unmoving, watching the water for a long time. She is only eyes looking, lungs breathing, no more: barely even thinking. When finally she moves her limbs, it feels as if they’ve been newly fitted, as if she’s never had a body before.

At the other end of the hall, Rebecca, too, lies in her bed and watches the glass blur and waver. In her sleep she’s dragged a coverlet over her and it rests upon her like a second skin. There’s a sense of great peace, after the night. Her bed is so warm, the air fresh and cool as it comes through the half-opened window. Rain spatters from time to
time on the sill. A soft crush of thunder comes and goes. The air gets greener and greener and Rebecca imagines a tender mouth kissing hers, and kissing her again, deeply; she sighs as she thinks this, and cups one breast gently in her hand, a warm handful of water; she holds it and rolls onto her belly and begins to pulse, dreamily, against herself.

::

When they’ve shut the front door behind them, both of them think to take the lead. Joss sets off down the road towards the church, aware that this is, after all, really her road—it’s the path she’s taken more often than she can count, it was the beginning of all the secrets she discovered. But Rebecca knows that they’re going to her church, and she uses her long legs to cut just an inch or two into Joss’s head start.

They stride on like this, both of them suddenly and obscurely jealous of the track they’re taking, until Rebecca says, a little out of breath, ‘Why are we rushing?’ and slows. She isn’t feeling very well this afternoon. The rain finally pattered to a close, and the sky is a thinning blue. After the heat, the day is the temperature of blood, barely discernible.

Joss raises an eyebrow. ‘I wasn’t rushing.’
‘Let’s just take it easy. There’s no hurry.’

They walk on, side by side now, framed in the middle of the empty road by the hedgerows on either verge.

‘God, it’s pretty here. All this wildness.’ A daisy waggling from Rebecca’s lips.
‘What’s the date?’
‘First of August.’
‘Right.’
‘Why?’
‘No reason. I guess there’s a lot of summer still to go.’
‘Yeah. A lot of summer.’

They walk on, to the turn-off, up the side-road, to the churchyard. There’s a lorry parked outside the lych gate, as they walk up, and three men standing in the churchyard. Two of them have on neon orange vests, and the third is wearing a jumper, shirt and cords.

‘Shit.’
‘We’ll never sneak it back right now.’

They open the gate and wander around the nearest edge of the graveyard, browsing along the gravestones as if ambling around a gift-shop. They bend and slowly
read the blurred epitaphs as they wait for the men to go. Joss puts her hand on Rebecca’s arm. ‘Look at this. John Caleb Kerrick. 1856-1870. Drowned at Soar. He has outsoared the shadow of this night.

‘That’s sad. Just a young guy. That’s Shelley, isn’t it? From Adonais?’ Rebecca frowns and closes her eyes in concentration. ‘‘He has outsoared the shadow of this night; Envy and calumny and hate and pain Can touch him not, nor torture yet again. From the contagion of the world’s slow stain He is secure…” I forget the rest of it.’

Joss says nothing, only smiles sadly and moves away. She looks at no more graves, only trails her fingers against worn stone, the frail fronds of long grass as she wanders slowly around the yard.

Rebecca makes a slow circuit, still feeling that great sense of comfort from this place. The sunlight is fragile on the grass and the old grey stones She cranes her head to look at the church tower, and then glance at her friends, the two stone ladies. They haven’t changed, they still gaze out, one happy, one sad. She walks over to stroke their faces with a light finger. Then, following their blind gaze over her shoulder, she turns and she sees.

The men are gathered around the yew, and now she can see why. The bushy top of the tree, so broad and etiolated with its long reaching branches that hide the trunk, looked intact from the gate. But now she can see that its trunk has been wrenched out of the ground, the whole thing tipped over, devastated, ruined.

The branches now reach out, across the earth. She draws closer.

The roots of the yew are as fearfully convoluted as the branches; a paler brown, thickly tendrilled and fringed with tinier strands. One half of the root system is bared to the air where it has risen from the ground. The trunk has sagged and split a little.

One of the men in orange vests notices her. ‘Shocking mess,’ he says.

She stares, nodding.

‘Freak, must have been a complete freak. There was no report of winds in the village. But maybe one of those, what do they call them? Micro-bursts, innit. Pulled the whole poor darling right up. The mayor’s here, he’s upset all right. Bloody shame.’

Rebecca takes a step forward, touches a root as she has just touched the stone face by the door.

‘Over a thousand years old, this. So it’s said. There’s a legend, you know, that there’s a sword buried right in the heart of it. All sorts of stories for trees like these, of course. I’m a tree man, I’ve heard them all. Still, she was a beauty.’ He gives a whistle.

The man in cords says something and the tree man winks at Rebecca and moves away to continue the discussion on the other side of the tree.
Joss is beside her. Her mouth is open with dismay.

Rebecca lays a hand on the trunk, where it has split. She feels like crying.

‘I’m sorry,’ Joss says. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’

She walks around to the other side, stooping to look at where the hollow in the tree now gapes towards the ground. The sill of it, where the flint had been stowed, is all broken away. Bared shards of wood are shockingly raw.

‘I can’t put it back,’ Joss whispers.

From the other side of the huge trunk Rebecca says, ‘I know.’

‘What shall I do?’

Her sister walks around to meet her. Impulsively, Joss puts her arms around her. They rest against each other, breathe in, and out.

‘We’ll bury it.’ Rebecca speaks into the side of Joss’s neck.

‘Back there.’

Rebecca nods.

‘Will you come with me?’

Rebecca lets go and stands back. She gives her sister a weak smile. ‘Of course. Of course I will.’

::

As they walk through the field towards the river, Rebecca pauses. ‘Hang on. I’ve got to stop a minute.’

‘You look a bit pale.’

‘I know.’ She stands, holding her abdomen, her eyes closed, getting her breath.

‘Joss?’

‘Yeah?’

‘There’s something I should tell you.’ She opens her eyes. ‘Should have told you before, I guess. I know you know that last year I had an—’ she glances away. ‘An abortion. Well, now I’m going to have a baby.’

Joss’s face is almost as soft with surprise as it was soft with something else last night. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘No.’ Rebecca laughs. ‘No! I’m going to have a baby! A bloody baby!’ She cackles.

‘You’re insane! That’s wonderful.’ Joss throws her arms around her for the second time that afternoon and squeezes her tight. She scrubs her sister’s tummy with a rough hand. Rebecca crouches away, giggling.

‘Careful! I might puke.’
‘Sorry. But oh my god. You’re going to be a mother. Good grief.’ She makes a face of mock-horror. ‘No, seriously. I’m really happy for you, Beck. Does Mark—’ she grimaces. ‘Does Mark know?’

‘He does not. He hasn’t given me a chance.’

‘More fool him. We’ll raise it ourselves. It’ll be great. We’ll call it Godfrey,’ she starts to chant, ‘and it’ll live in the bathtub, and it’ll eat only boiled eggs and—’

‘Shut it…’

‘It’ll make an honest woman out of you at last.’

Rebecca makes a face. ‘We’ll see about that. Not everything in life is redeemable’

::

The wood, this afternoon, is gilded and lovely. Sunlight catches the edge of every shape, like gold illumination in a manuscript, a lustre that they walk through. The light makes a metallic filigree of Joss’s brown hair as she walks beside Rebecca. The ivy that smothers the place is a soft bedding now; the sound of birds makes the light seem to quiver.

‘I have no idea where we’re going,’ Rebecca whispers. It’s so hushed here. Their footsteps scuff the leaves below. ‘I don’t know how I found you last night.’

‘I know the way.’ She has grown straighter and more possessed of herself since they entered the trees. What kind of trees are they? Birch, thinks Rebecca. Birch and elder. Lovely princesses of the woods. Joss holds herself like a princess here, too. She seems unafraid.

There they are, at the water’s edge. There are a couple of blackened places where the candles were left behind. The water purls and slides silently between the banks. There is a sledged part of the bank, where it looks like something heavy has dragged across it, but the river mutters only over rocks. There is no sign, now, of the dead animals Joss was once brought to see. Perhaps they rotted, perhaps they were swept away, or were taken away and disposed of. It was a long time ago.

‘Where do you want to put it?’ Rebecca says, hoarse from the silence.

Joss hesitates. ‘I know I have to do it. But I hope someone finds it again some day. I hope it doesn’t get lost. It’s precious.’ She pulls the stone blade from her pocket. In the look she casts down on it is all the hot hope of her imaginings. She holds this piece of ancient time, frozen in the shape of a blade, in her small young hands. Then she kneels by the bank of the river where the soil is soft and bare, and scrapes away at dead leaves and pebbles. Rebecca kneels and joins her. They dig with their fingers, uncovering grit
and softened leaves and thick, dark earth. When the hole is about a foot deep, Joss picks up the stone.

‘Should I say something?’ she says, looking up at Rebecca.

‘What would you want to say?’

‘Goodbye for now,’ Joss says, and lowers her face. She places the axe in its pit, pauses a moment. ‘Goodbye.’

When it has been covered over, she stands and looks steadily at her sister. ‘I feel better now,’ she says.

‘Give me another minute.’ From her pocket Rebecca takes a sprig of yew branch. It wasn’t easy to wrangle a piece off the tree; it was a tough material. She doesn’t know if it will work; probably not. She was going to take it back to the house, but now she plants the little sprig in the earth above the stone. Better not just to bury something, she thinks. Better to let it start again.

She cranks herself upright and looks at the trees, the water, the muddled ground scattered with leaves and stones and dead twigs, the grainy close air, the golden light.

‘This is a strange place,’ she says. ‘Maybe Mark was right. Maybe you can still feel things in a place like this.’

Joss offers her a small smile. ‘Maybe.’

They give the river one last look, the bank with its little circle of darker earth and its twisted flag of green; the haze of condensation that has risen to fog the further trees, the wonderful stripes of light, the odd grace that has come down through the leaves.

‘We’re leaving soon, aren’t we,’ says Joss as they cross the field towards the road. In these late hours, every nub and bump of the shorn wheat and bone of chalky flint seems crowned with a cap of gold. ‘Back to Melbourne?’

Rebecca quirks a look at her. ‘Do you want to?’

‘I guess,’ Joss says, ‘I guess you won’t want to have the baby here. All alone. You’d want to go back to your friends. They helped you with me, didn’t they.’

‘Yeah, they did. God, they were wonderful.’

‘It’s like you’ve already been a mother, haven’t you? But with me, you didn’t get any choice. There wasn’t any choice.’

‘No, there wasn’t. But I never minded, Joss. You’re my sister. I love you, and we were lucky we had each other.’ She puts a hand on Joss’s arm. ‘That’s what mum and dad would have wanted.’

‘They’d be so happy for you now.’ And Joss finds tears in her eyes. ‘They’d be really, really happy.’
'They’d be proud of us both, my love.’ Rebecca kisses her little sister on the cheek, swiftly.

‘Oh my god, your hormones are already completely out of control, aren’t they?’ says Joss, bright.

‘Do you want us to go home?’ Rebecca asks, bending to tie her shoelace. It’s not really coming undone, but she wants to stop. ‘I’ve been afraid that this place has been no good for you. And I don’t know when Mark’s coming back. It’s rough—’ and she sighs, ‘—but to be honest, even when he does, I’m not sure I want him. Who knows?’

‘I’m sorry. But I’m also glad. Does that make sense?’

‘So we can do whatever you want.’

‘I don’t know what I want. Let’s just go home and have one of your cups of tea for now.’

‘Jolly good then!’ says Rebecca in an awful English accent, and Joss smiles as they climb over the stile.
The water fills his body like a stain. Somewhere above is light and space. Here in the water everything is substance, everything is dense. It loads him, soaks and saturates. His skin is softening, his teeth are wet. Water washes in the hollow channel of his throat. His body is heavier than it has ever been on the earth, and yet it floats still, a little.

Flesh sinks, drifts like cold air, buckles and wavers, dissolves into darkness. The river is deep and chill, the current gentle. The drowned man is gentled here. Water turns in his deaf ears.

In a few days, his skin will be jelly. His hair will rise around his drooping head, and then, with time, detach. The flesh will loosen and sag around his limbs; the colour will become waxen, a pastel shade. His lips will shrink back from his teeth, so wet, his glistening teeth. Water will make him sodden, and yet he will rise. The body’s buoyancy, like the soul’s, will lift him.

He will rise, and then he must be buried again.