**CONFUSION: IRIS MURDOCH, THE GOTHIC AND THE SENSE OF PLACE.**

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**Abstract:**

This thesis comprises my novel *Confusion* together with a critical piece exploring depictions and uses of the sense of place – in particular architecture and the built environment – in the Gothic, and in the Gothic legacy in contemporary fiction. I have chosen to focus on two key Gothic texts and two novels by Iris Murdoch.

My novel *Confusion* depicts a man’s entry into a house in which the inhabitants are each struggling with distinct and ‘confusing’ moral, sexual, spiritual and emotional problems. John Cole is at first only able to understand the situation in which he finds himself by ‘reading’ his life – and that of others – as a kind of fiction. The novel’s use of third person narration interspersed with diary entries permits an exploration of the distance between John’s perception of events (in his role as ‘reader’) and the events themselves, and the inevitable narrowing of that distance as he enters the ‘text’ he is at first content merely to ‘read’. The novel places particular emphasis on the sense of place evoked through John’s perception of what he sees, and, though intended as realist fiction, draws on Gothic motifs of ruin, madness and transgression.

The critical component of the thesis sets *Confusion* within the context of essentially realist contemporary novels which nonetheless appear to exploit Gothic narrative protocols, focusing particularly on the treatment of place in the novels of Iris Murdoch. The Introduction explores the origins of the Gothic, the crucial importance of the sense of place as a Gothic device, and the extent to which realist fiction may make use of Gothic protocols. It emphasises the importance of consciousness – both of character and reader – to the construction and perception of the sense of place. Chapter 1 explores the extent to which a Gothic sense of place permits and enhances fictional portrayals of madness and reason/unreason in Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and in Iris Murdoch’s *The Unicorn*. Chapter 2 examines the use of the Gothic built environment in the form of ‘consecrated ground’, exploring matters of transgression and goodness in M. G. Lewis’ *The Monk*, and in Iris Murdoch’s *The Bell*. In Chapter 3, I conclude with an examination of how my own childhood, faith and faith-crisis formed the themes and motifs of my fiction, in particular the use of Gothic protocols.

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**CONFUSION**

**WEDNESDAY**

I’m writing this in a stranger’s room, sitting on a broken chair at an old school desk. The chair creaks if I move, and so I must keep very still. The desk has a sloping lid scored with initials and symbols I think I’ve seen before, and at the bottom of the inkwell a beetle is lying on its back. I’ve been watching it for some time because I thought I saw its legs twitch, but it looks dry as a husk and must have died a long time ago.

There’s a lamp here, set on the floor. It has a dirty shade with pieces cut out of it, I suppose to put patterns on the wall to comfort a child in the dark. I daren’t turn it on in case someone sees it shining and comes in, but a yellow light at the far end of the garden makes it bright enough to see. There are two long windows to my right, and as the light comes it in throws a pair of slanted panels on the floor. It makes this paper yellow, and the skin of my hands: they don’t look as if they have anything to do with me, and it makes me wonder where mine are, and what they’re doing. I’ve been listening for footsteps on the stairs or voices out in the garden, but there’s only the silence of a household trying to keep quiet. They gave me too much wine and there’s a buzzing in my ears, like a fly under a glass – I wonder if I’m drunk?

I’ve never kept a diary before. Nothing ever happens to me worth writing down. But I hardly believe what happened today, or what I’ve done: I’m afraid that in a month’s time I’ll think it was all someone’s else foolish story I read years ago, when I was young and knew no better. This notebook was pushed to the back of the drawer in the desk where I sit now, hidden by a pile of newspapers buckled with damp. The paper smells dank and all the pages are empty except the last, where someone’s written the same name on every line as if they were practising a signature. It’s an old name, and one I recognise, though I can’t remember why: Eadwacer, Eadwacer, EADWACER.

Underneath it I’ve written my own name down, because if I ever find this notebook again and flick through the pages I’d like to be certain that it’s my handwriting recording these events, that I did what I have done, that it was nobody’s fault but mine. And I’ll do it again, in braver capitals than my name deserves: JOHN COLE, underlined three times.

Where should I start, when already I can hardly remember how the day began?

This morning I slept too deeply and far too long. When I finally woke up the damp sheets were tangled around my arms and legs, and I struggled to stand and dress myself for work. I’ve adopted a kind of uniform – the sort of thing I’ve always felt the owner of a bookshop ought to wear – but for some reason the suit and grey tie felt stiff and tight, as though someone else had left them there. Caught off-guard while I was still asleep, the day felt awry from the moment I stepped out of the lobby shade. I’d got into the habit of glancing up whenever I left the flat, checking for signs of cloud or wind, but there was nothing, just the same old spiteful sun. I counted, and it was the thirty-fifth day without rain.

For days the streets had been eerily quiet, as people left town in search of places where the air wasn’t so thick and warm you could feel it on your tongue. Fretting I’d find customers outside the bookshop peering in at the window, I almost ran along the baking pavements, but of course no-one was waiting. The café next door had lowered its shutters, and I couldn’t hear anything except someone calling their dog home. When I let myself in, I found that in the dim cool air of the shop I felt suddenly dizzy. There’s an armchair I keep beside the till (it was my father’s, and whenever I sit there I expect to hear him say ‘Be off with you boy!’), and almost collapsed into it. It had been foolish to run in that heat - sweat had soaked through my shirt and jacket, and stung my eyes. Though I’d slept so long, I thought it would do no harm to sit a while and rest – I’d leap to my feet if the door opened, and find the proper words of greeting.

My brother’s always said the shop fits me like a shell around a snail, and he’s right: I’ve never sat in that armchair, or stood behind the till, and not felt fixed in my proper place. But this morning it was as if everything had shifted, and nothing was as I’d left it the day before: even the clock in the corner sounded ill-tempered, and the carpet wasn’t just whorls of colour after all but birds opening their beaks at me. After a while I stood and did a few futile little tasks – straightening shelves and going over the accounts – but I think I knew that no-one would come. I’ve never much wanted the company of others, and I’m sure no-one’s ever wanted mine, but I realised I was desperately hoping for the bell above the door to ring, and someone to stand on the threshold and say “I wonder if you could help me?”. But when I stood at the window and looked out on the street it was quieter than ever, and for all that I’ve never believed it possible I felt my heart sink, a physical sensation as real as hunger or pain. I put my hand in my pocket, looking for something to wipe away the sweat gathering on my forehead, and instead pulled out a postcard I’d folded and shoved in there, a week ago or more.

It showed a boat adrift on a muddy marsh, and a sunrise so bleak and damp you’d think it designed to keep visitors away. I turned it over and saw the question mark written in crayon, and the name CHRISTOPHER signed with a kiss from each of his four sons, one of whom must have stuck on the crooked stamp. It was a kind of joke between us that in his house on the Norfolk coast a room was kept for me, with a narrow bed and a bookshelf where they put the sort of novels they thought might interest a man like me. “Come any time: any time, mind you,” he’d say, but I never did, other than at Christmas when it seemed the correct thing to do.

I turned the postcard over and over in my hands, and raised it to my nose as if I could smell salt rising from the marsh. If I went to see my brother, there’d be a houseful of good-natured boys, and my sister-in-law who seems always to be laughing, and my brother who’d sit up until the small hours talking over whisky. But I could put up with all of that, I thought, for clean air and a cool wind in the afternoon. So I took a large square of cardboard out of the desk, wrote CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE on it in as tidy a set of capitals as I could manage, and propped it in the window. Then I turned off the lights and made my way home.

I’d hoped the weather might be breaking at last, but the sky was blank and cloudless as ever and my head immediately began to ache. I let myself into my flat and packed a small bag, and left again quickly, feeling like a schoolboy playing truant. Outside I couldn’t remember where I’d left the car – we all scrabble about for spaces and often find nothing within a hundred yards - and walked up and down the road twice feeling the heat beat like a hammer against the pavement. When I finally found it I saw someone had drawn a five-pointed star in the dust on the bonnet, and when I opened the door the handle burned my palm, and hot air burst out as if the car was alive and breathing on me.

Perhaps I ought to have turned back then. A superstitious man might have seen signs the journey was cursed – reservoirs receding, and crops that never grew fat enough for harvest. I almost turned back and went indoors, but when I looked up at the windows of my flat I thought how empty they looked, as if no-one had lived there for years. I put my bag on the back seat and set off while the wheel was still hot enough to burn my hands.

It wasn’t until London was forty miles behind me I realised I hadn’t packed a map. I didn’t think it would matter at first – I’d been there a dozen times at least, and as he always says, it’s straight on until you hit the sea. But in less than two hours I was lost. I must’ve taken a wrong turning early on, and before long it felt as if I were being boiled inside an enormous kettle. Every now and then boards flashed red and yellow lights that spelt out SLOW DOWN, and the sun began to scorch my right arm through the window. I found myself gripping the steering wheel like a nervous boy on his first lesson and blinded by the sun flashing from the windscreens of all the cars coming towards me.

I tried looking for a familiar landmark that would set me on the right path – there’s an isolated house I always look for, like a rectory without a church - but I only know the road in winter and the dense green of summer made everything unfamiliar to me. I wound down the window, but the air that came in was foul with traffic fumes, and I began a convulsive coughing that shook my whole body at the wheel. My bottle of water had rolled off the seat and was leaking into the foot-well, and when I tried to reach for it my hands slipped on the steering wheel and I swerved into the next lane. All around me traffic went past as though I was a small expendable part of a grinding machine: I slowed almost to a crawl, and as they passed me they leant on their horns and swore at me through open windows.

For the first time in my life, I began to panic. My stomach clenched like a fist, and there was a sour taste in my mouth as if I’d already been sick. The knot in my stomach and the beating pain in my head became all mixed up – nothing about me was doing what it ought and I felt as though I were coming apart in pieces. Then steam began to come out from under the bonnet and I could see nothing at all, so I gritted my teeth and drifted across the slow lane and onto a by-road where the traffic was sparse and slow. When I recognised the dark fringes of Thetford forest I was so relieved I could almost have wept.

I drove for just long enough to leave the roaring of the road behind me, and pulled into a lay-by. When I got out of the car I looked up and saw the pines stooping over to give me shade; then I was sick on the grass verge and sat down with my head in my hands. Some time later my headache began to fade, and I stood up. One last gust of steam came from under the bonnet, and I could hear the engine ticking as it cooled. Everything I know about cars could be written on a bookmark, but I thought perhaps I needed water for the radiator, and guessed it wouldn’t be far before I found a garage or campsite, or even another car pulled into a lay-by further along with a flask and a picnic.

I wanted to get as far as possible from the motorway behind me, and thinking a walk in the shade would help the pain in my head I followed the narrow road into the forest. After a while I noticed all the signs along the bank pointed back the way I’d came, as if no-one would ever go the way I was walking, and the deeper I went, the more alone I was. I still felt very sick, and even the pines overhead couldn’t prevent the sun beating against the top of my head. Every now and then I’d hear a car pass a short distance away, and I’d run into the wood to see if I could flag it down, but I never found another road. Why did I go on walking? I should have gone back to the car and waited, or walked out on the motorway's hard shoulder to find an emergency telephone and call for help. But at the time I thought of none of this, only saw the forest opening in front of me like a deep green tunnel, and went on walking. Once I caught my foot in some bracken, and fell over, grazing my shin through my trousers. I watched a spot of blood seep through the fabric, and remembered reading once how bracken drips cyanide on anything growing underneath, and persuaded myself I could feel its poison in my blood. My ankle had been violently twisted, and began to throb so insistently it was as if my heart had been relocated there. Eventually the road began to narrow in front of me into little more than a dusty track. There were no cars anymore: I could hear nothing but the wind in the branches, and sometimes the hum of crickets in the long dry grass on the verge. The forest closed around me and I felt myself to be the only thing of blood and bones for miles around. Then suddenly the trees began to thin out, and the patches of shade on the path diminished, until I realised I’d left the forest behind and was standing at the edge of a dying lawn that reached ahead of me for a hundred yards or so, sloping slightly upward to a house in the distance.

How can I explain the impression it had on me, to see it high up on the incline, the sun blazing from its windows and the arrow of its weathervane? Everything about it was bright and hard-edged, its walls so white my eyes flinched to see it, the slate tiles more blue than grey, the door of a green so vivid it made the parched grass look more threadbare than ever. I have it memorised already, and if I close my eyes I can see it now from between its walls: it has two wings that recede from a central three-storied portion with the weathervane at its peak. In each of the wings there are eight windows, four set above four, the glass divided into small uneven panes so that the sun glitters from them as it would from a faceted stone. There's a rose window set above the door, its glass stained in the pattern of a peacock’s tail and missing several panes. A broad flight of steps leads between two pairs of slender columns; the columns are white, and so are the steps, as if no-one’s ever gone inside.

It seemed to me the most real and solid thing I’d ever seen, and at the same time far too bright, like a child’s drawing coloured with crayons. It wasn’t inviting exactly, but even if I hadn’t needed help I’d have gone on walking all the same. I felt like Bunyan’s pilgrim finding the Palace Beautiful, only I still had that burden of heat on my back. As I got nearer it all became realer and less like a dream or invention – I could see stains where ivy had been pulled from the walls, and unmatched curtains hanging in the windows. Someone had left a book open on the lawn, its spine broken and the cover torn. The garden must have been neglected for much longer than these last few weeks, and near the windows rose-bushes in their semi-circle beds had withered back to stumps. A ginger cat with thin haunches and weeping eyes was stretched out in the shade between them, panting in the sun. The door wasn’t freshly painted after all, but peeling and blistered, and as I stood at the foot of the stairs, tucking in my shirt and wishing I didn’t smell of stale sweat, I could see a door-knocker shaped like a man’s hand ready to rap against an iron plate.

I was steadying myself against a broken stone bench beside the flight of white steps leading up to the entrance – I was anxious about asking help from strangers, and could feel the swollen flesh of my ankle straining against my shoe – when the door was pulled open, making the iron hand rattle so loudly it made my ears ring. Before I could shield my eyes to see who was there, I heard a child’s voice calling. At first I thought they were talking to someone behind me, who'd been following me unnoticed all the time, but when I looked over my shoulder no-one was there. The child laughed and then called again, and when I heard the name I knew I recognised it from years before. Then suddenly I realised it was my own, coming from somewhere up ahead, and the shock made me stop suddenly with my foot on the lower step. I thought: it’s only the heat, and the ringing in your ears, no-one knows you’re here, and started to laugh at my foolishness.

The child’s voice came nearer and nearer, and though the white light of the sun made me blind I could make out the figure of a girl, older than I'd first thought, running down the steps towards me with her hands outstretched: “John Cole! Is that you? It *is* you, isn’t it: it must be, I’m so glad. I’ve been waiting all day, you know: all day! I thought you’d be early but you’re here now, aren’t you?” I don’t know if those are exactly the words she used, only that it was certainly my name and that she’d been waiting for me. While I was still trying to take it in and find ways to explain there’d been a mistake, the girl reached the bottom step and was standing beside me. She said, “Do you know where to go? I’ll take you in, I’ll show you,” then put her arm through mine and started leading me towards the door. By then all I cared about was finding shade – I thought if I could just sit down and rest my ankle until it stopped aching, everything would be all right – and at the top of the steps, behind the open door, I could see an entrance hall that was dark and cool. The girl went on talking - about how they’d been looking forward to meeting me, and how late I was, and how glad she was to see me at last - all the while leading me into a stone-flagged hall so cold I began to shiver as soon as the door shut behind me.

If I’d thought the sun was blinding it was nothing compared to being suddenly in an unlit corridor. For a moment I thought I’d lost my sight, and if she hadn’t kept her arm through mine I might have snatched my arm from hers and sat on the floor with my hands over my eyes until everything ordinary and unsurprising came back to me. She must have noticed I felt ill, because she started talking to me as if I were an old man, which I suppose I am to her. She said, “It’s all right, we’re nearly there,” as if these were things she’d heard were said to elderly people and thought they would do all right for me; and all the time I was saying “Please don’t trouble yourself, there’s nothing wrong: I’m all right”, and neither of us listened to the other.

At the end of the dark hall we went down a step dipped in the centre (I remember that very clearly, and thinking how often people must have gone in and out to wear down the stone) and into a large kitchen with a vaulted ceiling. I just had time to register a dozen meat hooks hanging from their chains when she dragged out a stool for me and I nearly fell onto it. I’ve never fainted before, so I can’t tell if that’s what happened to me then. All I remember is that the beating in my ankle stopped like a clock wound down, and the pain in my head vanished leaving in its place emptiness and release, as if my head had detached itself and was drifting away. Then I remember opening my eyes and thinking how gritty they were, as if they’d been left on a windowsill to dry, and seeing the girl sitting opposite me, her palms resting on the table between us.

She was frowning, and examining me with unworried interest. Then she asked if I wanted some water, and without waiting for a reply went over to a stone sink. I saw then how mistaken I’d been: she wasn’t a child after all, although she talked like one, rattling on in a light high voice without pausing to breathe or think. She was fairly tall, and her arms and legs were lean but also soft-looking, in the way of a child. She was wearing a white T-shirt with a torn pocket on the breast. Her feet were bare and not very clean, and her face was finely-made, as though it couldn’t possibly have grown out of a muddle of flesh, but must have been carved in stone. When she came back to the table she passed me tepid water in a chipped mug and I saw that her hair was the colour of amber, and so were her eyes, and her lips were almost as pale as the skin on her cheeks. It was lovely, but also eerie, as if nothing about her was real.

She told me to drink up, although the country water tasted disgusting to me, without the clean tang of chlorine. The she said, “I know what! Let’s have a cup of tea!” and started to run the tap. The sound of the water in the stone sink reminded me why I’d come, and I started to try and explain, but of course she wasn’t listening. She said, “I’ve got to look after you, you see. They said: make sure he’s got everything he needs, and I said: I *can* do it you know, I’m not *stupid*.” I still felt light-headed and could hear bells ringing in my ears, and I thought, she can’t possibly be saying all this, not really, which was a comforting thought. The cat I’d seen outside appeared suddenly on the table in front of me, moving its tail like a hypnotist’s watch, and I sat following its swing. The table was scored with knife-cuts and scorched with hot pans, and someone had scratched into the wood the words NOT THIS TIME.

The girl said, “Do you want milk and sugar? I always have both. Everything’s ready for you, anyway. All your things are there. I got your room ready myself. They told me off because I wanted flowers for you and I picked the last ones left in the garden but I think you’ll like them. It’s much better to have them indoors, where someone will see them. That’s what I think.”

She picked up a box of matches to light the gas stove, striking too hard so the first few broke and dropped half-lit to the floor, and I could smell sulphur. The cat’s tail halted its swing, and it looked at me as though I’d just arrived, then flattened its ragged ears and bolted. The girl at the stove and the glass of water in my hand, and the meat-hooks rattling on their chains under the vaulted roof, suddenly struck me as being so absurd that I started laughing. I tried to swallow the laughter down but couldn’t: it stuck in my throat and came bursting up again, so that when the girl turned from the stove to face me she must have thought I was crying, because she dropped the matches into the sink and ran over, and patted my shoulder awkwardly saying, “Oh dear, oh dear, there’s no need for that,” which only made me laugh harder. Then she said fretfully, “And I promised them I’d look after you, didn’t I?” and started wringing her hands.

The laughter made the pain in my head so fierce that the kitchen and the girl’s face were obscured by bright specks of light. I stopped suddenly and put my hand over my eyes and said carefully, “It’s just that my head hurts, you see, and my ankle, and I know it’s impossible but honestly I think I might break in pieces - ” I began to feel cold and wet, and my heart began beating in fits and starts. I never think much about my health; but at my age, it’s the heart that’s the worry. I remembered my mother telling me how my father's had given out as he ran for the morning train, and I clapped my hand to my chest as if I’d be able to force it back into its proper rhythm. I said much too loudly, “After all I only wanted water for the car...” When I tried to stand up the ringing in my ears grew more persistent but also further away, as if it came from another room. The girl ran to my side and thrust herself under my arm and said, “I think I’d better take you upstairs, don’t you?” I remember looking down at the top of her head and seeing her amber hair ringed with brightness where the lights in the ceiling struck it. It was so like a painted halo that it set me off laughing again, stopping me from speaking and saying she was mistaken, and that someone else must be on their way, perhaps was there already on the doorstep, waiting for her to come and fetch them in.

Instead I let her lead me out of the kitchen and up a flight of stairs, all the while saying things like “That’s right, now another one – careful: lean on me,” as if I were a very old man. We came to a long corridor carpeted with thinning rugs, and it seemed to me that we passed a dozen doors before she paused at one and kicked it open saying, “Here we are now, *there* you are: you can have a sleep.” She pushed me into the room and closed the door behind me as if she were glad to have finally finished the task she’d been given, and I heard her lightly running away down the hall.

I stood swaying on the threshold and saw in front of me a narrow bed with a peeling white iron frame and a patchwork bedspread, an empty bookshelf, and a pair of long casement windows that tapered to a point. In a corner of the room a narrow white door stood half-open, and I could see through to a bathroom tiled in blue. From a plain oak frame propped in the corner a painted Puritan with a square white collar eyed me over his Bible, and beside him there was a wooden desk and chair. In a jug on a stool beside the bed a few flowers had used up their water and slumped on their stems, and as I watched one fell with a dry rustle to the floor. At the foot of the bed, untidily piled as if they’d been left in a hurry, was a jumble of boxes and cases, some sealed with brown tape, and with a large white label on each. The white labels all bore the same name - and the name was mine.

I don’t know what I did then – I only remember seeing my name over and over, and putting my thumbs to the pain in my eye-sockets to try and push it away – but I must have collapsed onto the narrow bed and fallen asleep almost before my head reached the pillow.

I don’t know how long I slept. I was woken by more of that insistent ringing in my ears, but as I listened it became more and more distant until I realised it was coming from downstairs, in one of the rooms I hadn’t yet seen. It was like the ringing of a bell, tolling the same note, growing louder then fading until I couldn’t hear it any more. Then the single note became a peal and eventually a melody I think I recognised, and I knew it wasn’t a bell after all but a piano, expertly and patiently played. I stood, feeling the blood drain from head and into my fingertips, then went over to the windows to see where I was. Immediately below me I saw a stone terrace, bordered by more of those dying roses, although someone must have been watering these and a few parchment-coloured flowers clung on. Around the edge of the terrace was a stone balustrade with pieces missing, so that the barrier to the lawn was broken. In the middle of the terrace I could see a sundial on a stone column, but when I leant closer to try and tell the time I could see the gnomon was askew, and it managed to tell two times at once and neither of them correct. Some distance from the terrace, built against the wall of the house like an afterthought, there’s a ramshackle kind of glasshouse. From its foundations to about the height of a man’s waist the walls are red brick, and from there up panes of glass are set in peeling white frames. I had a clear view of the roof, which is made of oval glass tiles that overlap like the scales of a fish, and thought I saw someone moving inside.

This room must look over the land at the back of the house, because I couldn't see the forest or the path I'd taken. Past the terrace and the glasshouse the dry lawn slopes downward for a hundred yards or so, and becomes a stretch of untidy land where brambles and nettles have taken over. Beyond there (and I’ve never seen anything like it before) I could see a steep embankment wall rising to perhaps fifteen feet. Though all around it the lawn is parched and dry, the grass on the embankment is vivid green as though it’s found a source of water it’s too selfish to share. You could scramble up it, if you tried, although I don’t know what could be on the other side. On the right, almost out of view, I could make out a folly of building: a little red-brick tower with an arched wooden door, and a yellow light high up on a crenellated roof. It’s this light that reaches me here, as bright as if someone were standing just behind my shoulder, shining their torch on the page. It looked so out of place I half expected to see a pair of knights-at-arms come tumbling out, with the yellow light shining from the blades of their lances.

While I stood at the window, wondering how far I’d strayed from my path and how long I would have to walk in the dark before I found my car, and how painful that walk would be, someone knocked on my bedroom door. I jumped as though guilty of something, and looked down at the terrace outside, wondering if I could climb down and slip quietly back to my own life where I go unnoticed and am left in peace. But the knock came again, and then the young woman who’d brought me upstairs put her head slowly around the door. She had put up her hair and it left her face and neck white and bare, and the effect of it, seeming to float in the dark space behind the door, was so lovely and strange it stopped me from speaking. She smiled at me and said, “Oh good, I’m glad you’re awake. Dinner’s ready. Are you better now? You look better. Come down then, I’ll save you a seat. Everyone’s waiting.”

It’s thirty years since I conquered my stammer by pretending I'd first written down what it was I wanted to say, but it came back then, taking hold of my tongue so that none of the words I had ready (something like: You’ve been so kind, but really I think there’s been a mistake…) came out. While I stood stupidly mouthing at the air the girl in the doorway flung up her hand and reared away, because downstairs someone was calling her. She rolled her eyes at me and said, “I’d better go. I’ll see you down there. You know where the kitchen is, right?” Then she slammed the door and I was left alone again.

I can’t remember the last time I was angry. I can't help thinking it's a weakness, and one I despise and pity in others. But the confusion and aimlessness that had dogged me since the day before all vanished, and were replaced by a very single burst of fury. Here at last was a moment of perfect clarity: I must be the butt of an unkind joke. I began to imagine conspirators laughing at me somewhere, maybe even downstairs; my brother pouring them all wine, and perhaps even that woman I’d seen with hair the colour of wheat, who’d seen me sitting in the gutter and pitied me for being there.

Then I remembered the boxes, with my name on each, and the anger gave way to unease: my memory had been failing me lately – was there some other plan I had forgotten? Did they know me, after all? It was impossible, surely - I kicked the box nearest me, which burst its cardboard seam. A book fell out. It had a bright paper cover and seemed to be an account of the war in Iraq by an anonymous soldier, who was pictured grinning through the dense mask of a balaclava. At the sight of it I felt the unease begin to slip away – the name on the boxes might be mine, but the books inside certainly weren’t. I threw it at the painting of the Puritan, who raised an eyebrow and shifted the bible a little, but refused to look my way. Then of course I felt more foolish than ever, and knelt beside the box to see if I could put it together again. The crooked white label was lit by a thin beam of lowering sunlight, and I suddenly saw it wasn’t my name written there at all, but someone else’s. Jon Coules, it said, in the thick smeared ink of a felt-tipped pen, repeated over all the other boxes tumbled at the end of the bed. At the sight of it everything that had been puzzling and perturbing vanished, and the world settled around me: I felt as though I might be coming off a long sea-trip to stand on solid ground. I wasn’t supposed to be here, of course I wasn’t: no-one expected or wanted me, and there was no reason to stay. I began to laugh, and said to the Puritan, “Jon Coules, you see? Well how *stupid* – it’s not my name at all: how could it have been!”

So I tried to smooth my hair, and undid my tie and knotted it again, and tucked in my shirt, and went downstairs. Though my ankle hardly ached at all, I remember clinging onto the banister and treading lightly as a thief. Then I remembered to take courage, that there was nothing strange here at all, and ran down the last few steps not caring that the sound rang all along the empty corridor behind me.

The notes from the piano had stopped, and I could hear voices muddling in the easy way of people who’ve spoken so often they don’t need manners anymore. There was the sound of cutlery thrown down, plates passed from hand to hand and bottles knocking against the rim of wineglasses. Now and then someone laughed, a high girlish sound that wasn’t quite sincere, the sort that’s meant to please the teller of a tale. I followed the sound towards the darker end of the hall, to the third or fourth door along, which was open a little and through which spilled out light and the scent of cooked meat. I could smell along with the meat my own sweat, and I knew I looked dishevelled and foolish, with stains on my clothes from where I'd fallen in the bracken. But I thought I'd despise myself if I turned and left like a coward, without saying goodbye to the girl or explaining her mistake, so I drew in a breath that did nothing to settle my stomach, and pushed open the door.

Seated at irregular intervals around a long polished table five people went on talking and eating as though they hadn’t seen me come in. The table reflected the blue-grey paper on the walls, and the dim lights in the ceiling and the lamps on the sideboard were shaded in blue glass: it looked like they were dining underwater. Behind the table a pair of long uncurtained glass doors, blurred with the heat of their bodies, were open onto the terrace I’d seen from my window, and I could just make out the slanting iron blade on the sundial, and past that the yellow light on the folly at the garden’s end. The biggest moth I’d ever seen beat its wings against the brightest lamp, and set huge soft shadows moving all around the walls. A very large painting, the colours darkened and cracked into pieces, showed a man with a clever shy face and a long beard. He was sitting at a table holding a steel ruler and a pair of compasses so large they might have been a weapon, and another moth had settled on his painted hand. At the head of the table a man rather older than me sat in a oak chair like a bishop’s throne. A branched candlestick stuck up from the high back of the chair, and someone had only just blown out the candles, so that his head was wreathed in bluish smoke. He didn’t seem to notice, but sat staring at his plate and drumming his fingers on the table. He too had a long beard, and looked so like the painting on the wall that I kept looking from one to the other and wouldn’t have been surprised to see either of them turn to me and speak.

The chairs on either side of him were empty, and to his left the girl who’d welcomed me in sat spreading butter thickly on a roll. The roll was hot, and melted butter ran into the crook of her elbow. She didn’t notice, or didn’t care, but went on chatting in the amiable inconsequential way I recognised as fondly as if I knew it well. Another woman sat at the foot of the table with her back to me. She had thick grey hair skewered to the top of her head with a broken pencil. On the right of the man in the bishop’s chair a tall thin boy in denim dungarees, with black curly hair so glossy it picked up the blue light of the lamps, sat turned away from me. I remember thinking how fragile and white his neck looked, with the bone at the top of his spine casting a blue shadow. He was listening attentively to a man who leant back in his chair with an indolence I immediately disliked. The man wore a white shirt unbuttoned at the neck, and he was inspecting the nails on his left hand and murmuring quietly. The table was covered in far more food than they could possibly have needed, on chipped platters showing blurred flowers like old stains, and there were several open bottles of wine.

Standing with my hand on the door I waited for someone to see me standing there, and the wait went on and on until I couldn’t bear it anymore and shoved the door so it knocked against an empty chair. Immediately they all fell silent: a knife was dropped and hastily snatched up, and even the moth paused mid-flight and turned to look at me. Then the girl with the amber hair stood up and said, “Look, it’s John! Look everyone, he’s here!” She dashed round the table, took my hand, and pulled me further into the room. And I couldn’t resist, of course: she smiled up at me as if she’d been waiting all day to have me there, as though I were something she wanted to show off. “I *told* you I’d look after him didn’t I,” she said: “Well I did, and here he is.”

I think I said “Hello,” or “Good evening,” but before I could pull my arm away and begin to explain the grey-haired woman with her back to me stood and turned to face me. She was very tall, so that her eyes were almost level with mine, and she came towards me with her arms outstretched. I found my own hands going up to meet hers, not from any impulse of my own but as if she compelled them to her. She held onto me and said, “Dear John, how glad I am to see you at last. How pale you are! Did Clare look after you? I feel sure she must have done. We’ve all been looking forward to seeing you so much. Well: I’m Hester, of course.”

I said, “Of course,” because I was trying to take in the names, and also because her appearance startled me. Her eyes were black and fiercely lit, so that I couldn’t tell where the iris ended and the pupil began. It was like being put under a magnifying glass and inspected for flaws or virtues, and it made me flush more than ever. It wasn’t this that startled me, but how unfit those clear fine eyes were to the rest of her. I never think much about appearances, my own or anyone else’s, and I don’t think I’d ever thought of someone as ugly before. But for her it’s the only word that will do: everything about her seems poorly assembled, as though she’s been put together from leftover pieces. Her eyes are set under a deeply lined forehead, her nose is crooked like a child’s drawing of a witch, and her skin is thick and coarse. It looked to me as if she must have stolen her wonderful eyes from someone else. I didn’t notice her body then, but remember it now, her heaviness as she sat passing wine or getting up to look out of the glass doors: she’s padded everywhere with flesh so there’s no distinction between her shoulders or waist, and she wore a dark blue dress that covered her from her neck to her knees. Her ankles were swollen in the heat and she wore ugly leather sandals.

I went on saying “Of course, of course,” letting her hold my hands, while she looked at me as though she knew what I was thinking and wasn't hurt, but found it amusing. Then she dropped my hands, pushed me towards a chair, and gesturing around the table said, “Clare you know of course. Clare darling: you’re covered in butter. This is Elijah” – the man in the high-backed chair nodded gravely and went on tapping the table – “Have you met Walker? No? Walker, pour our guest a glass of wine. White, I think, John?” I nodded. The grey-haired man leant forward rather slowly, and passed me a glass that was much too full. He gave me a disinterested look, shrugged faintly, and turned back to the boy beside him. Hester flung out her hand towards the boy and said, “Eve, my darling, remember your manners.” Then she leant and whispered to me, “I do what I can with them all, but really …” I took several gulps of wine, and saw the black-haired boy turn reluctantly from the man beside him and look at me. I spilt my wine, which was so cold on my shirt I shivered: it wasn’t a boy at all, but a young woman who must have cut her own hair in a fit of rage or boredom, because it stood out from her head in irregular curls, some of them clinging to the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

She stood up, and reached across the table to shake my hand. Hers was as small as a child’s, and like a child her nails were dirty. She was very slender, and I could see how fine and sharp her bones were, with their delicate covering of white skin that pulsed at the base of her throat. She said, “You must be hungry, John. Do sit, won’t you? Don’t let them frighten you. They will, you know. If they can.” I’ve never heard a voice like hers: it moved as though she were on the verge of singing. The man next to her concealed a smile, and then struck a match on the table’s edge and lit a cigarette.

I think I said that yes, I was hungry; then straightened my shoulders, raised my voice, and prepared to explain their mistake. But from all sides hands appeared, passing me a plate piled with roast lamb and sliced tomatoes, and more wine, and torn pieces of bread that burnt my fingers, and the old stammer kept me quiet. The girl who'd found me kept smiling up at me as if I were a particular friend of hers that no-one had believed would come, and I couldn't think how to get out of it without making her look foolish. In the end I found myself saying *Thank you, Thank you*, over and over again. I felt as if I’d tried to cross a small stream, confident of reaching the bank in a stride or two, and suddenly found myself in a strong current, borne out to sea. And besides all that, how do you refuse kindness?

All night I sat watching them pass food and wine and words back and forth between them as deftly as a dance no-one bothered to teach me. Sometimes they spoke to me, saying “Isn’t it better now, without the sun, and wouldn’t you be glad if it never rose again?” or “The salt John, would you mind?”, and then seem to forget I was there. I remember it all in fragments: the black-haired young woman taking her companion’s cigarette and drawing so deeply her eyes ran, but refusing to cough; amber-haired Clare leaning her head on Hester’s round shoulder, instantly sleeping; the tap-tap-tap of the older man’s fingers on the chair. Then I began to notice a sort of watchfulness, as though they were waiting for something to happen. Now and then the older woman looked up to the glass doors and then down at her plate with a frown. Once she saw me catch her in an anxious glance and I believe she looked for a fraction of a second guilty, before passing me meat that had grown cold.

A little later, as I was almost asleep and beginning to think with relief that I was dreaming, somebody else came in. I was so drowsy with wine and heat that when I heard them all cry out at once I started, and knocked over an empty bottle. I could hear them all saying “There you are” and “About time!” and “I’ve saved you a seat … no don’t go there, sit here: sit with me.” I looked up and saw a young man of about twenty-five coming in through the glass doors. His hair and his clothes were wet, and he had grazed the knuckles of his left hand. It was immediately clear, from the colour of his hair and eyes, that he was the brother of the girl who'd welcomed me in. He looked jubilant, and said, “You know, I think it might be all right, after all. I went right out, and couldn’t see anything. Maybe I’ve been wrong all this time – what d’you think?” He stooped over his sister, his bright head touching hers, and taking her plate began to finish off her meal, talking between mouthfuls in bursts I couldn’t quite hear, about a water level somewhere falling and then, I think, something about house-martins making their nests. Then the girl whispered into his ear, and gulping down a piece of bread he wiped his hand on his shirt and thrust it towards me. “Oh - didn’t see you there – how glad I am to see you at last! Only – I hope it’s not too much for you – being shut in here, with us all?” He gestured around the table and they all laughed, affectionately but also too loudly, as though they were indulging a child. I said that no, of course it wasn’t too much, and wondered why it was they all seemed to be straining towards him across the table, sometimes reaching out to touch him on the shoulder, or brush dust from his sleeve. Once the older woman came to crouch by his side, curling her hands around the table edge to steady herself and saying: “Whatever was it you were doing last night? I heard you banging downstairs as though you were breaking all the furniture - I almost called the police!” At that he looked up, baffled, as though she must have been talking to someone else, but she shrugged and squeezed his shoulder and said, “Ah well: no harm done.” For a few moments he was silent and troubled; then he shook his head violently as though to clear it, and smiling asked if there was more to eat.

So it went on, I don’t know for how much longer, while I sat as dumb as if I’d never learned to speak a word. Sometimes I pressed my ankle to the wooden leg of my chair to raise the dull ache into a lucid pain that roused me from my reverie: once I pressed too hard and moaned without meaning to, and the black-haired girl caught my eye and pushed a bottle of wine my way. When all the wine was gone they drifted out into the garden, as though they were drawn down towards the yellow light at the end. Only the older man stayed, sometimes turning to look through the glass doors to the terrace, where the young man stood with his arm around his sister’s shoulders. I remember thinking he looked strained and anxious, as though he wanted to go out into the cooler air but had been told it was not allowed. The drink had made me slow, stupid, not alert enough to question what I was doing, or how it had come to this; I might have stayed all night at the threshold of the garden watching and listening, if a phone had not begun to ring just the other side of the door. Elijah seemed not to hear it, nor the others in the garden: it went on and on, the shrill unpleasant noise of one of those old-fashioned phones that were only ever used for bad news.

The sound of it brought on my headache again, and broke through the indolence that had settled on me with the heat and the wine. I got up and followed the sound to a low table at the foot of the stairs and stood looking down at the black receiver and coiled cable, waiting to see if Hester would come running. Then it stopped, and the silence afterwards was so complete I heard the cat purring in another room. I sat on the bottom step to ease my aching foot, and looked ahead at the front door. The key was in the lock and on the other side was the road home, and no-one would see me leave. I began pulling myself to my feet – I was foolish to stay as long as I had: little better than a liar and a thief, when you thought about it, taking their food and their kindness - then I realised that of course I was drunk – my head ached, my legs were slow and heavy. I could no more drive home than run there. I reeled back against the stairs and sat too heavily, jarring my spine against the step. Then the phone began to ring again, and with a sort of reflex action that had nothing to do with me I snatched it up and said, “Hello?” When I realised what I’d done, I was so appalled I nearly dropped the receiver back in its cradle, but at the other end someone was shouting. It was a bad line, from a mobile phone or a call-box, and I could hear traffic and noisy passers-by. A man’s voice said, “Hello? Hello? Is anybody there? Hester, is that you?”

“No”, I said: “No, she isn’t here.” And then, because for my own sake I wanted to hear my name out loud, I said, “It’s John Cole.”

The other man couldn’t hear me, only went on shouting against the passing cars: “Hello? Is anybody there? Hester – is that you?”

“No”, I said: “No, she isn’t here.” My voice when I heard it was brisk and impatient as I imagine a secretary’s might be. Then he swore and said, “Well take a message can’t you?” I said that I would, of course, and he said: “Tell her it’s Mr Coules here, Mr Jonathan Coules, and I’m delayed: I’ll be a week at least – ” The line buzzed and broke, and when his voice returned to my ear it was clear he had given some explanation that I only caught at the end: “ – couldn’t be helped, though nothing to do with me: none of my business, really. Well have you got that – have you got it? A week, and I’ll be with you,” and he hung up.

While I write this I imagine that perhaps I might have a reader, one who doesn’t know me, who doesn’t believe a word I’ve written here, or – and would this be worse? – believes me, but finds me too dull, my handwriting too cramped, to read any further. Well - if you’re there, perhaps holding this page nearer the light to see more clearly, wishing I had told you more, hoping I might do better on the next page, or the next - I want to make you understand that what I did next wasn’t a plan. I didn’t do it out of malice or mischief. Do you believe me? Can you believe it could have been an impulse that was nothing to do with me, that I didn’t know was coming, or I would have done everything I could do avoid it?

When I looked up from where I sat, Hester was standing in front of me. Her dark blue dress was black and damp under the arms and in an irregular patch at the base of her throat; her hair had come loose in greasy coils that seemed to have an animation all of their own; and her broad ugly face was oily with sweat. But in the dark hall her black eyes glowed, and she stooped and put her hand on the crown of my head where the hair is thin, and I could feel how hot and gentle her palm felt against my skin. Then she said, “You must be terribly tired.” She said it so kindly, and so certainly, that I realised at once how many years it had been since anyone had noticed whether I was tired or not. Then she said, “Go up now, go on. Go up before the others come in. Sleep as long as you can. Nothing will happen here tonight or tomorrow, nothing ever does: you can sleep just as long as you like.” I was tired, and probably drunk; but I honestly believe I was going to tell her, quietly and away from all the others, what a mistake there’d been. But then she glanced down at the telephone and said, “Did I hear that earlier? Did you answer it, my dear? How rude of me: you didn’t come here to be my secretary, after all!” She laughed, and so did I. Then she said, “Was there any message?” and began wearily pinning back her hair.

How many times have I read of those moments when minutes accommodate years, and lives are recalled in the time it takes to pour a drink? I have never believed a word of it, but in the space it took me to draw a breath, the events of the day replayed themselves with absolute clarity. I saw the branches of the pines closing over my head, and the path narrowing as it reached the dying lawn, and the face of the young woman with the amber hair, wonderfully made and stooping over me as I sat at the table. And all the while I remembered also the last I’d seen of my flat, with its empty windows overlooking the empty street, and the shop's clock ticking slower than any other clock I've known.

Then I heard myself say, as if it was someone else’s voice in another room: “Oh it’s nothing, just a wrong number,” and without meeting her eyes I came upstairs.

**THURSDAY**

**I**

John was woken by ringing that came not from the piano in a room he’d not yet seen, but from a newly hollow place inside his skull. He could see, through the pink net of veins in his lowered lids, the sun filling the room to its corners, and began to raise himself on his elbows. Pain surged from the back of his neck to his forehead then receded in a sickening wave. Gripping his head to prevent it toppling to the floor, he sat cross-legged on the damp sheets, carefully counting air in and out of his lungs and swallowing down bile. His bladder was painfully full, and when he was sure he could stand without vomiting he crossed the room to the small bathroom. He sat to relieve himself, wondering what poison had been slipped into the glasses of wine they’d passed him, and how long it would be before he was sick, and whether afterwards he'd be himself again. The little room was surprisingly chill: he shivered, and saw gooseflesh break out on his knees, but in time the chill settled his stomach, and he sat there a long while fixing his eyes on the sink, willing the world to shrink to the proportions of the blue bar of soap in its cracked clay dish.

A little while later, with nausea stirring his stomach, he stood half-dressed at the window, flexing his ankle to test its tenderness. It was another day without any sign of rain, and another morning without birdsong. In the clear early light the garden below looked diminished and ordinary, the folly at the end a prop for an abandoned play and the glasshouse stained and shabby. The windows were thickly glazed in uneven panes that threw back a mottled reflection nothing like the neat-edged image he saw in his own mirror every morning. The face was white and too lean, the hair too long, and under heavy lids glossed with sweat the pale eyes glittered. He raised his right hand, uncertain whether the other man would raise his left in the proper greeting. “Whatever came over you?” he said. “What in God’s name have you done?” The watching man had no reply, and John returned to the edge of the bed, cradling his aching head in his hands: what *had* he done, after all? Nothing brave or impassioned, not the brief lapse into madness to be expected of a man arriving suddenly in middle age, but an abuse of kindness and trust: he’d been welcomed and cared for – he touched the place where the woman had put a kind hand – and in return he’d played a childish trick.

He would have laughed, but he ached to the soles of his feet and thought the sound might dismantle him piece by piece. Well: in the sober light of morning, away from the gaze of a dozen eyes, there was no difficulty in slipping downstairs and making his way through the forest to his car (he imagined it sinking already into the dense verge, its windows curtained with an overnight fall of pine-needles, the tyres sagging and empty), back on the road to his brother, or to his ordinary ordered life. How could it have seemed so impossible, the night before, as though the wine and the hot bread and the smell of candle-smoke had been a drug? “Just as though they had been mild-eyed melancholy lotus-eaters”, he muttered to the Puritan in the corner, who had no sympathy to spare for a man suffering a hangover, and shook a disapproving finger.

He thought it must be early still, though he’d lost his watch somewhere along the way, and outside on the terrace the sundial was lying. He pressed an ear to the door, but the house was silent: his heart quickened - here was his best chance of leaving, decently and with no questions asked. Moving swiftly around the room, he pulled sheets taut, shook out the pillows, and smoothed the patchwork quilt, murmuring *who’s been sleeping in my bed?* as if it might diminish the significance of what he had done. In their jug beside the bed the daisies had shed their flowers; he collected them from the floor, and arranged them in a circle on the table, looping the jug that had held them (the amber-haired girl would like that, he thought - Clare, had that been her name? - and for a moment regretted he’d never thanked her for her misplaced kindness). Then he lifted the lid of the child’s desk and took out the notebook from where he’d hidden it underneath a pile of yellowed newspapers. He flicked through the pages, running his finger with surprise over the lines of neat blue handwriting – had he written all that, by the yellow light above the tower? He supposed he must have done, and remembered with sudden clarity the black-haired woman turning to face him, and sensation of cold wine seeping through his shirt.

He closed the notebook, returned the little wooden chair to its cubby-hole beneath the desk, and turned to look once more behind him. Already the curtains hanging unmoving over the windows, the paint peeling from the white iron bed-frame, the Puritan in his oak frame, seemed as familiar as though he had stayed here once when he was young, and only just remembered. He shook his head, tempted again to laugh at his own folly: how easy it would be to persuade himself that he had some small slot in the house into which he might make himself permanently fit. But he had no right to any of it, not the narrow bed or a place at the table, or the frank smile of the girl with the amber eyes. Setting his shoulders, he gripped the rolled-up notebook in his left hand and the door-knob in his right, and quietly opened the door.

Barring his way as certainly as any gate, the girl herself stood in the dark hall, turning away from him towards the head of the staircase where sunlight streamed between the banisters and hurled its banners on the wall. She wore a man’s white shirt which reached almost to her knees, and her bare feet, set lightly on the narrow strip of carpet as if she were ready to run at a moment’s notice, were stained with dust. She had been playing with bindweed, and twisted a few stems around her neck: the sight of them irritated John, who suspected it had been done for an effect which he refused to feel. When she heard the door open she turned to face him and the flowers turned too, regarding him with their white eyes open. “John…” – she whispered, but as a child might, so that it carried along the hall and would have woken anyone still sleeping – “John, Eve says we need you and will you come *now* please.” She shifted from foot to foot. “She says she needs you or needs someone and you’ll do.”

“Won’t they die, out of water?” John discovered that he was reaching out to touch the flowers at her neck, and in horror let his hand fall. “Needs *me*? But – ”

The girl tugged crossly at the bindweed as if someone else had put it there. “Yes: but there isn’t anyone else is there? They’ve gone out for a while, and she said you’ll do, and that you’d know.”

The nausea which had begun to recede struck him again so forcibly that he leant against the doorframe for a moment, and pressed his forehead to the cool white-painted wood. *What now*, he thought, helpless against the nausea, and against the plea which creased her face with anxiety: what ought he to know – who had that other John been, who ought to be standing where he now stood? And then, alongside the confusion, he felt a needling of resentment: oh, he would *do*, then, ever the last resort. He imagined her saying it, that black-haired laddish girl downstairs in whose eyes and voice he thought he’d detected mockery the night before, and in the end it was resentment and not the plea for help that roused him. Squaring his shoulders, and breathing hard to suppress the gorge rising sourly in his throat, he said: “Where shall I go then? What shall I do?”

She grinned in relief or surprise, and by way of answer dashed away from him and swung herself down the first step or two, calling over her shoulder “Well, this way then, and hurry,” as if it had been only the beginnings of a game. He moved after her, then remembering that he still held the notebook hastily returned it to the drawer in the child’s desk, regretting that after all he could not take it with him, and must instead try and remember what had happened the night before.

Then he took the stairs cautiously, a little afraid his ankle would weaken without warning and send him tumbling to the lower step where he’d sat feeling the kind weight of Hester’s palm, and in return had lied. He could see over the banisters to the stone-flagged floor of the hall, which overnight had taken on the familiarity of a place to which he had returned often over the years, so that he could almost persuade himself the polish on the wooden rail he held had been stripped by his own hand. When he reached the last stair he turned to look behind, and caught the flash of the girl’s bare heels as she ran out into the garden through the narrow door at the furthest end of the hall. It hung open a while on tired hinges, showing a stretch of parched lawn and a glimpse of the high mossy wall he’d first seen from the road, then slammed shut as though tugged from the other side. The sound startled John, and startled also someone who had been there all along, concealed by the shadow cast by the front door: there was a gasp, swiftly suppressed into a kind of low cry, not quite of fear but of something more like denial.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the hall’s dim air, he saw the young man who’d come in late the night before crouching against the door and resting his head on his forearms. He looked diminished, as though overnight he’d lost half his height and strength, and when he raised his head his eyes were rimmed with shadow. Beside him stood Eve, stooping to rest a hand on his shoulder, her arm showing white against the dark fabric of his shirt. Neither acknowledged John, but talked instead in low urgent murmurs, the young man gesturing towards the door, as though he’d seen something slip out or come in.

John thought briefly of the notebook hidden upstairs, and of his painstaking record of the night before: he peered a little closer, the better to remember precisely the tilt of her head as she stooped over him; then, ashamed, moved towards the door at the further end where the other girl had gone. It occurred to him then that he could simply leave, unnoticed and unmissed – hadn’t that always been his way? – but he became aware that the low murmurs had stopped, and Eve had turned her face towards him. He’d remembered it being alive with restless merriment, her eyes narrowing with laughter or censure as she lifted them to the man at her side. That image seemed impossible against the one presented to him now: there was no laughter in her, nor could there have ever been. She nipped anxiously at her lower lip, and without speaking communicated a plea for help that conferred on him a responsibility and knowledge he neither felt nor understood. With a slight jerk of her head, she gestured towards the young man, who’d drawn himself up a little and was picking at a graze on his knuckles with all the concentration of a craftsman. The movement plainly conveyed that John should do something, and that he would instinctively know what it was: she raised a hand towards him in mute appeal then passed it wearily over her forehead, which gleamed with perspiration. Then she came towards him and putting her mouth close to his ear whispered: “Look, I’m sorry: it’s your first day, I know - only I have tried, and Hester will be gone a while now – won’t you have a word?” She drew away from him, and said, gruffly, and as though she knew she was overstepping a boundary: “You understand. Don’t you? Alex, he …I mean – *you* know…” She paused, and he felt a moment’s pleasure in seeing her disconcerted before the sensation of being entirely at a loss overwhelmed him. He began to protest, but the schoolboy stammer held his tongue, and before he could frame the words to keep them all at arm’s length Alex stood, with a quick fluid motion wholly at odds with his defeated posture a moment before.

“John! Aren’t I glad to see … Eve, look: it’s John - why didn’t you say!” He cuffed at his eyes, and it was as if the rough gesture dislodged the misery and weariness that had weighed him down. Patting at his clothes, which were dusty from where he had huddled against the door, he came towards them, first kissing Eve on the cheek (“You’re pale – what is it? Did you not sleep? I wish you wouldn’t *worry*…”) and then thumping John on the shoulder. “Yes, it’s good to have you here: we looked forward to it, didn’t we, Eve? We looked forward to you coming. They didn’t think you’d make it but I knew you would, and now look: here you are!” He said this triumphantly as if it were a trick he had pulled off for their benefit, and thumped John again, a little harder this time so that he lost his balance and transferred too great a burden onto his injured ankle. John let out a groan of pain, which the young man seemed not to hear: he patted at the wall behind them, where a strip of paper unfurled from the damp plaster, and said vaguely, “I think I might go and have a snooze.” He paused beside Eve, frowning as though he’d forgotten something, then slipped his hand into hers and said: “Yes, I think so,” and slipped behind them into a room which John had not yet seen. As he did so a small brown envelope fell from his hand or pocket to the floor, and grateful for an excuse to conceal his confusion John stooped to pick it up. When he straightened, Eve had not followed the young man, but instead stood with her arms folded, examining him as though he had just arrived. She held out her hand, beckoning twice with an index finger, and John passed her the envelope, noticing it had not been stamped. She folded it hurriedly, as if hoping she might reduce it to nothing, and pushed it into her own pocket. Then she said, smiling with too much brightness, as though effacing the past few minutes: “Shall we go? Clare has something to show you, I think.” Then, with an authority which was all the more irresistible because it sat so curiously on her, she indicated that he should follow her down the hall and out into the garden.

It was early still and there ought to have been dew on the grass, but already the hard-baked earth had stored up the morning’s sun and John felt it through the thin soles of his shoes. The forest pines huddled against the garden wall looked weary, and were shedding their needles to lighten their load. Ahead, an elm had been struck with disease so that half its branches were weighted with summer leaves, and the other half were bare and grey as if cursed with perpetual winter. In the shade of the elm, the girl who’d greeted him the day before knelt over a series of irregular white objects, and as he came nearer John saw they were a dozen small parcels wrapped in paper and tied with waxed string. She had arranged them in order of size, and had opened several of the smallest, scattering torn scraps of paper. When she saw them coming, she picked up a small clay doll with its makers thumbprint on its belly and an untidy woollen head, and made it wave a welcome: “John, come and look!”

“She found them in the attic, packed into a cardboard box,” said Eve, touching the young woman’s head with a fond gesture, but as if she were a child. “I don’t know whose they were, or when they were last opened: years ago or more, I imagine…” Then she dropped to her knees with a cry of delight, and snatched up a bundle of bamboo pipes set around a lacquered black dome. “What’s this doing here, with these old things – isn’t this mine? Didn’t I have it last year?” She examined it, frowning, then pushed the black dome beneath her lower lip, and blowing over the pipes produced, without giving it a thought, a line or two of Bach. So it was her, he thought, at the piano last night and this morning. He was disappointed, and would much rather it had been the older woman Hester, making something fine and beautiful with her ugly hands.

Clare set the clay doll down in the grass, and covered it with a sheet of tissue-paper, carefully leaving its upturned face exposed. Beside it lay a corked jar of yellow liquid in which a mouse or vole curled its pink hands and waved a naked tail. She said, with a shy eager smile, “I found them, all by myself, and brought them down while everyone was still in bed. Look!” She held up her wrist, which was banded with a string of irregular blue beads. “What do you think? Where do you think they came from?”

Forgetting for a moment that just beyond the wall his car waited on the road home, John stooped and tugged at the fine strands. He had seen something like it before, in a glass case or displayed on a cloth somewhere. “It might be tomb beads – from Egypt, you know: nothing precious, just chips of glass – something to be buried with, so you don’t go in poverty to the afterlife. Then in time all the sand blows away, and there they are, waiting to be picked up.” He thought she might recoil, but instead she stroked them thoughtfully, satisfied, and turned to a larger parcel, wrapped not in paper but in a length of chamois leather. John, by an instinct for the familiar that he later regretted, saw in the parcel the dimensions and thickness of a small book, and felt the idea of leaving recede a little more. He crouched beside her, and with a proprietorial murmur – “Shall I, do you think?” – took it from her. The strings came untied easily, as if it had been recently opened and they’d lost the habit of their knot. Inside the chamois was a second layer of frayed blue cloth, wrapped tightly around the book’s pale vellum binding. The gilding on the spine had worn away, and John, setting the book on his knees, turned to the title page. The thick paper showed an engraving of a bearded man, splendidly aloof, resting a long finger on a rolled parchment.

“Relative of yours?” said Eve.

Smiling, John turned the page, remembering having seen this edition on his own shelves: a collection of Anglo-Saxon poems, the translation shown with the Old English on the facing page. The book’s marbled end-papers, and its scent of dust and damp, were so familiar they brought with them the sound of the clock ticking in the empty shop, and the bell ringing above the door. When he opened his eyes he was startled to see the two women still there after all, the sun beating on their uncovered heads, and heat pooling like liquid on the terrace stones.

“It’s a collection of poems”, said John. The sight of the book, and the familiar weight of it spread evenly between his palms, gave him as much courage as an icon might to a man of anxious faith. “Written a thousand years ago, or more – see? Look at the Old English, here on this page: it seems so familiar, I always think I ought to be able to read it, if only I tried hard enough.”

Clare bent forward and traced a line or two with her finger. “*Where is the horse gone*,” she read: “*Where the rider*?” A drop of sweat ran from her brow and settled in the hollow behind her ear, where it shivered with her pulse. “Who was he? Where did he ride off to?”

“I don’t know. No-one does, nor who wrote them.”

“If ever I wrote anything,” said Clare, “I’d make sure everyone knew it was mine. I would be so proud, I would show everyone. I would always have it with me.”

“*Here money is fleeting*,” read Eve, taking the book. “*Here friend is fleeting, here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting, all the foundation of this world turns to waste*.” She shook her head, and thrust the book back to John. Her black brows together in distaste, and she looked again like the boy he’d first taken her for. He laughed, and said, “They’re not all so sad. I liked this one best, when I was young, though I never knew what it meant: *Wulf and Eadwacer* – ” He stopped, remembering the notebook upstairs, and seeing in the sulphurous yellow light the name EADWACER, scrawled half-a-dozen times. As he said the name the two young women kneeling on the grass paused, and looked up at him. Clare looked peculiarly stricken, as though he’d said something to wound her, and Eve said sharply, “What? - what did you say?”

John snapped the book shut. Her hostility was so sudden and unearned it took effort to say, without stammering: “Oh – nothing – just another of the poems, that’s all.” He felt them begin to withdraw from him: Clare rocked back on her heels and crossed her arms against her breast, and Eve’s narrow white face had become fixed and hostile.

“It was only the name of the poem. I don’t even know if I’m pronouncing it right – *Wulf and Eadwacer*.” He tried it another way - perhaps he could appease her with his ignorance: “Aid-wayser? Eed-whacker? I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Show me.” Eve took the book, drawing quickly away from him, opening the page and showing it to Clare. “*Wulf is on one island, I on another.”*

The old riddle, which had always puzzled him, became all at once part of everything else that was uncertain and troubling. She said, “Why did you say that? How did you know to read this one? Why did you choose it: why did you want to say it out loud?”

“We’ve heard it before you see, John,” said Clare gravely. She looked, he thought, rather disappointed.

“Yes.” Eve began to wrap the book roughly, winding the string so tightly John almost thought he heard the book’s spine breaking under the pressure. “Oh yes: everywhere. All over the house. Cut into the table, written in dust on the windowsills. Down there – ” Eve flung out an arm towards the high green bank at the garden’s end.

“Down there?” The sun was at its height, and John shielded his eyes from it.

“Haven’t you seen it yet? The reservoir.” Oh, but it’s a reservoir, of course, thought John: he’d seen those raised embankments once before, on the outskirts of a small town, where he and his brother had once fished, without success, for carp.

“We’re going swimming tomorrow,” said Clare, forgetting for a moment the book and the hated name. The few tears she’d shed had dried on her cheek. “We keep saying we'll go, but we never do.”

“We might, darling,” said Eve impatiently, not yet finished with John. Her eyes were opaque as smoked glass; then they cleared, suddenly, as though she had reached a favourable verdict on some fresh evidence. She shook her head. “Oh, however could you know? There have been” – she paused, as though selecting a word and finding it distasteful – “Letters. Anonymous ones.” She rolled her eyes. “Well yes: you’re smiling, and why wouldn’t you. Absurd, isn’t it? I keep thinking Holmes will arrive, and Watson following on the train...”

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” said John, thinking: if this were a book, I’d read no further. “Miss Marple, perhaps.”

“It is more her line of work, isn’t it?” The smoke receded, and left her mossy eyes clear and frank. “Poison pen letters. That’s what they call them, as if it’s not the person writing that’s at fault but the pen in their hand - they come for Alex, of all people! You can imagine someone wanting to torment Walker, can’t you.” She said this with a slight secretive smile, which she swiftly shook off. “Or Hester, or even me. But Alex” – she shook her head. “Well: you know.” John, who knew less now than he ever had, nodded.

“There's always something, with Alex. It was bridges before. This time it’s the reservoir - he’s got it into his head the dam will break, and the reservoir will burst the embankment, and the water will reach us down here. He says he sees it at night: he’s standing on the front lawn and the sky turns black, and black water from the reservoir bursts out of all the windows and doors, taking all of us with it. I tell him every day it would need the Severn or the Thames to flood us here, even if there hadn’t been a drought, even if the dam burst…” She shook her head, and unfolded a square of stained linen from its paper packet. It was embroidered with the text THOU GOD SEEST ME, and underneath the words a blue eye was coming unstitched. Eve picked at the trailing threads.

“Of course we don’t argue or disagree with him, it would only make things worse, and besides: what do we know, about this dam or any other -”

John watched her refolding the linen square on her lap. The bluish-white skin above her knees was beginning to burn; it made him anxious, as though he felt the soreness on his own skin. He said, “But surely – a disaster on that scale: it’s unthinkable.” He looked again at the raised grass bank: it seemed, in the curious brightness of its grass, more permanent than the house itself.

The woman shrugged. “There’s a crack, he says, although I’ve not seen it. Out he swims, when we’re all in our beds, then comes and wakes me, with his hair dripping on my pillow, to tell me it’s the width of his thumb, then the palm of his hand...” Kneeling between the scattered drawers, she spread her hands hopelessly. “Then, a few weeks ago, just at the beginning of summer, down we came one morning and there were two letters for Alex, side by side on the doormat. Oh, he was pleased – no-one writes anymore, do they: he thought a friend had found him. You know: from before.” She said this tentatively, and again John had the curious feeling that she did so out of a delicacy for his own feelings, but could not think why. “Only they weren’t letters, of course: just newspaper clippings, and all of them showed drownings, or floods. There was one with a terrible picture, from France, of two children who’d been stranded on a sandbank hunting for shells. They were lying on the sand, their hair all mixed up with the seaweed. . .” She shuddered. “On all the pieces of newspaper was that name again, Eadwacer – oh, how *do* you say it? Then it started turning up - scratched on the table, or written in pebbles down by the reservoir, or so he says – I’ve never seen it and of course, you never quite know.”

The whole tale was so absurd, and at the same time so cruel, that John would have liked to laugh. The woman stood wearily. “It’s all right,” she said. “What could you say? What can any of us say? It’s so *childish*. Once I even thought he was doing it, but he was never that way, not even – ” And again she said: “*You* know, John. Not even then.” They think I’m in on something, he thought suddenly: that’s why they never ask me where I’ve come from, or what I’m doing here. He said, frowning over the words, examining them to be sure they wouldn’t turn her against him: “But if the name’s appearing down by the dam or on the patio then either it’s one of you, or someone who comes here often.”

“I know. And I don’t know which would be worst. Isn’t it odd,” she said, smiling: “You turned up and I never for a minute thought it might be you, though even as strangers go, you’re fairly strange.” Much later John was to remember that phrase, and wonder why it had felt so like an unexpected touch on the arm. Then she pressed her hands into the dip in her spine and arching her back turned her face to the sun, which had begun its slow decline. Frowning, she ran to peer at the shadow on the broken sundial, swore beneath her breath, then vanished into the cool dark house. A moment later a door slammed, and the sound of a piano played in intricate swift patterns came at them through an open window. Clare stood, examining a bitten-down thumbnail, and rolled her eyes at John. “She's late again,” she said.

“How can she tell? The sundial's broken.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? I mean: it tells the same wrong time every day.”

John tried not to smile. Then he said incuriously: “Tell me - have you been friends with Eve for a very long time?”

“Put these on.” She bent to wrap the string of beads three times around his wrist. They’d been warmed by the sun, and where the ends of her hair touched his skin they pricked as if they were sharp. “She knew my brother before she knew me, from school. I didn’t see her for years, not for years, then she came to St Joseph’s and of course we saw her all the time then, sometimes every day.”

“I see,” said John. St Joseph’s? He imagined Eve’s black head bent reverently over folded hands, her white knees resting on an embroidered cushion. The picture was so improbable it instantly vanished. From across the lawn the patterns of music changed to an insistent motif that needled at him and made him uneasy. “She's very good.”

“See, they suit you. Oh – but you haven't heard anything yet. These are the boring bits: every day for an hour to make her hands strong and her fingers fast. You can't go near her now, not for an hour. And if she makes a mistake she slams the lid of the piano. She chipped a key once. She found a piano at St Joseph’s – no-one knew it was there, but it’s like she can tell straight away if there’s one hidden somewhere – it was old and had got damp but she paid for a tuner to come, and after that played it every day. Alex liked to hear it. Well” – she shrugged, and gave him a curious look that was, he thought, half-pitying: “Of course we all did.”

John noted the look. Did she feel sorry for him then, or at least for the man that should have been there, kneeling on the lawn with his wrist in the girl's hands? The idea baffled him, and he put it away to examine later by a better light. Then she fastened the beads and said, “You know, sometimes she plays so long her fingers bleed. Last week a man came to take her picture. She put on a white dress I found, and stood under the tree all morning until she had a headache, and had to go to bed. In the autumn she's playing at some old church a long way from here though I can’t remember the name: I’m hopeless, I never remember anything, in one ear and out the other Hester says, and nothing in between to stop it.” She smiled ruefully, as though distantly aware she’d been mocked.

“Well – I don’t want her to be angry with me, do I?” said John truthfully, remembering how quickly her mossy eyes had darkened. “I promise I’ll remember not to disturb her. Isn't that Hester, waving at the kitchen window?”

Almost hidden by the half-closed blind, the woman who'd welcomed him the night before beckoned the girl indoors. She said: “I'd better go. She went shopping for watermelon. Do you like watermelon? I don't, they don’t look like something that could have actually grown. . .” Then she dashed away, forgetting her tears as quickly as a child might.

John retreated into the shade. The heat, he thought, truly was infernal: it beat up from the parched ground and had burnt away the high haze that softened the morning. The trees in the garden and the Thetford pines behind were unmoved by any wind, and an anxious silence settled on the lawn.

Clare in her white shirt, dust from the dry earth blackening the soles of her feet, disappeared into the house. With her went the ease he'd felt, kneeling beside the women with their shadows overlapping on the lawn: “What have I *done*?” he said aloud, and leaned against the elm, suddenly weary. At first it had only been kindness that had taken him into the blue-painted room where they sat eating: how could he have made her look foolish in front of them all, and seen her laughed at? That man Walker, he thought, with a surge of dislike, would've mocked her for days. And after that how easy it had been, how appallingly easy, to slip in between them as if he'd always been there.

And what had *they* done, come to think of it? Surely it wasn't only friendship keeping them there, and perhaps not even that: he turned to look at the high walls dividing the garden from the road, and imagined an iron gate set within the bricks, its lock and hinges choked with ivy. The image was as plain as if it had been printed on the paper covers of a book he was half-inclined to read.

“Still no birds, eh?” Alex had come quietly on bare feet and stood smiling at him, his hands deep in his pockets, nothing like the frightened boy crouching by the door he'd seen that morning. His skin had tanned so darkly the long-fringed eyes appeared pale.

“No, none: it's like this in London - all the parks are empty - but I thought it might be different elsewhere. But there's nothing, not even when the sun goes down.”

“London, eh?” The younger man looked surprised. Then he shrugged, and said: “Makes you wonder where they've all gone, doesn't it? But it can’t last: nothing ever does…And – do you mind me saying? I’m glad you’re here. I know how hard it is – no-one knows more than me.” The boy flushed, and looked down at his feet as though he thought he might be speaking out of turn. “I know what courage it must have taken you, to leave everything, not to do what they tell you to do, but you’re not on your own. And I’ll help you, if I can – oh, you don’t want to talk about, I understand.” He reached out and with a quick impulsive gesture lightly touched John’s shoulder.

John, wretched with confusion and guilt, said “You’re very kind,” and casting about for a means of moving the subject to firmer ground gestured to the packets scattered on the lawn. “Ought we to take these in?” The book was set a little apart from the others, and he hastily took it and concealed it under his arm. It had been warmed by the sun, so that with its chamois-leather wrapping it felt like a live thing he was trying to restrain. The young man stooped obediently and began to gather up what remained, now and then exclaiming “What *is* all this, anyway? And where did she find them? I tell you what: we’ll take them into the red room, and find a home for them there.”

Obediently, and without glancing behind him to the boundary wall, John followed the young man, who sang under his breath something that echoed by chance or design the melody that reached them through a pair of half-open doors set with panes of glass. Alex edged an elbow between them and slipped inside, appearing to vanish at once. Pausing at the threshold John saw a piano with its lid raised and a dark head bent low over the keys, and wanting not to disturb or anger her again tried to ease himself silently between the doors. His ankle, no longer painful but weak under his weight, gave out at the threshold, and he stumbled suddenly and felt the small packages begin to slip from between his palms. He tried to steady himself against the nearest door, but there was a high sharp sound as it flew back on its hinges; a pane at shoulder-height cracked from end to end then fell to the ground in small shards. The chords stopped, and were followed by a bang which drew out murmurs from the piano's disturbed strings as Eve slammed its lid shut, and appeared her hands on her hips and her black brows drawn fiercely together. “What are you doing here – whatever have you done? There's glass all over the floor.” She stood back to let John pass, giving him a look that might have been scathing or amused. He at once felt his dampness and dishevelment more keenly, and stood as deeply as possible in the shade cast by the open curtains.

It was a larger room than any he'd seen in the house before, and ran the length of the east wing, so that all along the outer wall were eight windows facing south first to the grey-paved patio, then to the parched lawn and behind that to the dark pines behind. The light that came in ought to have blazed into every corner, but instead was absorbed by red-papered walls and Turkish carpets scattered unevenly across the wooden floor. Though these were old and thin, with patches rubbed bare and tangled fringes, they dampened their footfall so that the occasional step on the bare floor between rapped out unnervingly.

The ceiling seemed lower than in the other rooms, and had been recently painted with illogical pairings of spring flowers and roses, and all around the light fittings, from which hung broken chandeliers trailing chipped strings of glass drops, were painted yellow-beaked blackbirds caught in a briar thicket. The furniture was set around the piano, which was by far the largest John had ever seen, and bore no resemblance to the comfortably scuffed wooden instrument his brother’s children played. It seemed newly made, lacquered to so black and lucid a shine that he saw in its raised lid a perfect dark reflection of himself at midnight. The keys were not ebony and bone but plastic, with a strip of scarlet felt behind: the harsh colours looked, in the dim and shabby room, a little sinister, their regularity reminding John of over-bright false teeth bared in a grin. Scattered all around the piano were piles of sheet music, some of it torn and foxed with illuminated title pages, others on clean white paper. In comparison the furniture was desperately shabby: a velvet-upholstered couch was balding in the seat, and the pair of tables set between the windows looked as if they had rickets. All around the room, stuffed into vases and jugs and attracting a number of voluble bees, were long stems of untidy long-petalled red and yellow flowers, their hard stamens ejecting puffs of dark pollen. It looked as if someone had set a dozen small fires, and they smelt revoltingly sweet.

“Asphodel, she calls them,” said Eve drily. “Lilies, to you and me.”

“Sorry for the disturbance.” Alex laid out his armful of packages in a neat row on the seat of a couch. He looked up at the girl, who returned his gaze with a searching, anxious look of her own, then smiling buffeted him on the shoulder. “Oh, I was almost done - where's Walker? Have you seen him?” Standing half-hidden in the curtain's musty folds John saw him lift her hand and examine it, turning it over and putting his thumb in her palm. “Don't you ever wash, Evie?” he said gently. “Look at all this, under your nails.” He let her hand drop, and then he said: “I haven't seen him this morning. He's probably up with Elijah, leading him astray. Yesterday he was teaching him to gamble, you know -” The woman laughed, then pushed her curls back from her forehead, waved distractedly at them both, and went slowly out into the hall.

The young man watched her go, scratching at a raised mosquito bite on his arm; then he shook his head, and looked up at John as if he'd just remembered he was there.

“What a mess,” he said, pushing at a piece of glass with his toe: “I'll get a broom.”

“Stand back,” said John: “You've no shoes.” The shards looked cruel against the soft arch of the boy's foot.

Alex moved obediently back, and threw himself into a chair covered in indistinct tapestry. He plucked at the fabric of his T-shirt. “I can't stand this much longer,” he said. “Still, we’ll all be out of it, come Saturday.”

John glanced behind him out of the window, expecting to see clouds pulling at the sun, but there was only the same empty blue canopy. “Oh?”

“We're getting out of here, going to the sea - it's only about fifteen minutes’ drive. You'll come?”

“Of course,” said John quickly. Of course! How easy it would be to leave then, with none of those inept excuses he’d dreamed up in the night: he imagined pushing open the door to his flat, picturing the two locks set in the blue-painted door, and inside the rush mat with three pairs of shoes neatly paired alongside, and the bookshelves no less tidy than those in the shop. He paused, expecting to feel a burst of relief, and a longing for home, but neither came.

“I'm so glad you're here,” said the younger man suddenly, sitting up and grasping the arms of the chair. “It can get a bit closed-in here sometimes. Nice to have another face - another pair of eyes, if you see what I mean.” He looked at John with such warmth and gratitude that he flushed, and stooped to pick up some of the larger shards of glass. Then Alex said, bending to worry at a graze on the back of his hand: “I don't think I knew you, did I, back then?” His eyes met John's, and for a moment he was the huddled wretched boy he'd seen that morning

“Oh no, no, I don't think so, I'm sure I'd remember,” said John, reaching nervously to tug at a shoelace. Then he said, “Should I go and tell Hester about the broken window?”

Alex shrugged. “It's not like the rain's going to get in, is it? The graze evidently became sore: he winced, and rested his head on the arm of the chair. “Tell me: how do you feel, being here at last? I always think it’s safe, as if everything that might bother you out there couldn’t make it through the forest. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“Listen”, he said, standing. “Would you help me with something?”

“If I can, of course.”

“I could do with a hand, later. Down by the reservoir.” He looked anxious, and John remembered Eve’s sudden anger, and the tale she’d told him. He saw that name again, with its unfamiliar syllables: *Eadwacer*, written in the notebook upstairs and scratched into the wood on the kitchen table, and perhaps in other places waiting to be discovered. He reached up to flick away a hot trickle that had gathered in the corner of his eye.

“If you think I can be any use,” he said.

“You will. Just another pair of hands. Can you swim?”

“I'm not sure,” said John: “I can't remember.”

“Is that Hester calling us? Lunch, I expect.” He put a hand on John's damp and grubby shoulder, and then he said kindly, “But you've probably got time to change.”

**II**

A memory came to me today so bright and clear I wonder how I could ever have forgotten it. It was while I stood with the two young women at the kitchen window using a folded newspaper to coax a bee outside: it was fat and slow and looked as if its legs had been dragged through mustard powder, and you couldn’t imagine it doing anyone harm, but Clare hid behind me like a child until it had been sent on its way.

And suddenly I remembered how once my father had found a hornet dying on the windowsill, and called us in from the garden to see. Christopher was not afraid, so of course I couldn’t be either, and we stood together watching it fold its legs against its belly. I’d never seen anything like it before – as long as my thumb, and with yellow plates of armour – and Christopher swore he could hear it crying. When it stopped moving, my father put it on a sheet of white paper and severed its wings with the knife my mother used to slice tomatoes. I remember how they rustled on the paper, and how we told off my brother for coming so near that his breath almost blew them away. Then my father took out some of the glass slides he kept in the left-hand drawer of his desk, and using a bottle of my mother’s nail varnish (it had begun to turn yellow, and he thinned it with ammonia) fixed the wings between them. That night we put them in his microscope and by the light of his desk-lamp saw they were barbed with fine hairs.

What would I find, if I could do that now – take pieces of each of them, something they wouldn’t miss, fix them on glass plates or preserve them in liquid, to examine them with better eyes than mine and by a brighter light? I wish I could do it without causing them harm, because I can’t see clearly, am too charmed or befuddled to demand they tell me what it is they’re doing here, and who they expect me to be. ‘St Joseph’s’ they said, as if I’d know what it was they meant: sometimes I think I’ve stumbled on a cult of some kind, and certainly that Hester’s like something you could love and fear at once, which I suppose is what worship means. If so they’ve expected nothing from me yet – there are no ceremonies that I can see, and never the comfort of rules. Then I wonder if it’s not Hester who’s at the centre of things but Alex, whom they all watch so closely out of affection or censure, not with a worshipful eye but more as if they’re his keepers, willing or not. Perhaps it’s neither of these things, but something more prosaic – perhaps they have in common some pastime or passion which they imagine I share, so that tomorrow I’ll go down and find them all gathered together expecting me to take part. Or maybe this is nothing more curious than a kind of family home – haven’t I read enough to know there’s stranger things happen in kitchens and living rooms than are dreamt of by most of us?

Of course, I can’t stay: I won’t be here tomorrow. But if I could only watch a little more closely I know I could work it out, like a child’s puzzle or the plot of a book someone lent me and I’m reading only because it’s polite…

It’s very late or very early, depending which way up you hold the day. I've just been to the reservoir with Alex. He told me to wait for him after we'd eaten, and I sat till after midnight on the terrace, drinking the coffee Hester gave me (she makes it bitterly thick – small wonder I can’t sleep), watching bats come over the wall from the forest and listening to Eve play in the room behind me. She’d opened the windows wide, and from where I sat I could hear not just the music but her nails clicking as they struck the keys. I could hear the way she’d sigh sometimes when she’d made a mistake - or maybe when something had come out right: I never much cared for music, and can't really tell - and I could smell the lilies dying in their vases. By then the heat had made everyone tired and listless and no-one seemed to feel much like talking. Mostly they left me alone, although once someone put their hand on my shoulder on their way down through the trees. Clare sat cross-legged next to me for a long time, showing me how to blow a blade of grass like an oboe-reed. I pretended I didn’t know how, and let her teach me, all the while thinking: one more day of this: only one.

Behind us Walker paced up and down smoking so heavily it looked as though autumn had come and he was walking through morning mist. Elijah came to the window once or twice and looked down towards the yellow light by the reservoir as if he wanted to go down, but was terrified of what he’d find. I wonder what frightens him? Maybe it’s only the old, ordinary fear of whatever it is that’ll eventually kill us, lurking already in our blood or bones, or perhaps of waking up one day alone and forgotten; but watching him there at the window I thought it must be something he can see that the rest of us miss.

I don’t know how long I waited. The chair I’d carried out was too old and worn in the seat to be comfortable, but all the same I dozed off twice, my chin on my chest and the back of my neck stretched as if it would break. Behind me Eve went on playing, breaking off sometimes to swear quietly but viciously, and play a dozen times the phrase she’d mistaken, until the memory of it must have lodged in all the tendons and muscles of her hands. The same phrases over and over seemed to give me a kind of clarity: I remembered the poem I had seen as clearly as if I had memorised it yesterday, or years ago perhaps when I was young, and my mind held on to things. I recited the lines to myself making them fit with the phrases she played … *Wulf* is on *one* island, *I* on a*noth*er, *Wulf* is on *one* island, *I* on a*noth*er … Then Alex came and woke me with a thump between my shoulders so hard it nearly threw me out of my chair.

He said, “Sorry to keep you, John: shall we go?” and crooked out his arm towards me. I took it, and it wasn’t until we’d gone a little further on I realised no-one had walked with me like that since I’d last seen my brother. He’s shorter than Christopher, and his arm was slender but strong. He said, “It’s good of you, you know. I don’t like asking the others. Clare’s afraid of the water at night – she thinks drowned men will come up and get her by the ankles. Have you been down and seen it yet?”

I said I hadn’t, and he squeezed my arm.

“It’s not much of a reservoir, really. We get our water from there, and so do the villages between here and the coast road, but no more than that. You’ve seen the valve tower?”

“Is that what it is? I can see the light from my window. It doesn’t look like it belongs here.”

“I hate the light. It keeps me awake and turns my skin yellow, like a man that's been poisoned . . . I’ve told Hester I can go down and take out the bulb, but she says she likes it, like a midnight sun - as if we haven’t had enough sun by now!”

We walked slowly down towards the light, and as we left the house behind the hard earth become springy and pliable underfoot. As we drew nearer the rough land beyond the garden I could make out white patches on the earth, like smears of drying salt water. While we walked he told me more about the reservoir, quite contentedly, not at all as if he dreaded the water breaching the dam and reaching us where we stood. I wondered if Eve had been teasing me that morning as we sat under the dying elm, and felt suddenly very relieved. The whole business of the letters had been so childish and inane that I was glad I didn’t have to believe it after all. Alex went on talking, and I remember thinking how like his sister’s his voice was, cheerful and childlike and not much bothered whether or not I was listening, or had much to say in reply.

He told me the reservoir was built after the war, by flooding a hamlet that had once been within view of the house, in a shallow dip between what passes for hills in this county. The dam had stopped up a river so narrow no one had really believed it would rise to cover the post office and chapel, and the dozen cottages clinging to the single road. There were no protests, he told me: no-one had much cared about the chapel, which had been used by a sect called the Particular People, famous for singing their hymns out-of-doors. Elderly couples in the cottages were only too glad to move to new apartments with cable television and a warden who’d come if they had a fall on the doorstep, and only the post-mistress had taken it badly, hoarding letters in their sacks for weeks before the day they moved to their new homes. When the water came it dislodged them, he said, and for a long time after anyone passing by would have seen white envelopes floating on the black water.

“Hester’s got one”, he said, “That she found soon after she moved in. It’s a postcard of some cockle sheds in Essex. You can’t read it anymore but the stamp’s still stuck on – can you believe it.” He laughed. “Anyway, about a week ago the water got just low enough to see the Post Office sign. When we get there, tell me if you can see it.”

I asked him about the valve tower, and who came there. We’d drawn near it by then, and its yellow light gave him a hard translucent look, as if he were made of amber. The tower was smaller than it had looked from window, with red bricks neatly set in a checkered pattern, and a crenellated roof. The door was sheet metal, secured with rivets and heavily padlocked, but I could see through a grimy window to a few dials and a computer with a dusty screen. A laminated sheet of paper stained with damp had been taped to the door. It said NO ENTRY.

“It’s supposed to regulate the flow of water from the dam,” he told me. “They come once or twice a year, maybe more. I never see them.” Then his arm through mine tensed suddenly. He lowered his voice to a whisper, although there was no-one near who might have heard. “I tried to call them. I *did*. There’s a number on the door. Yesterday I called and the day before, and twice this morning before anyone was up, but they won’t listen. They said they’d send someone this month, maybe next, but it might be too late by then: the summer's ending and there'll be rain for days.” We’d reached the place where the parched lawn gave way to gravel and rough grass, and banks of bramble with berries dying unripe between the leaves. The brambles had put out low branches that crept across the ground and caught my ankles as I passed.

We came to the cannon ball Eve told me had been brought down from the attic: it must have been found on a tideline somewhere, and was crusted with barnacles and rust. Alex bent to pick it up, holding it out to me cupped between his hands, laughing and hefting it from side to side as though he wanted me to see how strong he was. He carried it a few feet, pretending to toss it in the air like a tennis-ball, but I could see how the weight of it raised ridges of muscle and tendon in his arm, and when he dropped it I thought I’d hear it ring like a ship’s bell on the hard earth. Up ahead the bright grass of the embankment wall was made more unnatural in the light from the valve tower. I looked at Alex, who’d stopped suddenly when he dropped the cannon ball, and was staring fixedly at the embankment. It was only ten or fifteen feet high, on a sharp slope he could’ve dashed up without losing his breath or footing, but he looked for a moment old and defeated. He started plucking feverishly at the skin on his bottom lip, leaving a smear of blood. I walked past him and said loudly, “I’ll beat you to the top.” It was childish of me, but it worked: he laughed and overtook me, and I reached the crest of the embankment a moment after him, favouring my ankle, which had reminded me again of its old grievance.

We stood together on the high grass verge, the light from the valve tower shining behind us, and everything in front lit by the waning moon. At our feet the receding water - which I suppose must have once reached almost level with the grass embankment - had left bare two or three feet of rubble in a kind of rough beach. The rubble was made up of large pale stones, littered with gull's feathers and a few pieces of blunt glass, and stained with rags of algae. All around us the dark pines of the forest stooped towards the water as if they were thirsty. I’d grown so used to parched lawns and dying flower-beds that the few spikes of purple fox-glove growing near the water’s edge seemed strange and rare, and I looked down at my feet to be certain I wouldn’t tread them into the ground. It was so quiet I could hear, in the undergrowth behind us, rats or foxes making their beds for the night. I could smell stale water, and the sweat that ran from my own forehead, and that stained the boy’s T-shirt on his back.

Alex swept out a hand to take in the reservoir from where we stood to the dam wall in the distance. “What do you think?”

I said it was smaller than I’d thought, and darker. The surface of the water was black and opaque, and the reflection of the moon at our feet looked very small, as if it had got diminished travelling there. He beckoned me nearer the edge, asking if I could see the Post Office sign, and I stepped forward until I was almost on the rubble beach. I could feel the pupils of my eyes opening to the dark, until I thought I could make out, just below the thick water, the familiar red oval.

He told me how he liked to go there alone, watching for water-fowl. One day he’d seen a pair of geese that looked as though their breasts had been painted red, and had never seen them again. There’d been kingfishers, and once an adder he’d recognised from the diamonds on its back. He pointed out the pine where he thought he’d heard a cuckoo (“Just like the clock!” he told me, although I don’t see why that would be a surprise). Then he turned his back to the dam as though he wanted to put it out of his mind, and in his rush to tell me everything he’d seen – mayflies mating over the water, and a dead vole lying with its tail in its mouth – he began to swallow and stumble over his words until I couldn't follow what he was saying.

All the things I’d heard that morning came back to me, as distinctly as if the two young women were talking within ear shot and their voices came at me over the lawn – the letters, the flawed dam and the water ready to rise; St Joseph’s, whatever it was and in whichever town; Eve playing to people I pictured leaning on white-painted walls to listen. I saw also the many versions of Alex that I’d watched through the day: huddled by the front door, or asking for my help as easily as if we’d been friends for years. Looking at him then, as he stood linking his thumbs and flapping his joined hands, imitating a white moth he’d seen the night before, it suddenly seemed obvious that he was suffering in ways I couldn’t describe or understand. Then I felt ashamed of myself, for having doubted Eve and for not having seen it myself.

I found myself nodding and saying “Yes, yes I see,” and moving back from the water’s edge. Then without pausing for breath, he tilted back his head to look at the sky, and said, “I think that’s the Pole star isn’t it? Elijah taught me how to find it once – look, you follow the line of the W, I forget what it’s called - yes, it’s the Pole star right enough.” Then he looked back at me, and it was as if locating that single point had steadied him, as though it were not something distant at all, but a bright shaft that pinioned him safely by my side. He frowned and shook his head, knuckling at his eyes like someone who’d just woken from a brief sleep. When I told him that he was right, and that every day it is there too, though we can’t see its modest light when the sun’s nearby, he gave me one of his frank childlike smiles and immediately I thought I must be wrong, and that I’d mistaken nothing but a harmless preoccupation for lunacy: it was as steady and direct a smile as I’d ever seen. Then he said, “Anyway, I’d like your help. Can you swim?”

When I told him I’d really rather not in that dark water he laughed, and said, “Fair enough,” and told me he only did it now he knew the water so well he could have swum there blindfold if need be. He stooped to unlace his trainers, and I asked him why it was he needed to go out there at all. I tried to sound as if I didn’t care, and he didn’t look up but said casually, as if I probably knew already, “Oh I like to check at midnight, you see. No sense checking in the morning then leaving it all day – anything could happen at night, don’t you think?”

Then he took off a pair of unmatched socks, pushed them into the toes of his trainers, and began to stoop and stretch like an athlete before a race. In between deep breaths he told me why he wanted to swim out into the black water. I listened, watching his stomach hollow and refill like bellows, and while I listened I think a slight wind must have blown over from the reservoir, because I began to feel cold.

He’d sat one day on the embankment wall reading a letter when he saw a bird fly up from near the centre of the dam. From its forked tail he’d thought it must be a swift, but when later that night he’d looked it up he knew from its pale breast it must have been a house martin. For a few days he watched for it, and saw the same bird go to and from the dam early in the morning, and again at sunset. He could never make out where it had been going – the dam was too far from the shore - but often it had a scrap of something in its beak - a piece of bark or clump of dying grass, and once a white fragment torn from a pillow or cushion – and knew that somewhere it must have made itself a home in a cleft in the dam wall.

“Everyone knows, don’t they, how house martins make their nests in houses or barns - anywhere they find a place,” he said. “But it was a long time before I knew what it meant, although now it seems so obvious – yes, yes: *you* thought of it straight away, didn’t you, I can tell! Somewhere in the dam I knew must to be a hole or crack, just big enough for the bird to be making its nest, growing wider and longer every day while we all sat down there in the garden. But even then I didn’t see it. I was slow, always have been, but now I understand, now I know what’s coming. They say a storm’s on its way, and the water will rise and - oh,” he stopped and put his hand on my shoulder and said, smiling, “I don’t need to tell you, do I, it’s so obvious: it’ll go into the crack and force it open, and then...” He waved savagely towards the reservoir then swept his arm down towards the house, and I imagined that after it he brought a hundred thousand gallons of dirty water. “Hester, Elijah, Walker, Evie, Clare,” he said, as if he were seeing them all going under.

With every name he pressed my shoulder until it hurt, then suddenly he let go and took off his T-shirt. I remember turning away out of decency and confusion and then remembering that he also was a man, and turning back. He was sunburned on his neck and forearms, and his skin everywhere else was as pale as Eve’s - it looked in the dark as though he were still dressed in white. When he turned away from me I saw, on his upper arm where a muscle dipped as he moved, a patch of darker skin the size of my palm, as though he were always accompanied by a small shadow. Then he dropped the shirt then looked out over the water. “It’s all right, I won’t be long,” he said kindly, and I realised I must have looked apprehensive, and tried to pin up a smile. He said, “It takes me sixteen minutes: I know because I timed it. Four to swim there and four back, and a little while to see what’s happening.”

He dropped the rest of his clothes in the dust, and I was so anxious to help, and so unsure what I should do, that I picked them up and began to fold them over my arm. His T shirt had picked up burrs from the weeds growing thickly on the bank, and I tugged them free from the folds of cloth and tossed them into the water. He said, “I haven’t found it yet - the place where the dam’s breaking. But as the water-level gets lower and lower, I stand more chance of finding it, you see, and then –” he nodded towards the valve tower – “Then they’ll have to come, won’t they?”

I’ve always thought people look diminished and vulnerable without their clothes, but Alex was so unselfconscious that he seemed to grow taller and broader as he stood there. He seemed to search my face for something – I don’t know what, or I’d have given it to him - then said again, “They will come, John, won’t they? When I tell them?” Of course I didn’t know, though I doubted it: I was tired and hot, and the headache that had plagued me since I’d woken on the floor in my own bedroom a hundred years ago was beginning to blind me again. I’d’ve said anything, I think, to avoid his gaze and go back to the iron bed upstairs, and draw the curtains against the sickly light from the valve tower. So I nodded and said, “I imagine they'd have to. If you had the proof.” Then I immediately felt ashamed of myself and plucked another burr from the clothes I held: I knew I should reason with him, but I knew also that I was an imposter, and had no part in whatever they all chose to do. The young man’s face suddenly changed (it’s a trick they all have, I’ve noticed, of changing face like a tossed coin), and he gave me one of the frank childlike smiles that made me think he was saner than all of us.

“Knew I could count on you,” he said triumphantly. “Knew it! You see – ” he leant towards me and I could smell stale beer and meat on his breath – “I don’t know if they really believe me.” He nodded ruefully towards the house. “They think I’m being a bit, you know.” He tapped his forehead, and we both laughed.

As I remember it now I think how mad we both must have looked: Alex naked and at ease, idly batting away a fly drawn to his sweat, and me a little distance away fussing over an armful of clothes. I did what was easiest: I laughed with him, and tapped my own forehead too, and said, “No-one could think that, not really. Not if you told them everything you’ve told me.” I let him think nothing could be more logical than for him to pick his way on bare feet across the rubble beach towards the black water.

The moon and the yellow light from the tower gave enough brightness for me to see him dwindle until the dark water reached his waist, then he lunged into the water and struck out for the dam wall. He called out to me once, then after that it was so quiet I could hear the swift splashes of his arms cutting through the water. A moment later and there was nothing, although I think I heard him call again from somewhere away to my right.

I don’t know how long I waited. Perhaps he really had timed how long it took to swim out and back again, but it seemed to me the moon moved across the sky and back while I walked up and down at the foot of the slope. Once or twice the yellow light flickered violently and I thought the bulb would blow - that I’d be left alone in the dark, and he’d have nothing to guide him out of the water - but it always came back and sent my shadow across the lawn towards the house. By the time he climbed silently out of the water I was tired and distracted, and when I felt his wet hand on my shoulder I thought for a moment the drowned men Clare was afraid of had found me out.

He said, “Nothing tonight I’m afraid: nothing to see.” He patted my back, as if he thought I’d disappointed too. “It’s all right, we can check tomorrow, can’t we, now we both know what we’ve got on our hands? Makes a difference to me, I can tell you, knowing you believe me – I’ll sleep better tonight.” He grinned, took his clothes from me, and dressed quickly. “You look awful,” he said, “Let’s get you home.” And because it was so ridiculous, finding myself being kindly led indoors by a half-naked boy, still wet from swimming at night to find a place underwater where birds might nest, I began to laugh, and as though it were contagious he did, too. By the time we reached the house we were both laughing, until we gasped for breath and clutched at each other’s arms as we walked.

At the foot of the stairs he said, “I’ll leave you now: I won’t sleep for a long while,” and turned towards the kitchen. His feet left black prints on the flagstones. Then he turned back and said, shyly and as though he were afraid he might have transgressed, “Sometimes I forget where I have been and what I have done, so you see I don’t like to be alone – sometimes I think when I’m alone and no-one sees me perhaps I’m not there at all. And all the time in the water I thought, I can feel it on my back, and I can hear it splashing, and John is there waiting, and if he is there, so must I be too – ” Then he plunged forward, with the same motion as when he had struck out into the water, and squeezed my shoulder so hard that I have the marks of his hand on me now. Then Hester called him from the kitchen, and I came upstairs alone.

**FRIDAY**

**I**

All the day that followed John remembered the quiet splash of the young man striking the water, the constant shadow on his bare arm and the scent of algae drying on the rocks as if it had happened years before. The hour spent by the reservoir became part of the fabric of the house and its history, whatever that was: it had the effect of weighting him there, as if he’d become an essential part of them, and must have always been. The next morning he’d have been startled and offended if anyone had stopped him at the door to his room and said, “But what on earth are *you* doing here?”

At breakfast Alex said nothing to his sister, nor to Hester as she stood frying eggs in spitting oil and stacking them on a tin plate. But passing John a mug of dark brown tea, he’d given him first a wink, and then a slow-growing smile of such frank happiness that Eve paused on the threshold and said, “Well now. And what are you boys planning?”

“We’re going swimming today,” said Clare. She had plaited her hair into two untidy ropes that fell over her shoulders. The effect should have been childlike, but it bared her unflawed face and pale mouth, and she looked more like a tomb-carving than ever. The cat dragged a fried egg over to where she sat, and crouched between her outstretched arms lapping at the yolk. “Can we? You said today we could go swimming.”

“My darling, we’ve said so every morning since the end of spring.” Eve, wearing a shirt that smelt a little of Walker’s cigarettes, sat beside John and drew up her legs. The long fine bones of her shins gleamed in the light.

“No - everybody’s going, they said they would: Walker said so, and John.”

“John?” Eve drew out his name across several low notes, and her eyes glittered as she surveyed him through steam rising from the cup she cradled loosely between her palms. He shifted in his seat, ignoring the unfamiliar rasp of denim behind his knees. Finding his clothes beyond the help of the bathroom sink, or a night airing beneath an open window, he’d dressed that morning in jeans and a shirt taken from the boxes stacked at the foot of the iron bed. The man who ought to have been sitting where he sat now was younger, shorter, and had none of his own fastidious neatness. The jeans John had despairingly chosen, avoiding the eyes of the Puritan in his frame, were thinning and frayed, and in several places burnt with cigarettes. He’d found a red flannel shirt without visible holes or torn seams, but the cuffs didn’t reach his wrists, and he’d folded them neatly back towards the elbow. He found the sight of his own bare arm peculiarly unsettling, noticing as if for the first time that the dark hairs clustered at the bone of his wrist. The shirt was missing its top button, and John felt the woman’s gaze pass, amused, over his bare throat. “You brought trunks, did you?” The black arch of her eyebrow plainly doubted it. Then she lost her brief interest in him, and she dashed out to meet Walker in the garden, leaving John once again feeling that she found him foolish.

“Well anyway: I’m not going in first,” said Clare. “Will it be cold?” She was wearing a child’s swimming costume worn to grey netting at the seams. It was far too small, and left red welts on her shoulders. The promise of a swim had woken her early: John had heard someone light-footed run past his door not long after sunrise, slamming doors in the kitchen downstairs and throwing windows open.

“That depends when you go in,” said John, vaguely remembering his nephews having once asked the same question as they dragged him towards an incoming tide. “Wait ‘til after lunch, and the water will be warm as a bath, and we won’t be able to get you back on dry land.”

She nodded and said, “All right then,” and scooping the cat under her arm followed Eve out into the garden.

“The trouble with my sister,” said Alex, turning away from the sink where he was inexpertly washing up, “Is that she does as she’s told. You have to watch that.”

“I imagine you do,” said John.

Compared to what came later, it was a quiet uneventful day, full of fractured conversation and small incidents in other rooms he never quite understood. He was always to think of it as having passed slowly in a thick mist, as if the incessant sun was boiling up the last moisture in the earth and they were all trying to reach each other through rising steam. A slight wind came now and then to spin eddies of dust on the patio and rattle the husks of poppy seed heads against the wall, but did nothing to cool the air. He kept himself apart from them, not because he was afraid they’d find him out, but because he felt he’d earned his place, and needn’t attend to them or make himself liked.

Late in the morning, on his way to the garden, he came across Hester seated at the bottom of the stairs where two nights before he'd answered the phone. She was sewing buttons onto a blue-and-white striped shirt, which showed patches of dust and grease where she held it, her needle flashing in the light coming through the panes in the front door. He wondered why she'd chosen to crouch with her back resting against the wooden stairs behind, and her broad hips crammed between the banisters: bent over the shirt, she looked childish and ancient all at once.

“John,” she'd said when she saw him, not looking up from her work, “Is all as it should be, out there in the sun?”, and he realised she'd placed herself exactly at the centre of things. From the step she could see into the blue dining room and down to the kitchen, and - if she leant against the banister - along the hall to the door leading out to the garden. Little could happen that would not be seen or overheard.

“Elijah’s asleep in the dining room with the cat on his shoulder, and Walker’s dead-heading the roses. Clare says she won't go swimming after all: she's afraid she'll cut her feet on the stones.”

She nodded twice, and then once more after a pause, as though she had given a problem some thought and reached a conclusion. She broke a length of cotton in her teeth, and sucked at the end to draw it through her needle. “And Alex?”

“I saw him sleeping in the long grass.”

She nodded again, without surprise, and looking up from her mending gave him one of her sudden transforming smiles. It was impossible not to smile in return, and John stood a while watching the needle slip through the button and the fabric in a deft practised rhythm. Then she said, “*You’ll* look after them for me, won't you, dear John?”, and this time mischief tugged at her smile, so that he felt irresistibly drawn into a conspiracy.

“I'm going outside now,” he said, “To brave the sun.” The needle flashed through the cloth, and he imagined she was sewing not a faded shirt, but a fine net that drew them all together. As he put his hand to the door to push it open, she called after him: “When you see Alex, will you tell him I found the book he asked me for, and left it in the dining room, where he always sits?”

John went, out pleased to be given another task, as though it affirmed his place in the house, and when he found Alex on the terrace picking moss from the lead face of the sundial he passed on the message word for word with the accuracy of schoolboy. The younger man frowned, scratching at an insect bite at the rim of the shadow-mark on his arm. “A book?” He shook his head, drawing together his brows so that a deep groove showed between them. “I don’t remember…” Then he shrugged. “Oh well – so often I forget what I’ve done and said, and if I didn’t have Hester to remind me…” He grinned ruefully, and patting John’s shoulder in thanks stepped through the glass doors and into the dining room behind.

John sat for much of that day underneath the stricken elm, his back pressed against the bark. The thought of the notebook upstairs, and all its empty pages, made him attend to whatever scraps of conversation came to him through the still air. Someone had opened a window in the glasshouse, and not quite fastened the latch; it swung back and forth on its hinges sending flashes of reflected sun across the garden like a signal of distress. The two young women began to play a silent childish game, exchanging clothes or finding unfitting dresses in damp cupboards, wandering between the house and the reservoir, making it seem as though days must have passed. He watched Eve's face alter as she moved between the others, so that it was for Elijah respectful and a little grave, as he sat indoors with his chair on the threshold and his feet not quite in the sun, and with Clare became again mobile and quick to laugh or scowl. The young women sat together cross-legged, pulling at sunburn peeling on their arms, threading the blue tomb-beads they’d found around the cat’s thin neck until it grew angry and bolted to the shade of the fading rose-bushes on the terrace. Once he looked up to see Eve and Walker on a remote part of the lawn, circling each other like wary animals: she grew suddenly spiteful or angry, and raised her voice until he held his hands palm outwards to calm her down; then he shrugged and wandered up to the reservoir wall where Alex sat scribbling on a crumpled piece of paper. John knew she saw him at his post beneath the elm, and once passed close enough for him to see three livid marks where she’d been bitten on the pad of flesh behind her knee. While he was still restlessly wondering what he might say to her, or she to him, she changed her course and went for the glasshouse instead, singing under her breath.

Late in the afternoon, as the shadow from the elm reached almost to the house, Clare came and sat beside him. She’d covered her greying swimming costume with a dark green dress that reached to her ankles, its hem splashed with mud from another season. Sweat had darkened the roots of her hair, and she was smeared with cream that lay on her skin like the marks on an animal’s pelt. The lotion smelt a little of honey, and had begun to attract tiny black flies. “Thunder-bugs,” said John, lifting one from the back of her hand with his thumbnail. “It means the storm is coming very soon.”

“I don't think I want to go swimming,” she said. The cat had broken the string of beads, and she tossed them between her hands.

“Why - aren't you hot? Won’t the water cool you?” He picked up a bead from where it had fallen, and put it in her palm.

“I went up there just now and there was something under the water, like hair or clothes. Alex says it’s a plastic bag but I don’t think so. A plastic bag would float, wouldn’t it?”

“Aren't you going to the seaside tomorrow? Then you can swim in the sea.”

“That would be even deeper, though. Do you like swimming?”

“I don’t know”, he said again. “I can’t remember.” This was true: there must have been swimming, he thought, on the short holidays they took in bed-and-breakfasts in Kent and Suffolk, but he was too dazed with heat to remember. He felt sweat collect where the girl’s shoulder rested against his, and easing himself away from her lowered himself onto the grass. She spread the beads in her lap and began to sort them into small piles, chatting idly to him without pausing for breath or answer.

Her undemanding presence soothed him until he lay half-asleep, now and then caught by a word or phrase: “The beads are pretty aren’t they, blue like bits of a broken plate - are they glass? … I tried to make him wear them but he wouldn’t: he said they smelt like the skin of the dead man who’d been wearing them but I can’t smell anything, can you? … I remember someone at St Joseph’s had beads just like this on her wrist with a bird hanging from it and when she lost the bird I found it for her …”

There it was again, thought John, St Joseph's: when I see Hester, when I'm awake, I'll make her tell me, and then I'll write it all down.

“It wasn’t like this last year,” said Clare, “Do you remember? It rained and rained and Eve was unhappy then and wouldn’t play the piano, and the keys got dusty … well of course that was before Walker got here but I don’t know why that would cheer her up; she’s always hated him and I heard him call her bitch once when he thought no-one was listening. Bitch, I said, that’s terrible, you can’t say that; and he laughed and said well she’s more like a cat really, a dog’s a faithful animal, and kissed me on the forehead like he always does when he’s sorry … and of course that was the year we took Alex away …”

At this she fell silent, so that the sound of the beads clicking in her lap roused John, who looked up between outspread fingers to see her frowning over her shoulder, back towards the house. After a while she began singing under her breath … *Oh thunderbug, fly away home, Your house is on fire and your children will burn*… The low hum went through her and into the hard earth, and became part of the heat and the dry rustle of wind in the dying branches of the elm. Soon after he must have fallen asleep, because when he was woken by Clare shaking him urgently by the shoulder, it had begun to grow dark, and the empty garden was in shadow.

The sound of a dog barking frantically reached them from the open windows of the house, and with it an unfamiliar voice raised in hysterical anger or pleading. John sat up too quickly, and felt the blood drain from his head. Specks of light floated in front of his eyes, and shaking his head to be rid of them he asked the girl, “What’s that, who’s come here? Who is it?” His first thought was that he’d been finally found out, and his stomach lurched once and then receded, leaving him breathless and hollow.

Clare twisted the fabric of her skirt. “I think it’s that woman again – ”

“What woman?”

“She never told us her name . . . She comes sometimes, because – ” She stopped herself, pressing her hand to her mouth as if she’d suddenly remembered there were things she mustn’t say. Then she slid her hand into his and said, “You won’t let her come down here?”

“Of course I won’t,” he said, thinking of the name written in the notebook upstairs, and engraved into the table in the kitchen. Was this Eadwacer then, come to deliver another of those foolish letters?

“Let’s stay here.” Clare crouched beside him clasping her knees, and whispered: “She always goes away after a while, let’s just stay here where she won’t see us – where’s Alex? She mustn’t find him.” Up on the embankment wall, John could see the young man pacing back and forth. The yellow light above the tower had come on, and shed a sickly glow on the grass. “It’s all right, he’s up there,” he said. “Who is she?”

“She’s horrible – she shouts and cries, and always brings her dog. And I don’t like looking at her face: it’s all soft, like she doesn’t have any bones. Alex knew her, you know, back when he went away. She’s always trying to find him.” She started to cry, and John patted her helplessly on the shoulder.

Then there was a lull in the noise from the house, and instead they heard a deep measured voice that must have been Elijah’s. The dog barked once more, in a single threatened yelp, and the cat bolted from the house with its ragged ears flattened against its scalp. Spying John and Clare huddled at the foot of the elm, it slowed to a saunter, and reaching them thrust its head into Clare’s palm and set up an ecstatic purr. The girl fussed over it for a while, and then said, “I can see her, look.”

As it grew darker, the lamp-lit rooms of the house became more distinct, and they could make out a small group in the kitchen, stiffly ranged against each other. Hester and Elijah stood side by side, their backs to the window as if they had made a prior agreement to form a barrier. Elijah spoke, the lights making an untidy halo of the reddish curls on his head, his hand raised in a defensive soothing gesture. In the centre of the room John saw a short woman with thick colourless hair and a pale soft face twisted with anger or misery. She wore a shapeless grey coat buttoned to the neck, and light reflecting from the small thick lenses of her glasses gave her movements a blind menacing look. John immediately felt a surge of loathing and disgust, as though he’d woken up to find a spider on his pillow. Eve and Walker stood in the doorway, Eve a little behind the older man as though he’d pushed himself forward to shield her. The fine bones of her face were pale as paper underneath her cap of black hair, and her head was tilted back like a child trying to be brave. It was this, and not Clare crying beside him, that made John stand and say, “Do you think we should stay here? Shouldn’t we go in?”

She shook her head, and sniffed at her tears. “I don’t think so. They always make her go away. Won’t you stay with me here with until she goes?”

“But don’t you think it must be her, who writes those letters? Perhaps she came to put another one through the door, and they saw her.” The woman looked so exactly the kind of person to do something so idiotically spiteful that John suddenly felt relieved: of all the fragments of the whole story, here was one that finally fit. The idea satisfied him, as it would if he’d been sitting in his armchair at the shop, idly turning the pages of a book; but all the same the nervous twisting of his stomach didn’t subside.

“I don’t know. Maybe – but stay here, please: I don’t like the shouting, it scares me.”

“Of course I will.” Her face, streaked with tears and grubby with dust, was suddenly very like his brother’s had been, when they were young and he’d come to John with the terrible, brief distress of childhood. He patted her shoulder twice, and said, “Well then, let's not think about her. Why don’t you tell me about your cat? How old is he?”

“I don’t know.” She wiped her nose on her bare arm. “I think he must be very old, look: he has white hairs on his nose.” The cat shot John a baleful stare, and began to worry at its torn ear. “Is it true that all ginger cats are boys?”

“Toms, yes. They call them toms, I think – look, is she going?” The little group in the kitchen was slowly dispersing, and he thought he heard the front door close. A moment later the dog’s bark receded into the distance, and after a long silence in which they could make out the footsteps of Alex pacing the embankment wall behind them, Eve began to play the piano. The cat, sensing the crisis had passed, aimed a petulant scratch at Clare and idled back towards the house, pausing now and then to pat at something in the grass.

Clare began to cry again, this time quietly and with a steady fixed look of sadness. She seemed to John less like a child then than she’d ever been, and it made him anxious and unsure of himself and his methods: he took his arm from her shoulder and said, “Let’s bring your brother in, shall we? Look, here he comes: don’t let him see you cry.” She reached up her arms, and he pulled her to her feet. “That’s right, everything’s all right,” he said, patting his pockets for the handkerchief that was always there, not remembering he wore another man’s clothes. “It’s just us now, there’s no-one else here.”

**II**

That night Alex passed him in the ill-lit hall upstairs and said, “Game of cards? We’re teaching Elijah to play poker.” He had combed his auburn hair into a side-parting, which made him look like a boy playing at manhood, and wore a grey T-shirt on which were printed a large and unblinking pair of eyes. “Walker’s been trying to corrupt him all week – first drinking, now gambling. Want to join us?” He looked a little drawn, thought John, finding himself avoiding the eyes on the boy's chest as if they'd see something the others had missed: perhaps he’d heard the dog barking in the afternoon and seen the woman go, and resented being kept in the dark. No-one had mentioned the unwelcome visitor at dinner, as they sat picking wearily at a pair of chickens Hester had roasted, though John saw - with a surge irritation he did not understand - that Eve and Walker sat very close together, unspeaking but complicit. He’d have liked to raise his voice above the murmuring at the table and say, “Who was it, then, that came this afternoon?”, to put himself between them, but knew it was impossible.

“I haven’t played poker since college,” said John, following the younger man, whose T-shirt brought indoors the stale damp smell of the reservoir. “Even then I always folded early – I never could sustain a lie.”

“It won't matter: you won't be any worse than Elijah.” Alex paused and turned. “You haven’t spoken to him much yet, have you? He’s a good man. A bit odd” - he tapped his forehead, in exactly the same self-mocking gesture of the night before - “But I like him: always did you know, even then - ” As the hall led away from the head of the stairs, the floorboards were pock-marked and bare, pale with dust by the skirting-boards. The lights overhead were dim and unshaded, and cast weak circles of light at uneven intervals along the way. Velvet-flocked paper rubbed bare at shoulder height covered the walls, and between the closed doors on each side darker squares of paper showed where paintings had been taken down, to be sold or given away. “Here we are”, said Alex. The door ahead of them had swollen with damp and weak lamp-light showed where it didn’t quite fit its frame. John could smell cigarette smoke, and behind that the familiar scent of old damp and new dust that comes with a roomful of books.

“Ready?” said Alex, and put up a hand to open the door. Behind him, the thin cat woke from the dark corner it had chosen and dashed to the door, where it tried to trip John. He gave it a furtive kick, and said: “Before we go in – do you mind my asking; I don’t want to be rude – what is wrong with Elijah? I see him standing at the door but never coming out – what is it?” What’s wrong with all of you, come to that, he thought.

“Oh”, said Alex vaguely, pausing on the threshold: “If you ask him he’ll say, ‘It’s trouble with my heart.’ And if you ask him what trouble, he’ll say ‘It’s heavy.’ There’s not much wrong with him really,” he went on, turning the door-handle. Then, as if he’d heard what John had barely thought, he grinned and with one of his careless affectionate blows to the shoulder said, “At least, not much more than the rest of us, anyway. Now” – the door swung open, and revealed Elijah sitting with Walker at a bare plywood table - “Who’s for a game of poker?”

“Too late, I'm afraid.” Walker, in a freshly-laundered white shirt unbuttoned a little too far, deftly shuffled a pack of cards and knocked them against his knee. “Turns out the Preacher’s not a natural gambler. His face is too truthful - he might as well be using glass cards. How much did you lose?”

“One hundred and seventy-three pence,” said Elijah regretfully, tugging at his beard. He wore a black shirt that looked as if it had recently borne a priest’s white collar, and his thick reddish hair stood out in sweat-dampened curls. “You didn't tell me it was all about lying. I'm no good at that.”

“So I see. Sit down, won't you?” said Walker to John, glancing wryly at his grass-stained jeans. “You're always so keen on standing about.”

John sat with Alex at the table. It was stained with coffee rings, and scattered with piles of copper coins and a discarded deck of cards too dog-eared for use. On one of the playing cards someone had printed EADWACER in cramped capitals, and John drew them towards him, hastily concealing the card from Alex. He glanced at the two older men: had they between them planned so cheap a trick? But Elijah was stooping towards the boy, and in his low murmur there was surely nothing but warmth.

A tin of Drum tobacco and several damp cigarette papers suggested Walker had added smoking to the curriculum of vices he taught, and there were two empty teacups that smelt strongly of whisky. Aside from the table, the room was the same as his own: there again was the narrow bed with its painted metal frame, and the same shabby bookshelves, though John saw enviously that these bowed under the weight of cloth- and leather-bound books.

The sight of the gilt spines, carefully aligned, reminded him of something he’d seen a long time ago; and it was a while before he realised - with a jolt that pricked at the nape of his neck - that he could hardly remember how his own shop had looked when last he’d seen it. The pair of casement windows were uncurtained, overlooking the lawn and the light above the valve tower, and showing the new moon with a bright star hanging from it by a thread. “Close the door”, said Alex, “Or you’ll wake up Hester, and I’ve had enough of her today.” He rolled his eyes affectionately, and Walker reached out with his foot to shut the door. Its swing set up a faint rustle from somewhere behind John, and wondering what caused it he turned to see that where the walls were bare of shelves they were covered, from roof to floor, in sheets of thin white paper printed with columns of black type. Each sheet was pinned at the upper corners and left free at its lower edge, so that they lifted in the wake of the door. John would have liked to reach forward and tug one from the wall to read it, but felt Walker's pale eyes on him and affected not to have noticed.

“What do you think, then?” said Elijah. He pointed over John's shoulder. “It’s my patented storm-prediction system.”

“I see,” said John, who didn't. “And does it work?”

“Well I don’t know yet, do I? But it's a simple matter of wind direction.” Elijah surveyed the wall, clasping his hands across his stomach and tipping his head to one side. “Or, indeed, of there being any wind at all. They're surprisingly loud: listen.” He stood up, and flapped his hands at the wall as if shooing it away. The paper shuffled noisily and then settled in their regiments. “Imagine how loudly that’ll sound when the storm comes! I don't want to miss it if I'm asleep. Don't you think this’ll wake me up?” Sitting down again he looked at John, who said, “Yes, I should think so. Almost certainly.” Alex caught his eye, and again made that faint tapping gesture on his forehead. Stifling a smile, John bent to read the nearest sheets of paper, and at once recognised them as pages torn from a bible large enough to have rested on a pulpit lectern. Some had been cut neatly with a razor, and others were carelessly torn, bringing with them fragments of the white thread that had stitched them to the spine. On every sheet the phrase *be not afraid* appeared, the verse circled in uneven loops of red ink.

“Are you a drinker?” said Walker. He withdrew a bottle of whisky from underneath the table, and pulled out the stopper. In the close air of the room, the smell of peat and alcohol stung John’s eyes.

“Not much of one,” he said, apologetically, turning back from the table. “In the winter, sometimes. I couldn’t drink in this heat. All I want is water. Last night I dreamt I was trying to pour myself a drink but as soon as the water hit the glass it evaporated and all that was left was steam. When I woke up I was so thirsty my mouth was dry and my tongue felt like cloth –”

Walker’s gunmetal grey eyes glinted, and John blushed: he was conscious of having made an opening that could be probed wider if anyone cared to reach for it. He opened the Drum tin, and picked at the shreds of tobacco on the table. “Alex tells me you’re being corrupted,” he said politely to Elijah, as though it were no more unusual than a remark on the weather. The older man nodded gravely, and began tapping out a familiar rhythm on the table. “Walker’s doing his best, and of course I’m grateful for his efforts; but I’m not taking to it as easily as I always feared I would.”

“We've done drink,” said Walker, picking up a box of matches and sliding the drawer in and out of its case, “But not with much success: he’s far too big a man – look at him: he's the size of an ox. Smoking makes him feel sick – he turns white before the match goes out. Gambling's a waste of time; it's like playing with a child. I’m running out of vices, although there’s always women and song...” Alex looked up sharply, and set a penny spinning on its edge. The fabric of his T-shirt moved in folds, and the eyes printed on his chest shifted to the door.

“No women available here, though, are there?” he said, and John thought he saw Walker faintly incline his head in apology.

“And do you mind my asking,” said John, feeling his way through the conversation with outstretched hands, “Why you’re doing all this?” The penny rattled to a halt.

“He had a wasted youth,” said Walker, striking a match and idly watching the flame flare at his fingertips.

John looked at Elijah's grave unsmiling face, and his forearms solid as oak, and could not imagine him either a youth or a wastrel.

“Wasted it on God,” said Alex, with his habit of saying aloud what John had been thinking. He rolled the coin across the table with his thumb. “On God, and on doing good.” At a loss, John decided he’d wait patiently for someone to say something sensible, and began neatly stacking coins. Elijah, taking pity, leant back in his chair, folded his hands across his dark-shirted stomach, and said gently: “You ought not to mock our guest, you know.” His voice, though rather quieter than that of the other men, was deep and grave, as though it came to them from a pulpit. Walker and Alex both looked a little ashamed of themselves, and Elijah, content with his reproof, turned to John. “I wasn’t always like this, you now. I didn’t always live here. I was a pastor, I was respected …” He thought about this, and then said, as if the thought had just occurred to him: “Admired, actually, and I believe I was loved - but lives change, even at my age - suddenly – quite without warning -”. He paused again, and John thought he saw the man's heavily-lidded eyes brighten with moisture. Then he said, “How can I explain? I would like you to understand me, if you can ... It was like coming home after a long day, tired and hungry and with your feet aching in their shoes. And there at the end of the road is your house, and your car's on the drive, and the lights are on. And there's the front door you painted yourself, in the colour your own wife chose; and by the doorstep there's the bay-tree you planted the year before. But when you try your keys, they won't turn in the lock, even when you turn it left and right and grow angry until the door shakes on its hinges.”

He drew the whisky towards him and surveyed the label. It showed a watercolour picture of a distillery set on an outcrop of reddish rock. The rainstorm gathering above the rocks looked to John like an impossible miracle he’d never see again. “I think I’ll have another, if you don’t mind,” said Elijah. When Walker had passed him a half-filled teacup, he went on, “No, that isn’t right: it wasn’t like that at all. Look: if I drop this cup, what will happen?”

“It will fall and break,” said John, glad for once to be certain of things.

“Of course. You know that to be true, because you’ve dropped things many times before. Things fall and often break: those are the rules. But what if I let go and it just hung there, or fell slowly, or began to rise up? Would you believe it? Not the first time, you wouldn't: you know the rules, after all. You wouldn't believe your eyes – you’d think yourself mad, or unwell - you’d do it again and again, until you really believed the rules had changed. And then you’d think: what else has changed? If that rule can be broken, what about all the others? And maybe you’d want to put your hand in a fire, and see if it came out wet.” He drained the cup. “It was like that. All my life I’d lived by a set of rules that weren’t any less real or unchanging than an apple falling, or the sun setting in the west. The laws were fixed and constant. They made sense of everything in the past, and nothing in the future frightened me. It was a rock under my feet. I’m talking about God,” he said anxiously, leaning forward a little, as though he wanted to be very certain John understood. “You realise that?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Good.” He reached for the bottle, thought better of it, and instead ran a finger around the lip of the teacup, and sucked thoughtfully at it. “You see, I believed - no, I *knew* - that my life had been ordered since before time. I knew that events would follow each other in their proper order, and always for my good. There’d be rainstorms of course, but always after that sunshine. Illness, but then good health. Disappointments – more of those than I like to remember – but always soon after cause to hope again. And I never once thought ‘this simply is the way of life’. I thanked God that he was the overseer: that he was holding up the sky, if you like. And I became a pastor, because nothing mattered more to me than making others see that they too were in the hands of God. And then one morning” – John thought for a moment the older man was going to make the teacup disappear up his sleeve – “He was gone. Just like that. I woke up and he wasn’t there. . . or was it like that, after all?” He rolled the cup between his palms and John flinched, certain it would break. “I must try to be truthful. Maybe it happened more slowly, like waking alone in your bed with no loved head on the pillow next to yours, and mourning a while before realising you've always been alone, and the footsteps you’d heard out in the hall were only echoes of your own. I expect it happens every day – children grow up and grow out of their faith, or life makes the case against God. But in my case, of course, everyone noticed, because they all went to church one Sunday morning and there was no-one in the pulpit.”

Walker coughed discreetly, and lit a cigarette. In the unmoving air the ribbon of smoke lifted to the ceiling where it spread and thinned. “They waited almost a quarter of an hour, didn't they? Sang the same hymn three times.”

“They did,” said Elijah, and began to tap the table again, this time accompanying the beat with a deep, half-heard hum. John thought he knew the melody, and then, in a sudden moment of perfect clarity, remembered where he’d heard it before. His had not been a pious upbringing, but his mother had been a dutiful church-goer, largely because she alone could coax the church’s elderly harmonium into life. John and his brother sat beside her in the same pew every week, playing noughts and crosses, waiting for the sermon to end. Christopher had a fine treble voice until it broke at thirteen, and sang cheerfully with no thought for the meaning of the hymns, walking home afterwards still singing for the mere pleasure of using his voice. Their mother’s favourite hymn, which she contrived to play at least twice a month, had a mournful lilting melody (she once told them it had been found on a seashore by a Welsh vicar, written on a scrap of paper and rolled into a bottle). The words were sentimental and melancholy and often moved the congregation to tears, and John remembered them now: how the love of God was *vast, unmeasured, boundless, free, rolling like a mighty ocean in its fullness over me*… Singing it as a child, he had imagined grey folds of saltwater closing over his head, and not fighting upwards for air and life but sinking instead with his hands folded in prayer. Twenty five years later - his mother and the music she'd played too distant and vague to remember - he felt the old unease return.

The older man was staring distractedly at the paper-covered walls, preoccupied with the old song. “It’s all gone, you see: all gone. The rock under my feet turned out to be sand after all, and in the end the tide came in. Walker says I’m free, like a dog off its leash. Which is all very well, but what if I run into the road?”

“We’ll show you where to cross,” said Walker, smilingly. He looked at Elijah with more warmth and affection than John would have thought him capable of summoning, and began deftly shuffling the pack of cards. “Shall we try again, Preacher?” he said. “Practice makes perfect, even with sin.” He dealt them each a hand of three. Sitting with the other men around the table, the whisky-bottle between them and the moon passing the open window, was curiously like being on board a half-empty ship, forced to find company in a stranger’s cabin. It reminded John of a pamphlet he’d once bought at auction, a coarse engraving of a ship under full sail printed on the cover. “I’ll tell you something interesting”, he said rather eagerly, leaning forward.

“*Finally*,” muttered Walker, rolling his eyes, and smiling to show he meant it kindly. John flushed a little, but pressed on: “Last year, or the year before, I bought a crate full of books that had been left to get damp in a garage somewhere. Most of it was ruined – one of the books even had some sort of fat blind maggot burrowed into its spine - but there were a few things worth having, and the best of them was a facsimile of a German poem - from the fifteenth century, I think, though I can’t remember who wrote it – called *The Ship of Fools*.” John risked a glance at his companions. Walker had tilted back his head to release a ribbon of smoke towards the ceiling, and the others were listening, both inclining slightly towards him across the plywood table. He went on, “The poem was about a boat put to sea full of madmen. No sane man or woman was allowed board, except the captain, I suppose, though I thought he must have been mad to take such a crew. At sea of course they say and do as they please: there's no law, and no-one watching; and if no-one’s watching, who’s to say what’s sane, and what isn’t? I didn’t read all of it, but I liked the idea, and ever since I’ve wondered if it ever really happened. Madmen turned out of towns and villages and sent to sea, and allowed to get on with being mad as hatters, without bothering anyone by it.”

He paused, aware the other men were avoiding his eyes. Walker put out his cigarette half-smoked and shuffled intently through his hand of cards, and Alex began to gnaw at the scab between his knuckles. It was the same effect as when he’d read aloud from the book of poems he’d found the day before, trying out that curious name for size, and found Eve and Clare retreating from him without knowing why. I always said no good ever came of reading poetry, he thought, and felt his blush deepen behind his beard. He said, “I expect I’ve got it wrong. I didn’t read it all the way through. I don’t suppose anybody does, these days.”

Beside him Alex began to set coins spinning on the table until a dozen of them reeled between the tobacco tin and the bottle of whisky, buzzing as they went. The noise set his teeth on edge, and made him painfully anxious: he glanced up at Walker, who laid down his cards in a tidy arc, then stood up and lightly touched Alex on the shoulder. “I’m off to put the kettle on, old thing”, he said. “Lend a hand?” The younger man stared miserably at the buzzing coins, which suddenly ceased their spinning and clattered to a halt. The eyes printed on his chest blinked at him with undisguised malice, and he gave John a veiled, secretive look, both hostile and guarded, as if he suspected him of having been spying for a weakness all along. It was so unlike the affectionate lad who’d threaded an arm through his the night before that John flinched, as if it had been a blow. Then Alex stood up, and without saying ‘goodnight’ to the others followed the other man into the corridor. Walker turned at the door, gave an ironic bow vaguely in John’s direction, and closed the door behind him.

Elijah sighed, and reached across to push the window open a little further, and the scent of dry grass and night-flowering jasmine seeped over the windowsill.

He surveyed John for a while without speaking, then reached for the bottle. “I think maybe it’s time we had a talk,” he said kindly. John took the cup he was offered, and recoiled as the scent of whisky stung his eyes. Elijah drained his own, wiped a droplet from his moustache, and gazed without speaking at the other man over steepled fingers. John suspected he had practised that same gaze on any number of faltering church members. He said, with a relieving burst of exasperation: “I just wish I knew what was going on, that’s all. Sometimes I think I know what I should say, and when; and then I take a wrong turning and find I’ve fallen into a pit someone left for me. . .what *is* going on, Elijah?” He heard his own voice as though it came from another room: it was plaintive and tired, and nothing like his own. “They tell me stories, or seem to, and always there's those names – Eadwacer, St Joseph – but I never hear the end of things, or understand what's happening...”

Elijah’s eyes, above the russet square-cut beard, were kind and frank, with pupils that reacted readily to the glow and fade of light. As he turned them now on John the pupils spread and darkened his gaze; he raised his hand to his moustache, and his face registered first surprise, then caution, then finally – with the slow half-smile of a mischievous child – delight.

“But surely,” he said – “Dear me: surely you know? Why else would you be here?”

John’s tongue was tied with the old cords, and for the first time in his life he was grateful: he would not have known how to answer. Instead he drew the empty bottle towards him across the table, and sliding his thumbnail under the label began to peel it from the glass.

Elijah nodded, as emphatically as if the other man had spoken. He said “Ah!”, and leaned back in his chair.

“Never mind that,” he said. “I must admit, I did wonder – St Joseph’s is a private hospital. It is a -” Here his fine voice faltered, as if he found it distasteful; then he coughed, drew himself upright, and said with something like defiance, “A psychiatric institution, if you like, though they – we – never called it that: it was a quiet place when I first arrived, until Alex came. He was not in his right mind, you know, not for some time. The others were never…” – again he faltered – “Never patients, if I must use that word, though we never liked it. No: the women came to see Alex at first, and after a little while they came for me too and I forgot they weren’t anything to do with me. Walker was never one of us, he worked there for a while, but everything overlapped, every mark was overstepped – do you follow? – and when we left we left together, and Hester told them ‘I have room for more, if there are others not ready to be alone yet.’” Elijah shook his head. “She wrote down her name and address and phone number, even. We said it wasn’t wise, that anyone could come, but I think perhaps she’d hit on a way of saving her soul…”

John tore the last strip of paper from the whisky bottle and crumpled the rainclouds above the distillery in his fist. He saw again Alex’s face, as he turned it up to the Pole Star, and saw the fixed steady gaze as though the boy was tethering himself to it for fear he might otherwise come loose and not find himself again.

He said, “I see – yes: I think I see now.” Muddy with heat and sleep, he stirred in his chair: a new thought had come to him, and with great difficulty he forced it onto his tongue. “Then – is this why no-one ever asks me where I came from, or what I’m doing here?”

Elijah, reaching across to pin one of the white pages more securely to the wall, looked up and smiled. “Oh they think you came from there too. We all just assumed you were mad.”

**SATURDAY**

**I**

The pliant, salt-stained earth that had given way under John's feet as he made his way down to the reservoir marked the beginning of the marshes that ran for miles along the coast. The poplars and copper beeches that shaded the house were among the last of the tall trees on that final stretch of land before the sea. Beyond there they thinned out to squat shrubs and low-growing pines, all that could withstand the incoming wind.

The road from which he’d first found the house reached the coast fifteen miles from where he’d left the car. It passed between fields of harvested wheat and barley, where crows flew low over the pale stubble and pecked at voles and mice. All through the fields pylons in the distance came at them like high-masted ships of the line. Along the parched grass verges rabbits poisoned by exasperated farmers shivered and closed their weeping eyes, and on the horizon sea-birds wheeled over the white masts of fishing-boats moored in the small quay. Past the last of the fields, a row of dark Scots pines bent to the ground, and beyond here the land shelved downwards by degrees, first to shallow sand-dunes and bleached grasses, then to the quay and the salt-marshes out east.

It seemed to John, as they took that road in the early morning, that the whole world had a close attentive look, the Scots pines peering at him as he passed and black unblinking eyes regarding him from the hedgerows. What he had learned the night before had quietened and unsettled him in equal measure: he knew now why, on his first night, they'd all had a watchful, anxious look, until Alex had come through the glass doors; and why Hester had sat alone on the stairs the day before, like a sentry at her post. He understood, too, the curious atmosphere within the house, of nothing being asked or expected. But for everything that seemed clearer by morning, something tugged at his memory and made him uneasy. If some curious unwise pact had brought them here, and kept them together in unquestioning intimacy, what burst of childishness and spite had caused one of them to write those absurd letters, and leave the name EADWACER scratched into the table in the kitchen, and written in dust on the windowsills?

Worse by far was the knowledge they’d readily believed he had come from a psychiatric hospital, however comfortable the premises and however discreet the staff. The preacher, amused and not much surprised, had promised to keep the secret of John's deceit, until either he confessed or found his way home. “Or stay, if you like,” he'd said, walking with him to the door, his heavy arm across John's shoulder: “It makes no difference to Hester- she's wealthier than you or I will ever be. And – forgive me! - are you certain you don't need to be here, at least for a while?”

There had been a brief moment when, brave with drink, John thought he'd go to Hester and tell her what he'd done: he imagined her seated the other side of a confessional grille, ready with some easy penance and a word or two of gentle reproof. But by morning it had become impossible again. His habitual impulse to honesty was pushed aside by the demands of all the empty pages in the notebook waiting to be filled, and behind that something deeper and harder to define: a leaning towards them all that had nothing to do with curiosity, but was almost a helpless kind of desire. He had gone to sleep remembering the promised journey to the coast, and his car waiting on the verge, and imagined turning left as they turned right, and quietly taking his leave. But it was not relief he felt as watched the yellow lamp-light stain his bedroom wall, but an early sense of loss. They’ll hardly miss me, he thought, and tried to recall the precise order of his silent flat and the sound of the clock keeping its good time beside the till, but they were just out of reach.

That morning he had been woken soon after seven by patient knocking on his bedroom door. The room was already warm and the air moist, and the damp sheets tangled around his feet. The knocking grew impatient, and after a brief pause Alex put his head around the door. “You up? Everyone else is.” His russet eyes, so very like his sister’s, were bright and clear, and had none of the veiled, sour look they’d held the night before.

“Not up yet,” said John, pulling the sheet to his chin.

“We’ll be off in a bit. Best not to drive when it gets too hot: it can be very uncomfortable.”

“I imagine it can...”

“Half an hour then? The girls are taking you.”

“Oh but I have my own car,” said John, but the young man shrugged, and made a dismissive gesture.

“Let Eve drive you,” he said: “Time she made herself useful.” Then the bright head vanished, and John lay back on the hot pillow, refusing to acknowledge that it was not frustration he felt – another day, then: really it couldn't be helped – but relief.

Dressed this time in a dark green T-shirt with a red star on the chest and only a single tear on the shoulder-seam, and having managed in the shower to return his hair and beard to something like their usual ordered state, John came down to the dark hall and pushed open the kitchen door. The two young women were sitting on the table, Eve with her legs crossed and Clare swinging hers like a child.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Is it?” Eve reached up and lifted the short black curls from the nape of her neck, arching her back with a tired groan. It was an unselfconscious gesture John had come to recognise, and it annoyed him: he turned away, and watched Clare pass fragments of burnt toast to the cat.

“You’re coming with us. Eve is going to drive. Hope that’s okay.” Clare grinned up at him.

“Alex told me, yes: you are very kind.” He pressed a hand to his aching head. “I don't suppose there's coffee?”

Still in a muddle of waking, he found the events of the day before laid out one after the other, as though he were being dealt a hand of cards: the barking of the stranger's dog echoing against the hard lawn; the thin pages pinned to the walls of Elijah's room; the preacher's broad short fingers beating against the stained table while they talked. He shook his head to clear it, and drank the coffee Eve offered him.

“We mustn't be long, you know,” said Clare, peering at the plastic watch she wore. “Hester will be angry if our place is taken. She always has to have the same spot, and says she’d like to die there. Isn’t that stupid?”

“Very,” he said, thinking that it was not, at all: in the weeks before she died his mother had often said there was a particular place she’d like to be seeing when she closed her eyes for the last time, only she couldn’t quite think where. In the end, waking fretfully from an opiate doze, she had asked where she was, and his brother had said smilingly, “Just where you wanted to be, of course.”

“Well then,” – he set down the coffee-cup rather harshly in order to startle the cat, which had been sneering at him since he’d first opened the door – “Well then – ought we to leave?”

Clare picked up a watermelon, its green bands so lurid it was impossible to believe the flesh inside was not poisoned, and followed him through the half-open front door to the white steps he had first seen from the far end of the drive. Behind them Eve withdrew a bunch of keys from her pocket, and turned to lock the door. The fabric of her T-shirt sag at the nape of her neck, leaving her blue-white skin exposed to the sun. “You’ll be careful won’t you?” said John, so surprised at his own voice that he felt the blood come up in his cheeks.

She turned, startled, and because her face was unguarded for a moment he wondered if she’d noticed him for the first time as independent from the others, and not merely a part in the constantly shifting engine of the house. Or perhaps it was that he’d never really seen her before: her mouth was half-open and he could see a tooth set crookedly and a little darker than the others. She looked anxiously down at the key in her hand.

“No, I’m sorry: I mean, your skin” –his hands were full; he couldn’t gesture, and instead nodded two or three times at her shoulder, which was now also uncovered, the neck of her shirt having been pulled out of shape long ago – “You’ll burn. Won’t you? I think you’ll burn.” He felt he must have transgressed again, but couldn’t see how or why. Surely, he thought, trying to will the flush away from his cheeks, surely anyone would say it, anyone at all: it’s such an angry sun these days. She turned the key in the lock, then tugged impatiently at her clothes, and gave to her face the half-mocking expression he recognised. “Decently covered now,” she said. “This way.”

John followed them to a car parked in a narrow passage between the house and the boundary wall. The passenger door had been replaced with another of a slightly darker shade of blue, and the wheel arches and windscreen were thick with pale reddish dust. When Eve opened the doors gusts of stale air buffeted them, then rose upwards.

He said, “Are we going far?” The shabby leather seat, patched with black tape, was painfully hot against his back. In front of him Clare folded her hands over the watermelon and immediately began to doze.

“Not far – we never do,” said Eve, turning the key in the ignition twice, “Twenty minutes. Straight up until we reach the coast.”

John averted his eyes from the window. He did not want to his see own car, the bonnet half-raised, beckoning from the verge. The low voices of the women and the sound of the road beneath the tyres lulled him until he almost slept, now and then wondering if he were back in North London, soon to be woken by the number 73 idling in the lay-by. He had almost begun to persuade himself that if he opened his eyes he would see not harrowed fields but the white covers of his own bed, when Eve wound down her window and let in air that left the taste of salt on his lips. The car shuddered over a raised kerb, and she pulled savagely at the hand-brake. “This is it – come on, won’t you, before the tide turns.” She leapt from the car, cradling the watermelon on her hip and biting thoughtfully on her thumbnail. John unfolded himself from the seat. It wasn’t much past nine o’clock, but the car park was already almost full, and the sun beat back at them from windscreens and wing mirrors, and made pools of silver wherever the tarmac dipped. To the left of the car park, a series of tufted sand-dunes led out to the beach, and beyond them John saw a stretch of immaculate pale sand, the sea a fine bright strip on the horizon. Past the cars huddled into corners of shade, he could see the masts of the boats that crowded the small boatyard, and beyond there a line of dark squat shrubs that marked the beginning of the salt-marshes. Two men stooped over a green-painted tender with a wooden hull, and looked up curiously at the man in his winter shoes and the women following, then shrugged and returned to their tasks.

A shed selling seafood had just opened its hatch, and a woman in a white paper apron came out and chalked her wares on a black-board propped against the side, scuttling out of the sun when she’d finished, and laying strips of seaweed on beds of ice for mussels and oysters. The car park sloped gradually down to form a quay-side, and here a boy in a blue cap sat cross-legged, trailing a crab-line in the green water while his father lay back and dozed with a newspaper spread over his chest. There was the familiar scent of clean air and salt and something deeper underneath, of fragments of fish dropped by gulls and drying out in hidden places, and seaweed dying on beds of rock. John could hear, above the calling of the gulls, the rushing and receding sound he'd once taken home in the coils of a shell that he pressed to his ear in winter, when there seemed no possibility of the sun ever shining again.

“This way, then,” said Eve, and led them west, to where a pine boardwalk, worn down in the centre of each step, led from the car-park through the dunes and out to the beach. An east wind cooled the air, bringing to John a memory of long days with his brother digging trenches round sandcastles brave with shells on the battlements. When the boardwalk ended in the white sand, the women kicked off their sandals and John rolled borrowed socks into the toes of his shoes, tied the laces together, and hung them round his neck. As they walked on, Eve’s shadow on the sand in front of him overlapped his bare feet, and he saw the sun already marking her between her shoulder-blades.

“*On*ward *on*ward *ev*er *on*ward,” chanted Clare behind him, as they passed the last of the dunes and bore west towards the open sea. John’s breath was snatched by wind and by surprise: the beach lay in front of them in a white stretch that he couldn’t take in at first, so that he stood turning his head from side to side, trying to bring it all within his vision. The tide might have been ten miles out, it was so far away; and between the dunes behind them and the first lapping of the waves was a long shallow pool, dazzlingly bright, set back from the sea by a raised sandbank. Now and then small white butterflies ventured out from the long grasses behind them and were beaten back, and overhead black-headed gulls sailed out on clean wings and vanished from sight.

“Keep going, keep going,” said Clare. “This is heavy,” and hefting the watermelon in her arms it slipped suddenly and fell, landing on a broad flat stone and bursting open. There was a strong scent of sugared cucumber, and flies immediately found it and settled among the black seeds. John flicked at a fragment of pink flesh on his shirt.

“Oh dear. You’ll be in trouble for that,” said Eve, and Clare put her hand over her mouth. John pushed at the pale sand with his toe until the fruit was concealed. The flies, bereft, lifted away in search of other prey. “It’s all right,” he said, and reached out to touch her shoulder, then thought better of it and flicked at a glossy seed that had landed on her arm. “I’ll tell her I did it,” he said. Clare gave him a grateful look, Eve an amused one, and they carried on, shortly reaching a line of immense black rocks brought in from elsewhere as defences against the tide. They looked resolutely artificial, so that John half-expected to see each one stamped with a factory's mark, and were glossy, as if they were polished each night by white-capped maids. At the third and largest of the rocks Hester sat cross-legged on a red blanket, her hands folded in her lap, looking out to the shining strip of water. Following her gaze John saw two men walking with their hands clasped behind their backs, the sun marking one head with silver and the other with copper. It was Walker and Alex, talking intently, coming back to the rocks from wherever they’d been.

“You’re late. Put that here, and - where’s the other one? Clare, did you drop it again? Never mind, I never did like the things, they remind me of cucumber. No fruit ought to taste of salad, I always think – John that must be heavy, put it here in the shade. Make yourself comfortable, won’t you?” She delved into a large canvas bag with rubbed leather handles and withdrew two or three more blankets, all of them threadbare and with tangled fringes. John set down the crate of beer, rubbing at the grooves it had marked on the palm of his hand, and taking a blanket from her folded it into a cushion and settled against a smooth part of the rock. Its warmth seeped through him, and he squinted against the sun coming at him from the sand. Eve spread a blanket beside Hester and threw herself down, resting her head on the other woman’s heavy thigh. “I don’t know why we’ve come,” she said. She drew her black brows together and a sharp line appeared between them. “It’s far too hot to play games: we’ll just get bored and fight like last time.”

Hester played absently with the black curls on the girl’s forehead, her eyes on the two men drawing nearer. “Didn’t you bring a book?”

“What book? I’ve read them all. And I won’t have time to practise, will I, and tomorrow my fingers will be stiff.” She began to tap out swift patterns from where her hands rested in the hollow of her stomach.

“A rest will do you good. Don’t you think so, John? Too much music can’t be good for you, I always say. It makes you think in ways simply that wouldn’t occur to you otherwise. Clare darling, what are we going to do with all this beer. It will boil in this weather.” The shade thrown by the rock receded as the sun rose, and John drew in his legs.

“You *don’t* always say that,” pointed out Clare, withdrawing the bottles one by one from their compartments in the crate.

“Never mind that. What are we going to do about the beer?”

“Bury them,” said Eve, her eyes closed. “Up to their necks in sand.” Clare began scooping out hollows and pushing in the bottles, until after a while there was a crop of them, their blonde frilled caps not so different from the clam-shells scattered nearby. “That should do it,” said Hester. She coiled a lock of Eve’s hair round her thumb. “I’m glad you came with us, John. And thank you for looking after these two: were they trouble?” It was evident she wished they had been, since she twinkled at him from an inch or so behind her eyes.

“None at all, of course. It’s very kind of you all to let me come. Is this a tradition of yours?” Either she wore the same dress as the previous two days, or had had several made up of the same dark blue stuff, and in the saline wind her coarse hair stood out from her forehead in gleeful curls.

“A habit, perhaps. We like it here: Eve likes to light a fire, but not this time - I was afraid in this heat the wind would take it inland and we’d have the whole county burning by nightfall.” Clare finished with the last beer-bottle, tapped its cap as if in apology, and came to sit cross-legged nearby. “Where’s my brother? What’s he doing? I want to show him this.” She held out a speckled cowry. “You don’t get them very often, isn’t that right Hester?”

“He’s with Walker. They’re on their way back. I can’t think what they’ve been talking about so long.”

“Eve, I think, like they always do,” said the girl with a rare show of mischief, and on Hester’s lap Eve’s black eyes flew open and flung out a glare. John, who’d been watching her breastbone rise and fall beneath her T-shirt, thought: her skin’s like skimmed milk, the kind that’s almost transparent, and at the thought of it scorching under the sun he felt miserable, and pressing against the warm rock he closed his eyes. The sun was a drug that thickened and slowed the blood in his veins, so that for half an hour or more he half-slept in the narrowing shade of the black rock, stealing pieces of conversation as it passed by -

“Here they are, Evie. Here you are! - what’s kept you? Look at this, I found a cowry over there, but I don’t think there’s any more…“

“ …very warm in the water, you know: like a bath, it’s so shallow - Hester you should come. Is that a cowry then - it’s beautiful, yes: look, it’s spotted like an egg…”

“ …and if I don’t play at all today I won’t be able to do any at all tomorrow, my fingers will hurt and be stiff … “

“ – you wouldn’t think he’d sleep so easily, would you? Man his age…where the hell are my cigarettes.”

“…and besides, a whole day without music? What a waste.”

“There are two packs in my bag, where you put them earlier. Alex, Clare, should we eat? I’m hungry and the bread is still warm. If a day without music bothers you then sing. There was singing before anything else .... No, not that bag the other – and don’t wake him, will you…”

“…don’t feel like singing, my head aches. Blow the other way, can’t you?”

“It will keep away the flies.”

“...no more cowries, but lots of the long ones – razor clams, you told me last year, when I cut my foot, do you remember, and you had to carry me all the way back to the car…”

“…of course, no Elijah, what did you expect? Won’t you have some, too? There are napkins, cloth ones, in there, in the other one …”

“Remember we used to keep the shells that were still on their hinges and you’d try and keep pennies inside? Sing for us Evie, go on…”

“…yes, thank you, and is there cheese?”

“I might use them to make a necklace, for Hester's birthday.”

“How can you eat and smoke? You disgust me. What shall I sing, I wonder…”

“*No doubt did you please, you could marry with ease*…”

“Who’s got my cowrie anyway? Is it in your pocket? Is it in your pocket, Alex? I want to collect enough for a necklace, or maybe a picture…”

“*When young maidens are fair many lovers will come*… and why won’t they come to me I wonder…”

“But you’re not fair, my darling, are you? Clare, now, she’s as fair as the moon –“

“And no maiden either...”

“*But she whom you wed should be North country bred*…talking of bread, hand me the knife would you?”

“…do you think Elijah might come next time? Yes all right Eve, lovely. Though maybe a touch flat at the end there?”

“Can I see the cowry?”

“Elijah? I don’t know. Did we bring the bottle opener, I wonder, or will Alex have to do that trick with his teeth…I believe it might be there, in that tartan bag, by John’s feet, but don’t – no, careful –“

And John, sand kicked into his eyes and the shade retreating from his feet, sat up, took the bread that was offered to him, and said, “It was always a favourite song of my mother’s, that one, though I don’t think she’d ever been North.”

After they’d eaten, and all but Hester had wandered out towards the long shallow pool or behind to the sand-dunes where there were rumours of peacock butterflies, John said: “I think I’ll go for a walk.” Hester waved something between a farewell and a blessing, and resumed her watchful cross-legged position on the red blanket.

Taking the boardwalk he’d crossed an hour or so before, the soles of his feet flinching from the bleached and burning pine, John reached the car park again. The sun came at him from a dozen windows as doors were opened and shut. The child sitting on the edge of the quay had abandoned his fishing-lines and now leant against the wall of the crab-shed, tucking his feet into the shade and scratching patterns on the tarmac with a piece of flint. The marks were too complex to be the work of child, and had the appearance of curses cut into bark or stone, so that John skirted them cautiously and kept his eyes away from those of the boy. Across the car park the tarmac became a gravel boatyard, which sloped to a muddy creek dampened by only a narrow channel of water, waiting for the tide that would bear the stranded boats out to sea. Pretty vessels with clinker-built hulls and brown sails, and bright-painted tenders on wheeled trolleys, lined the yard as tidily as the cars in the car park. In the gusting wind, ropes slapped against steel masts and raised a noise like the untidy ringing of small bells. It lifted the corners of tarpaulin drawn across the decks and showed curled ropes or damp shoes, left behind to dry until the tide came in. John picked his way between the boats, not believing that they could ever have been borne up on water, looking out to the salt-marshes behind.

These were reached from a narrow pathway, perpetually damp, that ran for ten miles or more eastward from the quay. The path was raised several feet above the marshland, on a bank that formed a kind of sea wall. As John set out on the path he paused to let a toad cross; it splayed out its soft patient feet and crept past, a pulse throbbing in its stomach and its butter-coloured eyes rolling thanks. To his right as he walked were the long narrow gardens of the last houses before the sea; to his left, three or feet below, was the long melancholy stretch of land that was drowned and revived every day by the industrious tides. It was an indistinct landscape riddled with irregular channels that ran into and out of each other everywhere he looked. Late in the day water would seep from under the soft mud and trickle unhurriedly in fine rivulets, gathering speed until the tide was high.

The land through which the channels ran was piebald green and blue, covered in grasses and fat blades of samphire or broad patches of sea-lavender, its flowers so fine it might have been a bluish mist settling at ankle-height, rolling in from the sea. It was impossible to believe it could ever have been underwater, but here and there a fine dark lacework of seaweed lay on the tips of the grasses, hanging like cobwebs in a forgotten room. The land looked soft and plump: if I walk out on it, thought John, I’ll sink in it up to my knees.

It was not a wholly unfamiliar scene: his brother had taken him to places like it often over the years. “These salt-flats are an eerie sort of place,” Christopher had written to him, soon after he moved to the coast from his neat London terrace: “I go there in the evenings and come back different, every time. You couldn’t possibly stand alone out there and not feel it.” John, visiting his brother for the first time, saw how empty it was, and how doleful, and was proud to feel nothing but the damp chill of a winter morning. That a man’s spirit could be brought low by nothing more than an empty sky over empty land was absurd, he’d thought, and thumped his brother’s shoulder with cheerful force as they walked home.

John came down from the raised shingle track onto a wide path littered with stones and gravel brought in from elsewhere. It reached through the hazy sea-lavender and samphire down to where the grasses ended and a glistening stretch of mud began, dotted with boats listing on their keels, waiting for the tide. Made a little higher than the marshes on either side, the path had dried out under the sun, and on the cracked mud broad white salt-stains glittered. Over him the sky was empty, and the small hard sun pricked at his scalp. From away to his left, deep in a channel he couldn’t see, a curlew began to sing with a bubbling call that might have come from underwater. The sound brought with it a feeling of melancholy that was all the more painful because it was new.

That bright clear stretch of land and sky ought to have severed the false connection he had with the house and everything in it – ought to have begun to rouse him from the half-slumber he’d fallen into. But standing there now, he found the house wherever he looked: surely he saw the sky through the lapping tiles of the glasshouse; surely the sea-lavender at his ankles was lit blue by the lamps in the dining room at night, and the cracked mud at his feet was only the broken stones of the terrace?

He stooped to pick a head or two of sea-lavender, wincing as the sturdy sharp stems rasped against the flesh in the crook of his fingers. The flowers were papery and dry, and held no scent. “All will be well,” said John hopelessly to a herring-gull dozing on a wooden boat nearby: “All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” Then seeing the gull’s disdainful turn of the head he said defensively, “Julian of Norwich, you know – and she might even have been right.” It was plain the gull doubted this, and with a tired thrust of its wings it abandoned its wooden perch. John, who hadn’t noticed the boat when first coming down from the embankment path, walked curiously over. By far the largest of the crafts stranded on the marshes, it was an ugly, ill-proportioned, unpainted thing, with no rudder, mast or sail that he could see, as unseaworthy as a garden shed. A black stovepipe stuck up from the roof of the cabin, reaching down to a grimed oven that could just be seen through the centre of the boat’s three windows.

Moving a little closer, setting his feet carefully on the few raised firm patches between the damp rivulets of mud, John peered in. The window on the left was half-open, and swayed now and then in the breeze, sending the reflected sun sliding back and forth over the smeared glass. Three pans, untidily stacked, sat on the stovetop; a clean towel hung on a wooden rail. On a shelf nailed over the stove was a tin can with its bright label turned to the wall, and a childish egg-cup with a blue stripe. If he stood on tiptoe it was possible to see, in the centre of a pine table pushed under the window, a stack of blue napkins ironed into neat squares, and a magazine with half its cover in shade, and half bleached pale by the sun. The boat was stranded in a stretch of damp mud as pale as the cap of a mushroom - no-one could possibly reach it from the soft wet marshes without floundering. A set of tracks, plainly showing the paws of a curious dog, led half-way to the tilting hull and back again at the anxious call of its master. Where the drier marshes met the mud several wooden planks were stacked, caked with mud and in places draped with seaweed. They made a dry path out to the boat a short distance away, but there were no marks in the mud. John watched it awhile, half-expecting to see a face at the window, but there was only his own, thinner than he remembered it, and anxious under an untidy thatch of hair.

Turning away, he returned to the path and followed it towards the empty horizon. Small furtive movements came from the grasses and sea-lavender at his ankles, and occasionally a gull screamed out. Behind the stranded houseboat, beyond the embankment path, a line of pine trees showed black against the empty sky. Pigeons squabbled in the branches, bursting out of one tree and furiously into another. John watched them, peering through the black thicket, wondering if he should sit there awhile in the shade. The sun raged at him: he felt it burning through the thin weave of his shirt and sending the blood to his head, where it beat implacably behind his eyes. A woman and child coming down the shingled path looked at him startled as they passed, the woman tugging at the boy’s hand to walk a little distance away from him. She had a pleasant soft face tanned by a week’s holiday; the boy was small, thin-legged, inquisitive, his green T-shirt still damp at the edges from the sea. Not sharing his mother’s suspicion, he eyed John frankly as he passed, taking him in with the same joyful interest he showed in the deep-cut channel and the listing boats.

“Look, look,” he said, seeing the window on the houseboat swing open and shut: “Is someone in there? Can we see? Do they live inside?”

“I don’t think so. It’s too old. No-one lives there now.”

The two stood side by side at the edge of the pool of mud, dampened by thin channels of rising water. “Yes they do, they do: look.” The boy jumped up and down to see better. “They’ve had their dinner, look.” The woman peered in. “A long time ago, maybe. There’s no-one there now.”

“But I want to go inside!” His voice rose with indignation.

“Well. You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why do you think?”

John had almost reached the path. Beside the wooden houseboat, the boy tugged thoughtfully at his T-shirt. “Because it isn’t mine?”

“That’s right. It’s not ours, so we can’t go in.” The woman smoothed his hair, then said: “Listen! Can you hear that funny sound again?” She stooped to crouch beside the boy and turning him towards her put her head beside his. “Be quiet, and listen, there is again!”

The child cupped his hands behind his ears and pulled them comically forward, straining into the breeze. John heard it too: the mournful bubbling call not far away now, hidden somewhere in the marsh. “It’s a curlew,” he said, not quite to himself. The boy heard him and turned sharply.

“That man said something!” he whispered loudly, looking at John with astonishment. The woman stood and turned to John, her eyebrows raised.

“It’s a curlew,” he said again apologetically. “You can tell because he sounds like he’s singing the under the sea. Like there are bubbles coming out of his beak.” He smiled at the boy. “Listen. Can you hear it?” There was nothing for a while, then it came again, starting on a high fluting note and falling unevenly through a scale. “You’ll know it when you see it,” said John, “Because his beak turns down at the end, like this.” He made a curving gesture, and the child glanced quickly at his mother – could this be true? – and back, wide-eyed, at John. “Watch out for it,” he said. “It won’t fly very high. It’s just a brown old thing, really. Quite ordinary. You wouldn’t notice it, in a crowd.” He smiled at them both and turned back to the path.

“Thank you,” said the woman, smiling uncertainly at him. Then she said, “Say thank you!”, and the boy did, twisting the green fabric of his T-shirt around a dirty thumb.

When John was only a few feet along the embankment path he heard the call again, and the child shouting out. They’ve seen it, he thought, and hoped they’d not be disappointed.

Late in the afternoon he found Hester sitting alone with her back to the rock, her hands clasped over her stomach. “You’ve been gone a long time. I was worried - it would be easy to get lost, out there. I did once.” She gave the impression she'd done so only out of choice, and enjoyed every minute of it.

“I heard curlews singing, and the tide coming in – look: I picked some sea-lavender.” He’d tied the bunch with a ribbon of grass, and blushed when he gave it to her.

“John! How sweet you are, and the flowers won’t fade, you know: there are bunches in the glasshouse someone must have picked just when the last century turned. Sit down, won’t you, and have a drink with me – let’s see if it’s kept cold, all tombed up in the sand…” John took a bottle of beer from her and sank into the meagre shade. There was no sign of the rising tide: the sea was as far away as ever, and hadn’t yet reached the long pool which was busy with children, and with old women who'd wet their feet and go no further.

“You’re all alone here, then?” He fell to wondering where Eve might have gone, and whether after all she had let the sun burn her skin.

“Clare’s over there” – Hester jerked head to the left, where he could see the girl stooping to the sand, her amber hair falling over her eyes – “Collecting shells. She’s making a picture in the sand – a tree, I think – it’s not very good.” She paused, scratched her head, and seemed about to speak, but changed her mind. “Alex has been swimming but he’s there now, can you see? He seems to have made a new friend.” Not far away, between their disarrayed blankets and books and the shallow pool, Alex crouched and spoke to a child. Leaning forward John saw the green T-shirt and recognised the inquisitive boy from an hour or so before. “Oh yes, I spoke to him earlier on the marshes: his mother can’t be far away.”

“Alex is a sort of magnet for children: I don’t know how he does it. They climb all over him like he’s a friendly dog.” She watched the two with such pride and gentleness it transformed her face: her fine eyes seemed to broaden and spread, pushing at the lines and furrows that coarsened her features, making her, for a brief moment, handsome as a healthy girl. Catching John’s eye she flushed, and the effect fractured: she looked, he thought, rather astonished, guilty, as if she’d been caught out in a secret vice. “Here comes Clare,” she said rearing up on her knees and waving the bunch of drying sea-lavender over her head: “Move along a little, John: the shadows are getting longer now, there’s plenty of room.”

**II**

I like watching the patterns the light from the valve tower makes on the walls of my room. It comes in slightly skewed and makes a pair of rectangles that lean away from the door. When it's darkest in here the colour's vivid, like patches of fresh yellow paint. Now it's almost dawn, and the air is greyish and thick, full of particles I can't make out; the lamp has turned itself off, and the morning light is so dim, it looks as though someone has hung up two thin panels of cotton.

Things have changed: I can feel it from here. My mother used to go out onto the doorstep at the end of summer and scent the air like a dog and say, “Change of season coming,” and go back inside and put the kettle on as if she already felt a chill. It was always hard to believe she could be right, when we could hear the ice-cream van coming round the corner and we'd forgotten we ever wore school uniforms, but it would never be long after that the leaves turned. I saw it happen yesterday: not just the end of this interminable heatwave – though thank God I think it might be coming - but one complete and final change, as if the tide's going out and won't ever come back again.

In the house where I grew up, there was a painting in the dining room. I always took the same seat at the table (even now I'll sit with my back to the window and with the wall to my right, if I can: anything else makes me uneasy), and I could see it as I ate. Years later I discovered it was a John Singer Sargent print, and I found a copy, meaning to hang it in the shop, although I never did. The picture shows a woman in a black dress with a pale anxious face, sitting at a dinner table. You can just see a man sitting almost out of the frame, and he's talking to her, but she isn't listening: she's looking straight out of the canvas. She has a small mouth, and it’s half-open, as if she’s waiting for someone and has just seen them coming. She has a glass of red wine in her hands, and on the table in front of her there's a carafe of wine so dark it looks black. There are lamps with red shades, and the flowers on the table are red, and red catches the silver candlesticks and the ice-bucket on the white tablecloth. The whole painting is saturated with colour and light, and seeing it there was like finding a gap in the drab walls of the house, with something realer and more vivid just the other side. When I was young it used to frighten me – I didn't think a painting should look at me like that. Sometimes I would stand directly in front of it, and see my own face reflected in the glass and laid over hers, and I would wonder which was the painted face, and who was watching whom.

Everything that happened today brought that painting back to me as clearly as if it were hanging on the wall between the windows. I’ve been outside them all looking in, or thought I had; it has been as though I were holding them in my hands between the hard covers of a book when I grow tired of them and want to look elsewhere. But I begin to feel myself being drawn against my will: it’s as if one day I passed that painting and from the corner of my eye saw the woman in the black dress reaching out to give me a glass of wine.

After I came back from walking on the salt-marsh I sat with Hester for a long time. I find her peaceful: she has a firm grip on everything, and on all of us, too. When I first saw her she looked at me as if she'd seen numbers scribbled on a piece of paper and was adding it all up. I felt as if she knew me then as well as anyone ever has, or is likely to. I wish I hadn’t described her as ugly. I’ve seen what happens to that face of hers when she looks at Alex: her bright dark eyes seem to refine and illuminate the rest of her, and make her beautiful.

We sat together watching the emptying beach. I could see the child I’d spoken to, playing with Alex in the shallow pool between the rocks and the sea: I remember wondering where his mother had gone, but by then it was late in the afternoon and I was tired, and my head had begun to ache. The pieces of rock where we sat soaked up the sun, and sent its heat into my blood and bones. Every time I opened my eyes I'd see Hester still sitting like Buddha with her legs crossed, patiently watching Alex playing with the child, and each time the tall boy with his hair lit amber by the sun and the child in his green T-shirt would be further away until we couldn't hear them laughing and shrieking in the water any more. When I closed my eyes for the last time it must have been to sleep for a long while, because I was woken up by the sound of footsteps thudding into the sand. At first I thought it was my own blood beating in my head but it grew nearer and louder, and when I looked up a woman was running towards us with her arms outspread, shouting. When she reached us she kicked up the sand and it went in my eyes, and for a moment I was blinded. I turned away and cleared them, and recognised her as the woman I’d last seen on the marshes, telling her son to thank the strange man who’d known the sound of a curlew.

She'd been crying, and must have come a long way – sweat dripped from her forehead into her eyes and ran down with the tears and gathered into a stream under her chin. “Have you seen him?” she was saying, “My boy – he's in a green T-shirt – have you seen him? I've been looking and I can't find him. He was with a man with red hair - did you see him?” All of this came out between deep rasping breaths, and her eyes were so wide I could see the whites of them all around her pupils. I tried to get up but my legs had gone to sleep, and I had to brace myself against the rock. Hester took her by the shoulders and said, “Calm down sweetheart, calm down, stop and breathe. That's right, we'll find him, he won't be far. That's right: that's right.” She said those last words over and over until it was really just a soft soothing hissing: *'ssri, 'ssri*. I could see her gripping the other woman so firmly her knuckles were pale, and it was calming her: she was staring fixedly at Hester as if she might be able to somehow see her son reflected in her eyes, and she began to actually count as she breathed, concentrating very hard on the air going in and out of her. Seeing Hester nod and smile I came a little closer. Then she recognised me, and turned her body slightly to catch me in her distress. I felt it reach me – the pulse in my head began to beat harder and faster. The woman's anguish was horrible - although she was calmer she shivered violently, and the skin was drawn tight across her cheekbones making her seem to have been starved in the short space since I'd last seen her. Hester remained as she always was, a solid calm presence, still murmuring to the woman so that she too had to lower her voice, although she asked the same question over and over - “Have you seen him? Where's he gone? ”

Hester started to question her, as if she had authority over her and the whole beach and everyone on it: the poor woman had fallen asleep, beaten into the shade by the sun and worn out by the wind. She'd watched her son from the corner of her eye as he played with a kind young man on a half-empty beach where surely no-one was ever lost or hurt. He was a talkative boy and trusting, but not stupid; he would talk to strangers but not go anywhere with them; he knew better than that. She berated herself for having fallen asleep - “But he seemed so nice, just a young man, not much more than a boy himself really; they were just over there and I was so tired -” While she was still talking, pleading partly for help and partly for forgiveness, Hester - still gripping the woman's hands - turned to me and said, very calmly and quietly, “Can you see Alex?”

My eyes were still sore from the sand and my vision was blurred, but I shaded them from the sun and scanned the beach back and forth two or three times. The light coming back from the hard-packed white sand was so dazzling I felt it pierce through to my already aching head, and it was hard to tell what was heat-haze pooling on the beach, and where the sea began. I could see Clare crouching by her collected shells nearby, making spirals out of cockle shells and not noticing the tension that had suddenly bound us tightly to a stranger. Our three shadows reached her red plastic bucket and made it dark, but she didn't look up. Further off a tall pair made thin and fragile by the distance walked slowly at the water's edge. “I can't see him.” I said. “I don't think he's there.” My words went further and did more than I meant them to. The woman had given in to Hester's soothing, but when she heard me she stiffened, became combative. “That man he was with, the young man with the red hair, he's with you then?”

“He's with me,” said Hester.

The other woman had been holding Hester's hands, or letting her own be held, but when she heard this she pulled them out, and her eyes, which hadn't left the other woman's face, narrowed with sudden distrust. I felt the air change slightly as her anxiety flared into anger. She'd been angry before, but it had been turned inward and made into guilt. What I'd said gave her liberty to fling it at other targets. Hester stepped away from her and held up her hands like someone fending off a blow. The woman said “What -”, and shook her head violently. “What? He's with you? Then -” Stumbling on the sand, which must have burnt her bare feet, she moved quickly round the blankets and books and empty water-bottles that staked our claim to the beach. “Ben?” She pushed past me, not maliciously but because she couldn't really see either of us any more. “Ben, are you here, can you hear me?” She slid behind the black rocks we'd been leaning against and raised her voice. It was compressed by the rocks and I thought, he wouldn't hear you, even if he was nearby, even if we were keeping him out of sight. “Answer me darling. Mummy isn't cross with you. Ben? Can you hear me?”

I saw Hester standing with her hands on her hips watching the woman. She was less impassive now, biting hard on her bottom lip. I said, “I saw them together earlier. The lad wanted to see inside one of the boats on the marshes – maybe Alex took him there?” Hester took this in on a low breath, then said “Right,” and gripped my shoulder. She shook her hair back from her forehead. “Look, be quiet: she's coming back.” Then she called out: “Sweetheart?” It was an endearment she used without discrimination, had now it had changed; it wasn't mollifying but condescending, as if she could use it to put an opponent in her place. The woman had appeared again from between the rocks; her flash of anger had gone, and she was wringing her hands. “He isn't there, he's not there -”

“Of course, not” - Hester put an arm across the woman's shoulders - “Of course not. We'd've seen him, wouldn't we?” Turning the woman to face her, she put a hand on either side of her face and said intently, “The man he was with is called Alex. Did you speak to him?”

The woman nodded eagerly – her mistrust of Hester had gone, dissolved by the stronger woman's gaze, and she was looking at her again with a desperate pleading face: “Just a bit, an hour ago I think. Ben wanted someone to play football with and my head ached, and the man was nearby – he was young and he smiled at me.. .they were there, just over there” - she flung out her arm - “I don't understand, how could they get so far?” Her voice ended on a drawn-out wail.

“You mustn't panic. You won't find him by crying, now will you?” Hester bent awkwardly and picked up a half-empty bottle of water. “Have some of this.” The woman winced as she drank and I thought it would be warm and unpleasant by now. I began to feel agitated by what I knew: the boy had probably begged to be taken back to the boat to spy for faces at the windows, and Alex would have taken him, I was sure of it, not seeing anything to threaten the happy day. I stepped forward and put out my hand thinking I'd tell the woman, but the order of the house had established itself here too, and I deferred to Hester, and stepped back again. Hester waited for the other woman to stop sipping at the bottle, then said, “You were out on the marshes, earlier in the day?” She nodded. “Do you think your son might have gone back there?”

“Not alone. He's only five years old: he would never get that far alone, he'd get lost, he would never go by himself...” Then the realisation of what she'd said struck her - he wasn't alone and lost, he'd been taken away from her - and she threw down the water bottle. It landed beside Clare, on her knees beside a mandala of cowries. She noticed for the first time the three of us standing there and frowning came over, looking from me to Hester and back again. She came and stood close by me, smelling of salt. I said, “She's lost her little boy,” and she grimaced. “But we'll find him, John. Won't we?” Then she said to the woman, more loudly, “We'll find him for you,” but the woman wasn’t listening. Without turning to speak to Hester she ran heavily over the sand and I watched her heels sinking into the fine powder. We three looked at each other, and followed, Hester moving a little behind me and Clare running lightly ahead. She seemed not to be aware of what was happening. Hester and I had caught the woman's anxiety: our running was urgent and uneven and twice I stumbled on driftwood. But I remember thinking that Clare ran alongside us quite happily, glad of something to do beside playing games with her shells, glad of company, or glad like a child for a reason to run.

We came without stopping or calling each other to the end of the beach and the car-park, following a woman whose name we didn’t even know, and I couldn't think why I felt panic sickening me, or what we were expecting to find. I remember watching the woman's bare feet thudding on the concrete of the car-park and wincing as if I could feel it too, but she went on running and calling her son’s name, although even if he’d been able to hear her it came out so high and frantic it was like the seagulls crying. Many of the cars were gone by then, as people had tired of being battered by the sun and had gone home to lie in the shade until evening made life bearable. I looked for the boy with his fishing lines but he was gone too, with his white marks like a threat on the tarmac, and the shed selling crabs and cockles had closed its shutters. I remember being surprised that Hester, carrying so much weight on her stomach and thighs, could run so far and so fast. I could hear her breath heaving in and out of her but it didn't slow her pace, and she reached the edges of the marsh just after us.

By then the tide was coming in fast: fingers of water crept across the cracked mud, and although the woman called and called, and Hester's breathing behind me hissed on the back of my neck, I thought I could hear it trickling up from underneath. Then suddenly I couldn't hear anything because the woman stopped in her tracks and put her hands up to her head and screamed, not a high woman's noise but deep and rasping and terrible, and it silenced everything else. I'd never heard anything like it and hope never to again – it dried my tongue and my stomach fell through me. I'd stopped running when I heard it, and Hester ran into me and knocked the breath out of me: I bent double and when I straightened up the woman was silent, which was worse than the screaming, because everything else was silent too, and there was a long empty moment when the water stopped creeping towards us over the mud, and we tried to see what she'd seen. She stood pinned to the ground, her hands still raised to her head, and I thought stupidly that if the wind blew she'd fall where she stood like a toppled statue.

When we moved either side of her on the narrow path and saw what was coming, Hester gasped and I heard a groan that can't have been from Clare, so I suppose must have come from me. Coming slowly towards us and with his head bowed and loose so that it swayed a little as he walked was Alex, and he was carrying the child. The bright green T-shirt was muddy and dragged up over his chest. His body sagged between Alex's arms, and one of his trainers was missing. Alex must have been able to see us on the path but he didn't lift up his head or call out, just went on walking, and the boy's dangling limbs swung as he walked.

I marvelled at how slowly and painfully the blood thudded against my ears, and then the woman drew her breath in a gulp and screamed her son's name. She dashed forward, pushing Hester into the rough grass, and snatching the boy lowered him onto the path. By the time we reached her the child was trying to sit up, and seemed not frightened but dazed. Where the T-shirt was pulled up over his thin torso he had a long fresh graze, and before his mother wrapped him in the cardigan she'd been wearing I saw a few dark splinters in the skin. The woman had become very calm, no more distressed than if her child had caught a cold: she stroked his hair and murmured “We'd better get you in the warm, hadn't we,” although the sun was still trying to scald the water on the marshes. There was a bruise on the child's forehead so recent it was still swelling as I watched, and when I saw it I became aware that Alex was standing a few paces away, wringing his hands and saying, “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry”, over and over. His T-shirt, white when we'd left the house that morning, was covered in patches of mud that were like inkblots, making a pattern like the drab wings of a giant moth. He too was grazed, down the length of his right arm.

Clare stood behind me and touched my arm briefly and uncertainly every few moments, as if she wanted to ask me something but couldn't think what to say. I felt we were all ranged against Alex, that battle-lines had been scored in the mud on the path: I wanted to place myself exactly halfway between the mother and the man who'd taken her son away, but couldn't move, and as I write it now I feel it was cowardice that made me just stand by. “I'm so sorry,” he kept on saying, and I wanted to shout that he should either say nothing at all, or tell us what had happened: what was the point of 'sorry', if he'd done nothing wrong?

The boy was sitting up by then – the cut on his forehead hadn't after all gone deeper than the skin, and there was colour in his cheeks. He looked around, seeming unsurprised, not registering Alex's face as any different from all the others that leaned over him. He recognised me. “We heard that funny bird again,” he said brightly, and then began to cry. It seemed to me such a simple sound, so straightforward and easily remedied in all the muddle I'd been living through, that it calmed my anxiety, but the effect on the crouching woman was terrible. She stood up, and left unsupported the child almost toppled backwards. Clare, with her unselfconscious helpfulness, knelt next to him and patted his back with the same rough uneven strokes she used on her cat. The woman stepped forward towards Alex, who put out his hands and spread them in a gesture of fear, I think, and also of apology. It would be easy to look at the wringing hands and call it guilt, but that wasn't what I saw then, and I don't see it now, in my memory or as I write it out. He said again, “I'm sorry!”, this time making the words firmer, as if it might forestall the woman who was still coming towards him.

When she reached him, she put out her hand either to strike him or grip his arm, then pulled it back as if the idea of touching him disgusted her, and hissing between clenched teeth she said, “What did you do? Did you hurt my son? What have you done?” Alex tried to speak but it came too slowly, and while he still formed the words on a stammer I'd never heard before, the woman said again, not hissing this time but almost shouting with controlled malice: “Well? Talk, can't you? What's wrong with you – can't deal with adults, is it? Talk to me, damn you, say something: tell me what you did, did you hurt him, how is he hurt?” She was moving towards him still, taking small steps with every word, and Alex backed away imperceptibly, still holding out his hands to ward off the words and not finding any of his own. His silence infuriated the woman and she carried on shouting but with tears of anger this time - “What have you done, you bastard? Well? What have you done?”

Hester, still standing close to Alex, moved forward a little, and I remember then being puzzled at her face which briefly showed open hostility to a woman who had every cause for anger. If she was going to say something, to defend Alex, to placate her perhaps, we never heard it, because a thought occurred suddenly to the woman and she stopped, gasped and said, not shouting any more but falteringly, testing the thought: “Did you – did you *touch* him?”

Seeing the word now, written plainly and without the awful inflection she gave it, it's impossible to think how we all saw at once how to touch could be worse than to hurt. But it hung in the air like a foul smell; Hester paused in her movement and I felt bile in my stomach start seeping up towards my throat. Alex went white and his eyes widened, and the movement of his hands became very frantic as if he felt the accusation against his face and wanted to bat it away.

Only Clare seemed not to have noticed: she and the boy had found something by the path and were parting the grasses to get a better look and I wondered if it was the toad who'd passed me earlier that day. I wanted Alex to shout “No!”, to shout it clearly and strongly so that it would break through the hysteria I could see bunching the woman's shoulders and darkening her face, but he didn't: the accusation was so painful and so baffling it made him incoherent and he said again, “Sorry, I'm sorry, it isn’t *in* there, I can’t remember,” mumbling it this time and sagging slightly against Hester's curved shoulder. The weak apology must have looked to the woman like a confession, because so quickly that none of us saw it coming or could prevent it, she rushed at him and struck out, not with the comic flailing I'd seen in drunken fights sometimes on my way home late from work, but with violent precision. She wore a ring with a big cheap stone on her right hand and it flashed as her arm swung back; Alex flinched and put up his arm but the woman was quicker, and the blow landed. I heard it, a thud nearly as loud as a knock on a door. There were others blows but none that reached him so painfully because the first made him double over. He didn't make any sound, and I remember being proud of him for that. The woman's anger exhausted itself quickly, because when he raised his head again Alex was bleeding from a split in his bottom lip. He'd stopped making the same quiet apology over and over, and perhaps that calmed the woman too: she returned to her son, who looked now like any child might who'd been rummaging through mud somewhere and fallen. He and Clare had picked long broad blades of grass and were trying to blow them like reeds, but they were the wrong kind and the only noise they could make was a tuneless hissing. The woman bent and yanked the boy's arm to make him stand, and he looked up baffled at first then remembered where he'd been, and that his head hurt, and started sniffling.

Standing there holding his hand she turned to face us. By then I had crossed the battle-line and stood with Alex and Hester, and felt the force of her rage pulling me in with them. She said: “I'm calling the police. I'm going to go and get my phone and call the police - you took my son and hurt him, and everyone will know.” The child stopped sniffling and rubbed his eyes and nose on his bare arm. Tears and snot made a clear path through the mud that had dried on his skin. “It wasn't his fault,” he said weakly, and I heard Alex make a small grateful noise, but the woman didn't hear her son, or didn't listen. She turned away from us and began walking back along the path, and I felt Hester move convulsively next to me and draw in her breath to call her back.

But a few paces away the woman stopped. It must have been only a second or two that she stood there, indecision making her unsteady on the soft path, but I felt the moment stretch out in front of us, and it gave space for my mind to run through what had happened or might have happened, what would happen to them all now, what it meant for them and me. Then she spun round and said, in a voice she must've taken great efforts to make chilled and controlled, like a teacher before a difficult class: “I want your names. All of them. And your phone number.” She said it again, only tried to make it sound professional as if she could intimidate us, but the words weren't quite right and I almost smiled, because I was ashamed of everyone and frightened for them all: “I require your contact details immediately please, so this matter can be resolved.” I think she must have seen my smile because her eyes narrowed and the chill left her voice and I saw the flush of anger or embarrassment creep back into her cheeks.

The woman had found a pen and a scrap of card in her bag, and thrust it me with shaking hands. Thinking all the while how absurd this was, I wrote out my name in clear capitals, as if I were humouring an inquisitive child. I wanted to say, “You are mistaken; you must be: I never knew anyone less capable of harming a child.” But every time I took a breath to speak I remembered my own guilt in deceiving them all, and the old stammer came back, and I couldn't make the words come. I passed the card to Hester, thinking that surely she would speak in his defence, but instead she paused and looked at me with what I think was gratitude, then wrote Alex's name underneath. She made it complete – ALEXANDER – as if this could distance it from the boy she'd sent to bed the night before with a glass of water for the hot night. Then she wrote her own name, and underneath that her telephone number, folded the card, and walked towards the waiting woman, who held out her hand.

Hester put the card into her open palm and folded the other woman's fingers over it, and I heard her say: “I am so sorry your child was hurt. And I am sorry your day is spoilt. But it was an accident, no-one touched him. You're making a terrible mistake: and I understand, I do, the world these days is dangerous for children. But it is a mistake. Look at Alexander, look: can't you see he's hurt most of all, that this will take longer to heal than bruises? Call us, call the police, talk to the boy: we're not afraid. We'll talk to you, to anyone. But take him home. He needs to rest. And talk to him: he'll tell you.”

We watched and waited for an angry response but none came. Hester's strength of will gives her words weight: there’s something in her face, although it's ugly - or even perhaps because it's ugly - that seems incompatible with deceit or half-truths. The other woman briefly touched her son's forehead, then nodded at Hester, and walked away from us. Clare stood beside her brother patiently plaiting three blades of grass. She'd realised by then what had happened, I think, and was leaning against him slightly, biting down on her lip in concentration or perhaps because she didn't want to cry. Hester came back to us. She put out her hand and touched each of us lightly on the shoulder. “Come on,” she said. “Time to go home.”

Not much was said or done that night. There were phone calls I only partly overheard, Hester saying little and Alex saying nothing at all. I was there when Hester told Eve and Walker what had happened, and saw Eve storm at Hester as if it had been her fault: “The woman's an idiot. Who leaves a five year old alone on a beach? She should be glad. She should be glad it was Alex who found him, who looked after him. She deserves to have him taken away. I hope she calls the police. I hope she does...” Walker put his hand on the back of her neck with a possessive, restraining motion I hated; she flung it off, and shut herself in the music room. She didn't play the melodies I was hoping for but scales, painfully slow and even, so repetitive that after a while it was like the noise of the crickets in the garden and we couldn’t hear it any more.

I found Elijah in the dining room, dozing in the high-backed chair with its wooden candle-sticks, where I'd seen him the night I arrived. His grave quiet presence was a relief to me, and we played chess until Hester came in to draw the curtains against the moths drawn to the light. When I told him what had happened he listened without anger or surprise: either the thought of Alex doing harm was so absurd it deflected off him without sinking in, or he could accommodate the idea of wrongdoing more calmly than we, as being just another regrettable consequence of being human. When I finished the miserable tale he shook his head and picked up a white bishop. “I'm afraid I never was any good at chess. You've won again, haven't you?”

Just before I came upstairs to bed I went into the kitchen. Hester was there, unpacking the plastic cups and plates we'd taken to the beach. Clare was there too, knocking the sand from her shoes onto the kitchen floor and being scolded for it; and I didn’t notice for a long time that Alex was sitting in one of the kitchen's dark recesses with his legs crossed, inspecting his hands and looking up sometimes when he heard his name.

“She called, of course,” Hester told me. She pulled a foil-wrapped parcel from one of the bags. “That's the fruitcake I made, and we never got to eat it,” she said, turning it in her hands. It gave off a sickly scent of spice and honey. “Yes: she called, firstly to ask lots of questions. She took the boy to hospital: he'd been knocked out but not for long, though they're keeping him in until tomorrow. Alex spoke to her. She wanted to know if Alex would tell her what the boy had told her. Whether it all added up.”

“And it did,” Clare told me.

“Well of course it did. The boy had lied to Alex. He told him his mother had gone to the marshes to look at the boats, and he was scared to go out and meet her on his own, and would Alex take him. There’s no-one on earth can lie as well as a child, because they believe themselves, so it comes out like the truth.” I thought she gave me another of her searching looks as she said it, and wondered what Elijah had told her. But she shrugged and said, “They went out to the marsh and she wasn't there, of course. No-one was. And the boy ran off and got across the mud to look inside some abandoned boat. He slipped – I suppose the wood was wet – and fell. I don't really know how. If Alex hadn't been there he would have just lain out there on the mud, wouldn’t he, with the tide coming in.”

I asked her if the woman would carry out her threat to call the police, and she said, “I doubt it. She says she might still, that there were questions at the hospital. She’ll call in the morning and tell me. But what would she say? That she left her child alone? Fell asleep? That she wasn't there when he fell? That this man saved him and she thanked him with violence?” She nodded at Alex. The wound on his lip was closing already, though the flesh was swollen and he darted out his tongue now and then to moisten it. “She almost said sorry. Almost. I imagine she's ashamed of herself. She should be.”

Hester took a sandy blanket out of the bag and shook it, then folded it against her breast, and as she did she sent one of her long bright looks over to the corner where Alex was sitting. I saw something then that I couldn't believe – something so peculiar that I had to blink my eyes clear them, and look again to be certain of it. I don't want to write it down here, in case I'm wrong. No, that's not quite it: I don't want to write it down because when I do, it won't be a vague memory of something I thought I saw. It'll be as real and solid as the pen I'm holding now.

Alex had pulled his knees up under his chin, and was pressing himself against the kitchen wall as if he wanted to vanish, to seep into the bricks and plaster. But Hester didn't look angry that he'd been accused of something so unthinkable, or frightened that maybe the woman had seen something in him that had passed the rest of us by. I didn’t find in her face the confused pity I was feeling, or even the most straightforward things – tiredness and hunger and anxiety. What I found instead was a long slow look of satisfaction, like a woman who'd come to the end of a day's work sooner than expected. Then she smiled, and it wasn't the sudden unfeigned smile that she uses when you least expect it, but a pinched smirk with no mirth in it.

It shocked me more than anything else that day, and made everything I'd seen up to that moment suddenly shift and sharpen. I fumbled for a chair and sat down much too heavily, knocking a knife onto the floor. They all turned to stare at me, except Alex, who scratched over and over at the graze on the back of his hand. Hester turned very slowly away from him and said, “All right there, John?”, and smiled at me. It was the same warm, steady gaze that had greeted me when I arrived, in the same kindly ugly face, and everything shifted again and settled into its old patterns.

I went to bed soon after that, but couldn't sleep, and instead I’ve been writing by the light from the tower. I keep thinking: if I write it all down, like a mathematician working through a problem, then sooner or later the truth will come out.

What is truth, anyway? I hope I’d have waited longer for the answer than Pontius Pilate did, if I’d had the courage to ask.

**SUNDAY**

I

It had always been Walker’s habit to get up early. He had no interest in catching out the sun before it finished rising, nor was he especially disciplined: he simply liked to feel he’d stolen a march on whoever slept under the same roof. It had annoyed his mother, braced for a teenage son still tangled in his sheets at noon; and annoyed his wife, who wanted to be alone in the mornings when there was a chance of finding a jay on the lawn. He found himself alert the moment his eyes opened; smoked before he drank or ate; and at the end of the day went to bed no earlier and no more tired than anyone else. Once Hester thought she’d beaten him to the kitchen, and had laughing laid out plates with a ringing of china on wood fit to quicken the dead, but he’d appeared at the window a moment later, his grey hair damp from the bath, smelling a little of cedar and already on his second cigarette.

On the morning of John’s sixth day, which Elijah would once have called ‘the Lord’s Day’ (and still did, sometimes, when he forgot to mind his language), Walker stood in the glasshouse watching the sun begin its passage west. The pitched roof with its lapping glass tiles caught the early light and filtered it through a thin rime of lichen and moss, so that it cast a greenish pall upon the floor. The sharper edges of the roof-tiles glistened, in places splitting the light into pricks of colour that paused on the wall of the house then hurried on elsewhere. Already the air was thick with moisture, and Walker tugged at a worn cord to open one of the hinged windows. It swung open, and the reflected garden slid across the pane. He stood a while with his face turned to the opening, feeling a slight chill against his cheek that would be gone within the hour. The sun had reached the high grass verge that bounded the reservoir, and he wondered where Alex had slept that night, if he’d slept at all – once they’d found him lying at the foot of the embankment, as if he’d climbed from the reservoir and falling in exhaustion rolled down the incline and slept where he lay.

The events of the day before were so vivid still that Walker wouldn’t have been surprised to find the woman at the window with the child in her arms. He hadn’t seen her, nor the wound on the boy’s forehead, but overnight conjured up a lesion that opened to the bone, and eyes upturned so that only their whites showed. Was it possible that Alex had hurt the boy? After all, he was not well, wasn’t that the purpose of all this … he stooped to pick up a snail’s shell picked clean of its meat, and tossed it from palm to palm. It was weightless, and when he closed his fist it turned almost to dust. No – he could not believe that, or wouldn’t, at least. He opened his hand and let the fragments of shell fall to the unswept floor.

Before Walker had come, the glasshouse had remained locked and unvisited in more than a decade. He’d had no interest in it at first – it had smelt both of damp and of overheated tiles and blistered paint, and when he and Eve idly tried the key late one night they found the door had swollen to fit its frame, and wouldn’t be moved. It was Elijah who first forced his way in, setting his shoulder to the door and leaving a dent in the rotten wood that Walker could see now as he stooped to pick up shards of a broken pot. He’d found the preacher one morning a week or so after they all arrived, listing to one side in a cane armchair. He’d mislaid the half-frown that gave him a constant grave sad look, and said, smiling: “It’s the nearest I can bear to going outside: I can see the sky, look - I nearly feel the wind!”

Together they’d unwound the lengths of cord that fastened the windows, and flung them open. Stale air crossed the painted wooden windowsills and left behind a very faint scent of peat and even - though only Walker claimed to have smelt it – of pollen and green leaves.

It had been built hastily on some whim of the earliest owners of the house, and in high winds the glass tiles ground against each other and the window-frames creaked at their joints. The connecting door, set into the external wall of the house, had been painted too often in thick layers of white paint, which had begun to unfurl from the wood at the point where the panels met in pale sheets as though it had been flayed. Against each of the three glassed walls pine benches reached to waist height, stacked with troughs and pots where woodlice curled in dried-out remnants of soil. The floor was tiled with squares of terracotta, and the bodies of ants clotted in the seams where the tiles were joined. Sheaves of paper, buckled with damp, lay in piles against the walls and under the benches; most were blank, but some were covered in botanical drawings very poorly done in faded watercolour and ink. A pair of cane chairs was stacked in a corner: white paint had peeled from their legs, and the seat of one had burst and lay in shreds beneath it on the floor. This was consigned to a bonfire, the other cleaned and set beside the door with a cushion to tempt Elijah from his room again. Against the wall of the house sets of shelves on iron brackets held books on agriculture and farming, as if someone had intended to plough the gardens and sow for wheat or barley. Alongside the books were small sets of shears with the blades rusted shut, and trowels with turned wooden handles riddled with worm. Narrow trays held empty seed-packets printed with flowers and scored with a blunt pencil: some bore only a date (the latest 1924), and others were marked *FAIR YIELD* or *Gift for Anna, August ’12*. A white-painted steel pipe circled the walls, fastened to the window-frames and leading out through a narrow shaft on the outer wall. Here it met a reservoir built to draw rainwater from the gutters above, though the pipe swung loose and drummed against the wall of the house when the wind was in the east. Inside, the steel pipe sprouted narrow outlets at regular intervals, and had once irrigated the seed-trays laid out on the benches. At each joint blisters of rust broke through the paint, leaving white flakes scattered in the dust.

At night the glasshouse took on the appearance of a small shadowed grove: the remains of roses trained against the wall and a vine that had only ever produced grapes too sour to eat would bloom in the quarter-light from the garden, and it was possible to imagine, above the dust and damp, the shocking scent of jasmine opening at night. Dozens of jam jars covered the benches, banded with waterlines and with the black stems of specimens drooping over their glass rims, or standing rigid as if ossified. In one corner, a blue crystal vase that belonged elsewhere held a bunch of purple sea-lavender, its colours no more faded than the morning it was cut.

Walker, anxious to occupy any empty moments in which he might fall to thinking about what it was they’d done, found himself drawn more and more to the glasshouse, spending his mornings there rifling through empty seed-packets and dividing the botanical drawings into ordered piles. One morning he discovered, under a bench where a mouse had bitten a Saxon arch leading to the terrace outside, a cactus in a mossy pot that had survived its long drought. It was greyish, like the skin of someone kept from daylight, and covered in spines. Fine as hairs and hooked at the tip, they caught in the fabric of his shirt and irritated him later that night, so that he scratched too hard and raised welts on his shoulder. Kneeling on the hard floor, he’d rocked back on his heels, holding the pot between his palms and raising it to the window: how had it clung on, there in the dark, with the soil at its roots shrinking as it dried? He raised it and drew in its scent, which was not of sap or leaves unfolding but something more earthy and enduring. When Eve came in a moment later, her bare feet flinching from the hot tiles of the floor, prepared for another of their unsatisfactory skirmishes, she saw him in a new and unexpected light, revelling in something ugly and small with the uncomplicated pleasure of a child. It had pained her for reasons she didn’t understand, and later that day she found ways to be unkind as punishment for having taken her by surprise.

Walker reached beneath a bench and took out a bag of potting compost. He plunged his forearm into the cool black soil, and withdrawing his fist let it run like water into a dozen white plastic pots set in ranks on a brass tray. He surveyed them for a moment, conscious as ever that he didn’t know what he was doing, then sunk his finger into each up to the knuckle. Then he took out several of the seed packets and working in a slow quiet rhythm began to plant the seeds, three or four from each paper envelope, filling the cavities with more soil and pressing them flat with his thumb. Then he took a notebook from the windowsill and made a record of what he had done. The preceding pages showed abortive attempts at cultivation: of the thirty or so he’d planted since first discovering the glasshouse, only one had germinated, and sat in its white pot on the kitchen windowsill under Hester’s care. It was one slender stem split at the tip, flattening into a pair of tapered darker leaves that recoiled from each other. There was some doubt whether it could survive the summer, and each morning Walker expected to find it scorched down to its thread of a root.

No-one ever asked him what had prompted this new pursuit – after all, there’d been gardens at St Joseph’s, where Hester had walked between rows of cabbages in the last few minutes before dusk, and he’d shown no interest then. It was so at odds with his cigarettes and pressed shirts that Hester at least thought he must have been doing it as an experiment in being as unlike himself as possible. Alex, taking delight in his friend’s new pastime, squeezed the seeds from a tomato he ate one afternoon, rinsed them free from their orange flesh, and handed them to Walker wrapped in a square of white paper. “See what you can make of these,” he’d said, and watched disbelieving as under their ignorant care a small vine surged up its wooden cane, and all summer put out small dark fruit pointed at the tip like quails’ eggs. Walker himself knew that it was both a welcome occupation for a mind that otherwise would have worn itself out trying to make sense of what he’d done, and a way of trying to regain what he’d seen in Eve’s eyes as she came across him that morning: a look of surprised tenderness, as if after all he might have been worth following.

At thirty Walker had married a woman called Katy, five years older than he and often called ‘mousy’. He’d found her in the garden of someone else’s house, sitting wrapped in a blue coat too large for her though spring had begun a week or so before. It was true she was rather like a mouse, with pale brown hair cut close to her head so that it lay flat and gleaming like a pelt, and very dark large eyes that darted about and never missed a movement anywhere. Her friends liked to call her delicate, but always laughingly, because although she seemed frail, with her small slender limbs and long neck, and was often unwell in a decorous old-fashioned way, there was something steely about her. Walker had teased her into removing her coat, and liked the way she leaned back in her chair with her arms hanging by her sides; he’d liked her clever wry commentary on the party as it unfolded in the darker corners of the garden, and liked buttoning her coat to the chin when he finally agreed it was cold enough to be worn.

He soon discovered that her delicacy was a skill cultivated with some care: she managed never to suffer from anything unpleasant or likely to dull her eyes, but instead developed headaches and fits of breathless anxiety in car-parks and boring dinner parties, and spent her wages on a man who cleansed her spleen through the soles of her small high-arched feet. There had been some surprise when she moved into his large flat in a gated block on the Isle of Dogs, and more when a year later they married: those who knew him best suspected him of doing it out of mischief. But Walker inhabited his marriage as if it had been a cell he’d chosen for himself. It required self-discipline and restraint; it left no time for mind or eye to wander; it occupied him with so many small tasks of care and attentiveness that it held in check the restlessness he’d always thought would see him alone at fifty. It suited him to be needed, and always to feel that he needed nothing in return.

When his firm passed him files for a private psychiatric clinic whose debts were so heavy the patients were in immediate danger of being turfed out of their beds, he’d flicked through the disordered paperwork with a prick of irritation: nothing was simpler, he’d always felt, than the neat ordering of incomings against outgoings, and the tidy accumulation of capital. The clinic, attached to a convent named St Joseph’s not far from the coast, had puts its faith in God and an accountant of dedicated and patient corruption, who’d over the course of forty years drained the accounts, and diverted its funding streams into many small pockets of his own making.

“You might find it easier,” the chairman of the board of trustees had said, in an apologetic phone call early one morning, “To come and stay a day or so; no more than a week, certainly – we have room after all! - it’s the papers, you see – going back years – and to think how well we all liked him! He came to my daughter’s christening, you know: I can hardly believe it, and who knows how much of it all is false…”

Katy, bag packed for a retreat in the South of France, had clung to his neck as he left: “They don’t really need you,” she’d said, on breath smelling bitterly of herbal tea: “Not half as much as me.”

He’d imagined a sinister red-brick place, three-storied and deep-shadowed with gargoyles spitting from the gutters, but St Joseph’s was a low modern building set around a neat small courtyard, with windows that let in light from the east and an acre of garden. The staff were mostly nuns from the convent trained in medicine and prayer, and wore modest wimples so stiff they looked as though they were made of paper. Inside, the retreat (no-one ever said ‘hospital’) looked like nothing so much as a suburban home, with floral wallpaper and sofas with tapestry cushions, and a vast television in what the staff called the ‘lounge’. A piano huddled in the corner of the room under a grey canvas cover, every now and then showing a pair of scratched wooden feet, and in the courtyard benches bore brass plaques in memory of benefactors or residents moved on to better things. The patients were largely wealth and devout, dependent on medication prescribed by a consultant who came every Wednesday in a cab paid for by the local authorities, who had an eye to the scarcity of beds in the hospital in the nearest town, and were kindly disposed its programme of gardening and devotions.

Walker was greeted by a pair of trustees who talked in whispers, as though afraid the patients might overhear and become anxious for their future. He was given a room tactfully distant from the wards, with a pine cross over the bed and a view of the courtyard, and ate small plain meals alone. The work absorbed him, as he’d known it would: there was something in him demanding order from chaos, and deep in the thick files bound with treasury tags and shedding scraps of torn paper was a solution to be hunted down. In the afternoons he went out to the courtyard to smoke, keeping close to the corners in case someone caught his eye, and watching the staff moving in patient circles between the gardens and the long dim corridors hung with watercolours of bluish hills.

It didn’t occur to him to wonder why he felt no regret that the work was time-consuming and circuitous, so that a week passed and nothing had been achieved, nor that he took no pleasure in his wife’s occasional calls. Nor did he notice that he began to time his walks in the courtyard by the movements of the patients, pushing away his work and patting the pocket of his shirt for his cigarettes when he thought he might catch them on their way outdoors. He liked to watch the man who’d stand for an hour or more at the window, tugging fretfully at his beard as though summoning the courage to go out; and the boy with the long eyelashes and amber hair who surely couldn’t have been unwell – he was too quick to laugh, and would stand beside the older man lightly touching his elbow and talking quietly as if encouraging him to step out into the autumn rain. Then the three women came and brought a change of air: Hester in a coat that smelt of cats and woodsmoke, and Clare, so like her brother; and Eve, who drew a black fringe like a wing across her eyes when he passed her in the courtyard, and was always at the old upright piano. Remembering that music, and how he heard it first through the open window of his room, Walker paused at the wooden bench in front of him, looking out over the dying lawn where Clare was leading her shadow over the grass. It had been nothing but an annoyance, that incessant repeating of childish patterns as she disciplined her hands, and the melodies he thought he recognised - he shook his head: he ought to have fastened the window against the sound, and turned back to his papers and the task he'd been set.

Behind him, Elijah opened the glasshouse door. His damp hair was combed into ridges against his skull, and he wore a dark tie printed with swallows. He paused on the step and looked up to the sloping glass ceiling; it was, he'd said more than once, the nearest he came these days to a chapel. He said, "Have you seen him?", and picked a small fruit from the tomato vine. It had been left too long to ripen on its stem, and had split open; the lips of the broken skin were whitish with the beginnings of mildew, and between them showed the translucent flesh inside. He put it in his mouth and burst it against his palate with his tongue.

Walker took a steel tack from the windowsill and began to pick at the black soil beneath his fingernails. "Alex? Not since last night."

"Our new friend John told me all about it, then let me win at chess - " He smoothed his tie, and lowered himself into the chair. The cane creaked, and shed a flake of paint. "A terrible business - I heard Clare crying this morning, though Hester said there was no need. I would like to see him. I'd like to see for myself how he is...they say he doesn’t remember it, you know. You don't think he might have - "

"I don't."

Elijah smiled, and with his thumb tapped the arm of the chair. "No more do I. But still - he's our responsibility, wouldn't you say?"

Walker unrolled his shirt sleeves, and buttoned them at the wrist. He shrugged the question away. "You look tired."

"I am. Saturdays tire me - they were always the burden, you see, not the day after: I'd sit up all night waiting for morning, reading and studying or praying until I was hungry. Hard habit to break, after all those years - " He tilted back to look at the roof, but closed his eyes against the sun, and tried instead to recall the image a church he'd seen once stranded on a fen, its roof borne up by wooden angels with cobwebs in their mouths. "And what d’you make of our John?" he said, remembering with a smile how the other man’s pale brown eyes had widened with shock under their heavy lids: *we all just assumed you were mad*.

"Oh - John. I don't need to make anything of him. There he is: nothing we can do about it now." Walker shrugged, and Elijah turning away smiled and said nothing.

Not long after his last Sunday as a believer, Elijah had held a meeting in the study where he prepared his sermons late into the quiet nights. On his desk Strong's Concordance was open at *persevere*, and above it a framed print of Bunyan's Christian making his way to the Celestial City shone behind polished glass. Two of the church elders, arriving in dark suits and black ties as though already expecting the worst, had listened with disbelieving sadness; the third and oldest had offered a series of kindly rebukes, but finding them met with silent agreement suggested instead that they pray. Elijah dazedly followed the familiar cadences - *Amen Lord: let it be so, to the glory of Thy name* - and noticed for the first time that the elder who knelt to his left had taken to dying his hair.

He had known it would be painful to remove himself from the pulpit, with its high wooden rails stained darker where his hands had rested the past twenty years, but confronting his wife had been worse. He'd married her for her soft rich voice and for her piety, and her faith in him almost matched that in her God. She hadn't believed him at first, and nor had their daughters, though he suspected them of revelling in so unexpected a turn of events, and later that night heard the youngest laughing on a long high note cut off suddenly as though she’d pressed a hand to her mouth. He was being tempted, she said, like Christ in the wilderness: would he give in so easily? He discovered that it was not merely a betrayal of a god too remote to notice or mourn his loss, but of something nearer and more easily hurt. They tried to find common ground: there was none. The best he could offer was a promise to think it over, and to pray, if he could: "I can only try, though," he said, finding that the loss of faith did not gain him the freedom to deceive. He took the bag she packed him, and later found a Bible in the folds of his shirts.

It was a priest who'd recommended St Joseph’s to the bewildered preacher, who was unsuited to being alone and had no real desire to talk to the faithless (he felt they had the advantage over him, having lost nothing). By the time he'd unpacked his bag in the large low-ceilinged room overlooking a courtyard where leaves spun against the wall, the cavity left when he lost his faith was filled with a weight of fear that grew heavier as the days passed. When asked what frightened him, what always occurred first was that he wasn't sure how the sky was being held up; this he knew he couldn't say, and instead took to shrugging and smiling, and gesturing vaguely out-of-doors. On the second Wednesday in November the visiting consultant, himself a lapsed atheist with a vice for prayer, diagnosed an anxiety disorder and recommended he stay as long as funds would permit. Elijah's wife, patiently waiting for the backslider to return, took their daughters to a mission in Manitoba and wrote loving letters every week, in cards on which Bible texts were so heavily wreathed in flowers he couldn't quite make them out.

Elijah's world dwindled around him. For the first time in his life, no-one ever sought his wisdom or advice, or measured everything he did against a Divine standard he couldn't hope to achieve. Life pared down to the essentials: he slept a little, ate a little, and watched autumn harden the earth in the allotments. He avoided his fellow patients, not out of distaste but in case the sadness in him would prove contagious, and instead took command of a deep-seated chair set between two long windows, where he sat for hours reciting silently the hymns he'd once sung, beating out their rhythms with restless hands.

It was there he first saw Walker, smoking in the courtyard on a memorial bench (*It Is a Far, Far Better Rest I Go To, Than I Have Ever Known: Eleanor Mary, 1920-2005*). He had known at once that the grey-haired man who frowned in the shadow of an upturned collar was nothing to do with either the staff or the patients: he kept apart from them all as effectively as if he were sheltered behind panes of glass. Months later, as the two men shared wine with Hester in the blue-lit dining room the other side of the forest, they'd laughed and shaken their heads: "To think," Elijah had said, "There we were, all silently watching, and not a word said, not for weeks - "

At the beginning of his second week in St Joseph's, long before Walker took up his post in the small offices choked with paper, Elijah had been woken in the night by a young man crying. The cries were pitched high and unbroken, so that at first he’d thought it was a girl, but deepened suddenly - *What are you doing? Everything would be all right if you would let me … you don’t need to and anyway I have to get back* - and was silenced as he was calmed or sedated. The hopeless echo along the corridor had been unusual enough in that decorous retreat to have kept the residents awake till morning, and at breakfast they ate sombrely, watching the door for the newcomer. Elijah had been shocked at the boy's face - "Like an empty paper mask," he said that evening to one of the staff, "Like it would crumple if you touched it.” She’d fretfully touched the rosary beads in the pocket of her cardigan, and said the young man had almost broken his shoulder, throwing himself against the stanchions of a bridge near his home: possessed with fear its narrow concrete pillars couldn’t bear the weight of traffic, he’d tried to bring it down one night when the roads were quiet.

The consultant, coaxed from his practice on a Thursday, prescribed medicine that dulled the boy’s eyes until they looked as though they were covered in a film of dust. But he ate, at least, and did no harm to himself or others. With startling speed either the tablets they gave him in pleated paper cups or the calm of the place returned him to himself, and it wasn’t long before Elijah found himself waking to the prospect of a sunny face at the breakfast table and a fond arm beneath his elbow in the corridors. He discovered that Alex had that trick of the very beautiful, of persuading others beauty must be a symptom of goodness and could be caught by standing nearby. And there was general agreement, in the room where the staff drank quarts of tea and out on the allotments where they were planting out broccoli for spring, that in Alex it wasn’t a trick after all. When the first month had passed, the dullness in his eyes cleared and his good nature looked out at them all: he managed somehow to exist exactly halfway between the patients and the staff, treating them all with instant affection as if he’d known them for years, and couldn’t think why he hadn’t come sooner. He’d stand beside Elijah at the window with his hand resting lightly on the older man’s shoulder and say: “I’m not clever like you and I know I don’t understand, not really - but don’t you think tomorrow you and I could take one step into the garden, only one, and see how you are?” It was a little like being comforted by a wise child, and never failed to make Elijah think that the next day – or the next, or perhaps the one after - he’d follow the boy out into the courtyard, where the man whose name he didn’t know was smoking the last of several cigarettes.

Creaking in his cane chair, watching Walker pat the pocket of his trousers with a sharp decisive gesture and withdraw a steel lighter, Elijah said, “I remember the day you arrived. You looked more miserable than any of us. I remember thinking it looked as if you’d had a headache for years.”

Walker laughed: “You were always by the window. I’d’ve thought the place was haunted only I saw your breath on the glass.”

“But I don’t remember the women coming – why’s that, I wonder? - only that suddenly there they were, and no-one was ever quite sure whether they were one of us or visitors…”

Walker could remember very clearly the day the women came and the dust-sheet was dragged from the piano in the hall. But he would not admit it, and turning away from the preacher reached out with his foot to nudge an earwig fretting at the dirt between the tiles.

They had arrived together at the end of the second month, Clare with her brother’s eyes and hair and her high pale forehead creased with anxiety, clinging to Hester’s arm. The older woman – who by some distant tie of blood Elijah never quite understood had taken responsibility for them both in their teens – had been so immediately in charge that at least three of the staff had mistaken her for some member of the board of trustees, perhaps come to peer over Walker’s shoulder as he sat perplexed at the books. Eve, following a few paces behind, unsure whether her old friend would welcome a face he hadn’t seen in more than a year, had knelt on the grass beside the bench where Alex sat, covered her face with her hair (“It was down to her waist then: do you remember?” said Elijah, “And she would wind it like a rope round her neck and frighten us all.”) and wept all afternoon. When she had finished crying, all the while Alex patting her head and talking quietly to his sister who sat so close their amber-coloured hair mixed on their shoulders, she dried her eyes and went into the communal room where two or three residents slept in their deep-winged armchairs. Pulling the dust sheet from the piano she played so quietly that no-one woke, though the nurses on duty came along the corridors and leant in the doorway to listen, inclining their white-capped heads.

All that autumn the three women came until other visitors were hard-pressed to tell which of them were thought to be more or less sane. Hester would sit with Elijah at the window, saying little but conveying such steadiness and comfort he’d forget to glance overhead and see if the sky had come loose and was bearing down on them. She offered to make herself useful, spending hours kneeling between the rows of winter crops pulling at weeds and managing to make the most melancholy resident laugh aloud. Eve taught some of them to play, and though the staff grew tired of hearing the same childish duets played over and over, no-one had the heart to lock up the piano and hide it again under the heavy grey cloth.

Walker, watching from his room or from the corner of the courtyard, found himself making a careful audit not just of the files that had begun to find order on his desk, but of the three women as they moved through the house. He’d have thought Hester mother to the amber-haired boy and his sister, if her face had not been so coarse and so unlike theirs, and he would have liked her path to cross his one afternoon, so that he could sit and hear her talk in the low voice that seemed to soothe whoever heard it. Eve he disliked at once for her black sheet of hair and eyes that never missed a trick, and for the music that made him restive and uneasy. He saw the quick light steps that carried her body restlessly from room to room (she took thirty-two paces across the courtyard), and overheard her laughing coaxingly at Alex or Elijah or murmuring in corners with patients who put their hands in hers, and knowing she demanded to be seen and admired refused to do so. If when passing in the corridor his gaze happened to meet hers, it slipped past without pausing, and shrugging himself more deeply into his coat he’d return to his office. “He doesn’t even know we’re here!” she said once, watching him turn away from them one afternoon, his collar turned up against the wind.

Elijah, dozing in the glasshouse, smelt bitter smoke unfurling between Walker’s fingers and remembered the day their separate territories had overlapped. The sound of the piano – especially dissonant that day, since two inept patients were attempting a cheery duet – reached Walker in his airless room, and driven to distraction by hopeless accounting he wrenched open the door to the hall, where a dozen or more residents sat waiting for their evening meal. He’d crossed the courtyard to reach them and his grey hair glittered with drops of rain that fell to his shoulders as he moved. He slammed the piano-lid shut, and the two women playing – easily startled at the best of times – only just managed to pull their fingers free. They stared at him for a moment, then snatching up bags from beneath the broad low stool left the room squabbling with indignation.

Eve had been sitting cross-legged at Elijah’s feet, inspecting a torn nail and with hair still matted at the crown from where she’d been sleeping. She heard the buzz of the disturbed piano-strings as acutely as if it had been the voice of someone she knew well, and leapt to her feet. Elijah had looked at her then, her tall fine body tense with anger, and thought she would run to the piano and raise the lid and play something so insistent Walker would hear its echo it all that day, and later too when he tried to sleep. But she stood where she was, parting her hair with her hands to look more keenly at the man who stood in the doorway with rain-drops falling from his hair to gather in the corner of his eyes. Elijah rubbed his own eyes in sympathy, but the other man stood fixed where he was, one hand resting on the piano still and his mouth half-open as though he was waiting for his turn to speak. The preacher, whose years in the pulpit and out of it had made him wise, murmured “Oh, no – ”, then shook his head and looked away. Beside him Hester turned the pages of her book, and Claire put the final pieces to a jigsaw puzzle someone else had left unfinished. When he looked up again Walker had gone, and Eve was standing with her hands half-raised. When she turned towards him it seemed to Elijah that her face had altered a little, as if it had taken an imprint of the older man’s, and his of hers.

The earwig at Walker’s foot bore the attack bravely a while, then scuttled to the corner of the room. The sun filtering through the moss-stained roof lit the glasshouse with a greenish light, and Walker almost thought if he took a breath it would be saltwater and not air that filled his lungs.

“It’s possible though, don’t you think, that yesterday, when no-one was with him, Alex could have – ” he paused: the thought appalled him and he reached for it distastefully – “That he could have had something to do with it, at least … not consciously of course, not that; he told me once he has moments, whole hours at a stretch, where he can’t remember what he’d been doing, or if he did remember thought he must have overheard it, that it must have happened to someone else. You remember they told us how he hurt his shoulder at that bridge? He told me about it, you know. He said, I knew a man once who tried to bring down a bridge all by himself, and I couldn’t tell him that I knew the man too…”

Elijah stood. The fabric of his shirt clung to his back and he plucked it free, and felt a breath of cool air between his shoulder blades. He joined Walker at the window, and watched him dig with the steel tack at the soil beneath his nails. The tack slipped in his fingers and slid a little too far between the nail and the flesh; the younger man winced, and sucked at a sluggish bead of blood.

“Give it to me, it’s rusted: you’ll make yourself unwell. No – I won’t believe it, and nor should you. You think the worst because you feel responsible, because we brought him here. It was always my job to think the worst of us all – original sin, you know: it makes a man a pessimist. But I think for now we’ll believe the best – Oh! Here comes Eve, and she’s brought us water and ice.”

At the end of his second month it was as if Alex had forgotten what had brought him to St Joseph’s. He was young and strong, and by nature resilient: his bruised shoulder healed and he couldn’t remember what caused the slight ache remaining. Every day he took the tablets they offered, thankful they dulled the elation and misery that had worn him out by turns. He became exhaustingly full of life and went through the wards like an electric charge, helping the residents decorate their narrow rooms three weeks before Christmas, insisting on a tree though most would be with family then, helping Eve teach carols they sang in ragged harmony to the staff.

But early one evening, sitting beside Elijah as they waited for Orion to appear over the courtyard wall (“I tried to teach him the constellations,” said Elijah, tossing the nail he’d taken from Walker beneath the bench, “But the only one that stuck was the Pole Star...”), Alex sat counting the green and white pills he held in his palm and said: “I’m not quite myself at the moment, you know. I’m half of me, maybe not even that. Hester says at least it’s the better half, but I don’t know if it’s enough…” He tried to explain to the preacher how it had been before: how he’d felt each crack in the pavements and pebble in the grass through the soles of his shoes, and the blood coursing through each separate artery and vein. The tablets he took with his morning tea blunted not only the edges of his misery, but also his senses – it was as if he’d woken one morning to see the world in black and white. Sometimes he sat stroking the back of his hand, feeling the slide of skin against skin and wondering if his touch had always been so slight and brief: surely he’d once felt each ridge and groove in the whorls of his fingertips? It almost made him wonder if he were really there at all: he knew he was, that it was madness to think otherwise – here was his hand on the door, here were his feet taking turns on the carpet - but what if his place in the world was not secure, like a tooth loosening in its socket?

No-one realised he’d begun to fill his pillowcase with the capsules he pretended to swallow, nor that in time he’d began to persuade others to do the same. “Just like a kind of game,” he whispered in the corridors, his arms linked through those of the other patients as they watched the white-capped nurses pass on the other side: “It won’t do any harm, just for a few days, to see how we all feel, to find ourselves again –.” He taught them sleights of hand and tricks to deceive the staff at breakfast and supper, and collected their pills, green and white and yellowish, in the pockets of his jeans. Hester, never easily fooled, saw the merry glint in his eyes harden to a constant glitter, but said nothing, biding her time.

By New Year there was a change of air. The residents lost their easy ways of being together and grew mistrustful and easily vexed, preferring to sit alone in their rooms and leaving their meals uneaten. No-one came to listen when Eve played the piano, and one woman – who’d made a particular pet of Clare – took a sudden and violent dislike to her and accused her of stealing her clothes. A young man whose medication had treated a compulsion to wash his hands took to scrubbing himself raw with a wire pad he found in the kitchens; when he saw the welts he’d raised he tried to clean them with bleach, and later that night he was taken away in an ambulance.

It was Hester of course, watching all the while, who finally put an end to it. The force and warmth of her character had given her a status with the staff she neither sought nor earned, and when she asked to see the senior nurse she did so with such an imperious lift of her chin that he followed her into the courtyard in a worried hurry. The nurse, wringing his hands and hers in turn, saw at once that it had not been Alex’s fault, nor hers: there should have been better procedures in place for dispensing medication; the staff, really, should formally apologise – they had a duty of care.

Alex could not stay, nor did he want to, and it seemed obvious that he should go with Hester to her empty house the other side of the forest. It was obvious too that Elijah should come, and when he’d paused at the door and flinched at the low winter clouds Alex had taken his arm, not for comfort but as though afraid he might otherwise trip and fall. Walker, his work finished days before, watched them go through the smeared window of his office, and in the morning staff taking the early shift found the files ordered and annexed, and the piano neatly concealed under its cover.

The uneventful patterns they’d established at St Joseph’s were repeated in the house without any thought or effort. Letters for Elijah were forwarded and became scarce; Alex ranged through the house painting shabby windowsills and replacing handles on the doors, or sleeping for hours in the kitchen alcove while Hester made the air thick with steam as pans simmered on the stove and too many loaves of bread proved under white cloths. Eve came when she could, sometimes for days at a stretch, and paid for the piano in the red room to be coaxed back to concert pitch. One afternoon Elijah found her in the dark corridor stooped over sheets of music that had fallen from her arms as she ran from one room to another. He bent to help, picking up a foxed sheet showing a woodcut of an ape in slippers and a bonnet huddled in an armchair.

“*Messalina’s Monkey*,” said Eve, vaguely: “Oh, just some old song.”

“Is it all right? It looks sick.”

“Dead, I think - music and monkey both.” She took the music from him. “Did you sleep? I didn’t. . . that light from the reservoir comes in like it’s something real and solid, like yellow water almost: I keep dreaming that it’s rising round my bed and the sheets are wet and I’m cold…” She shivered.

Elijah laughed. “Can’t you just close your curtains, child? Let me take these: I’ll walk with you.” He went ahead of her down the hall, and pushing open the door to the music room stood back to let her pass. It was winter then, and dark by half past four; Hester had turned on all the lamps and they threw circles of brighter red on the papered walls. Elijah helped her raise the piano-lid, and pulled out the tapestry stool so she could sit. She bowed and laughed, and bending her head played a swift high run that made an ornament somewhere buzz in sympathy.

“I’ll leave you,” said Elijah, then turning at the door said on impulse, “Do you ever hear from him? Walker, I mean – I thought you might talk again, you and he….” He regretted it at once: her narrow back stiffened, and she lifted her hands from the keys. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t –”

“Oh! No, no … I did wonder whether anyone knew, or saw: no-one says anything here, do they? We’d all rather be in the dark…” She played a low chord that put notes where they ought not to have been, and Elijah felt it in his stomach. Then she said, “I wish I could explain how it felt, when I saw him that day - it was impossible, I never thought it could happen – he was just a stranger and nothing to me but it was as though I looked up and recognised him ... Do you understand how troubling that is? And after that what else could I have done, it would be like finding a door half-open and hearing a voice you know on the other side, and not going in. And I went to find him and it was as though everything small and unimportant that you have to get through before reaching what matters had been over and done with years before, and there was no need to pretend …” The chord hung and died in the air. Then she said, very quietly, as though she were ashamed of herself, “Sometimes I stand at the window and imagine him there on the lawn coming towards me and my throat *aches*, and I lift up my arms as if I could reach him through the glass.” Then she laughed, and turned in her seat to look at him. “Sometime I think I don’t even like him, not really; he told me once that he doesn’t much care for music – can you imagine! - and that he only wanted me because I was so exactly the sort of person he didn’t want. And I wonder if that’s why he’s angry with me sometimes, because it wasn’t a choice, or something reasonable...but I was only ever glad. How could I not be?” She looked down at her hands, and plucked at a shred of skin beside a nail. It tore, and she winced and flicked it to the carpet. “He knows where we are. He knows he can come when he likes. But he won’t: he hasn’t got the courage.” She shrugged, and dismissing him with a nod turned away and began to dash at the piano with her hands. When, not more than a week later, Walker joined them in the blue-lit dining room one night as though he’d always been there, Eve looked at the preacher across the table and arched her black eyebrows: *Well! Who would’ve thought?*

In the glasshouse Elijah said “She’s brought us water and ice,” and Walker looking up made a movement with his shoulders that might have been either a shrug or a flinch. The preacher smiled behind his beard, and loosening his tie went to open the door.

“Elijah! Thank you – it’s too hot to play, my fingers were sliding on the keys. Take this, would you, before I spill it? Oh – Walker – I didn’t know you were here.”

“He is always here, in the morning,” said Elijah, and taking one of the three glasses she carried gasped at the chill in his palm. Eve grinned. “I brought as much ice as I could, but it won’t last, I can hear it cracking already – how can you bear it in here? I am wet through.” She put her hand to her neck and showed him her fingertips. “See?”

“I am going to find Alex”, said Elijah, “To see how he is.” Behind him Walker knocked one of the plastic pots from its bench and scattered soil and seeds across the floor. He swore, and bent to scoop it up. “*Gird thy loins up, Christian soldier*!” whispered Elijah, and went out laughing.

Eve watched him go, then said: “I couldn’t find Alex this morning, though I looked everywhere I could think of. But Hester says he’s all right, and that he slept the whole night through, though how she would know that I’ve no idea.” She shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do, not now, only go on like we always have. Oh, Walker - how can you be so clumsy, with such wonderful hands? Let me help you…”

**II**

That same morning John had woken late, the knuckle at the tip of his middle finger tender and swollen where he’d gripped the pen as he sat writing until almost dawn. In the kitchen downstairs Hester had given him a subdued ‘Good morning’ and passed him strong tea and toast with honey, then gone out to the garden with a pair of shears, snapping their blades as she went. He thought perhaps she’d avoided his gaze, as though she knew he’d caught her out in something secret the night before, but the idea was troubling and he shrugged it away. He had no appetite, and chewed wearily at the crust for a few minutes, then carried his plate to the sink and rinsed it under hot water. On the windowsill above the sink a housefly washed its hands, and John watched a while then frightened it away. Then he took his plate to the shabby dresser in the corner, where a soft white bundle was fastened by cobwebs to the corner of a shelf. He imagined it seething with small spiders waiting to hatch, and shuddering turned away to sit alone at the long oak table, tracing the name EADWACER where it had been cut into the wood. Not since arriving at the house had he seen the table empty: on any other morning he would have found Alex leaning on his elbows and tearing at new loaves of bread, or Clare trying to caress the spiteful ginger cat. Perhaps I really am alone, he thought: perhaps everything that happened the day before has broken us – them! - up for good, and they’ve gone back to whatever’s waiting the other side of the forest. He strained to hear footsteps rapping on the bare wooden floors above, or Eve at her piano, but there was nothing. Having prized solitude for years, he discovered that it made him uneasy, and standing so suddenly his chair reared and fell to the floor he went out to the garden to see who he could find.

Up on the raised verge beside the reservoir Clare sat cross-legged, patting at something in the long grass. Between the girl and where he stood the lawn was empty but for a herring-gull in the shade of the diseased elm, so white and rigid he thought at first it was cast in plastic or glass. He was alone, unbearably so, and the sensation was so unfamiliar he didn’t know how it could be borne, and stood looking fretfully back at the house hoping to see Elijah at his window, or Hester kneeling between the dying stumps of the roses. The gull screamed once then turned its head and regarded John, frowning, and shifted its splayed yellow feet.

“*You* again,” he muttered fondly, remembering the gull out on the marshes. In the still air of the garden it was the nearest he had to a companion, and he edged forward with a hand outstretched, feeling foolish but determined to reach it if he could: “Should you be here? Were you invited? I don’t remember asking you to come -” Its tail was blackened as if it had been burned or dipped in ink; it switched it from side to side and retreated deeper into the shade. The company of birds had been so rare since summer set in that John would have liked to say “Look! Look at its eye, just like a drop of custard!”, but no-one was there. Then, from somewhere in the house behind him, he heard someone laugh, and raising an arm to shield his eyes from the sun saw movement in the glasshouse. He could just make out, through the green-stained panes above the low brick wall, Eve’s black curls above her thin neck, and Walker’s greying head. They stood side by side at the window making slow definite movements at something out of sight, and there was a stillness and contentment in their bodies that unsettled him because it was so at odds with everything he’d seen before.

He began to move towards them across the lawn, thinking he would rap at the window and gesture to the gull, which opened and closed its beak as though laughing silently at something just out of sight. He wanted to say, “I think it followed us here, all the way from the marshes,” and see if Eve would smile, or even Walker with the reluctant curl of his mouth that he already knew well. But as he came within the shadow of the glasshouse he heard the woman laugh again, not too brightly as she often did, like an actress obeying her script, but quietly as if it had been a private remark. If John had forgotten by then that he was nothing more than an intruder, the feeling returned with its full force of loneliness and shame. He fell back, and finding himself exposed and vulnerable on the bright empty lawn walked swiftly to a pair of copper beeches that grew against the garden wall. Their black glossy leaves sheltered him as deeply as a curtain might, and pressing into the shade he found he could draw near the glasshouse without being seen. After a brief silence, in which John made out Eve’s raised hand trickling a stream of soil into a small pot Walker held, he heard the woman’s voice carry clearly through the dead air: “He went swimming again last night, you know. I’m afraid he’ll knock himself out in the dark, and no-one will be there to find him….” She turned her back to the window, and John saw plainly through her shirt the sharp bones of her shoulder-blades, and between them a darkening blot of sweat. Then she put her hand up to Walker’s shoulder, and brushed something from his clothes. “He’s taken to John, anyway – I saw them together by the reservoir two nights ago. I followed them down, I don’t know why. Perhaps I ought not to have done but we don’t know anything about him, not really, only that he came from there…I couldn’t hear what they were saying but they were laughing when they came back, and John was saying that the dam’s OK. But we knew that all along, didn’t we?” She shrugged, and John, fastened to the ground by the sound of his name in her mouth, strained towards them. Then she said, “He’s very like you, you know,” and turned smiling back to the window, making deft movements with her hands at something out of sight. The ease between them fractured suddenly – even at a distance John felt it – and for a while there was no talk or small gestures but silence.

The gull padded towards him scowling, and screamed again. The sound must have startled the pair inside the glasshouse: another of the windows flew open and a small white pebble was flung out. It startled the gull, which gave a weary thrust of its wings, shot John an aggrieved glare, and wheeled away towards the reservoir where Alex and Claire lay unmoving on the bright grass of the embankment. It found a rising current of hot air, and rode it out of sight.

“Do you remember being a child and drawing birds so they made the letter M?” said Eve, watching it go and bringing her tilted head to rest against Walker’s shoulder. “And every house had a chimney, and the sky was a blue stripe with nothing between it and the green earth.”

“Don’t they say that’s how the Greeks got their alphabet,” said Walker: “Cranes flew over and their wings and legs made all the letters, and when the last crane in England was shot, it was the end of the great poets.” He bent his own head so that it almost rested on the black curls on his shoulder, then as though changing his mind straightened and said, with a return to his usual careless voice, “All nonsense obviously: is there any more water? My mouth is dry.” John, beech-leaves pricking him through his shirt, felt a curious surge of envy: I’d’ve told her all of this, he thought, if she’d asked.

“The glasses are empty – shall I go back to the kitchen? But there’s no more ice…before this summer I don’t think I ever knew what thirst was like, or that your tongue could be sore with it, and your lips crack. Hester put on the radio this morning and they said it would rain tomorrow or the next day, but I can’t imagine it, can you? It would be like a miracle.”

Her companion laughed and said: “*Western wind, when wilt thou blow, the small rain down can rain…*”, and in the shade of the copper beeches John started: it was so unlike Walker that it was like seeing him give the woman at his side a gift of something stolen. After that there was silence again, and no movement from the windows: he waited, and thinking he’d hear nothing more stooped under the branches to make his way back to the house, hoping he might find Hester or Elijah, so steady and unchanging and unlikely to take him by surprise. But they were there still, and he thought of the notebook in the child’s desk upstairs and all its empty pages. If he were to make a true account of his time with them all, surely it was his duty to wait and listen? After all, what else might be said? Might she say his name again, with that particular inflexion that leant on the sound as though she were trying not to laugh? As he watched, Eve raised her dark head and began talking in a slow soft murmur, pointing down towards the reservoir at something John couldn’t make out. Whatever it was delighted the man at her side, who with an impulsiveness at odds with his usual careful gestures kissed her forehead where her hair parted, and she subsided again into the circle of his arm.

For a while John watched them - so still and quiet he thought he could see their bodies fall and rise on same breath - then shame and loneliness overwhelmed his curiosity and he turned to go: what right did he have even to know their names? He might have made his way back to the house and the safety of his dark narrow room without being seen if the gull had not returned, bearing a grievance. It settled determinedly between John and the glasshouse windows where the pair stood, then shook its white haunches and throwing back its head let fly a volley of cries that echoed from the walls of the house across the empty lawn. Walker straightened, and leaning forward peered through the murky pane of glass. His gaze scanned past John and rested for a moment on the bird, which had begun to dig with its yellow beak at something hidden in the scorched grass, then slowly returned and rested without surprise on the watching man. John began to raise his hand in cautious greeting, but Walker’s gunmetal eyes were levelled at him in amusement and challenge. John fell back a step or two and felt the blood gather in his cheeks: he’d been found out after all, as little more than a lonely Peeping Tom. He waited for the mockery that surely was coming: for the glasshouse door to fly back on its hinges; for Walker’s scorn and Eve’s half-pitying contempt. But while he waited, wondering if he would ever be able to exhale the gasp that was straining in his lungs, Walker turned back to the girl at his side and pushing aside the neck of her T-shirt kissed her again in the hollow behind her collar-bone, with as much deliberation as if he were writing something down. Then he raised his head again, half-turned towards the window, and slid a look at their watcher from the corner of his eye.

Something started then in John, which ought to have started long before, when he was young and might have endured it better. A surge of envy rose in his throat as he watched, and he put a hand to his mouth as if he’d taste not his own palm but the damp white skin at the nape of her neck. All at once, without warning or an effort of memory, he saw each small detail of a woman who days before – hours, even - had been a stranger. The bitten nails at her fingertips and the dry earth ingrained in the soles of her feet were secret and prized: he’d have liked to conceal each part of her from any eyes but his. He could not have despised Walker more if it had been he and not John who had lied his way to their table. A pain set up very low in his stomach – or not quite a pain but an insistent tugging - gentle at first but which would sharpen later when he lay in the narrow iron frame of his bed, and later still when he expected it least, as if hooks had been pushed through his flesh and were sometimes forgotten, sometimes pulled at steadily or with bursts of malice. That his mind and body together would conspire to such treachery made him gasp aloud: he pressed a hand to his belly as though he could suppress the ache, and turning his back to the glasshouse swiftly crossed the lawn to the shadow of the house with his head bent and the blood beating painfully in his ears. When he reached the patio he looked up and saw Hester there at the door with a wine-stained cloth thrown over her shoulder, eating a green apple.

“Dear John,” she said, “You really ought not to stand in the sun. Are you feeling sick? I think I have tablets for indigestion somewhere, or a bottle of milk of magnesia if you prefer: come inside, won’t you, and we’ll see what we can do. That sort of thing never lasts long.”

**III**

I’ve come down to the glasshouse. There’s no-one here. I can smell the fruit on the tomato vine left to get too ripe, and I can hear something moving under the bench. All the shadows are thick in the corners and if I half-close my eyes I can almost believe the dead plants are putting out new leaves. The air in here is so moist I can feel it on the pages of the notebook: I’ve opened a window and the tilt of it gives me two moons to write by. I don’t know what the time is but then it doesn’t seem to matter anymore.

Every now and then I remember Elijah leaning across the table in his room with the torn-up Bible all over the walls, saying “We all just assumed you were mad!”, and I laugh - it delights me, it’s so absurd. And then I think: here I am in a stranger’s house, writing in a stolen notebook with a pen that isn’t mine, a liar of a man laughing to himself up here alone in the dark – who’d blame them for thinking me mad?

Then I feel the ache in my side that won’t go, and think: is this the first symptom? Is this the beginning of madness perhaps, this pain under my ribs as real as anything I’ve ever felt, though no harm’s been done: maybe whatever keeps your body apart from your mind severs and the two things get muddled up somehow. It’s my heart that hurts, like a muscle that’s been too long out of use, just as much as my finger that’s sore from where this pen is pressing on the bone.

When I went up to my room after I’d been watching the glasshouse I found this book and wrote down her name, in the margins and on the unused pages at the back, and every time I see it I smile though I don’t know how I can, with the shame of having been caught out and the pain in my side –

Eve

Eve

Eve…

But no - I mustn’t give in to it - my mind’s still my own: I must make an account of what Hester told me this afternoon when she met me at the door. She’d been out all morning buying food, and the kitchen was full of vegetables and meat and bottles of wine as though she was preparing for a siege. There must have been two dozen green apples on the table, and someone had put them in a circle around the string of cowries that Clare had brought back from the beach, reminding of a pictures I saw once of tokens in a burial chamber. She sat me down and gave me some disgusting medicine in a glass – like ground-up chalk stirred into milk – and said it would stop me feeling sick, and I was so grateful for her company I wouldn’t have told her what the real trouble was even if I’d known. She said, “I’m sorry for what you saw yesterday, out on the marshes – I wouldn’t have had you witness that for the world. Not for several worlds, indeed!”

I had a mouthful of medicine, which was disgustingly thick and had grown warm in its bottle so that it was hard to swallow, so instead of answering I settled for shaking my head and shrugging. I think she knew what I meant: she leant forward and patted my hand twice as though she were grateful and said, “I knew I needn’t worry: I knew you’d understand. He’s not himself, you know. A beautiful loving lad but never really free from what troubles him – ” She shook her head, and lowered her eyelids so that her whole face took on a resigned and mournful look. But I couldn’t shake the feeling there was something a little satisfied in her as she’d looked at the aftermath of the day’s events – or if not satisfied certainly less anxious than I would have expected her to be - and the unease that had prickled under my skin the night before returned. Then she got up quickly, with a dismissive sort of gesture as if she’d dispensed with that subject and was ready for the next, and started to fill the kettle. “He will be fine, now – none of us need ever think of it again. Let me make you tea: my mother told me it’s the thing for this weather, though I can’t believe it – might as well lie in a hot bath for all the good it will do!”

When she returned to the table with two mugs overfull with strong tea, she said, “Did I see you coming from Elijah’s room, the other night? I hope you didn’t find his room too odd!” She smiled, and this time it was so frank and mischievous and so plainly affectionate at the mention of the old preacher’s name that I forgot my unease of the night before and would have told her anything she asked me. I said I thought it a very practical way of forecasting a storm, and that made us both laugh. Then she said, “Have you spoken to him much? Or have the others told you why he wouldn’t come with us to the sea, or even go down to the reservoir?”

I told her that we’d talked a while in his room, and said, “I don’t understand. How can I? I never had faith. I can’t imagine that mislaying it would be such a calamity.”

“Nor I,” she said: “But there it is. He's afraid of everything, you know ”- she flung out her arms and gestured towards the window, where a bright strip of empty lawn showed under the blind – “Afraid of everything. Just – everything.” Her hands dropped to her lap and fidgeted there. I said “Heavens above,” and she smiled.

“Hells beneath, more to the point - though really we ought not to laugh.”

I told her how I’d seen him on my first night, standing at the window looking up now and then as though waiting for the sky to fall in, and as I spoke I realised I’d begun to remember things as though they’d happened years before.

“Yes, that’s just it: waiting for the sky to fall in!” Hester sat up straighter and pushed back the hair that was falling into her eyes. “That’s just it! Crash, and the moon in pieces at his feet. He wasn’t always like that, of course: he had that kind of faith so solid it wasn’t faith anymore, it was certainty. He didn’t *believe* in God any more than you believe in me. I'm here, aren't I?” I smiled at that, because with her heaviness and with her black eyes that see everything there’s something about her you could almost worship.

She told me he had believed that the God who made Adam out of dust and clay knew Elijah, of Clapham, South London. “Believing that he had counted the hairs on his head, watched him sleeping, helped him put one foot in front of the other without falling over.” She shook her head. “He had a wife and three daughters – did he tell you that? – and they weren't any less faithful than he was. Maybe you catch it if you breathe it in, like a virus. So there they were, just think of it: the hand of God turning the world on a tilted axis, and at the same time seeing to it that your cold gets better and you can find a parking space when you need one, and you always have just enough money for the gas bill.”

I imagined Elijah’s arms pierced and threaded for a puppeteer’s strings and shuddered, spilling my tea. As though she’d seen it too Hester said, “Oh I don’t think of it that way, like a great eye in the clouds watching, just watching. I think it was more that God was everywhere, being beautiful and good or whatever, holding up the sky. I remember Elijah saying once he only needed to look at dandelions growing by the side of the road, greasy and black with exhaust fumes, and there was the evidence of God. His was the Kingdom.” She shook her head in either admiration or pity.

I don’t know why, but I began to feel impatient with the old preacher, that he had let a fine and wise mind be broken over something so slight. What difference was there, after all? He had not seen God then; he did not see him now. I said, “Well what happened, then? How do you lose God? You go out one day and he’s not there in the weeds anymore?”

Hester drew together her heavy grey brows. “It’s easy to laugh, of course,” she said reprovingly. “I did, at first. But if you could see how stupidly, how childishly afraid he is, of everything – the sun, he says, at the moment. He said to me last week: It’s the Last Times, Hester! Then he remembered he didn’t believe in all of that anymore, but that was even worse. The world ending because its Maker has decided it’s high time is one thing. It heaving and collapsing with a cough without purpose or meaning is quite another.”

Then she shrugged and went on: “He told me about the day it happened, though I'm not sure I believe it. I’m not even sure he believes it himself, but I suppose we all have to explain ourselves as best we can. Did he tell you about his study? Sometimes I think he misses that, more than his family - his books and papers, the pictures on the wall, the cup he always used for tea in the morning. He had his desk against the window, so he could sit there and look out at creation – or at least what he thought was creation, then. Every morning he went to his study, and didn’t come out until the afternoon - except on Sundays, when there wasn’t time. Every week he had three sermons to prepare, or four on special weeks, and for hours he’d sit at his desk reading the Bible, or books about it. I imagine you’d believe in anything, don’t you think, if you read it every day?”

I smiled then, thinking of one long wet summer when my brother had learnt the language of Tolkein’s elves and wouldn’t answer to any name but Celeborn, which our mother tried pronounce and never got quite right. I said, “I think you probably would.”

“He told me it happened like this. One Sunday morning he’d just finished dressing in his suit and tie and was going over his sermon notes. It had been a hard year for some of the congregation and Elijah knew his duty, and wanted to comfort them. So he found out somehow – he might have counted, for all I know – that in the Bible the words ‘be not afraid’ or something like it come 365 times.” She drained the last of her tea with a gulp and said, “Do you understand? To Elijah it meant only one thing: thousands of years ago God had personally seen to it there’d be enough comfort to go round for every day of the year.”

I felt again my annoyance, disappointed that a man I liked so much could have been so simple and childish in his reasoning. I said I thought it seemed to me a kind of madness, taking everything you read and see, and turning it until you could make it fit into the way you see things. She smiled and said, “But don’t we all do the same? I believe that right this minute we are circling the sun, because I have been told it’s so: I’ve no evidence for it myself. Anyway, there it was - proof he’d been made in the image of God, and the paths he'd walked had all been planned for him an eternity and were fenced off from danger. He’d nearly finished making his notes when his youngest daughter came in – they all wore long skirts, you know, for the sake of modesty - and asked him what he’d be preaching on that morning, and he told her. And you know what she said?” I shook my head, and saw that her lips were pressed together as if she were trying not to laugh. “She said: what about leap years? What about leap years!”

She saw that I didn’t quite understand, and lightly slapping the table said, “Don’t you see? The girl said something like this: you’ve always told me God has ordered everything for my own good. But every leap year, when winter has gone on too long and we’ve all forgotten what the sun feels like, there’ll be one day when there’s no word of comfort from God. And either he knows about leap years, because he’s God, which means that either he wants me to be unhappy and afraid for one day every four years, or he doesn’t know about leap years after all. So either he’s unkind or ignorant, and either way, he can’t be God, because to be God you must be perfectly kind and perfectly wise…”

It seemed so absurd – to think this was the man who thought me mad! – that I felt a curious mix of anger and amusement, until I remembered how grave and sad Elijah always seemed, and how he restlessly drummed on the arm of his chair as if trying to occupy his mind. I said, “So for want of a nail, the Kingdom was lost?”

“That’s it, I think. That’s just it. His faith was made of tiny pieces that fit perfectly, or were made to fit at any rate, and this one piece wouldn’t go in and broke the whole picture up. He told me she just kissed him on the cheek and went out laughing, thinking nothing of it, while he went on sitting at his desk. The windows were open, and there were daisies growing out on the lawn, and suddenly they weren’t carefully made things there to make us good, or whatever it is he’d been telling the Sunday School children all those years, but just accidents. Happy accidents, but accidents all the same.”

I said, “They talk about conversion, don’t they, those American preachers with a diamond in their tie-pin. And he went the other way.”

“He told me it was like falling out of love. Not any sort of decision but something much worse than that. He looked and looked at the weeds in the garden and the sun in the sky and so on, and tried to summon up – what: love? Awe? I don’t know – and it just wouldn’t come. It must’ve happened to you, John. We’ve all felt it. Love going for no reason you can think of; a face you thought beautiful becoming ordinary, or worse.” She turned her black eyes on me like a light, and it was as though I were being searched. I thought of Eve’s face and of the small details that had become somehow essential to me – the tooth that’s set a little further back from the others, the blue veins in her lowered eyelids – and could not imagine it would ever be ordinary. Afraid she’d see a change in me I stood, and carried our mugs to the sink. On the windowsill someone was growing a seedling in a plastic pot; it had been left too long without water and the tips of the leaves were turning brown. I scooped up some water from the sink and dribbled it into the pot, and pushed at the soil with my thumb, imagining the seedling growing plump and straight as I watched. Behind me Hester said, “Of course he couldn’t just put his Bible under his arm and go up those pulpit steps and pray and sing. He might be afraid of everything, but he’s no coward. Then he made his way to St Joseph’s of course, and after that here, and once he had come up the steps and over the threshold he never went out again. Who’s holding the sky up now, you see? Who’s seeing to it he doesn’t break his arm on the way out of the shops on a Saturday morning? He’s alone for the first time in his life and he’s terrified.”

I asked what his family thought of his change of heart, and she said “Well – they’re confused, I suppose. They write. He writes. They'll be back from abroad before long, and he'll go back - but to what? They’re still living under God - there’s there’s a light shining on their feet and a lamp on their paths. And now he’s just like you and me, stumbling around in the dark, trying to find his way.”

She stood up, groaning and pressing her hands into the small of her back, and joined me at the sink. Touching the leaves of the seedling on the windowsill with her little finger, she said “One of Walker’s attempts, though I doubt it’ll survive the summer – oh, and here he comes with Eve, laughing about I don’t know what. Are you all right there, John, or are you feeling sick again? The medicine is on the table – pour yourself another glass.”

After that I took myself away into the gardens and the ground beyond it, where if you look carefully you can find something still growing among the yellow grass and the roses left to die in their beds. There were clusters of mauve flowers with yellow hearts that seemed to turn and follow me as I walked: eyebright, I think they’re called, and I was glad to see them. No-one saw me, and I was glad of that too: I kept away from the glasshouse, where I imagined Eve and Walker standing where I’d left them, mocking me as perhaps they’d always done. I didn’t want Clare to find me, or Elijah to call me in to sit with him at the window where the heat of the sun has a particular vehemence and you feel like an ant beneath a magnifying glass.

But all the while I was hoping to be left alone I found myself straining to hear a footstep behind me on the lawn, or a movement in the copper beeches that grow alongside the wall, and I knew I was hoping to see Eve as much as I dreaded ever having to meet her eyes again.

After a few minutes of aimless walking I came across a part of the land I hadn’t seen before. It lay to the left of the reservoir wall at the corner of the embankment, away from the valve tower and the yellow light. Here the lawn gives way to brambles and nettles, and not the beeches and poplars someone once planted in order near the house, but ragged pines and hawthorn bushes I suppose are remnants of the forest. Everywhere bindweed had taken hold, so that it looked as if the brambles and hawthorn were all blooming at once with the same flaring, open-hearted white flowers.

I crouched a while on a piece of wood that must have sheared away from one of the pines in a violent storm, and put my head in my hands. I tried to order everything that I had heard and seen since the day I arrived, but nothing would fit, and underneath it all was that curious ache in my side, as though I’d been injured and not felt the first blow. When I lifted my head and saw Alex a little distance away I was glad: if he was part of all the confusion I felt, he at least seemed to see me directly and clearly, and even to have need of me not as he thought I was, but as I am.

As I came nearer to him I saw that he was crouched intently in the shade of a sycamore, with his back turned to me and his head bent. He had taken off his T shirt, which lay beside him in the grass, and I could see the bones of his spine and the birthmark like a shadow on his arm. The sycamore was shedding its spinning keys all around, but Alex didn’t look up: whatever it was he’d found on the ground absorbed him completely. Some distance away the cat huddled at the foot of the tree. Its eyes, always streaming, were swollen almost shut, and it licked wearily at a paw.

When I reached him, I coughed once or twice, so I wouldn’t startle him, and he looked up sharply like a child caught out in something they ought not to be doing. He said, “John!” with surprise and displeasure, and then frowned and bit his lip, and looked down at the grass between his hands. I said, “I wasn’t looking for you, no-one sent me. I only came because I wanted to be alone, too.” Something in the grass moved, and I came closer. When he looked up again the displeasure had gone and he looked both guilty and wretched, but determined to continue with whatever he was doing. He muttered “Go away”, but not with any conviction, so I came closer still and crouched beside him. When I saw what he had between his hands I think I cried out, because he said “I’m not doing anything to it not anymore!”, and shifted away from me a little.

Pinned to the ground by his forefingers a large moth struggled in the grass. It was far larger than the pale moths I’d seen in the dining room, or beating against the lamps in the room upstairs: it must have measured seven or eight inches across its wingspan, though I suppose it would have been less had it not been stretched between his fingers like a man on the rack. Its wings were thick like velvet and the colour of a horse-chestnut, marked darker at the joint where they met its fat body, and with one blurry marking of white at the tip, as though they’d been touched with chalk. Its legs looked far too frail to bear its weight, and every now and then they twitched with a horrible imploring gesture. I couldn’t see its eyes, only a pair of strange flat antennae that looked like nothing so much as the soft furred leaves of a sage plant. As I watched, Alex suddenly grasped its right wing between his thumb and finger as though he were going to tear it apart; the moth arched and convulsed its body and although it was silent I thought I would hear it screech, or hear the tearing of its wing like a piece of fabric. I said, “Stop – what are you doing – Alex however will it fly, if you take one of its wings?” I wanted to pull his hands away, but the moth revolted me and I wanted to turn my head so I wouldn’t have to see it raise its leg as if it were signalling its distress.

He gave a long explosive sigh and his whole body sagged, almost as though he would pitch forward and cover the moth with his chest. He loosened his grip, but its wings were still pinned to the grass, and the creature lay quite still for a while as if it had given up hope. Alex muttered to himself, and dipped his head to his shoulder to wipe the sweat from his forehead and what I thought might have been a tear. I said, “I can’t hear you – won’t you tell me what you’re doing, so I can help?”

He said, “You thought I could do it,” and gave me a sullen look that was nothing like the bright frank smiles I had come to expect from him.

I said, “Let it go now Alex: nothing good ever came of hurting even something so small”, and all the while I was thinking*, I thought you could do what – who have you been talking to? What have they said?*

He looked again at the moth between his hands, this time with a puzzled frown as if he could not remember how it had come to be there, or what he might have been intending to do. He withdrew first his right hand, and then his left, with a show of care that was a little like fear, as if he thought it might rear up from the grass and beat its wings blindly against his face. It did not, only lay there quite still, sometimes twitching a wing as if it were testing its strength. Alex turned his back on the moth, drew his knees up to his chest, and buried his face in his arms. His shoulders convulsed once with a sob, then he suppressed his tears and instead drew in a series of long slow breaths while I sat beside him and patted his shoulder and even put my arm round him and pulled him against me, as if I could steady him, saying that he hadn’t done any harm, and that of course no-one need ever know what I’d seen.

After a minute or two he calmed himself, and lifted his head. When his eyes met mine he seemed himself again, as if he had taken the time to reassemble who he’d been the day we went together to the reservoir. But he said again, ruefully, as if he knew I wouldn’t want to hear it, but felt it should be said: “You thought I’d be able to do it, didn’t you? You thought I could hurt it. I did try, and not just that, I tried earlier too – ” Unconsciously he looked over to the foot of the sycamore tree, where the cat with its swollen eyes still nudged and licked at its paw. I felt a little cold then, wondering what he had been doing while I sat with Hester at her table, but still I let my arm rest on his. I said, “Never mind that: never mind what you have done or what anyone has done – but I would never think you could, you know. What made you think so?”

He drew away from me then to reach for his T shirt, which he pulled over his head. It was stained with dust, and was pierced with the stems of dried grasses. I stood, and saw the moth had gone.

“*She* told me. She said she heard you say so, to the others: that you thought – yesterday – I might have done it, only not remembered…”

I was bewildered and angry; I think I can bear anything but being made out to be what I’m not: I said, “Who? Who have you been speaking to?”, all the while thinking: *Let it not be Eve, thinking so little of me* *and doing such harm*.

He said, “Well Hester of course!”, as if it were foolish of me even to ask. He smoothed his T shirt, and looked at me again, and I saw in his eyes a mixture of challenge and uncertainty. “And I remember nothing, not really, only the boat and the boy wanting to see it, and the way I could hear the water coming up through the grass and the mud and the way the gulls sounded like men screaming a long way away. So I thought perhaps I did hurt the boy after all – if John thinks I could have done, *even John!* – so I came here away from the others to be on my own, and thought I would try, and see if I had it in me. And I couldn’t, not really, though I think the cat might limp a while; I couldn’t even pull the wing off a moth, just an insect, so what would I be doing with a child? John? Whatever would I do to a child when I can’t even hurt an insect in the grass!”

I felt such pity then that I would have liked to put my arms around him like I did when Christopher was a boy, but I think he hated me a little, for believing I thought so badly of him, so instead I stayed away and said “I never thought so. Not ever, not when I saw the woman on the path, or later when we all talked it over on the way home. Hester…**”** – pity for Alex was overlaid completely with a burst of rage, and it was a while before I could speak again – “She is mistaken, Alex: that is all. She must have misheard. No-one believes it of you, and neither do you, and you must think of something else now.”

He stood for a long while with the sun putting lights in his hair, and the sycamore keys spinning from their branches. Then he bent to pick one up, and said “I saw a woman once who wore a necklace with one of these in silver hanging from a chain. She said inside the silver was a real one and I remember thinking that it seemed wrong, walking about with something dying round your neck.” Then he smiled, in the old frank way I knew, and said, “All right. I won’t think about it anymore. I’ll put it away somewhere, and won’t take it out again. That’s the best way.”

So we walked together across the grass, and our shadows were long and reached in front of us, and behind us the cat came slowly. We could hear Eve playing the Maple Leaf Rag much too fast, and Clare calling from a window upstairs, and as we walked I repeated to myself over and over, under my breath: *put it away somewhere and don’t take it out again*.

Eve

Eve

Eve, Eve -

*Western wind, when wilt thou blow?*

*The small rain down can rain.*

*Christ! That my love were in my arms*

*And I in my bed again.*

I have known that poem all my life!

oh my hand aches I’m too tired to write more

**MONDAY**

**I**

On the morning of the sixth day John woke to find a grey haze gathering at the lower edges of the sky, as though all the fields to the east and west were on fire, and a pall of smoke had settled on the horizon. He stood watching a while at the window, buttoning the shabby blue shirt he'd found in one of the boxes at the foot of the bed, wondering if the haze would rise and gather into storm-clouds.

The changing sky outside made him anxious and ill-at-ease: he felt the end of his time in the house must be near, and wanted to memorise every detail of it, as he’d once memorised poems to be recited in front of a class of boys he never came to know. Would he, in the months coming, alone in his ordered flat, remember what he’d seen and heard? Surely he’d forget the step that had first taken him into the kitchen, and the particular curve of the dip worn into the stone, the blue lights in the blue room where they ate, the lichen that crept across the stones on the terrace?

When he made his way downstairs he paused in the cool dim air of the hall. It stretched ahead of him, surely far longer than he’d first thought, and a bunch of keys hung in the lock of the front door. He heard a quiet dry rustle from somewhere very near, and looking up saw a strip of wallpaper slowly peel from the damp plaster behind and droop towards the floor. Stooping to smooth it back against the wall, he saw for the first time the design of tangled leaves and branches, with small birds caught in the dense undergrowth. The pattern was so deep and so dark he wouldn't have been surprised to hear little furtive movements, and he stared for a long time at a goldfinch until he was sure he saw its black eye blink. He smoothed his palms against the paper, hoping it would fasten back against the wall, and imagined finding Eve painted there and hiding in the thicket.

Really it was she he was hoping to find, he thought miserably, feeling again the painful tugging in his stomach, and was so absorbed in imagining her there that when she passed by a minute later she seemed unreal, as if she’d slipped out of the wallpaper, drawn by longing.

She said: “I have to talk to you,” and put out her hand. It hung in the air between them an inch from his sleeve. The thin bluish skin was pulled tight over the strong musician’s bones, and there were blue shadows between the knuckles. Her voice had lost its particular musical tone: it was terse, and all seriousness. The hand crossed the last inch between them and touched him lightly on the forearm, and the ends of her fingers were sharp and hot.

John met her gaze with difficulty, remembering Walker's long sly glance at him as he had drawn her closer against his side: had he told her they'd been watched? Was he going to be mocked all over again?

“Oh?” said John. “What is it?”

“I need your help.” It had the rising cadence of a plea: he made a half-step towards her and brought his own hand out from his pocket, then not knowing what to do with it instead reached up to smooth his beard. She said again, this time leaning on the first word, “*We* need your help.”

“Of course,” he said.

“Of course. Well - ” she glanced over his right shoulder, where down the stone step the kitchen door stood half-open, then brought her eyes up to his with the snap of a key fitting its lock. “But no: shall we go for a walk?” She slipped away down the dim hall, beckoning as she went, and he followed the flash of her bare feet on the carpet.

Outside, as he watched her walk ahead of him on the scorched sharp grass, John felt again the change of air, as though there’d been a disruption overnight. The stillness now wasn’t like the calm before a storm, which would surely be a gathered sort of stillness, like a muscle bunched before a blow: this was complete inertia, and more unsettling than a lightning-strike.

He followed to where she stood waiting for him on the lawn, beyond the blighted elm. Around him the sun picked out every shallow fissure in the dried-out earth, and gave each blade of grass its own black shadow. But as he came near to her, he saw that she stood within a bluish shadow slowly moving. It spread for several feet around her to a blurred edge, and shed a softer light on the fine white lines of her face and hands. She beckoned - “Hurry up!” – then lifted her arms above her head. The bright dome, empty for thirty-two days, was punctuated by a single cloud moving east, shedding white air at its fringes and casting a shadow on the lawn, as solitary as if it had just now puffed out of the chimney-stack. “I can cover it with my hand, look,” said Eve, and John smiling bent his head nearer hers, to see her spread her fingers and blot it out. A second passed and the white blot edged past her fingertip.

“Stand here with me, underneath,” she said, and pulled his arm to draw him nearer.

“I nearly believe we could touch it, if we really wanted to,” said John. “It’s exactly halfway between here and there, like it’s hanging on a string.”

She laughed, and her delight was so pleasing he felt buoyed up, as if he might actually come untethered from the hard earth. He said: “You wanted to tell me something?”

“Oh – yes. Yes, I did”. She drew her black brows together.

“Is it Alex? Did that woman call again?”

“No” - she waved distractedly, as though pushing the stranger out of their dark circle – “It’s not that. At least, it’s not quite that. Look: I want you to take this.” She reached into the pocket of her shorts and took out a small envelope. It was stamped, though the stamp wasn’t franked, and had been opened and closed several times until the pale brown paper was soft.

“Another letter,” said John. The sight of it depressed him, and he took it reluctantly, as if the stupidity and spite inside might be contagious.

She nodded. “I found it yesterday. It was under the doormat. You don’t need to look at it –” John had half pulled out a folded piece of newspaper – “It’s more of the same, another drowning: Wales this time, I think. Oh John – who’d do this? Who’d be so childish?” She plucked at the fragile skin on her throat and left it mottled and red. “I want you to hang onto it. In books they burn them, don’t they? But don’t burn it. Keep it. Maybe we’ll need it sometime. No good my taking it - Alex comes to my room too much, so does Clare; and I don’t want Hester to know. Did she speak to you this morning? About anything important, I mean?”

John shook his head, pushing the letter into his back pocket and feeling it weighing on him.

“It’s her birthday tomorrow.”

“I remember. Sixty.”

“And not for the first time! Anyway: there's supposed to be a party. You’ll be the only guest: no-one else is invited. There isn’t anyone else to invite.”

For a moment he was tempted by the old polite uncertain formula – “Oh, well, that really is kind, but I don’t” – but it was much too late for all that. Eve, seeing his hesitation almost before he felt it, raised an eyebrow, then said: “It’s all planned. More than she knows. Clare has made a cake.” She threw him a glance from under her fringe. You and I will both be kind, however awful it is, said the glance. It made him complicit, and gave him far more pleasure than it ought to have done. She lifted the curls from the back of her neck in a gesture he’d begun to recognise, arching her back as though testing the strength of her bones. Her shadow reached beyond the circle of shade, and then retreated as she lowered her arms.

“And Walker wants to show a reel of film he found in the attic: Hester As a Young Woman. You can’t imagine, can you? I think she was an actress for a while. She has the voice. I suppose I’ll play something. Elijah might sing. Everyone has to do something. We did it once at St Joseph’s you know... ” She looked anxious for a moment, as though she were afraid she'd been insensitive. John felt a pricking at the back of his neck and flicked at it, expecting to dislodge a sucking gnat, but it was only a leaping nerve.

“What I need *you* to do,” said Eve, stretching her bare foot ahead of her so that her long toes, already dirty, poked out of their circle of shade: “Is talk to the woman. She wants to call it off – says it wouldn’t be right to celebrate. *In the light of events*.” She shook her head. “It’s no good. I know what will happen because I know Alex better than her: he’ll spend all day down by the reservoir, feeling miserable and guilty because it will be his fault there’s no music and no-one’s dancing, and no-one ate his sister’s cake. We have to carry on as if everything is all right because if we don’t, it will never be all right again – especially after yesterday. You agree?” It wasn’t really a query, but he nodded, glad again to be needed. “There’s no use at all my speaking to her. You’ll have to do it. You have a beard. It counts for something.” So she couldn’t keep the mockery from her voice for long: the seriousness briefly left her and her speckled eyes roamed speculatively over his face. Then, as if regretting the change, she became grave again and said, “Please do. Please. She’ll listen to you.”

“I’ll try to help – I’ve been trying.. .” The memory of standing with Alex by the reservoir, letting him believe that his frantic anxiety that the dam would break was only cold reason, tapped him on the shoulder and made him step impatiently forward (what else would be lining up behind him before the week was out?). “Come on, let’s move this way.” They walked on in the cloud’s shadow, following its slow path across the lawn. “Of course I’ll try. But what shall I say to her? She is” – another tap on the shoulder, sharper this time, and he saw again the curious satisfied look Hester had worn had the night before – “Very certain of things. Do you think anyone has ever changed her mind, about anything at all?”

Eve turned to look at him. In the mild light of their little dark territory on the lawn her eyes brightened. Oh, but they’re not green after all, not quite, he thought: I’ll have to think what colour they are, so I can write it down. “Don’t you understand?” she said, then paused, smoothed a damp curl from her forehead, and said: “Look, she doesn’t mean what she says. Nobody ever does! Dear John, you’re so like Clare. Don’t you ever pick things up, and look to see what’s underneath?” Dear John, she said, on a cadence like the music he heard her playing at night, and without warning there began an insistent pulling in his stomach, so like the painful drawing of the day before that he put his hand to his stomach as though he felt sick. Then, afraid she’d notice, he arrested the movement, and instead hooked his thumb in the warm brass buckle of the stranger’s belt.

“She doesn’t mean it – oh come on, follow me, it’s getting ahead of us: there must be wind, up there! – it’s just she needs to be heard saying the right things. She must have the correct feelings. D’you see? After all, how could we love her, if we thought her selfish? And of course if we’re made to plead with her, and tell her how loved she is, how we can’t believe she can be sixty, how there’s no-one in the world quite like Hester, for she’s a jolly good fellow – well, then she’ll know we love her. John nodded, thinking not for the first time how changeable they all were, and how mistaken he’d been on almost every score. He said, “If I do this can I be excused from any – from any kind of performance?” He said the word distastefully, then to show that of course he looked forward to her playing, if to nothing else, he added, “Because I’ve no talents at all, you know.”

“Well, someone has to listen, don’t they? Now then” – she touched him lightly again above the elbow, and this time her fingertips were cold – “Thank you. You’ve been rather put-upon so far, haven’t you? I don’t suppose you imagined we’d all need your help like this – but I promised Walker this will be the last thing we ask of you.”

The mention of the other man soured John's pleasure, and he crossed the lawn slowly, setting his back straight like a soldier doubting orders. He looked once behind to see Eve standing in her diminishing circle of shade. She was waving down the garden towards the valve tower: someone was coming to meet her. Ahead of him, the house in shadowed replica on the lawn tilted towards him, and at the kitchen window Hester stood half-concealed by the lowered blind, her forearms plunging and withdrawing at the sink.

“More tea?” she said when he opened the door, rehearsing how best to begin.

“Yes – thank you.” He watched her move heavily between the table and the draining board. Something unappetizing bubbled on the stove, and gave off a thick floury scent he thought he knew, but couldn’t place. She dried a teacup on her apron, which was not clean.

“How’s Alex?” he said, implying that she alone would have the full story. The kettle sang on the hob. “Tired, I think.” She poured the water too rapidly into the pot and splashed her arm without flinching. When she came to the table with two overfull cups, scald marks bloomed on the back of her hand. “He didn’t sleep much. He was down at the reservoir most of the night, though I don’t think he went in the water. These days I think he just likes to be there. Hard to say by now whether it’s a curse or a comfort. It’s always the way, don’t you think,” she said, getting up to stir the pan on the stove: “After a while our troubles are the only thing we have that never change and we wouldn’t lose them, even if we could.”

“So the woman didn’t call again?”

“Is your tea all right for you? I like it like this, brewed brown...” She sat opposite him in a chair that groaned under her. Her fine black hard-edged eyes were hooded with sleep. “She called once more last night when you were all sleeping. There’s really nothing wrong with the child. He’d come to more harm in a PE lesson! She didn’t thank us, not quite, but everything’s cleared up. There is – what do they say, on the news? – there’s no case to answer.”

She sucked thoughtfully at the rim of her cup. It was too full, and a droplet of thick stewed tea spilled from the handle onto the table. “Best just to leave him awhile. Best to let him sleep. There’s all the time in the world for talking.” She began to sort through the piles of letters and magazines and books on the table, impatiently clearing a space, then returned to the stove and left her tea to stain a long-outdated headline (*Austrian Excavators Return Empty-Handed*).

The table was scored with knives and burnt by pots hurriedly set down. John traced the words NOT THIS TIME with his forefinger, and felt a chill pass through the damp high-ceilinged kitchen. Behind Hester, in the cool green-painted alcove where last night Alex had sat with his knees drawn up under his chin, Elijah the preacher sat silently reading. Some trick of the light, coming at him from the windows and the harsh strip-lights set in the vaulted ceiling, doubled his shadow in the recess, and his heavy down-turned head was reproduced over each shoulder. Leafing through a paperback, he smiling caught John’s surprise at the title. “Not exactly required reading in the seminaries, eh?” *Hume: On Suicide* said the cover, in a pretty fluid font not suited to its subject. “You’ve read it?”

“I went in for that sort of thing,” said John, gripping his teacup. “When I was young.” The handle was loose, and rasped when it was touched.

“This sort of thing?”

“Oh, you know. Thinking.” Stirring at the stove Hester let out a quiet blow of amusement.

“Ah.” The preacher stroked the embossed paper cover. “Perhaps I’d’ve done too, if circumstances had been different. I find it hard to disagree with now. Might even have done then, when I lay down in green pastures so to speak.” He smiled ruefully, and John could not have said whether he regretted having once been content to lie down, or having got up again.

“I preached on it, you know,” he said, “Very often. Popular sermon subject, nice and clear-cut: ending your own life goes against the will of God, which is that we would all live long enough to serve Him. *What is the chief end of man*?” he recited thoughtfully, “*To glorify God, and enjoy him forever*. But this book, now” – he shook the slim white book – “It says if one day you went out walking, and saw a rock rolling down towards you, no-one would condemn you for stepping aside and averting your death, and diverting the will of God. Taking your own life in that case – isn’t it just the same, like putting your finger in the path of a raindrop on the window and changing its course? The raindrop will carry on rolling, because gravity tells it to; it’ll just take a different path.” He shrugged, turning back to his book; and John, relieved of the need to reply, turned back to the kitchen table.

“Have you seen outside?” he said, tense with the burden of a duty not yet carried out. Hester bent over the pan on the stove and breathed in its steam. When she lifted her face it was blotched and wet. “Looks like the storm’s coming.”

“Oh?” she brought the pan to the table and sat opposite him, thoughtfully stirring. I hope that’s not lunch, thought John, looking at the thick translucent liquid with distaste. One final bubble burst weakly on the surface and left a shallow-edged crater. “Good. I feel like my bones have been boiled for soup.” She caught his gaze and laughing said, “Oh this isn’t soup, you know. It’s glue,” and reaching behind to the dresser with its chipped crockery stacked on the shelves brought out the bald china head and shoulders of a handsome man. His eyes were open and all over his brow and scalp were written the qualities of his character, which must have been a trial to his friends: *Blandness, Order, Mirthfulness, Combativeness*. The white packed bundle of nesting spiders’ eggs John had seen fastened to the shelf the day he arrived had burst, and several black dots scurried frightened over the mouth and nose. Hester blew them away, scooped her middle finger into a pot of Vaseline and smeared a thick layer of jelly over the glazed features. Then she said, “Tell me how you are. I though last night you looked tired – could you take this? Don’t let it stick.”

John took the pan from her and stirred the thick paste with a wooden spoon. “I’d walked a long way,” he said.

“But you feel rested, besides the walking and – well: the other business.” She pursed her lips as if she'd tasted something sour. “I’ll know I’ve failed, if you don’t feel more peaceful now than when you came. It’s why you’re here, isn’t it? And you know we’ve all been saying how well you look. Just get rid of that dreadful beard and you’d look a boy again!” She took a yellowing sheet of newspaper from the top of the pile nearest her, and began to tear it into narrow even strips. “They were saying so, the girls. Just the other night.”

“Oh yes, completely rested,” said John, who’d never in his life felt himself so drained of blood and good humour: “Completely rested. Very peaceful.” He stirred the glue into glossy whorls, and taking courage from his sudden skill at dissembling said: “I must say, I’m especially looking forward to tomorrow.”

Always alert to changes of air, Hester shot him a look from under the thick grey curls on her forehead. “Thank you, I’ll take it now.” He passed her the heavy pan. “Tomorrow?”

“I thought you said – did you say tomorrow was your birthday? Might I get a glass of water?” He went hurriedly to the sink. And did Eve say so too, he wondered, running the tap to draw cooler water: did she really say I’d look a boy again? As soon as thought occurred to him, he felt so ashamed of himself that he let the flame on the stove come too close to his wrist. In the slot between the windowsill and the edge of the blind the lawn showed bright uninterrupted green: the solitary cloud had burned up.

At the table Hester dipped a torn strip of paper into the glue, and ran it between two tight straightened fingers until a gobbet of paste dropped off. Then she took the wet paper and laid it over the blind white eyes in front of her, pressing it into the sockets with her thumbs.

“Yes, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” She shrugged expansively, and dipped another piece of paper. Some kind of actress, Eve had said, and John saw it now: she didn’t talk so much as deliver lines.

“But I’m undecided - well, you can advise me, I’m sure! – about what to do. Things aren’t quite right, somehow. You know the feeling, John, that you might get shaken off your feet and fall over?” Looking not in the least like a woman afraid of falling, she smoothed the wet paper onto the forehead in front of her. It’s *papier maché*, thought John, like my nephews make. Must they all be so much like children? “What is it? What are you making?”

“A mask. For tomorrow, if we go ahead, like dancers on a sinking ship.”

“*Nearer my God to thee*,” sang Elijah from his recess, in a voice so deep the table trembled. Hester smiled over her shoulder. “Quite.” She wiped her thumb on her dress and left a glossy dark smear on her breast. “Might as well go down singing, eh? Just to amuse myself.” She tapped the mask. “I’m going to decorate it. Last month, before all the birds went, magpies were fighting on the lawn and lost half their feathers, look.” She turned to the dresser and brought out a jar, not quite properly cleaned, stuffed with piebald feathers. “Do you ever wonder where they’ve all got to? They must be hiding, somewhere, don’t you think?”

“The birds?” John remembered a front page of the Evening Standard, with its picture of doleful park wardens collecting exhausted pigeons from where they’d fallen. “They just don’t like this heat. You don’t often see sparrows on the lawn at midday, do you? They must think this last month has been one long noon.”

“Always noon, and never lunchtime. Yes, they’re all abroad, probably, in cool valleys, waiting for the rain.” She picked up the glazed white head and examined it. “What would he tell me to do, I wonder, about this damn party tomorrow? He looks a wise old thing.” Laying the head and shoulders down again she said, “Well, perhaps we should go on with it. It might take his mind, Alex’s I mean, off everything.” John looked at the glistening strips of paper covering the blind face from eyes to chin. The mask would be too small to cover Hester’s coarser face, with its heavy pads of skin at the jowls and underneath her thick unplucked eyebrows.

It struck him that all the childish things they found to do – the mask and the cabinet unpacked in the garden, the long meals in the close hot dining room, the childish trips to the coast – were just a series of distractions, because they were terrified at what their idle hands might find to do. But all the same it was soothing to sit quietly, taking pleasure in having done as Eve had asked, watching Hester’s freckled hands dip over and over into the pan of glue and hearing behind him the slow turning of pages from where Elijah sat. However fierce the sun outside the kitchen was always cool: rivulets of condensation ran down the pale green walls, and the stone-flagged floor gave off a rising chill. John watched a daddy-long-legs creep across the floor, and instinctively drew in his feet with childish disgust. Out in the corridor a door was furtively opened, and after a pause – *The wind through its branches is calling to me*, sang Hester, and began to prise open a tin of black paint – footsteps receded upstairs. Perhaps it was Clare, and he was warmed by the thought, and by knowing that her feet would already be dirty, and that she would have in her pockets a dozen of the cowries she’d found the day before. It might have been Walker, too, gone up to meet Eve in some small hot room he’d never seen; and at the thought John reached out with his foot and slowly pressed the daddy-long-legs into the cold stone. It left far larger and blacker a smear than its thin limbs ought to have done, and John turned back to the table.

The paper mask was almost complete, a thick grey layer of wet pulp through which columns of black type were still visible. Tilting his head, he made out what he could: *revealed Martha Day, 61*….*strengthening in the east*….*suspended over allegations*….then was arrested by a length of paper laid across the bridge of the nose perfectly horizontal so that it demanded to be read. The headline was truncated – FOUR FEARED DROWNE … and accompanied by a photograph. Only a part of the picture remained, but it showed plainly a swollen river breaking its banks, a car plunging bonnet-first into the thick, muddy water.

A dreadful thought began to gather from the corners of the room. He drew a thin breath in through a mouth dry as sand, and all the while Hester went on singing (*With soft whispers laden…),* dipping into the pan and carefully pasting on strip after strip until the swollen river was covered. The chill rising from the floor enveloped him and he shivered violently, looking away from the mask to the newspapers piled on the kitchen table. Pages had been neatly cut to remove whole articles or photographs, and in one or two places columns of type remained, so that he could see repeated over and over the same few phrases: *drowned*…*lost at sea*…*feared lost*…. “Oh, *no,*” said John, in a voice of childish dismay that he later regretted, because it committed him to a course of action from which he couldn’t turn back: “Oh no -”

Hester looked up from her handful of soaking paper, and met his shocked gaze. It startled her: she began to scrabble with the pile of newspaper on the table, piling them on a chair out of sight. Her hands shook, and the papers fell onto the floor. She stooped to pick them up, but hurt her back, and straightening with a groan leant against the table. The name EADWACER showed between her spread fingers, and she tried to cover that up too. If John had at first not quite believed what he saw – that it was she after all who’d been so foolish, and so spiteful, shoving scraps of paper into envelopes like a school bully - everything she did showed her guilt clear as a brand on her forehead.

He shook his head slowly, like a man waking from sleep. Around him the house and everything in it began to collapse like a house of cards, and all the cards were knaves. Everything he’d seen - every conversation had laughing round the dining table or hushed and secretive in corners, every unwanted feeling of possessing them, of being drawn in, of despising or liking them by turns – evaporated. All that was left was this single, preposterous piece of deceit.

He pictured her sitting at the table at night, while everyone upstairs slept on stomachs full of the food she’d cooked, folding stories of drowning into envelopes she wrote on with her left hand. He imagined her leafing through the book concealed in its cabinet drawer, mouthing the unfamiliar names – Weland, Deor, Widsith - then finally Eadwacer, to be remembered, and written in the dust upstairs when the others were occupied elsewhere with their games.

I ought to be given a dunce's cap, he thought, wiping at the salt sweat that had suddenly gathered in the hair at his temples, to’ve been so completely duped. Hester began wiping her hands on the dark blue dress where it pulled across her heavy thighs. She said, "No, no - it's all right, it's all right". They were the same soothing words she had used to pacify the distraught woman on the beach the day before, and he also stood, poised somewhere between pity and a rage that had begun to settle in a cold knot in his stomach. Then he remembered waiting by the reservoir while Alex prepared to swim out, and how white the young man’s back had been as he’d plunged into the water, and rage won. For a moment he couldn’t speak, and then he said, "But it isn't all right, is it?" Leaning towards her, he stabbed at the newspapers. "What have you done? Do you know what you've done? And only yesterday I saw you looking at him and thought, I have never seen love written so clearly, not even on paper." A dreadful thought occurred to him. He said: “Is this a game you’ve been playing all along, have you been testing me?”

“You don’t understand – “

“There at least you’re right: I don’t.” With effort he took hold of his voice, which had lifted with anger to the opened window, and brought it down almost to a whisper: behind him Elijah had dropped the book, and resting his head against the outcurved wall was sleeping. “I don’t. And I don’t want to.” Alongside his anger, which burned unpleasantly in his throat when he breathed, he was affronted to have been so fooled, and to have been so wrong. The pages of the notebook upstairs were full of lies.

“Sit down, won’t you? Please sit down.” The deep voice had changed to a hesitant pleading, and her fine dark eyes were enlarged with tears. John suddenly felt tired and rather sick. He sat down. “I’m afraid I think it’s too late for all that. Haven’t you seen him, out there every night? He says he sees it, whenever he sleeps, everyone carried away by the water…”

Hester fretfully smoothed a strip of newspaper across the high bridge of the porcelain figure’s nose. She looked so like a chastened miserable child that he started to laugh, but remembering the preacher sleeping in his corner instead began to trace the name cut into the table with an outstretched finger.

“It’s so stupid, so spiteful,” he said. “So like a child … But no – a child would be ashamed; might do it once, perhaps - but not over and over again–” He stopped, seeing again the scene on the path through the marshes and Alex’s uncomprehending silence. “Yesterday when we came back from the marshes, I saw you looking at Alex, and I thought: why does she look satisfied? What is she thinking that she could be smiling after all that’s happened? I didn’t understand it then, and I don’t understand now. Is it that you hate him? But how could you - how could anyone?”

The woman pressed the back of her hand to her forehead, heavily beaded with drops sweat that stood on the skin without falling. It was so very like a well-rehearsed gesture of distress that John pushed on, determined to make her face things: “You should be ashamed of yourself. Aren’t you ashamed?”

“Oh I’ve been ashamed all along,” she said, as though exasperated at such a foolish question. “But after a while you get used to the shame and it becomes part of who you are. It was sneaking and stupid, yes, you’re right: it was just like something someone like me would do.” She put her head in her hands, her coarse grey hair falling forward to show a white neck far more frail and slender than he’d have thought. He was afraid she’d begin to cry, with heaving shoulders and ugly gulps for air, but her tears came silently so that he heard each separate drop landing on the table. He said gently, “I suppose it’s quite funny, really. I nearly laughed, when Eve told me about it, and showed me the letters. I thought: it might be some sort of joke. Nobody writes anonymous letters. This isn’t boarding school – this isn’t a *novel*.”

She gulped, and it might have been either misery or amusement. Then he said, “But I don’t understand why you did it. It doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand at all.” She raised her head from her arms. Her face was damp with sweat and the thick coils clung to her temples. Without the authority and warmth she applied to her face as carefully as powder, she appeared to him very young, and it brought a sudden reversal to his anger.

“There’s nothing so wrong it can’t be put right,” he said, remembering how the words would console Christopher like an arm across the shoulder. “And this’ll be an end to it all now.” Hester picked up the phrenologist’s head and surveyed it, biting her bottom lip. “You’re very kind,” she said frankly. “Everybody says so.” John, unwillingly moved by this, coughed and said: “When did all this start?”

“Oh, I can’t remember. I can never remember the times of things. It’s staying here that does it, I think - it might be fifty years ago for all I know. I might be young again. I might be as old as my grandmother.” Setting the head down again she caught John’s look of censure and said, “All right. It started about six months ago, I suppose. Not just this…I’ve made him believe he does things, says things, and can’t remember…I even let him think he might have hurt that child – after all: perhaps he did.”

John shook his head, appalled: “You don’t believe it. You don’t, and no-one ever could – ” . Between Alex’s outstretched hands the moth flexed its wing.

“He was going to leave me!” Gazing down at the table as though she could make out in the knots and whorls of the wood-grain the image of his face she smiled, with the old slow-gathering beam of warmth. “He was getting better, every day he was here. Everything I did for him made him go a little further away, and I realised that soon I wouldn’t be hearing his voice in the hall, or coming up from the garden. Then one night I found him sleeping out by the reservoir, because he’d tired himself out from swimming, and I realised that as long he was just a little afraid, he’d need me. There’s no other reason. I’ve got nothing else to give - I can’t charm. I’ve never been admired. I was never that kind. People like me don’t find affection coming our way: we have to scrabble about for leftovers.”

“I see,” said John, and thought that he did: of course a childless woman alone in a house that smelt of damp and too much furniture polish would love a boy like Alex. He imagined her calling him ‘son’ with a slip of the tongue, and saying to her friends, ‘I couldn’t have loved him more if he’d been my own flesh and blood. Not if he were my own!’”

But when he looked at her again, her head hanging low as she traced a shape on the table in front of her, her smile was secretive and coy as though she were thinking over a private pleasure. She was blushing, too, colour gathering at the base of her throat where the skin hung in a double fold under her chin, and spreading up to her forehead. In a moment of clarity that made the kitchen seem brightly lit he realised this ageing woman, in a stained dress that always smelt a little of stale sweat, had fallen in love. He said gently, “I see.”

She lifted her head then, firing a black look at him between narrowed eyes, as if she realised what he’d seen on her face and was challenging him to say more. “I think I understand,” he said, faltering a little, “I know what you’ve felt –”

“Oh, what would *you* know,” she said: “How could you *possibly* know?” He began to nod – her scorn was familiar, and he knew what she meant: that he’d nothing behind his ribs but books in hard covers, and nothing in his veins but ink. But then she made a furious gesture towards him, and he realised with a burst of mirth that this was not what she meant. She‘d mistaken him for the other sort, who needn’t scratch and scrabble for affection, but found it coming their way when they weren’t looking.

He was so thunderstruck by the idea that he slumped against the hard back of the kitchen chair, and listened with his eyes half-closed against the facets of her eyes. “What would you know about it? Do you think I don’t know what they think of me – old and ugly, with a face that could curdle milk! I dress like this – ” she plucked furiously at the old blue dress and he heard the small rending of a seam somewhere – “When upstairs in locked cupboards are clothes with flowers sewn on the breast, and I can’t even touch them because my hands are too rough and the fabric is too fine and it catches on my nails….”

The heavy lids of her eyes lowered, and she said, “I didn’t do all this because he’s young and I’m old. It’s because I’m ugly, and he’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, oh on both sides of his skin, too . . .” She stopped, and from under the closed eyelids tears came out unchecked. “Every time I look at him I feel myself grow older and uglier, until I’ve dried up into nothing. And all the while he gets brighter and better and further away, and it’s so unfair, because I’m not stupid, I’m not unkind. They say you get the face you deserve; but I promise you, John - my face only goes as far as the bones. I didn’t earn my ugliness, at least not until today. All my life, everywhere I’ve gone, there’s been girls and women with strong fine arms and legs, and faces they’re proud to show outside, and bodies that deserve to see sunshine. I see them now and I hate them, because they’re cut from the same cloth as him. And I’ll never tell him, even though I don’t want anything in return, because the dreadful thing isn’t that people like me can’t expect to be loved. What’s really cruel is that you don’t expect us to have it in us to fall in love like everybody else.”

John would have liked to say that it wasn’t true, but wanted desperately to repay her honesty with his own. They sat in silence for a long while, and then she said eagerly, half-reaching across the table towards him, “You can still help me, if you want to. It would be helping him you see, most of all, and I know you’d do that if you could.”

“What can I do?”

“There’s more – only one – oh God” – she covered her face with her hands and almost laughing said, “I can’t stand to think of it, could I really have been so stupid? There’s one more and you must help me look out for it, get to it before he does, or one of the girls – they like to take him things. Eve’s always first there in the morning you know, with his post.” Her lips compressed with envy, and not knowing it John mimicked her, remembering the boy’s easy affection for the young woman and how he’d called her Evie.

Then Hester, regaining by degrees her composure, and a little of the old authority that inclined her guests to do as they were told, stood up and smoothed her dress with slow deliberate movements that reassembled her as her other, placid self. “It’s only eleven o’clock. The postman never makes it this far till noon, though he does have a car these days. Won’t you help me, John? I can’t stay there by the front door all morning, but they won’t notice you and what you’re doing. You can get to it, can’t you? Only don’t let him see it.” She began to pull drying newspaper from the white head on the table, and balling it up in her palms tossed it with surprising accuracy into the bin beside the sink.

Then turning to him again she said quietly, “You won’t understand this, a man like you – I can’t imagine you feeling anything you didn’t choose to feel, just when you chose to feel it - but you see I didn’t know when it started how far I would go.” John stood up in his borrowed clothes, and accepting the hand she stretched out said, “Of course I’ll help. It’s an easy enough task, isn’t it? Even for a man like me.” She smiled and gathered the newspapers on the table into a sheaf in her arms. “Thank you. How glad I am you came!”, she said, and went out with her arms full of torn newspaper.

John stood slowly. They won’t notice you, she’d said. He’d forgotten Elijah sleeping in his corner, so that when the russet head reared suddenly out from the alcove his heart, already restlessly beating, convulsed behind his ribs.

“Oh the poor woman, poor woman,” said the preacher, fanning himself with the white-covered book.

“I’d like to kick her down a flight of stairs.”

“No. No, you wouldn’t.”

“All right. I wouldn’t. But why not poor Alex? Why did you think of her first – didn’t you hear it, don’t you know what she’s done?” In the vaulted kitchen his voice rang high with indignation.

“Let’s put the kettle on for tea. It’s her solution to everything, you know.” The man straightened his broad back with an effort, and stood at the sink filling the kettle, lifting with one hand the blind over the window to look down the bright garden. “Oh, I heard. But poor Hester all the same. It’s maybe not the saddest thing I ever heard, but sad enough.”

“I don’t want tea. It’s much too hot. You ought to despise her now, much more than I do – she’s been a liar. Isn’t that a sin? Or did you give up the idea of sin when you gave up God?”

The preacher shrugged, and lighting the gas on the stove moved his fingers idly in and out of the blue flame. He turned, and with a mild half-smile said, “Certainly she’s a sinner, if you want to think of it like that. But if you’d believed like I always did that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, you’re never very surprised when people turn out to be liars and cheats. That’s the trouble with you atheists: always so optimistic. What surprises me isn’t that we sin, but that we manage a single good action in all of our lives.” The kettle screeched, and turning off the gas he added with a spread of his hands, “Well, that’s what I would have said a year ago. Amazing, isn’t it, how easily it still comes? So yes: poor Hester, and I think you pity her too, don’t you, or will soon enough. After all” - he turned to John with a wry smile - “Haven’t we all lied?”

John, who’d forgotten their conversation the night before, the bible pages rustling on the wall of the room upstairs, nodded twice to show the shaft had hit, and went out into the unlit hall. At its far end in the red-painted music room Eve was playing the piano.

**II**

I’ve just come in from the garden, where we’ve been sitting watching the clouds blowing inland. Elijah didn't join us, but dragged one of the dining chairs to the open doors, as near to being outside as he can stand. We didn’t talk much, only watched to see if the rain would come, but there were just clouds stacking up like slate tiles on a roof. In the end we got bored of waiting and went indoors to sleep. It’s early still but the heat is tiring, and from where I sit I can hear bedroom doors shutting all along the corridor outside. It’s so quiet even the click of the lights being switched off reaches me here. I like to think I can tell who it is: Clare with a cautious push in case she wakes someone, Walker with the same flick he uses to light his cigarettes. Outside my window the clouds are very low and cover up the moon, and the garden is darker now than it’s been all week, though my room’s well lit by the yellow light above the tower, and I don't need the lamp.

I’ll go on trying to write them all down, though I see now what a disadvantage it is to be kept in the dark like this - another character, at someone else's whim. I sometimes imagine Tolstoy sitting at his desk with his notebooks spread in front of him, drinking tea from a samovar, or vodka if the writing’s going badly, and I think how he easy he had it, always knowing what was coming next. He could tell you what Anna Karenina wore for dinner, all the while seeing steam from the train-station puffing out from between the final pages.

All morning I watched for that final, foolish letter of Hester’s, sitting at my old post at the foot of the stairs. Every now and then when my back or my ankle began to ache I walked up and down the hallway with my hands in my pockets, pretending I was examining the wallpaper (which does bear a lot of looking at: the longer and harder you stare the more birds you find peering at you). Hester told me they wouldn’t notice what I was doing, and she was right, though I didn’t like to hear it said. They’re having a party tomorrow and they’re all occupied with something or other – Clare passed me on her way to the kitchen carrying a box of candles to decorate a birthday cake, and I heard Walker swearing in the dining room, trying to get an old film projector working so we can all see Hester when she was young, although you can’t imagine that she ever was. Elijah went straight up to his room singing something so melancholy I was glad when the low notes gave him a coughing fit and he had to stop, and Eve was playing her scales over and over in the music room at the other end of the hall. I watched for an hour at least, though it’s hard to tell here how time passes, but nothing came through the letterbox. After a while, just as I was getting restless, the door to the music room opened and Eve put her head round the door.

I hadn’t seen her since she sent me away from her shaded patch on the lawn to talk to Hester. But I must have been thinking about her all along, because when I saw her face I thought how different it was from how I’d remembered it, but at the same time how familiar her mouth seemed to me, never quite closed, as if she is always about to sing or to eat - oh I shouldn't write it down, I won't want to remember it -

She looked up and down the hall until she saw me at the far end, and when her eyes met mine I thought, so this is what they mean by a piercing stare. I swear I felt it perforate me, go through my borrowed clothes and my skin, between my ribs and through my liver, heart, spleen, kidneys, whatever’s packed away in there, and pinion me to the wall. It hurt, you know, or I thought it did: I wanted to look away because I could feel my cheeks burning, but I couldn’t because I thought even if I did, all I’d see, in front of me and behind me, would be those same clear eyes hunting me out.

Sometimes I think she’s just an annoyance, a stone I can’t shake from my shoe, that if I had my way I’d wake up tomorrow and would never have seen her: would never have heard her name, and never would hear it either. So I don’t understand why it was that when she pushed the door open behind her and beckoned to me I forgot about the letter and my promise to Hester, and followed her in as dumbly as a dog might.

The music room feels as though it must be the hottest part of the house - it’s a trick of the red-painted walls and the yellow and orange lilies Hester puts on all the tables. The lilies weren’t fresh when I first saw them on the second day, and by then were giving off a kind of animal scent, sweet but with something like flesh underneath it. When I brushed past, the pollen left stains on my sleeve as dark as dried blood.

I asked her why she wanted me. It never occurred to me that she might have wanted my company – I thought maybe she’d have some impossible task to test my strength or good humour, and ask me to take the piano out into the garden, or paint the room white to cool her down. But she said, “It’s nothing. I’m bored of these scales. Why don’t you sit?” The piano stool is made for duets, I think: it has a tapestry cover worn through in the centre and is just wide enough for two. She was wearing denim shorts that would have looked better on a boy and her legs were sunburned. I said: “I’ve got things to do, you know,” but she looked as though she thought it was very unlikely and began to play a melody, and asked me what I thought of it.

I hated it. It was brutally sad and sweet, and so obviously supposed to be moving that it made me determined to hate it even more. I told her it was lovely, and she smiled so suddenly it made me blink, as if lights had been turned on in a dark room. She said, “No it isn’t. Try this one.” Without looking at the keys – she plays with her head tilted down and to the right, as though she’s seen something wonderful out of the corner of her eye and can’t quite catch it again – she played something else. Her hands hardly moved at all - there were just sly shifts of her fingers sliding on the keys – and the notes were pressed together in dark low groups I'm sure I felt as well as heard. If there was a rhythm I wasn’t aware of it: I felt displaced, watching her from a great distance, borne up by the notes, suspended above her. When she stopped I felt myself falling through the sudden quiet back into my seat, and realised I’d been bending low over the keyboard, watching her fingers so closely she must have felt my breath on the back of her hands. She laughed and said, “Better?” and I said, “Much better,” and waited for the old blush to start up underneath my beard, but it never came.

I don’t know how long we went on like this. I watched the slanted shapes the sun made through the windows range across the fading carpets while she played and I listened, trying at first to think of something to say that would make her think I’d understood, but in the end just watching and listening. I've never much cared for music, but I’d willingly have stayed there all night and would be there still, if I could.

In the end her hands got tired from playing. She said, “Thank you. I hate to play alone. It’s like talking to yourself all night, and then I realise my arms are aching. If someone’s here I can go on and on without stopping.” Then I asked her why she went on playing with aching arms, and she said, “It’s because everything’s such a muddle, and then I come here, and it never fails me. Look” – she played a scale so swiftly I couldn’t really see where her fingers were falling – “It’s the same, every time, and your ears strain for it, and then the end you’re expecting comes.” With her thumb she played the final note again, and I knew what she meant.

I said, “It’s the same for me, only with words. I can only make sense of things when they’re written down. Sometimes, when I feel confused and in the dark, I think if only I looked hard enough I’d see words in their proper order, and I’d understand everything better.” She didn’t laugh at me, but nodded and smiled and played that final note again, sinking her thumb onto the key so that the sound rang out around us. She said rather eagerly, “Yes, yes: I understand, I do: you have words, and I these eighty-eight keys, but the effect is the same – ” That she knew what I meant, and understood completely, was for some reason terribly painful. I remember looking at her from the corner of my eye; her face was turned away from me, the skin so white it was almost blue, and drawn taut over the high bones of her cheek. I looked at my hands and I don’t think I’d noticed before how slack my own skin was, and how ugly the black hairs on my wrist.

Then I said, “What will you play tomorrow night, for the others?” and she asked me what I would like her to play and I said anything, I didn’t care. Then I touched the thin white wrist next to me on the tapestry seat and said, “Tell me what you’re doing here.”

She looked at my hand for a long while, then said, “It’s a very good piano.”

Since then I’ve wondered what could have suddenly made me incautious and unkind. Maybe it was the fault of the music, because it had been honest and true and meant only for me, and it made me think: maybe I matter after all. She had started to withdraw from me behind the hard glazing of her green eyes, when just a minute before her head had almost touched my shoulder while she played. I heard myself say harshly, “None of you ever tell the truth, do you? Tell me what you’re doing here. You could practice anywhere, someone like you – why won’t you tell me?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“I wouldn’t ask if you all kept me at arm’s length where a stranger should be, but you don’t. You like to show me the pieces of yourselves when you want to and never the rest. Is it because of Walker? What’s his real name, anyway? Walker! Does he think he’s in a film?”

“You’re not a stranger now.” She smiled at me, and it was the sort of kindly smile I imagine she might have given an impertinent child. I’d’ve preferred her to get up then and leave me there, but instead she made that gesture of lifting the curls from the back of her neck, and said, “No-one ever uses his first name. It’s so unlike him. It doesn’t fit.”

“Why are you smiling? You hate each other.”

“Oh -” She looked hurt – “How could you think that?”

“If you don’t tell me I’ll decide for myself what you’re doing here and what you’ve done and you won’t come out of it well.” The glaze cracked because I was being absurd: she laughed and said I was welcome to think what I liked. She slowly played a chord that I knew, because she’d taught me, was in a major key. I asked if they were lovers. The word wasn’t one I could remember using before and saying it seemed so vulgar, even in that vulgar room, that I looked away from her to the open door on my left, where I saw Clare pass on quiet bare feet. She laughed again, but without any humour. “I wouldn’t ever have called it that. I don’t know what I’d have called it – it’s not that now, at least.”

“I saw you with him yesterday.”

“I know. Walker calls you Peeping John.” This made me miserable with anger and humiliation. I looked down at the clean sunburned lines of her legs and the narrow hips on the piano stool next to me. She said, with a flat detached voice as though she was speaking about someone she didn’t much care for, “It was a long time ago now and not worth speaking about. Of course at the time I thought it was” – she flicked idly at the piano keys – “I wish we could come up with another word: this one’s got all worn out! – I thought it was love. But it broke everything up and spoilt things I thought would never be spoilt and in the end I was left on my own.”

I asked who’d left her alone and she said vaguely, “Oh everyone – everyone. I disappointed them. They tell you, don’t they, that there’s no right and wrong these days. We’ve all grown up, put that sort of thing behind us a hundred years ago. But there’ll always be some things they won’t let you get away with and even the words for it don’t change. Infidelity, adultery –” She shrugged, and the words with their hard consonants were like the snicking of scissors through paper. I remember hearing then a sharp metallic sound out in the hall that might have been the rattling of the letterbox or something dropped in the kitchen doorway and I thought: I ought to go, I’ve asked too much, I don’t want to hear any more, but my hand was still on her white wrist and it looked suddenly very frail and thin.

I said, “But Hester didn’t leave you alone, or Clare,” and she said of course she hadn’t - “Don’t you know her at all? She’s a child, a young child, she never knew or saw what everyone else did.” Then she looked across at me, and although I don’t think she meant it unkindly I thought it was mostly contempt that made her eyes glint under their white lids. “You’re not so different from her, are you, John? You watch and watch but you don’t understand any more than she does and you’ve had twenty years longer of living.” Then she said, “I want you to understand because I don’t want you to think badly of me, and because you asked.” Then she said, frowning and pausing between her words, examining them before they got to me: “If what happened back then – if it was all for nothing, just because I was foolish in the same banal uninteresting ways women always are, then it was all just a waste …but if something comes out of it, if I can love him now or make him love me, then it won’t have been a waste after all – it won’t have been foolish and destructive but something good.” She laughed and said, “Elijah would probably tell me I’m trying to redeem my soul.”

I said, “He was married then - and is he still? Where is she … why doesn’t she come for him? Don’t you care about her, or wonder how bad the pain was when she knew what you had done? ”

She smiled at that, and said, “I never think about her. I don’t even know her name. What has she to do with any of it? Could I alter what I felt for the sake of someone whose face I’ll never see?”

I could see both the sense and the cruelty in it, and it troubled me: I wanted to think only well of her. And all the while the heat made my head ache, and I kept hearing as clearly as if it were just outside the open window the two of them laughing at me as I hurried away from them across the lawn. So without much truth and with no kindness at all I said, “You must know he doesn’t love you. He’s laughing at you all the time and you can’t see it. It’s humiliating for you, following someone, being here because of them, I’m ashamed for you. And besides he isn’t anything, he’s just a man who’s getting old with grey in his hair. He knows nothing, he’s not kind to you, I’ve never even seen him make you smile –”

She said vaguely, “You’re hurting me,” and when I looked at my hand on the piano stool, I saw I’d been gripping her wrist all along and had left an imprint of my thumb below the sharp knuckle of her wrist. Though I was hurting her she had not pulled away, but instead drew closer: she almost leaned on me – I could feel her shoulder on mine, and when I looked up her face was tilted so that when a tear edged from beneath her eyelid it ran back into the black curl behind her ear. When she spoke again her voice was low, murmurous, almost a monotone, as though she were an instrument being played and a single note, low and soft, was drawn out again and again. She said, “I am afraid of not being wanted: I would rather it be him than no-one.”

When she had finished speaking she didn’t quite close her mouth, but left her lower lip loose, so that I could see where the flesh inside became smooth and bright with moisture. The pressure of her shoulder on mine grew more insistent: I thought perhaps she was reeling in the heat and might faint; then I looked again at the black lashes lying on her cheek and the half-open mouth and knew that I was being mocked all over again. It was just like her, that pretence at a kiss, or the beginning of it: I imagined dipping my head to hers and feeling laughter on her breath, and imagined her laughing later with Walker as they walked on the dark lawn sharing one of their cigarettes. I pushed her away, and stood so suddenly the stool groaned on the floorboards, and without looking back went out onto the terrace where the stones burned the soles of my feet -

Someone's coming. They’re just outside my door.

**III**

John closed the notebook and pushed it underneath a folded newspaper. In the band of light below the door, a shadow showed of someone waiting there. He cupped a hand behind his ear and could just make out, above the beating of his heart, the visitor’s shallow breaths. He stood cautiously, pushing back the chair behind him, but it skittered on the bare uneven floor and fell with a crash. The breathing on the other side of the door ended on a gasp, and there was a long anxious silence in which John imagined each of his fellow guests standing in line along the corridor. They’ve found me out, he thought, darting on bare feet to press himself against the wall beside the door: Elijah told them I lied, and they've come to send me away.

On the other side of the door, the indrawn breath was suddenly exhaled with a sigh. It was a woman's voice, and he thought: it's Eve – it must be, who else would come so late, and imagined the bruise darkening on her wrist. Low in his stomach, spreading up to make his throat ache, all his muddled confusion and loneliness sharpened into a single clear impulse to have her nearby. He put his hand flat against the door and left it there, as though instead of unpainted wood he had under his palm her sunburned neck, her thin hands with the nails bitten down, her black curled hair that had smelt, when she sat next to him at the piano, very faintly of oranges. Her breath came now with unnatural steadiness, like someone who’d had to be taught how to do it, and he began to match his breath to hers, drawing in the air as she let it out, fancying it was the same, that in him were particles that had passed down her throat and been warmed by her blood. Then she tapped politely three times on the door, and without pausing - if he did, he’d go back to bed and draw up the covers until he couldn’t hear the knocking any more - he pulled the door open.

Standing back as though she’d started to change her mind, clutching a thin dressing-gown high at the neck, Clare stared at him with a clear shocked gaze.

“Oh,” said John. The longing receded, scooping him hollow. He leant against the doorframe to steady himself.

“Hello,” she said. She stepped forward, pulling the dressing gown modestly across her breasts. It was a child’s gown in thin white cotton, printed with strawberries. She’d wrapped the red cotton belt twice round her waist and tied it, exactly in the centre, with a neat bow.

“Clare,” he said, as though to be certain, and then: “Is everything all right? What’s happening? Is it the dam?”

“Nothing,” she said, “Nothing’s happening.” Then making her voice lower and softer than it ought to have been added, “Nothing’s happened yet. Let me come in?” He stood aside, bewildered, and as she passed he smelt sweet alcohol on her breath, cherry brandy perhaps, something a child would drink in furtive nips when parents were away. She went and stood beside the window and he looked bewildered up and down the hall as though he’d see all the others standing laughing in their doorways at some prearranged joke, but it was empty and unlit. He closed the door and stood with his back to it, gripping his left hand with his right to reassure himself he was awake.

The girl looked curiously around her at the bare tidy room. “What is it you do up here all night? I see your light on sometimes.”

“Come away from the window. Are you unwell?”

She put her hand up to the cotton gown at her neck. “I’m okay. Do you read all night then? Eve says she thinks you’re only really happy with your head in a book.”

“Does she?” John watched her uneasily, and realising that his eyes were on her the young woman suddenly reached up with her right arm and began lifting the hair away from the back of her neck, arching her back as she did so. She was mimicking Eve in a parody as unconvincing as a schoolgirl in her mother’s shoes. Then she plucked at the red cotton cord around her waist and the dressing gown dropped to her feet, and stood facing him straight-backed and frightened. The tower light gave her flesh a yellow cast: her body from the narrow shoulders to the scooped small of her back and down her flank was like something moulded from candle-wax, and above it in the breeze from the open window her bright hair stirred like a flame.

Her imitation of Eve – of the tilt of the head, and her long restless back that flexed and stretched at the dinner table or on the piano stool - was so absurd John would have laughed if he hadn't seen her lower lip trembling like a child's as it tried not to cry. He would have liked to say, “What are you doing?”, but knew she wouldn't have been able to answer, and when he put out his hand and rested it on the outcurve of her hip it wasn't desire or curiosity that moved him most, but pity. She flinched, and wondering if his hands were cold he said, “I'm sorry,” and stepped away from her towards the window.

For the first time since she’d opened the door to him the day he'd left the city, he could see not her beauty, but all her flaws and defects. She’d picked at a mosquito bite on her shoulder leaving a smear of blood that hadn't been washed away, and the untanned flesh on her thighs was plump and uneven. At the side of her left breast was a birthmark the size and colour of a copper coin, a remnant of the constant shadow cast on her brother’s arm, and when she reached up to dash impatiently at a fly troubling her, the hair under her arms and between her legs was the same dark amber as the thick coil she'd pulled over her shoulder.

All along he had thought of her as a child, who neither knew nor cared what effect her uncanny beauty had, but by the dim light from the reservoir tower he saw that she wasn't perfect, after all. It brought her within his reach, and moving towards her again he put his right hand on her breastbone and fit his thumb to the hollow in her throat, and felt her blood beating. She flinched again when he touched her, and looking down he saw that her eyes were very like her brother’s, and dark with apprehension. It made her seem a child again, and he shook his head violently as if denying something, and stooped to pick up her dressing-gown.

“Don’t you want me?”

“If everyone always did everything they wanted – ” He shrugged, and spread his arms in apology and dismay.

“Oh -”. She considered this without rancour or hurt pride, the way another woman might have done, then obediently pushed her arm into the sleeve he held up. “I see what you mean.” Then she clutched her stomach. “I feel sick.”

“How much did you have?”

“Two glasses – big ones. It tasted of lemons. I don’t like your beard, I can’t tell if you’re smiling.”

He wrapped the belt twice round her waist, fumbling with the knot. “Well, I am.”

“But I can’t tell.”

“All right then, I’ll shave it off.” She nodded, then looked with disapproval around the small neat room, her hands shoved into her pockets. He wasn't sure what he ought to be feeling – ashamed of himself and embarrassed for her, perhaps – but felt a steadying rush of affection, nothing like the painful drawing he'd felt when he thought it was Eve waiting the other side of the door. He finished tying the belt at her waist, drawing the loops until they matched precisely.

“I saw you with Eve, earlier,” she said reproachfully. “I looked for you all morning but couldn’t find you. I've made a cake for Hester. I thought you could help me put the candles in, but you weren't anywhere I looked. Then I heard her playing the song she always plays when she wants someone to like her, and I knew you’d be there, so I went and looked, and there you were.”

She always plays it then, thought John. The hollow place in his stomach deepened. Clare kicked the nearest of the boxes. “Why haven’t you unpacked?”

“I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Can I sleep in here?”

Outside, the light above the tower dimmed in the brightening air. “It’s not long now till morning.”

“Can I lie down just here? I won’t make any noise.” She lay politely still on the edge of the bed, tucking the dressing-gown around her hips and watching him expectantly, so that sitting elsewhere would have been more than to lie beside her on the thin mattress. John took off his shoes, and stretched out beside her. The raised edge of the bed pressed them together, and her hair was caught up with his on the pillow. After a while she said, “When we shared a room and I didn’t like the dark, my brother told me stories.”

“It’s quite light in here,” he said, but the long line of her body next to him was still with expectation.

“What story shall I tell you?”

“Tell me yours.”

“Oh – ” He shifted, and caught the eye of the painted Puritan, who was trying not to laugh. “I haven’t one worth telling. Ask for another.”

“Couldn’t you tell me about that name – Eadwacer, however it’s said. It was all written down in that book you found and I want to know what it means, and who it was, and why it’s ended up here in the house.”

“Wulf and Eadwacer, you mean? I can try, though I don’t remember it well, and never understood it even when I did. Nobody ever really knew what it meant, or who they were, only that it’s a very sad story that didn’t end well.”

She turned a little, drowsing against the pillow: “I don’t mind, it’ll be easier to believe – tell it to me now, just until I sleep.”

He moved his foot against the sheets in search of a cooler place, and rested his hand on the white-painted rail of the bed. “A long time ago now, and a long way from here –”

“That’s not right! Start properly.”

He let out a long silent breath. On the wall the remnants of the light from the valve tower faded as the bulb went out. He began again: “Once upon a time there was a woman whose name everyone has forgotten. She lived on an island where nothing grew but heather and no birds sang but ravens and crows. Her hair was the colour of grass when it has dried in the sun, and she wore it in two plaits that came over her shoulders, as thick and strong as ropes.”

“Sometimes I plait my hair.”

“You do, yes: but will you listen now? The woman had a husband whom she loved. It had been raining the day he put his arms around her for the first time, and since then it was the falling of the rain and not the light of the sun that most made her happy. His eyes were like amber and his long hair grew black and grey, and when he hunted beasts or men it was by the light of the moon. Because of this he was known as the wolf, and if ever anyone had known the name he was given at birth, it was long forgotten. Wulf was the name they called him, and Wulf was the name he signed himself. When their son was born, he too had eyes like amber and they called him their wolf-pup and their whelp.

“But you see, this was a time of warring, and a day came when the woman’s countrymen gave her away as a kind of gift, or sacrifice. One night when the crows called from the rooftops and the moon was too young to give any light, she was taken from Wulf and her whelp to another island, one that lay low among the fens and black marsh-grass. The people of this particular island were murderous, and bore long grudges that could only be placated by taking captives and watching them mourn. I think – though I can’t be sure – that it was here the man Eadwacer lived, among the woman’s captors. Probably he stood where he could not quite be seen, and listened to her singing across the water to the island where her Wulf waited.”

The girl stirred, and raised her head a little on the pillow. “But I thought Eadwacer was a woman, too?”

“Not in the tale I’m telling. So can you see it, then? Two islands set apart by a dark sea that froze in winter, and in summer was white with storms. Whenever the rains came the woman remembered Wulf and pined for him so that the bread they brought her was like a stone in her mouth, and the water they gave her was too bitter to swallow. When the rains came she remembered his arms around her, and when there was no rain she thought of nothing at all. Her skin became grey as stormclouds and her hair came out in handfuls, and gathered around her feet where she sat.”

If he had hoped to lull the girl to sleep, he had failed. Troubled, she raised herself on a folded arm, and said: “What was Eadwacer doing all this time?”

“It is hard to be certain”, said John, “But I think perhaps he watched her as she constantly sang over to the other island, where her lover was, and maybe even took up her hair from where it fell and wound it around his wrist. In time perhaps they spoke, Eadwacer and the woman, and though the captors were his people, and he ought not to have done it, he also put his arms around her, whether or not it was raining.”

He could not think where the story went from there, and paused for a while. Beside him the girl leaned back on her pillow and let out a long slow breath. “And how did it end?”

“It never did, only the woman carried on calling to the island across the water, wishing her voice could meet the voice of her Wulf, so they made only one song between them, and whenever she spoke to Eadwacer, though I think he loved her by then, it was with contempt in her voice.”

The girl gave a snort of disdain. “I don’t like that story: not at all. I don’t even know what it means – do you?”

“No, and no-one ever has, not in a thousand years.” He lifted a strand of her hair from the pillow between them. “But it need not mean anything, I think: it’s not necessary to understand everything. Only you should feel what the woman felt, and hear her calling as if we were on one island and she on the other – now go to sleep won’t you, for an hour or two. It’s only just dawn, and I’m tired, and I can’t think any more.”

She turned obediently away from him and towards the window, where the light was sharpening in the split between the curtains. From underneath them a rumble had begun, that rattled the bed’s iron frame against the wall and receded in a while to an insistent whine. Downstairs in the kitchen Hester was washing her clothes.

**Tuesday**

John sat alone in the garden, a minute or so past midnight. He leaned against the trunk of a copper beech, cradling an empty bottle in his lap and watching a black canopy draw across the sky towards the low moon. As the cloud reached the moon it was stained silver at its fringes for a moment, then nothing broke the stretch of darkness from end to end.

He was the last to go indoors. Behind him, in bright-lit rooms that cast panels of light on the lawn, Hester and her guests sat dozing in armchairs, or listlessly picking at remaining fragments of rich food. All night they’d moved between the house and garden, alone or in groups pressed so close together their limbs could hardly be distinguished as they danced and drank. Anyone watching would have thought they were fragments of a much larger party, not the same half dozen so set on careless pleasure they swelled until they filled the garden with laughter.

They'd gathered in the dining room at eight o’clock, when Hester struck a gong dragged down from the attic three times. John – who’d cut himself shaving and stood stroking anxiously at the tender spot, wondering if anyone would remark on his newly naked face – had been first to obey the summons. He’d found, among the other John's possessions, black trousers free from stains or cigarette burns, and a dark shirt that only lacked one button. When the others arrived, tricked out in bright dresses and shirts, he felt drab in their company, and stood quietly by the folds of the heavy curtains.

“And here's our Hester gone?” said Elijah, seeking him out and passing him a glass of wine: “Making an entrance, I expect. Have you a gift for her? I haven't - she forbade it – but then women always do, don’t they, and one never knows...”

“Seen the sky tonight, John?” Clare, appearing at his shoulder, patted his bare cheek and smiled approval. She had found in a cupboard somewhere a white dress with a short skirt that stood out in folds at her waist: it looked rather like a child's Sunday School dress and displayed a grass stain on her knee, and above it her flawless face looked more incongruous than ever. “Have you been outside, and seen it? The sky's getting dark, and it's going to rain...”

“I thought I heard thunder earlier,” said John, and stooped to kiss the girl's cheek, but she'd turned away: Hester had arrived, and paused in the doorway, one hand on her hip and the other braced against the frame in a parody of a model's pose. She wore a dress in fine black fabric printed all over with a pattern like the bark of a tree. It covered her from her wrists to her ankles, and over it she had put on a collar of Egyptian scarab beetles carved from bone and stained unevenly turquoise. From a distance it looked to John as if they might at any moment detach from their binding and scuttle to the four corners of the room. They called out - “Hester, it’s Hester … for she’s a jolly good fellow!” and she made a deep, mannered curtsey, as though her performance had already been made.

John had last seen her early that morning, as she stopped him in the kitchen and drew him into the corner: “That letter – urgh, I hate thinking of it, never mind saying it aloud: how could I have been so stupid - did it come? Did you see it? And how I can thank you, John...”

“I watched all day,” he'd said untruthfully, hoping she wouldn't see in his face the memory of the hour or so at the piano with Eve, “And it didn't come. It's going to be all right – look.” And they had both turned to the window, where they'd seen Alex on the lawn with Walker, struggling with a film projector that threatened to topple on its iron legs.

As she stood in the doorway, sweeping out her arm and taking her applause, John thought she gave him a look of apology and thanks, and he nodded: surely the danger was passed, he thought, watching Alex fill his glass for the second time and raise it in a general salute.

“And so say all of us!” cried Eve, then dashed to the door and kissed Hester’s hands and cheek: “When shall we sing for you, darling? Shall we do it now, and get it over with?”

John, who’d only ever seen her in the boy’s clothes that left her limbs bare, had turned away from the door when she came in, wrapped in a green dress with a high upturned collar and thin shining fabric that showed the bones of her hips and shoulders. On her left wrist, positioned precisely above a purplish circle of bruising, was a silver snake consuming its tail. With her curls pinned back from her face she looked to John like a black flower blooming on a frail stem.

Walker wore trousers with a narrow satin ribbon at the seam, and a pleated white dress-shirt unbuttoned at the neck. He looked carefully dishevelled, as if he’d not yet slept after a better party elsewhere. Appearing at John's elbow with a glass of wine, he said, “I put an ice cube in to keep it cold. Drink up, I would: this could go on for hours.” And he drew on a cigarette, narrowing his eyes at Eve, who lifted her hands to conduct them all in singing happy birthday.

“Happy *Bir*thday, dear *Hes*ter!” sang Elijah, in a sober jacket better suited to the pulpit. He slipped into a bass harmony that delighted so Hester so they sang twice more, while Clare, her hair in plaits, grew increasingly out of tune and lightly touched John's cheek again. “I'm glad you did it. Have you hurt yourself? Only - you look a bit like him now,” she said, nodding at Walker, who raised an eyebrow and flicked the butt of his cigarette onto the terrace.

Later they went into the music room, where the lilies gave off a rank scent that wouldn’t be covered with the perfume Eve sprayed in the air. “I can bear it if you can,” said Hester, sinking onto a threadbare couch and arranging the beetles at her breast. “We can’t have a party without music.” The raised lid of the piano had been polished, and reflected on its black surface the garden was already at midnight. Eve took Elijah’s hand and pulled him smilingly towards the stool. “Sing what you like,” she said, “I'll find you.”

Walker rested his heels on a table, then removed them under Hester’s glare, and murmured to John: “Pass me the whisky, would you? I can’t take this sober.”

The preacher straightened his tie, and with a quick downward glance at Eve as she settled at the keys began to sing. After the first deep melancholy notes had shivered in the floorboards and in the high back of the oak chair where John sat, the woman joined him, fixing her eyes on his: “*As pants the hart for cooling streams when heated in the chase*,” sang Elijah, his eyes fixed on the floor and the lamps putting red lights in his hair. John closed his eyes and saw the deer panicked in a thicket somewhere, thirsty and frightened, and felt his own mouth dry up in the heat. Outside, a chorus of crickets started up in the long grass.

The song faded as the preacher forgot the words, and Eve, laughing, ended on a low chord that seemed unfitting to the melody. “Beautiful,” said Hester, “But much too sad for me – Eve, play us something merrier or we’ll not have the stomach to eat.” Elijah inclined his head with a rueful smile, and came to sit in the small space beside her on the couch; she mimed a scowl of disapproval and tucked a cushion behind his head, leaning forward to whisper something that made him smile.

Eve pressed her hands into the small of her back, arching it with a moan that rang loudly under the high ceiling, then launched without warning into a high-stepping tune that called up the image of a speakeasy somewhere, and filled all their glasses with gin.

Clare said, “Surely we should dance - who’ll dance with me?”, but they were too weary with heat, and contented themselves with rapping their heels on the floor, and when the song finished called for another.

“No more from me - everyone has to do something, that’s what we agreed.” Eve stood, showing a black blade of sweat in the centre of her narrow back. “Alex, come on, what have you got to show us?” He stood reluctantly, pulled by Eve at one arm and Clare at another, and finding a basket of fruit on a sideboard juggled with oranges, tilting back his head to watch them, grinning at their applause when he snatched another and another, until half-a-dozen circled at the end of his outstretched hands. John felt pricked with unease: They can’t really be fooled by all this, can they? he thought, watching the young man nail up a smile.

One of the open windows suddenly slipped its latch and blew back against the wall. It startled Alex, who dropped the oranges and watched them roll between the legs of chairs and tables. One burst as it struck the bare floor, and filled the room with its scent.

“Was that the wind?” said Eve, running to the window and leaning out. “It's getting colder – look at my arms: I have goosebumps.” She thrust her arm towards them, and John saw the fine dark hairs raised in the sudden chill. “The storm must be coming, after all,” she said. “Come on, let's go outside, let's go out and wait for the rain.”

“A tenner to whoever feels the first drop,” said Walker, following Eve into the garden, his hand resting at the back of her neck.

The hum of crickets in the long grass rose and receded like a dry tide, and the wind picked up dust from the lawn. Hester clapped with feigned surprise when she saw they’d brought out a white sheet and stretched it between a pair of poplar trees. “Dear me,” she said: “What on earth have you been planning?” On the terrace a film projector on an uneven tripod rested against the sundial.

“Sit down there, sit down,” said Walker impatiently, stooping over the projector and fiddling with a case of film pock-marked with rust. They all subsided sighing onto blankets and cushions brought down from the bedrooms, glancing behind to wave at Elijah, who’d brought his chair to the long windows beside the patio and raised his glass in reply.

Clare leant against John’s shoulder. “I thought I felt a drop of rain but it’s just me, I’m sweating, look” - and she turned her face up to show him.

The breeze had moved on elsewhere, leaving the air so thick with moisture they felt the weight of it on their shoulders. The bright-lit bank of the reservoir wall seemed to have crept closer while they were inside, and behind it the black fringes of the Thetford pines were unmoving against the sky. Hester let out a moan as she sank onto a cushion: “I wish the dam would break, I wish it would, and float me away” – then glanced guiltily first at John and then at Alex, who seemed not to have heard and was wetting Eve’s feet with a watering can.

“There,” said Walker, standing back from the projector and rubbing dust from his hands: “Do you remember this?” The reel of film began to tick through the projector, and Hester appeared as a girl. Forty years were crossed at the push of switch: the same black eyes challenged the camera from the same face, a little softer perhaps, and framed by thick black hair that fell over her shoulders. The sound was cracked and faint, and the rising wind tugged at the sheet and distorted her features. They watched in silence, glancing curiously over at the woman seeing her youth replayed in front of her. The young Hester raised her arms above her head - *What am I saying? Have I lost my senses*? - then the sound hissed and cut out abruptly, and she was left silently mouthing at them.

“Turn it off, turn it off,” cried Hester, delighted: “And I can still remember the lines, you know: *At every word I say, my hair stands up with horror*! Racine, of course,” she said to John, as though confiding in a fellow conspirator, and he nodded, though he’d never heard the words.

Walker took out the reel of film and handed it to Hester, who idly began pulling it from its case. “I don't remember having ever been so young,” she said, winding the tape around her fingers: “But at the same time, I don't think I've ever grown older...”

Eve sank onto a rug beside John, thoughtfully running a thumb over the bruise on her wrist. Seeing it, John flushed with shame and confusion: what had made him hurt her, when the day before he'd been afraid the sun might burn her skin; when he'd wanted to go on sitting beside her, talking quietly, finding things to tell her that might make her eyes brighten under their black brows? It made no sense; no-one else would have done it; he must lack something essential, after all - She caught his eye and shrugged, smiling, and it was so like the acceptance of an apology he hadn’t yet managed to give that his throat constricted, and he bent forward to say with hurried relief, “It was dreadful though, wasn’t it? She couldn’t act at all!”

She grinned, and put a finger to her lips, then turning to look over her shoulder called out, “Cake, Clare: time for cake!” and the other girl dashed indoors and reappeared carrying a uneven white-iced cake.

“No candles, thank God . . .” said Hester.

“There wouldn't have been room,” said Walker, ducking a blow to his ear then catching her hand and kissing the knuckles one by one.

“But we can sing again, can’t we?” Clare look anxiously at John, who found himself leading another chorus of *Happy Birthday* as Alex thrust up his glass and made an arc of red wine in the air, and Elijah joined in from across the terrace.

“Someone else cut it, my hands are full,” said Hester, showing them a tangle of film on which her face could just be seen in miniature, repeated every inch. There was a quiet snap, and the wind tore the sheet from the pegs tethering it to the branches, and blew it onto the patio where it huddled in the corner.

“Give me the knife,” said Walker, cutting savagely into the cake: “I'm hungry”. It split open, and the smell of almonds mixed with spilt wine and the herby scent of the parched grass. “Oh, it could be cyanide in there,” he said: “We'll all be found dead in our beds...”

Eve smilingly pushed the first piece between his open lips. “No more than we deserve,” she said. “Hester? Will you risk it?”

John had stood then to ease the aching in his legs and wandered away towards the light over the valve tower. Particles of wet air hung in the spreading glow around the bulb, and he could hear above the rising wind the poppy-seeds rattling in their husks. Over the reservoir a column of cloud struck a barrier and began to spread outwards in the shape of an anvil, showing clearly against the darker sky behind. The evening slowed and stretched, and behind him the little group murmured or broke out into laughter, and now and then a white face plunged out of the gloom as someone stood to dash indoors and return with another bottle of wine.

No-one followed him, or called him back to share whatever joke made Clare's laugh ring out across the garden: it would have been easy to leave them to their games, detaching himself from them by degrees, breaking the threads he imagined running between them in a net that grew stronger every hour he stayed. But he was tired: his head ached again, and his legs were heavy with drink and weariness. He felt for the uneven swing hanging from the poplar tree, and sat watching for the storm, eyes upturned to the clouds bearing down on the roof and the peaks of the pines behind it, listening -

“….and who was that new young man, Hester, with the shaving-cut and the dark shirt? You never said you’d invited strangers in …”

“I forgot the words, forgot them! I used to remember every hymn in the book, you know – all the verses - no I’ll stay here, I’d rather stay indoors–”

“…so handsome, and so tall, but has anyone seen John tonight?” That was Eve, laughing: did she know her voice carried to him over the lawn?

“Are we out of wine? We can’t be. Give me that bottle, let me see –”

“I didn't go down there today, I was sleeping. There was a letter, you know, and I took it upstairs to read then lay down on the bed and went straight off, went out like a light - Maybe I’ll go down later and check, just once before the rain starts. Will you come? Who’ll come with me?”

“One afternoon, yesterday I think it was, it was so hot I heard the paint blister on the windowsill.”

“I was reading on the lawn today and I swear a fly just died in the air and landed on my lap.”

“ … *dark, dark hath been the midnight*…”

“Elijah darling, I wish you’d stop. It’s my birthday after all - were there never any happy hymns?”

“ …*glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel’s land*…”

“Eve, do give him something a drink.”

“Did you see that? Look east – no, over there, past the trees – lightning, definitely, down on the horizon...”

“And it's colder, I'm sure. Let me have your jacket, Walker, my shoulders will ache...”

“Play a game with me Evie, the ones from when we were little” - and with the smack of palm on palm:

*I gave my love an apple, I gave my love a pear,*

*I gave my love a kiss on the mouth*

*And threw him down the stairs…*

*“*It's going rain! Did you feel that? It's going to rain!”

“But surely it would have to rain for forty days and forty nights to break the dam, even if he was right all along?”

“Don’t talk about it, not on my birthday, I don’t want to hear it. And look how happy he is, dancing with Clare, look how alike they are…”

“…is that an owl?”

“It's the wind.”

Much later Clare came to find him, her hair coming out of its braids and her skirt streaked with dust. He was sitting cross-legged on the lawn, an empty bottle leaning on his knee, plucking the longest stems of grass and winding them around his thumb. “There you are, I’ve been looking and looking. Hester says we should go inside – the rain will start soon, and I saw lightning, twice, over there - ” She pointed towards the reservoir: it was coming closer.

“I want to stay here a while longer,” said John, “And watch it coming.”

“Can I sit with you? Look - Alex gave me this.” She sat beside him, and reaching into the bodice of her dress took out an envelope. John dully recognised the careful handwriting on the front, the name *ALEXANDER*, the unfranked stamp. So it had come after all, while he’d been sitting with Eve, or while he'd raged about the garden afterwards like a petulant child, still feeling her wrist in the circle of his fingers. It been such a small thing to ask him to do, and he'd failed, even at that.

He said, “What’s inside?”

“I didn’t look! You can’t open someone else’s post – didn’t your mother tell you?” She picked up the bottle and turned it upside down. A trickle of wine fell onto the grass. “He told me to get rid of it. He said he didn’t need it anymore. Shall we burn it?”

“I don’t have any matches,” said John.

“Oh.” She turned the envelope over and over in her hands. “Shall I go and get Walker? He always has some, and he always knows what to do -”

“No,” said John, too quickly, and she looked at him in surprise, turning the envelope in her hands. Then she said, “Well I’ll bury it, then,” and began to scratch a shallow trench in the dust. Then she put the folded paper in the hollow, and he helped her cover it over and find a stone to weigh it down.

“I bet we'll never know who sent them,” she said, patting the stone three times. “But I think it must have been someone wicked, though Elijah says there’s no such thing, and we’re all as bad as each other…if I ever found them out I'd find a way to hurt them, you know.” She gripped her hands together until the knuckles whitened, and her face, when she turned to look at him, was suddenly not childlike at all, but set hard with fury.

“Maybe they did it because they were unhappy,” he said, and she shook her head.

“No, just bad, I think.”

“How is he? How has he been – did he read the letter, then?”

“Oh yes, he must have done – but he's fine: they don't hurt him anymore. Nothing seems to, not even that woman by the sea and the boy who hurt himself. He's all right. He'll be all right.” She dusted her hands on her dress. “Can we go now, John? Let's go inside. I didn't put my shoes on, and my feet are cold – and what if the storm comes and we're still here, sitting under a tree? The lightning will get us!”

She pulled him to his feet, her arms far stronger than he’d thought they’d be, and they picked their way through empty bottles and a plate that had been broken when Hester, heavy with wine and heat, stumbled indoors. Someone had brought out the book of poems with its white vellum cover, and it lay open at *Wulf and Eadwacer*. John, passing it, bent to closer it, and would have put it in his pocket if had Clare hadn't dragged him on: “Can you feel it coming? The air’s fizzing, and it’s making my head hurt.”

He stood with her at the window of the music room, watching the storm-clouds pile up above the reservoir. The wind moaned through cracks in the window-frame, and the grey air drew a veil over the garden. It was quiet indoors, and from somewhere along the corridor someone was talking in a low murmur. It might have been any of them, and John strained to hear better, wondering if it was Eve, foolishly hoping he might hear his name for the last time.

It won't be long now, he thought, and wanting again to gather everything he saw to be kept safe and complete in memory, gazed steadily around the room as though it were the face of a friend leaving for another country. The curtains at the window were torn and speckled with damp, and as he watched a flake of plaster detached itself from the ceiling and floated down like a leaf on a still day. Beside him Clare scratched the paint on the windowsill with her thumbnail, and leant her head on his shoulder. She said, “You don’t think he was right all along, do you?”

John bent his head, and let his cheek rest briefly against the top of her head. Her hair was warm, as though it had soaked up the last of the sun.

“He wasn't really in his right mind, I think - no, he was wrong: we’re safe here.” She sighed, and her head grew heavy on his shoulder. After a while he thought she must be dozing where she stood; but then she straightened with a cry of delight, and leaned forward to push the window open. A gust of wind threw it back against the wall and cracked the glass, but they neither heard nor saw: it was raining, and they were as amazed by it as if they’d never drunk water or washed in it. The first drops were so heavy John thought: they'll break the stones as they land. Laughing, they put their hands out to feel cold water in their palms. Then all at once the temperature fell, and there was a change of air so sudden they felt it deep in the channels of their ears. Clare shivered, and began to step away from the window into the darkening room. “Don't let the rain blow in,” she said, then leaned forward, arrested by something she’d seen, and began to point down the garden. “Oh – John, what’s that? What’s happening?”

A flock of small white birds was flying down towards the reservoir, and John leaned out to see better, wondering what they were; but it was only sheets of paper borne on the rising wind.

“What is it? Where is it coming from?” Running onto to the terrace, the girl knelt to pick up a sheet of paper from where it had been pinned to the stones by the rain, and her white dress darkened at the hem. Water streamed over her hair and into her eyes, and she held up the paper, laughing and calling to John, beckoning to him to come out. But although he couldn’t have said why, he began to feel cold and uneasy: he wanted to turn his back on the darkening garden, and wait out the storm in his bed upstairs with the windows fastened against the sky.

“Come out John – why aren't you coming out: look, it's only Elijah!”

Turning his collar up against the sudden chill, John went out onto the wet stones and turned to look at the house. All the window were lit, their curtains drawn back, and directly above where they stood, framed in a panel of light, Elijah stood with the naked light-bulb swaying in the wind and sending his shadow back and forth across the wall. He’d opened the windows as far as they’d go, and held sheaves of paper in each hand which he threw out onto the wet wind. Currents of air lifted them briefly towards the eaves of the house, then they were tossed down the garden, where the light from the tower was hazy with rain.

“Elijah!”, Clare called, waving the paper she’d picked up like a handkerchief. “Can you see us? What is it? What are you doing?”

He heard her, and waved to them both; then laughing began to throw out handfuls of paper until the air was full of it.

Then the first lightning-strike came, a bluish filament leaping from cloud to cloud, and the whole house sprang out from the darkness then receded into the rain. The full-bellied clouds bore down on the roof, and John thought: Just another few feet and we’ll all be swallowed up. At the thought of it he laughed, and turning his face into the rain shouted to the preacher, “The sky’s falling in Elijah - you were right all along!”

“You know I don't think I’ve ever seen him laugh,” said Clare, but he couldn't hear above the noise of the rain on the stones and the slate tiles of the roof.

When the second lightning strike came it seemed to John that the light came from inside the earth, was an upward surge that shone out through the windows of the house and every crack in the lawn and every fissure and bore-hole in the trunks of the trees receding into the rain. It gave the world a moment of absolute clarity, and in it the preacher at his window saw something that made him rigid with terror and warning, and even above the hammering of the rain they heard his frantic bellow.

John looked down at the water at his feet and thought: so he was right, after all - the dam has broken. But no, that was absurd: it was only the rain pooling on the terrace stones, rising, having nowhere to go. Elijah shouted again, and gripping the windowsill leaned so far out John was afraid he might fall, and put out his arms as though that would be enough to catch him.

Clare said, “What is it? What's happening?”, and gripped John’s arm so hard above the elbow that a few days later he found a mark, and was grateful for a reminder that he had been there at all.

“I don't know, I can't hear - ” Elijah vanished from the window, and all they saw was the shadow of a moth beating against the light-bulb. John wanted to call out for the others: none of this was anything to do with him; he ought not to have been there at all; surely someone else was coming? In the high wind a tile slipped free from the glasshouse roof and shattered, its shards lost in the rising water, while beside him Clare plucked frantically at his shirt. Then away to their left, as the lightning flared again, he heard a door slam from the side of the house nearest the garden wall. A moment later Elijah, his head lowered like a charging bull, ran down the garden towards the reservoir at the end. It was then that John realised it was not, of course, the dam breaking: it would have come not in a rising flood but a rush of black water. But whatever Elijah had seen had made him forget his fear of a godless earth, and was a nearer and more urgent danger, and John began running too, grasping for the young woman’s hand.

The lawn was too dry to suck up the rain, which might as well have fallen on a tiled floor, and as they ran water dark with mud and leaves lapped at their ankles, and the white-covered book was open again, floating face-down in the reflection of the swing. Ahead of them the bright grass verge of the reservoir wall was an indistinct barrier, and above it the yellow light from the tower showed clearly.

It wasn’t until there was another lightning-flash, a bluish thread connecting two black banks of cloud, that John saw what Elijah had seen from his window: Alex stood at the furthest edge of the verge beside the reservoir, staring fixedly down at the water. Below him, where days before there’d been a rubble beach, the rising water-level lapped at the edge of the embankment. As they watched he tilted back his head as though he were peering up to see perforations where the rain came through, and the water dragged his shirt from his back. As they drew nearer, slipping in the mud, John saw that the boy’s arms were clasped around a black object, and in the next flash he saw it was the cannon ball, so heavy it strained at his arms and made cords stand out on the arches of his neck.

John tried to run faster, to reach the boy before he lost his footing and fell, but he slipped in the mud and felt his treacherous ankle weaken and turn. He tried calling out instead, all the while remembering the deceits they’d practised as vividly as if they too were lit by lightning: his hand on the boy’s shoulder as they walked away from the reservoir – *I’m sure it’s all right, I couldn’t see anything, go inside now and sleep*; Hester’s hand dipping and dipping into the pan of glue as she papered her mask with the stories she’d used to keep him near; Eve’s hands on the piano keys as he sat bewildered next to her and all the while a dozen of those foolish letters could have been delivered unnoticed.

Then he remembered as though it had been years ago the woman and the child on the beach, and all their dazed confusion out on the salt-marshes, and he struggled frantically to reach the young man who seemed not to have noticed them shouting his name, and instead stepped towards the edge of embankment wall. The pain in his ankle worsened at each step, and he stooped to grip it as though he could push the bones and tendons back into their proper place. As he stooped there was a surge behind him as Hester in her party dress, the beetles still scuttling at her throat, rose up the embankment. Her eyes were so wide with fear they were rimmed in white, and she stumbled and slipped, and would have fallen if Walker and Eve hadn’t appeared at her side and taken her weight between them. On the surface of the rising reservoir, the water moved in eddies as though just beneath large fish waited patiently, and the pines at the water’s edge let loose a volley of cones as the rain struck their branches.

Alex began to edge away from them, turning his head away and moving slowly towards the curved dam wall where the water would be deepest. Hester began to shout his name, but it was so outdrawn with anguish he wouldn't have recognised it even if the rain and wind had fallen silent. He’d reached the edge of the verge, where a steel barrier marked the place where the reservoir grew deep, and stood gazing fixedly downwards. It occurred to John that perhaps he was looking for the Post Office sign; he shouted out idiotically “No, it’s not there, it’s this side, it’s over here!” The wind threw his words elsewhere, and Alex never heard: without looking back, he stepped over the barrier and into the rising black water. The weight of the cannon ball in his arms pulled him in so fast that the tendrils of his hair flew up, and as he entered the water it seemed to part and close over him as though it had been waiting all along.

Clare, gripping John’s arm, began to cry without tears, then covered her face with her hands and shook her head violently as though she refused to believe what she’d seen. Beside her Hester first sank to her knees then began to scrabble at the grass to get enough purchase to stand again; she was not crying, but shaking her head and saying, “No, no, not him –” on a rising panicked cadence that died down for a moment, then started up again each time she drew a breath.

John pulled his arm from Clare’s grasp and tried to run forward, tugging at the neck of his shirt, but there wasn’t any strength in his ankle; it turned twice under his weight before he could reach the water’s edge. By then Walker had stripped to his underwear and with a face set in courage or denial jumped into the reservoir. Eve, her curls drawn into a glossy cap, leant over the barrier, calling the names of the two men in turn as if she might be able to coax them out of the water, while beside her Elijah clasped his hands under his chin, his eyes closed and his mouth moving.

“Too late for that, isn't it?” said John, fear making him unkind, and he stood with Eve at the barrier, staring into the black water. Later he would think of those minutes as having been hours of waiting - he and the preacher poised at the water’s edge uncertain how to help, Eve a shaking green blade between them, Hester digging at the grass with both hands outstretched while Clare bent over her, trying to lift the older woman’s hair out of the mud. But it could only have been less than a minute before Walker plunged upward through the water; he gulped at the air then was gone for a moment, returning with a dark head cradled in the crook of his arm. He called out, struggling against violent currents; John, his weight borne on Elijah’s shoulder, leaned over the barrier with hands outstretched, shouting encouragement as though it had been just a race all along and there might still be a winner – “That’s it Walker, come on, that’s it, only a little further.”

Then the young man was slipping in their hands, his forearms grazed by the cannon ball, as wet and cold as though he’d been born underwater. Walker, his back bruised by the concrete of the reservoir wall, clambered over the barrier and shouted to Eve as if she were the other end of the garden, and not at his side trying to cover his shoulders with a soaking shirt: “Run – you’re fastest – call for help: tell them we tried… ”

Clare went slowly to her brother, moving her head from side as though not believing it might make the whole evening a lie. He lay on the bank with his arms flung above his head. Blood ran from a shallow cut on his forehead, and it mingled with the rain so that a pale stain began to spread over his breast. She picked up Walker’s shirt from where he'd dropped it in the mud, and began to dab at the cut saying, “He’ll be cold won’t he? He’ll be cold. He mustn’t get cold because it always goes to his chest.”

Elijah started as though he’d remembered something – “Oh yes, a blanket, that’s it” - and ran down the slope towards the house. Hester had fallen forward onto all fours, her head hanging low until her forehead pressed into the mud, the blue beetles scattered over the verge. Now and then she dabbled in the wet grass as though she were trying to reach him, but the rain dragged at the heavy folds of her dress and weighed her down.

John knelt beside the boy, and remembering a long-ago lesson in a school hall tilted his head, cradling it gently between his hands, surprised to find himself murmuring “I’m sorry – oh, I’m so sorry.” As the heavy head tipped back, dirty water spilled from between his lips. John leant forward and tried to fit his mouth over the boy’s, but the rain made his skin slick and most of the breath he gave was lost. Walker knelt beside John, and measuring a hand’s-breath upward from the last sharp shadow of the boy’s ribs found his heart and, locking his fingers released his weight onto the boy's white chest, counting first under his breath then out loud. Clare, glad of something to do, counted with him, dabbing at her brother's blue-lipped face: “One…two…three…four… One…two… three… four …You’ll be all right Alex, it wasn’t that deep in there and we’ve got you now, John’s got you and everything’s going to be okay…”

Then there was a new kind of lightning, fitful and blue at the end of the garden, and just as the rain began to recede John lifted his head from the boy’s and saw it wasn’t the storm but an ambulance, and Eve running with her long skirts raised, two men running behind.

Much later John sat on the edge of his bed in his own shirt, the collar an unaccustomed pressure on his throat, the buttons at the wrist too tight. His ankle was swollen and ached dully whether he moved it or not, and he could not shake a chill that now and then took him by the shoulders and made him shiver. He made the bed, picking from the pillow the amber strands of hair Clare had left behind and carrying them to the window, where the tower light had gone out and a mild sun was rising. The brightness of the embankment wall seemed to be spreading across the lawn towards the house, the rain enlivening the grass, the dam wall unmoved. The trousers and shirt he'd borrowed from the other John were still wet, and he hung them on the back of a chair in front of the window where the wind would reach them. He sealed up the boxes, running his thumb over the familiar name on the labels, then turned the Puritan to the wall. The child's desk where every night he'd sat trying to make sense of things seemed smaller than when he'd last left it, the chair much too light for his weight. Taking the notebook from its drawer, he turned to where the account ended and pressed a hand to the empty page. It seemed so long ago, that hesitant knocking on his bedroom door, that the pages ought really to have crumbled in his fingers. He put the book beside him on the bed and listened. Downstairs in the kitchen someone was weeping, and the kettle was left to scream on the hob.

They’d taken Alex away so swiftly it had been hard to believe, standing there in the slackening rain, that he’d ever been there at all. The men in their green coats, compassionate but unperturbed, had carried him on a stretcher, wrapped in layers of silver they said would make him warm. They had offered to take Hester - “She needs something to calm her,” the younger of the men had said to John, quietly, as if the decision would be his. But she'd refused, and instead stood clinging to Elijah, pale mud staining her dress, watching Alex go. As the men picked their way across the lawn they stumbled now and then, and once his arm had slipped from under the covers, swinging from the side of the stretcher. Then Hester had tried to dash forward, but Elijah held her back, and Clare had cried, “Should I go with him? I should go, shouldn't I…”

“I'll go.” Walker had stepped forward, tugging at the blanket they'd draped across his shoulders. “Go indoors, all of you. You can't do anything now, it's too late.” He stooped to kiss Eve once on her forehead, and followed them down to the waiting ambulance, plucking at a packet of soaked cigarettes and shredding the useless tobacco between his fingers.

John never knew how long Hester stayed up there, Elijah standing with her as the rain receded to the west. Together he and Eve had taken Clare back to the house, both touching her anxiously on the hair or shoulder, murmuring “We’ll call them in a minute, Walker will look after him – he won’t be cold now.” John only looked back once, to see Hester rocking in the mud and Elijah on his knees beside her. He wondered if he too ought to sit with her, but remembered the graze that had marked the boy’s forearms with streaks of blood, and turned his back on them both.

At the garden's end the walls of the house were already drying in the early wind, and the sky had begun to prepare for dawn. The two women went upstairs, their arms entwined so tightly he couldn’t make out whose hand steadied them on the banister, and whose reached up to smooth the drying skeins of Clare’s hair.

John had passed the remains of the night pacing back and forth, recounting to himself each incident of the past few days as though they’d been scenes in a play that had moved him too much, always returning to the upturned face under the rain: had it been the young man’s breath he felt as he’d stooped over him, or only his own thrown at him by the wind? Had Walker pressed his heart back into beating – was that possible, or only a myth that held out a little hope? He stood, shaking his head: nothing could be altered or amended now. He bent to pick up the notebook, and went downstairs.

Alone in the hall he listened to Hester weeping, and other voices murmuring in sympathy then falling silent as they exhausted their store of comfort. For a long while he waited, turning his face to the wall and resting his forehead against the peeling paper, rolling the notebook between his hands: he had every right to join them, and none at all. So this also is loneliness, he thought, and felt the painful drawing in his stomach set up again. He was ashamed to find it was Eve who most clearly entered his mind, not Clare crying for her brother, or Hester rehearsing her gestures of guilt and grief. When a door was opened and Eve appeared before him, still in her green dress, he felt no surprise: anyone would have been willed there by so much longing. He looked once at the fine white lines of her face, drawn finer and whiter overnight, and then down at the notebook in his hands.

“It doesn’t matter now, but I’ve been lying to you,” he said. It seemed very important that he should tell the truth. “I shouldn’t ever have been here. It was all a terrible mistake.”

“I know,” she said, and looking at her again he realised she was crying silently. She was too tired to wipe her cheek, and the tears ran into the stains of mud on her dress. “Yes, I know. I realised the first night, you know, and never said anything, not even – oh, not to anyone, not ever. I'd met him you see – the other John – and he was nothing at all like you. He seemed so angry and could never look you in directly in the eye, not the way you do - but it doesn’t matter now, does it?” She touched the bruise on her wrist, and in the kitchen they heard Elijah’s voice raised above Hester’s weeping. John thought, he’s probably praying, and took Eve’s wrist between his hands. The skin felt chilled, as though her bones were cold: he stroked her with slow and clumsy movements, trying to pass on the warmth he felt rising up from his stomach, but it made her wince, and he let her hand slip from his.

“If only we'd all told the truth, right from the start,” said John.

“No-one ever has the courage, not really. And besides, who'd believe it?”

“I did my best,” he said. “And I tried to understand. But I’ve been so tired and my head ached, and I’ve been so confused.” He tried to make a gesture that covered it all - the desire and confusion she'd provoked, and the gratitude that once she’d wanted his company.

She said, “So have I – so have we all,” and plunging forward kissed his cheek. When she moved away her mouth was wet, and she drew in her bottom lip to suck at a tear. His heart began a hopeless brief ascent, and he stooped over her as if he could draw her within his shadow; then she straightened, and lifting her chin as though walking into a high wind went back to the kitchen.

As the door swung open, John saw Hester kneeling on the floor, her head resting on the table as she traced the place where the name EADWACER had been cut into the wood. Elijah, kneeling beside her, distractedly sang the old song John had recognised, clutching a chipped mug that gave off clouds of steam. Clare had fallen asleep at the table, and her face was calm. John, remembering the weight of her head on the pillow beside his, would have liked to wake her, but the door swung shut and he was left alone.

Outside, the sun illuminated the clouds that massed in the vaulted sky, and kindled the drops of rain still clinging to the grass. John stood at the top of the stairs, and watched a jackdaw stalk across the grass and spread out his wings to dry. Ahead, Walker was coming up the path, his footsteps sounding loudly on the gravel, his grey head bowed. When he reached the foot of the steps and saw John waiting, he paused to finish his cigarette, and the pall of smoke blew upward. Then Walker joined him, and they stood by his side at the head of the stairs, in the shadow of the pillars.

“He's safe from all of that now, at least,” he said, turning the packet of cigarettes over and over in his hands.

“There's that, I suppose - ”

Then with a quick impulsive touch on John's shoulder the other man said, “I don't think you could have done anything different, you know – I don't think any of us could.”

John nodded, and gestured towards the cool deep recess of the forest. “I’m going home,” he said, discovering he couldn't remember what home looked like, or what might be waiting for him there.

“Perhaps that's best,” said Walker, turning wearily to the heavy door behind them. John looked again at the knocker, with the man’s hand rapping a stone against an iron plate, and thought: If I’d known what was coming, I’d’ve wanted it to throw stones at me until I went back the way I’d come.

“Come with me, if you like”, said John, on an impulse born of sudden pity. “Do you need a lift? I can take you – let me take you home.” Walker looked for a while out towards the forest fringes, as though he saw there a freedom he no longer sought. Then he shrugged, and passed a long-fingered hand across his face. The gunmetal eyes had lost their edge: he looked younger, but weary, like a man come without honour to the end of a battle.

“I can’t,” he said, and from somewhere behind them they heard the familiar steady progression of chords played on the piano. “I’ve tried before, you see,” he said, “Sometimes I think the tide has turned and I’m glad, forgetting that of course it always comes in again. And besides - wherever I go, there she’ll be.” He smiled, with a startling frankness, as though he’d seen in John an equal and a companion. “You’ll see, I think. He put a hand on John’s shoulder and left it there a while, as if there was something else he would have liked to say, then drawing a deep breath went inside. The door closed, and the iron hand knocked its stone twice against the plate.

From somewhere beyond the forest a pillar of smoke was rising. It furled against itself and began to dissipate, then thickened into a plume blowing east. As he watched, pressing a hand to the pain that had set up in his stomach, it resolved into a flock of starlings that scattered and dipped below the horizon. John looked down to the steps at his feet, which seemed so long and steep a flight he wondered how he ever could have made his way up.

One by one he said all their names aloud as though to leave them there, and then walked down the gravel path towards the dripping green-lit canopy ahead. The ringing of a single note on the piano and the sound of voices from an open window receded; then from somewhere in the forest came the sound of small wings beating, and the single-minded flock burst up towards the sun. The black plume on the white sky was a line of print, and John went on walking, trying to make it out.

**INTRODUCTION**

**1: The Accidental Gothic**

In ‘Fighting for the Crown’, his essay on the magical realist novels of Angela Carter, John Bayley asserts that a novelist cannot but be aware of the conventions flouted or exploited in his or her work: ‘The process [is] a very self-conscious one; the novelist [knows] exactly how new and up-to-date he or she is being’ (515)[[1]](#footnote-1). This thesis cannot attempt to deduce to what extent other contemporary writers have consciously drawn on Gothic conventions as they relate to the built environment, but must begin by stating that not until the earliest drafts of *Confusion* were complete was I conscious of having adopted an at times strikingly Gothic aesthetic in respect of the portrayal and use of architecture. This has prompted a consideration of the extent to which a Gothic treatment of the sense of place – particularly, though not exclusively, in depictions of architecture and the built environment - has consciously or unconsciously entered or influenced the essentially realist novels of Iris Murdoch, whose fiction has affinities with my own project in *Confusion*.

The thesis begins with an exploration of the origins of the term ‘Gothic’ and of the parallel responses of ecstasy and terror to the Gothic in both ecclesiastical architecture and in fiction. It then goes on to consider briefly the ways in which genres in fiction morph and overlap their defining boundaries. It explores in particular the ways in which buildings and the sense of place in the Gothic facilitate explorations of human behaviour by constraining or liberating characters, and affect the reader’s emotional engagement with and expectations of the narrative. The key elements of place considered here are the madhouse, in which characters display different kinds of madness or unreason, and consecrated ground, in which the narrative explores and challenges the notion of what it is to be good. The sense of ‘otherness’ implied by the construction of a wall or boundary is central to each of these considerations: just as the creation of the ‘inside’ delineates and confirms the notion of the ‘outside’, so the confinement of the ‘mad’ demands a distinction between reason and unreason, and the depiction of a repository for that which is holy raises possibilities of the unholy.

Throughout, the thesis considers both characters’ perceptions of their surroundings, and the effect of those perceptions on their emotions and consciousness; and the emotional responses of the reader, for whom depictions of particular kinds of place will be shown to provoke expectations of particular acts or themes.

In conclusion, I examine the experiences which have formed my own writing style and themes, in particular the struggle to reconcile faith with reason. Considering the Gothic – notably through Todorov’s model of the marvellous, the fantastic and the uncanny – provides a useful framework within which to contextualise my own fiction, and its use of Gothic protocols.

Key texts examined in this piece include the important Gothic texts *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Robert Maturin, and M. G. Lewis’s *The Monk*, together with Iris Murdoch’s novels *The Unicorn* and *The Bell*.

**2: Gothic Origins**

The term ‘Gothic’ was first used in the Renaissance as a contemptuous dismissal of the 12th century French architectural style exemplified by the cathedral at Rheims. To Renaissance sensibilities - which prized the simple lines and low curved arches of Classical antiquity - the flying buttresses, towering pinnacles and vaulted arches of churches built in the centuries following the Norman Conquest recalled the ‘barbarous’ German tribes that plagued the Roman Empire in its decline. As de Beer notes in his essay on the idea of style in architecture, citing Vasari’s 1550 publication on European architectural forms, the term was both abusive and historical, reflecting both an offence to the tastes of the era, and contempt for the German craftsmen instrumental in raising post-Roman buildings:

[Vasari] gives a satirical description of the kind of building style “which is called German”, and which differs from both the ancient and the modern manner, “Nor is it used today by the best architects, who avoid it as monstrous and barbarous.” This fantastic and confused style was invented, he says, by the Goths, after the destruction of the ancient buildings and the death in wars of those who knew how to erect them[[2]](#footnote-2).

Montague Summers, tracing the origins of *The Gothic Quest*, elaborates:

The word ‘Gothic’, which was to play so important a part in later days, and which now has so very definite and particular a meaning (especially in relation to literature) originally conveyed the idea of barbarous, tramontane and antique, and was merely a term of reproach and contempt (37).

On the publication in 1764 of *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole deliberately termed the novel ‘A Gothic Tale’, wryly foreshadowing the first reviews, which ‘objected to the preposterous nature of the narrative – to the fantastic gothic machinery of ghosts, skeletons, labyrinthine passages, and wild, picturesque landscapes[[3]](#footnote-3)’. Drawing a parallel between Renaissance responses to gothic architecture and eighteenth century critical responses to *Otranto* is thus by no means spurious, but rather suggests a clear trend in tastes across the arts during a given period, as part of a society’s attempt at defining itself through its cultural preferences. As Fred Botting observes in his critical study of the Gothic, ‘The insistence on neoclassical rules of composition manifests the importance attached to the manner in which eighteenth century culture constructed and reproduced its own idea of itself…[it] displays a serious effort to privilege classical cultivation over the barbarity of the past’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus responses to the Gothic – both to architecture in the sixteenth century and to non-classical literature in the eighteenth – suggest a protective reflex on the part of established society – law-givers, moral leaders, and those in political administration - baulking at threats to the boundaries it attempts to set and maintain. By contrast, Botting emphasises the power of fiction to mobilise, through a kind of romantic identification, political discontent and unrest:

It is in T. J. Matthias’s *The Pursuits of Literature* (1796) that novels and romances are closely linked to the thread of revolution spreading across the channel from France. In encouraging appetites for excitement and sensation and thereby disturbing the balance of domestic harmony and moral propriety, the effects of novels and romances were associated with the passions and violence of Revolutionary mobs in France (80).

Nonetheless, critics have observed the paradoxical nature of the term ‘Gothic’, which by the time of the publication of *Otranto* had developed and enlarged its meaning significantly since its first use as a pejorative. As Robert Miles notes in his essay on the eighteenth century Gothic, influential Whig politicians ‘invested ideological energy in the image of the Goth’, and thus ‘Gothic things rose in aesthetic value. Nowhere was this more true than in architecture[[5]](#footnote-5).’ The Gothic found its champions even in the church, as Summers records:

The term, so long slandered and traduced, found at length a learned and powerful defender in Bishop Richard Hurd of Worcester, whose *Letters on Chivalry and Romance,* published anonymously in 1762, must be accounted not only a work of paramount importance in the history of English romanticism, but also regarded as among the finest critical essays of our literature…The very first of the twelve *Letters* boldly throws down the gauntlet with its opening words: “The ages, we call barbarous, present us with many a subject of curious speculation. What, for instance, is more remarkable than Gothic CHIVALRY? Or than the spirit of ROMANCE, which took its rise from that singular institution?” (41).

Botting also records another ‘ambivalence and polarisation of the word Gothic’ (89), which might be taken either as representing ‘the northern European tribes, admired for their love of freedom and democratic institutions’ (88) or ‘all that is signified…by the *ancien regime* in France’ (89). Such a simultaneously evocative and paradoxical term was open to adoption by both radicals and conservatives: it functioned ‘within a network of associations whose positive or negative value depended on the political positions and representations with which Gothic figures were associated’ (89). It is perhaps this ambivalence associated with the Gothic that explains its link to what Botting terms ‘pervasive cultural anxiety’ (89): rather than providing a fixed point representative of all that society ought to reject or redress, it appears both to set and contest the boundaries of society.

It is interesting to note that Michel de Montaigne, writing his essay ‘On Books’ within twenty years of the publication of Vasari’s essay on architecture, emphasised his preference for the moderate and instructive in literature, rather than the stories of excess and attempts to horrify or seduce the reader that later characterised the Gothic in fiction:

I know well enough what is meant by death and pleasure; there is no need to waste time in dissecting them. I look for good and solid reasons at the outset…I do not want anyone to spend his time arousing my attention and shouting ‘Hark ye, hark!’, as the heralds do…(167)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Montaigne’s language in describing the literature he favours conjures up the planes of Classical architecture (‘good and solid’), and he later decries ‘the ingenious weaving of words and arguments’ which seek to drive the reader to a conclusion (167). Distaste for tales that contrived by ‘ingenious weaving’ of any kind to entice and seduce the reader clearly did not begin with the publication of *Otranto*.

Conversely, as the first responses to *Otranto* were published, deploring a writer who, ‘Though of a refined and polished genius’, appeared nevertheless to be ‘an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism’[[7]](#footnote-7), Goldsmith paid a visit to Westminster Abbey, and staggered under the effect of architecture that was both awe-inspiring and, to Enlightenment sensibilities, ‘uncivilised’:

Imagine a temple marked with the hand of antiquity, solemn as religious awe, adorned with all the magnificence of barbarous profusion…Think, then, what were my sensations at being introduced to such a scene (8-9).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The apparently contradictory pairing of ‘magnificence’ with ‘barbarous profusion’ sets up the duality of the gothic in literature: it is uncivilised, unrestrained by the laws and customs of the day; and both appealing and appalling to the senses. As Fred Botting notes:

Gothic produced emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational and cultivated response. Exciting rather than informing, it chilled their blood, delighted their superstitious fancies and fed uncultivated appetites for marvellous and strange events, instead of instructing readers with moral lessons that inculcated decent and tasteful attitudes to literature and life (4).

As this suggests, responses to the Gothic were informed not merely by tastes in literature, but by conventions as to what was civilised and tasteful in life in general. As noted earlier, at the heart of the Gothic is what Botting terms ‘cultural anxieties’, and a ‘fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries’ (2). More disturbingly for the eighteenth-century custodians of society’s moral and political norms, the Gothic narrative does not merely depict behaviours at the extremes of what any society might consider immoral or amoral, but also simultaneously encodes other patterns of thought or behaviour, less flagrantly taboo but equally potentially destructive. Readers of *The Castle of Otranto*, caught in a narrative of violence and incest, are at liberty to ‘decode’ the text, discovering what subjectively most troubling or taboo. Relatively unlikely to be consciously grappling with a personal desire to commit murder or incest, a reader might instead begin to question the validity and stability of the familial relationships upon which society is structured. There is a sense in which the reader’s unconscious enters into a dialogue with the unconscious of the author, so that *Otranto*’s (possible) encoding of Walpole’s own sexual anxieties unconsciously provoke the reader to examine and decode their own. The Gothic does not restrain or chasten modes of thought, but rather provokes a continuous testing of what the reader might previously have thought the limit of their endurance or experience.

The publication of *Otranto* marked a rare occasion in which an author self-consciously instituted and invented a genre, setting the terms and conventions for what followed after (and here Bayley’s idea of the self-conscious novelist is supremely apt). It is unlikely that by adopting the sub-title ‘A Gothic Tale’ Walpole was ignorant of the long pejorative use of the term to describe the sublimely ‘barbaric’ French architectural style (or, indeed, of its more recent redemption at the hands of politicians and clerics, and associations with an past age of chivalry and romance), and thus critics note the knowing use of architecture and the sense of place as a narrative device among the defining elements of the genre. Botting, for example, observes:

The major locus of Gothic plots, the castle, was gloomily predominant in early Gothic fiction…Architecture, particularly medieval in form (although historical accuracy was not a prime concern), signalled the spatial and temporal separation of the past and its values from those of the present…in later fiction, the castle gradually gave way to the old house (2).

Walpole’s titular castle, with its cloisters, ‘subterranean regions’, black tower and postern-gate (24 & 54), functions as the central prop in his narrative structure of terror and awe. Gothic novels thereafter followed the terms of the genre, with M. H. Lewis’s *Monk* descending literally and spiritually through the vaults of the Abbey, and Anne Radcliffe’s Emily St Aubyn and Bram Stoker’s Jonathan Harker both imprisoned in remote castles. Castle, cloister and ruin are so central to the idea of the Gothic that *Northanger Abbey*, Austen’s parody of the genre, foregrounded architecture in both title and plot. In her early critical study of the Gothic novel, J. M. S. Tomkins emphasises the importance of the Gothic building as being so heavily allusive that is mere presence in a narrative signifies to the reader the kind of story, the kind of themes and events, for which they should brace themselves: ‘The reader, one assumes, appreciated the allusion, and carried over into the novel something of the atmosphere of rich melancholy in which poetry, followed at some distance by drama, had bathed the Gothic building...A new source of emotion had been unsealed, and novelists were trying to take account of it, though without much notion as yet how this was to be done[[9]](#footnote-9)’ (265). Nonetheless, the mere depiction of a certain kind of building is insufficient to constitute the truly Gothic in fiction:

The key characteristic of the Gothic novel is not its devices, but its atmosphere…the setting exists to convey the atmosphere…wild landscapes, ruined abbeys, and the like, were merely a convenient convention, a standardized method of achieving the desired atmosphere[[10]](#footnote-10).

Thus this thesis explores not merely the *depictions* of buildings in the Gothic, but rather the *effects* of the device, both on the characters within the novel and the reader as he experiences the narrative. The consciousness of character and reader alike are essential to the construction each castle, abbey and ruin, with both anxiously supplying depths and shadows, and keyed up to expect moments of mystery and unease. As Marshall Brown notes in his study *The Gothic Text[[11]](#footnote-11)*, ‘Walpole’s accomplishment in *The Castle of Otranto* was the creation of a mood, not a mechanism’ (63).

**3: Iris Murdoch**

Exploring the extent to which the Gothic sense of place functions in the realist novels of Iris Murdoch demands a brief consideration of the ways in which the Gothic and realist genres differ in purpose and effect. The essentially realist novel, at its simplest, attempts a truthful representation of usually (though not exclusively) contemporary life, with all the attendant details of clothing, manners, cultural preoccupations and infrastructure. Dennis Walder cites the ‘traditional claim of the realist novel: to tell a tale not told before, using techniques that involve readers closely with the individual in a specific society, towards the ultimate objective of extending their sympathies and understanding’ (191)[[12]](#footnote-12). By this measure realism in the novel is an ethic as much as a genre: to delineate that ‘individual’ in his ‘specific society’, and to foster and develop ‘sympathies and understanding’, requires knowledge of both individual and society on the part of the author, and a dedication to its accurate portrayal in order to enlighten and engage the reader on an intellectual, as well as emotional, level. The term is of course more complex than merely suggestive of a kind of truthful reportage of events, as Ian Watt notes in *The Rise of the Novel[[13]](#footnote-13)*:

Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses; it has its origins in Descartes and Locke…But the view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it, obviously does not in itself throw much light on literary realism; since almost everyone, in all ages, has in one way or another been forced to some such conclusion about the external world by his own experience (12).

Watt indicates the second ‘layer’ of literary realism, which is to say the truthful depiction of ‘how things *really* are’ according to the consciousness and experience of both the character through whose eyes we observe the concrete forms making up the objectively ‘real’, and by extension the sub-narrative of the novel, which may depict a reality quite separate from that which is portrayed in concrete terms. Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew[[14]](#footnote-14)* offers a useful exemplar of this principle: realist in the first sense, of a detailed portrayal of the breakdown of a marriage in privileged nineteenth-century American society, beneath the depictions of theatres, carriages and evening gloves is another ‘reality’, one to which Maisie herself is not privy – that of the selfishness and cruelty of her parents. James’s formal triumph in *What Maisie Knew* is, of course, that the two realities are in absolute opposition, with the first suggesting an adored child for whom no toy or frock is too extravagant, and the second showing a mere inconvenience who is best put to use as a weapon in a bitter divorce.

Other important realists texts such as Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* exemplify both the realist novel’s ‘ethic’ of accurate portrayals of what is ‘real’, both on the individual and societal level, and that deeper layer of depicting all that lies beneath the concrete and the readily seen and understood. When Emma Bovary attends the theatre, the narrator takes care to note that she has added a flounce to the hem of her gown:

Then addressing himself to Emma, who was wearing a blue silk gown with four flounces, [the druggist remarked] ‘You are as lovely as a Venus. You'll cut a figure at Rouen’ (204)[[15]](#footnote-15).

This brief detail economically evokes the clothing and manners of the era, the position and aspirations of Emma (note the poignancy of its being merely Rouen, and not Paris, for which her new gown makes her fit), and the protagonist’s interior world: the reader senses Emma’s excitement at attending the provincial theatre, and the possibilities beyond it; and suspects also her inevitable disappointment. In *Keywords[[16]](#footnote-16)*, Raymond Williams emphasises the quality of the ‘real’ as demonstrating not simply what is apparent by the evidence of our own eyes, but rather all that lies beneath, and is signified by, that evidence: ‘There was an important sense of real as contrasted not with imaginary but with apparent: not only in theological arguments about the ‘real presence’ of Christ in the materials of communion, but also in wider arguments about the true or fundamental quality of some thing or situation – the *real* thing, the *reality* of something. This use is still very common, if often not noticed as such, in phrases like “refusing to face reality”’ (258).

Realism in its first sense is not restricted to ordinary events, or to a kind of historian’s attempt to record society as it (mostly) ‘really’ is. Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* makes what George Levine[[17]](#footnote-17) terms ‘a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth telling and extending the limits of human sympathy’ (8) to arouse an educated pity in the reader, through the detailed evocation of a temporal and physical place, though the subject matter is far from domestic, and tends towards the horrific:

At last they found means to carry their corn to a windmill near Woodford, where they had it ground; and afterwards the Biscuit-baker made a hearth so hollow and dry that he could bake the biscuits tolerably well; and thus they came into a condition to live without any assistance or supplies from the towns; and it was well they did, for…about 120 were said to have died in the villages near them, which was a terrible thing to happen (140)[[18]](#footnote-18).

Here the barest details of domestic life are juxtaposed against the terror of the plague; the effect is that the former informs the latter, and makes it both ‘real’ and more readily and comfortably accommodated in the mind. This effect is in marked contrast to the desired effects of the Gothic, which rather than constraining the terrible to make it more readily comprehensible imbues even ordinary artefacts with a mystery that rouses in the reader a growing sensation of horror and unease:

The room was barely furnished with odd things, which seemed never to have been used; the furniture was something the same style as that in the south rooms, and was covered with dust. I looked for the key, but it was not in the lock, and I could not find it anywhere. The only thing I found was a great heap of gold in one corner – gold of all kinds, Roman, and British, and Austrian, and Hungarian, and Greek and Turkish money, covered with a film of dust, as though it had laid long in the ground. None of it that I noticed was less than three hundred years old. There were also chains and ornaments, some jewelled, but all of them old and stained…(62)[[19]](#footnote-19)

Here the same use of detailed, attentive depictions of small objects with which the narrative ‘place’ is populated achieves a markedly different effect: where Defoe’s device uses unremarkable objects to bring an unimaginable horror gently within the limits of his reader’s comprehension, Stoker begins to signal a horror that is all the more threatening because it is just out of reach. The key is lost, and the reader fears confinement; the treasures are old and stained, and the reader conjures an ancient thief with a Europe-wide reach; the jewels are stained, and the reader suspects blood. Nothing is confirmed, and everything is implied, and all the worse for it. This effect – of the emotions of both reader and character being more exercised than the understanding/intellect – is explicitly referred to by Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, when the tormented Monçada cries ‘*Emotions are my events’* (227)[[20]](#footnote-20): in the Gothic, depictions of place, whether signified by descriptions of the built environment or the objects within them, are intended not to instruct or merely to provide a focus for the events taking place, but to inflate and provoke emotions.

Naturally this does not suggest that realist fiction has no interest in the interior world of its characters, or in profoundly affecting its reader: it seeks not only to achieve a ‘real’ depiction of the concrete objects that populate the world the narrative seeks to construct or recreate, but of the psychological processes and changes experienced by its characters. In his 1899 lecture to the Dublin Literary and Historical Society, James Joyce argued that ‘the artist has no interest in making his work religious, moral, beautiful or ideal; he wants only to make it truthful to fundamental laws’ (Booth 54)[[21]](#footnote-21). Those ‘fundamental laws’ govern the interior as well as the exterior: Flaubert’s realist ‘ethic’ is not restricted to the accuracy with which he numbers the flounces on Emma Bovary’s evening dress, but extends to the ‘truthful’ examination of a passionate woman’s disenchantment with French provincial life.

Gothic fiction, with its essential portrayals of the most extreme human behaviour alongside uncanny or outright supernatural events, might at a casual reading appear incompatible with the realist ‘ethic’, and with the notion of truthfulness to fundamental laws. Yet if, as James Joyce avers, the chief pursuit of the novelist is that the narrative should remain ‘truthful to fundamental laws’, it is possible to examine the use of Gothic conventions as means not merely to provoke sensations of pleasurable terror in the reader, but to explore ‘truthfully’ the consciousness of its characters. The calamitous arrival of the giant plumed helmet at the opening of *Otranto* defies laws of physics, gravity and probability, it is true; but Matilda’s behaviour is ‘truthfully’ that of a young daughter fearing for her mother’s life: ‘Matilda, who doted on her mother, smothered her own grief and amazement, and thought nothing of assisting and comforting her afflicted parent’ (Walpole 17). At this point the two genres are not mutually exclusive: their boundaries can be seen to overlap.

The novels of Iris Murdoch are especially instructive in this respect. As Bran Nicol observes in *The Retrospective Fiction*, ‘Her novels are difficult to place in any particular category (realism, comedy of manners, prose romance, metaphysical thriller, ‘late modernism’), seeming to constitute one all by themselves’ (1)[[22]](#footnote-22). It is noteworthy that among the genres Nicol lists, the Gothic is absent. Indeed, just as Walpole set his novel within the limits of a genre (albeit one which he had himself defined), Murdoch explicitly considered herself a realist writer:

The novel, she has repeatedly insisted, *has a duty to portray the world as it is*, and to strive to tell the truth about it, chiefly by portraying realistic characters not subordinate to the demands of plot or to the ideas which support it (Nicol 3).

The emphasis above is mine, indicating the importance of the term ‘duty’ here: it suggests again the sense that to write within the realist genre is to adopt an ethical commitment to truthful representations of life, both external and interior. And indeed Murdoch deploys painstaking details of the fabric of her realist fictional worlds, the better to ‘portray the world as it is’. In *A Word Child,* Hilary Burde’s London is so accurately depicted the novel might almost be used as a tourist’s travel guide:

My ‘home’ was a small mean nasty flat in Bayswater, in a big square red-brick block in a cul-de-sac. Outside the cul-de-sac was a busy noisy street, beyond that street were some modest dingy shops, beyond the shops was Bayswater tube station (District Line and Inner Circle), beyond that was Queensway tube station (Central Line), beyond that was Bayswater Road, and beyond that was, thank God, the park… (1)[[23]](#footnote-23)

Here, the ‘dutiful’ descriptions of the physical environment create a realist portrait of far more than the bricks and mortar of the Underground stations. The ‘small mean nasty flat’ conjures the disappointed middle-class Civil Servant of whom better things might have been expected; the noisy street and the modest dingy shops evoke the hustle and commerce of the capital; the colloquial use of ‘tube’ for ‘Underground’ and the listed stations pin down the setting to one particular city with its particular modes of speech; and that relief at the park (‘thank God…’) suggests the twentieth-century Londoner’s ennui and romantic attachment to intimations of a more pastoral existence. Yet within pages Murdoch revisits the same ground, but reinvents it with a distinctly Gothic aesthetic, suggesting the development (or deterioration) of Burde’s state of mind:

The stations, each unique, the sinister brightness of Charing Cross, the mysterious gloom of Regent’s Park, the dereliction of Mornington Crescent, the futuristic melancholy of Moorgate, the monumental ironwork of Liverpool Street…(38).

The Gothic is so familiar and resonant, its reach extending beyond literature to graphic novels and films (such as Frank Miller’s noir series *Sin City*[[24]](#footnote-24), or Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*[[25]](#footnote-25), both of which exploit the sense of place to provoke and sustain suspense and terror in the reader/viewer). Gothic motifs in fiction provoke certain expectations in the reader. The ‘mysterious gloom’, ‘sinister brightness’ and ‘monumental ironwork’ here function much as the stained relics discovered by Harker as he explores Dracula’s castle: they resonate, preparing the reader for a particular kind of narrative. Jung cites the importance of symbols to comprehending the incomprehensible:

Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend…(4).[[26]](#footnote-26)

Here lies the role of the Gothic sense of place, both in key Gothic texts and in realist fiction: in signifying the ‘other’ – those times and places unconstrained by the familiar ordered world of the everyday - it permits the exploration of the extreme and unfettered, whether madness or transgression, or that which sits just beyond comprehension.

**CHAPTER ONE: THE MAD-HOUSE**

**1: *Melmoth the Wanderer***

If one were to assemble a bookshelf bearing the key English Gothic texts, Walpole’s institutionary ‘Gothic Tale’ and Charles Robert Maturin’s 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* would perhaps be best placed to serve as book-ends. Between these, the works of Anne Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Mary Shelley would sit alongside less important or influential texts including *Zastrozzi*, the poet Shelley’s juvenile attempt at the Gothic, and Austen’s parody *Northanger Abbey*. Melmoth is often cited as perhaps the last of the true Gothic novels, a ‘conscious inheritor’ of Lewis and Radcliffe, but ‘seeking to outdo them in dark extravagance’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus David Punter[[28]](#footnote-28) observes:

It is generally agreed that the period of the ‘classic’ Gothic novel, narrowly defined as an historical genre, came to an end early in the nineteenth century. The exact moment is variously identified as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818 or Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820. (26)

In correspondence with the novelist Walter Scott, whose cautious pleasure in the Gothic is recorded in his review of *Otranto* (he considered it ‘happily detailed’, and its conclusion ‘grand, tragical and affecting’ (Walpole 160), Maturin declares that he wishes to ‘out-Herod Herod’ (Sage x). It certainly would have been hardly a stretch to out-Walpole Walpole, whose excesses of supernatural violence are comparatively modest, and restricted, as Marshall Brown[[29]](#footnote-29) dryly observes in *The Gothic Text*, to little more than ‘a mild nosebleed’

(20). However, Maturin’s choice of metaphor is telling: though himself a cleric, he identifies perhaps the greatest of the sins (not merely infanticide, but attempted deicide), and gleefully threatens to exceed it. In doing so, he acknowledges the conventionally horrified or perturbed responses to the Gothic, and its perilous nearness to obscenity and blasphemy.

*Melmoth the Wanderer* pieces together, through a complex network of oral and written narrative fragments, the tale of a quasi-supernatural being who, having entered a (never fully detailed) Faustian[[30]](#footnote-30) pact with the Devil, long outlives his threescore years and ten and travels the world seeking out men and women at the lowest extremities of human experience in the hope they will exchange their torments for his. As a ‘conscious inheritor’ of Radcliffe and Lewis, Maturin left scarcely a Gothic device or protocol unused, not least in s depictions of architecture and the built environment. Botting, for example, comments on the novel’s ‘Generic strangeness, its belated use of characteristically eighteenth-century Gothic machinery alongside agonised outcasts and psychological horrors … encountered among ruined churches, in stormy and desolate landscapes and in the subterranean passages, burial vaults and prisons of Catholic monasteries’ (Botting 106). Within this ‘characteristically Gothic machinery’ and sublimely Gothic sense of place, Maturin places monks both wicked and evil, men driven insane, and virgins and innocents at the point of seduction and corruption. There is transgression and attempts at redemption, filial, fraternal and paternal betrayal, and events that range from the eerie to the outright supernatural. Crucially, ‘*emotions are its events’*,[[31]](#footnote-31) and the effects of the narrative are felt by the reader as much as by the tormented agents[[32]](#footnote-32) in the text, even to the extent of a kind of madness, as this chapter will later explore. The reader, enticed into sharing the horrors of the agents, in effect reaches the same ‘place’ as that in which the text operates.

For all its knowing use of the Gothic, *Melmoth* nonetheless exemplifies the limitless flexibility and capacity of the Gothic genre: it fulfils (and, as Maturin desired, exceeds) the demands of the genre and the expectations of its reader, but nonetheless functions separately and effectively as a satire and polemic, and even in parts as a work of historical social realism. Where Walpole’s broadly medieval setting for Otranto’s Castle lends credence (through distance) to an unlikely and marvellous tale, Maturin does not shy away from accurate representations of the ‘places’ - both concrete and abstract - through which his narrative moves. That much of the action is set in Spain[[33]](#footnote-33) – furthermore, a Spain in which seventeenth century Madrileño society is carefully detailed, with its ‘wealthy citizens, conscious of their opulence and high descent’ and ‘square built, lumbering carriages’ (367) - is not incidental, but crucial to the text: it is the Spain in which the Inquisition, as devilish as the Wanderer himself, is the highest authority. The novel has as much in common with James Hogg’s 1824 *Private Confessions and Memoirs of a Justified Sinner* as with Lewis’ T*he Monk*: where Hogg savagely satirises the antinomians whose extreme Calvinism leads them to believe ‘every one of [their] actions justified by God, and instead of having strings of conscience for these, [take] great pride in them’[[34]](#footnote-34), Maturin satirises and castigates the Catholic church. Where Lewis satisfies himself with portrayals of depravity that in their departure from holiness are so extreme – and even absurd - they do not come sufficiently close to the bone to threaten or undermine the Church, Maturin permits his clerics lengthy speeches of self-righteous self-justification, setting up an ironic distance between their protestations (‘Every indignity I suffer I make a sacrifice to Heaven; it will qualify me to be an intercessor for my traducer with God’ [139]) and their actions of cruelty and self-interest. Further, he satirises the very form he exploits, with repeated sly references to romantic novels that seduce the incredulous English reader: ‘Romances have made your country, Sir, familiar with tales of subterranean passages, and supernatural horrors… ‘(212).

Maturin’s use of place gives both liberty and credence to the interlinked and incredible tales that comprise *Melmoth*: the detail with which he invests the prisons of the Inquisition and the convent vaults, and the rituals of church and convent life, appear to have some historical basis and assist the reader in suspending disbelief. When the tormented monk Monçada speaks of bells chiming for matins and vespers, the refectory and cell, the table, chair, missal and rosary that are his few possessions (Maturin 166-168), it is not the vague sketching of some generally ‘other’ place, but rather has a specificity that in its detail renders the most extraordinary acts of betrayal and depravity credible. As Umberto Eco notes:

The basic rule in dealing with a work of fiction is that the reader must tacitly accept a fictional agreement, which Coleridge called ‘the suspension of disbelief.’ The reader has to know that what is being narrated is an imaginary story, but he must not therefore believe that the writer is telling lies. According to John Searle, the author simply pretends to be telling the truth. We accept the fictional agreement and we pretend that what is narrated has really taken place (Eco 75).[[35]](#footnote-35)

In the Gothic, the function of the narrative's location is not merely to achieve that willing suspension of disbelief, but simultaneously both to permit and deny acts of savagery and barbarism (though the first readers of *The Castle of Otranto* were of course not required to ‘pretend’ to believe what they read, even though it was published in the guise of a true account discovered in a library, and prefaced by a note citing the extreme accuracy of the castle’s geography as evidence of its veracity [Walpole 5]).

Nevertheless, the Gothic simultaneously affirms and challenges the cultural, moral and social insecurities of its readers. Botting notes:

The centrality of usurpation, intrigue, betrayal and murder to Gothic plots appeared to celebrate human criminal behaviour, violent executions of selfish ambition and voracious passion and licentious enactments of carnal desire….[yet] Gothic novels frequently adopt [a] cautionary strategy, warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form (6-7).

In *Melmoth*, the sense of place is of crucial importance to the success of the narrative for relatively pragmatic reasons. Firstly, because without the distinct settings in which each of the intricately linked and embedded tales take place the reader would be wholly at a loss within so complex a narrative; and secondly, because the Wanderer's supernatural ability to pass across oceans and through bolted doors is a necessary device to a full understanding of his power: there is no boundary, whether literal or moral, which he cannot cross.

The novel opens with a device so recognisably Gothic – certainly to the reader with a retrospective view of the Gothic canon - that its familiarity almost reassures: John Melmoth, vulnerable in his youth and innocence, arrives at the family seat in County Wicklow, his heart ‘[growing] heavier every minute’ (Maturin 10) despite the beauty of the countryside. Recollections of his past experience of his miserly uncle and the decaying Melmoth seat 'builds' the sense of place in the reader's consciousness long before his arrival at his uncle's gate and our first view of the wretched house and grounds. In their essay on ‘Gothic Possibilities’, Holland and Sherman explore in detail the ways in which the familiarity and resonance of the Gothic ‘formula’ permits the reader (or ‘literant’) actively to partake in the narrative, by bringing a set of expectations to the text, particularly in respect of the sense of place:

The castle admits a variety of our projections. In particular, because it presents villains and dangers in an archaic language and *mise-en-scène*, it fits childish perceptions of adult threats. The castle is a nighttime house – it admits all we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening and unknown…at the same time, the gothic novel usually says that the castle contains some family secret, so that the castle can also become the core for fantasies based on a childish desire that adulthood be an exactly defined secret that one can possess[[36]](#footnote-36) (282).

William Empson, in his essay ‘The Structure of Complex Words[[37]](#footnote-37)’, addresses the notion that words come laden with connotations, that is, ‘the ideas which are thought to go with [them] without being part of the definition.’ He goes on, ‘We do not mean that it was a logical consequence, necessarily, but that it was somehow present; it is implied by the sort of way the word has been used on past occasions, and the way the present occasion recalls them’ (234). The Gothic is a genre especially rich in the kind of connotative words and images that Empson describes. The reader responds with pleasurably predicable unease to (for example) a castle viewed on a distant incline - it is highly unlikely to be brightly-lit and the centre of calm family life - and later Gothic narratives can be said to rely on that pleasing unease. J. M. S. Tomkins goes further, suggesting that the heavily allusive quality of the Gothic sense of place demands active participation on the part of the reader: ‘As a rule [novelists] provided the castle and left the rest to the reader’ (266).

The young Melmoth’s memory of the ‘meagre household’ and his uncle ‘picking the bones of lean mutton out of his mess of broth’, together with his recollection of his dying father's prayer that God would ‘look on [his] desolate state’ (10 & 11), culminates in his arrival at ‘what had once been a gate.’ The country house is in a state of ruinous decay, which both depicts the ‘real’ colonised Ireland (suffering, in Maturin’s lifetime, extremes of poverty), and satisfies the Gothic demand for places suggestive of ruin and anxiety. Everywhere are signs that ‘penury had been aggravated and sharpened into downright misery’ (11). This shift from castle to a broadly domestic setting is significant: ‘as both building and family line, it [becomes] the site where fears and anxieties return *in the present’* (Botting 3, emphasis mine). It evokes the Gothic tensions of fractured or dysfunctional family models, which in Walpole's institutionary novel are explored to the point of a final symbolic and literal collapse of the novel’s primary spatial focus:

With the death of Matilda, there is a clap of thunder and the walls of the castle collapse, suggesting the final disintegration of Manfred's line (Punter 180).

Typically of Maturin’s ability to deploy satire and polemic within the confines of the Gothic, the depiction of the Melmoth family seat, with its near-starving attendants, registers an important feature of Irish social and political life, and functions as an indictment of Irish poverty. It recalls Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*, with its witty but biting portrayal of English landlords mismanaging their Irish estates[[38]](#footnote-38).

The house John Melmoth anxiously enters is no longer the locus of domestic gatherings, with familiar ordered rituals of meals and pastimes, but has taken on the aspect of an institution. The dying uncle is attended by various ill-assorted women depicted as no more than barbarous incoherent hags, in the throes of ‘loud, wild and desperate grief’ (16). Their behaviour is erratic, unconstrained by manners or morals: they wring their hands and howl, gathering and scattering with an irrational disorder that evokes nothing so much as bewildered farmyard animals. They are the ‘credulous and terrified dupes’ (13) of the village's 'wise woman', detained not by force but by their own superstition and helpless avarice. The Irish-born Maturin satirises the tendency of the English to consider his own countrymen less than wholly civilised: ‘we shall spare the English reader the torture of reciting [their names] (as a proof of our lenity, adding the last only, Cotchleen O'Mulligan)’ (16)[[39]](#footnote-39). With the boundaries of the ordered family home broken both literally and figuratively, the decaying house suggests not merely the ruination of family structures and natural bonds of affection, but the dismantling of reasoned and structured modes of thought. This notion sits within a general exploration within the Gothic of the tenuousness of reason, and its dependence on familiar structures, as Marshall Brown notes in *The Gothic Text*:

What would be a left of a person, these novels ask, if all human society were stripped away, all customary perception, all the expected regulatory of cause and effect? They ask, in other words, what are people themselves, when deprived of all the external supports that condition ordinary experience? What resources, if any, does the mind retain in isolation? (12)

From this implied mad-house Maturin moves to the mad-house proper, with the tale of the Englishman Stanton driven to his wits' end by the spectre of the Wanderer. When we first encounter Stanton he is undertaking a tour of the ruins of Valencia, and Maturin makes adept use of architectural detail to provide a striking contrast between the Classical ruins, with their suggestions of lives of pleasure, and the Moorish keep, a structure once devoted to violence and warfare:

The difference between the architecture of the Roman and Moorish ruins struck him. Among the former are the remains of a theatre, and something like a public place; the latter present only the remains of a fortress, embattled, castellated and fortified from top to bottom, - not a loop-hole for pleasure to get in by, - the loop-holes were only for arrows; all denoted military power and a despotic subjugation *a l'outrance* (33).

However, the familiar Orientalist contrast of the Classical against the barbarous is not as straightforward as it might seem at first glance: Maturin describes the Roman ruins as being the work of savages, ‘yet they were wonderful savages for their time’ (33). The Enlightenment perception of the Classical age as having been the repository of all that was civilised is inverted (they were mere savages), and inverted again (and yet ‘wonderful savages’). This discomfiting equivocation signifies one of Maturin's most notable devices, that of persistently setting up expectations in both character and reader that are later confounded (the despised parricide monk who nonetheless appears to risk is own life to assist Moncada's escape, but ultimately proves treacherous, is a particularly striking example)

Note also the brief transfer to the present tense: its purpose is to bring the sense of place into the reader's *own world*, so that he is not as removed from it as from Otranto's Castle, which is reassuringly 'other' in its distance. Furthermore, it suggests that since the ruins persist, and are available to the reader now as they were to Stanton then, the reader can potentially partake in Stanton's response to them. This explicitly demonstrates that quality of 'the sublime' which is among the desired effects of the Gothic:

All was forgot in contemplating the glorious and awful scenery before him. - light struggling with darkness, - and darkness menacing a light still more terrible, and announcing its menace in the blue and livid mass of cloud that hovered like a destroying angel...he stood appalled...(Maturin 34).

Edmond Burke, in his essay on 'The Sublime and the Beautiful', draws a clear distinction between responses to the merely beautiful, which evoke a desire to observe and cherish, and responses to the 'terrible' which Maturin seems to play on here:

Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime;* that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[[40]](#footnote-40)

There is here an intimation of a kind of madness – not the full loss of reason, but of the mind being pushed to the extreme, and finding itself helpless in the face of outside agencies and their effects. Mieke Bal's assertion that it is not merely characters that can effect change within the story is relevant here:

Actors are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To act is defined here as to cause or to experience an event (Bal 5)[[41]](#footnote-41).

In *Melmoth*, the sense of place is as much an 'agent' as the Wanderer himself. Indeed, Maturin's language invests both the ruins and the natural phenomenon of the sunset with qualities of the human/superhuman: the cloud hovers like 'a destroying angel', and the Roman amphitheatre is not merely a ruin but a corpse, with a 'huge skeleton' showing against the sky (33). The power of the physical context to alter a character's state of mind is explicitly rendered: here are intimations of supernatural agents against which no mere human could be expected to stand, and of whole empires of civilisation reduced to nothing more than a decaying body. Botting further illuminates this idea of the sublime, by emphasising its effect on the mind as being quite distinct from a reasoned response to beauty:

While beauty could be contained within the individual's gaze or comprehension, sublimity presented an excess *which could not be processed by a rational mind*. This excess, which confronted the individual subject with the thought of its own extinction, derived from emotions which, Burke argued, pertained to self-preservation and produced a frisson of delight and horror, tranquillity and terror (39, emphasis mine).

It is thus possible to conceive of the response to the sublime as being a kind of unreason, since it stems from a primal unconscious response: to experience the sublime is to experience an involuntary alteration to 'rational' modes of thought and an expansion of the mind’s normal limitations of understanding.

Stanton's encounter with the ruins at sunset, and his fanciful sensation of being overlooked by a kind of avenging angel, suggests that his is a malleable and impressionable consciousness. It is the first intimation that he may be prey to more profound disorders of the mind, an intimation ultimately fulfilled by his eventual imprisonment in a London mad-house. His confinement is precipitated by a first brief encounter with Melmoth, who promises ‘I never desert my friends in misfortune. *When they are plunged in the lowest abyss of human calamity*, they are sure to be visited by me’ (50). This threatening promise proves the source of Stanton's undoing: his fate is inescapable, suggestive of the Furies of Greek tragic myth – having been warned of his destiny, that warning and the stranger who delivered it become an *idee fixe*, and unscrupulous acquaintances arrange for his detainment in an asylum. With terrible logic, the prophecy is fulfilled *because it has been delivered*. At the doors of the asylum the narrative colludes with the reader at Stanton's expense: we are in effect in private dialogue with Maturin, understanding - as Stanton does not - that he is on the brink of incarceration. Preoccupied with reading a manuscript, the first lines of which strike Stanton as 'indicating insanity in the writer’ (52) (and here we might suspect Maturin of wryly referencing his own device of compiling the novel’s complex narrative through fragments which are no less fanciful than the manuscript which diverts Stanton), he fails to notice its reference to confiscated scissors, and to iron doors and gratings (53). The reader’s understanding and expectation 'builds' the asylum before the character has quite entered it, with that anticipatory sense of place first evoked as John Melmoth approached his uncle’s house we have no doubt that Stanton is in the mad-house. When realisation strikes he cries out for help, and his voice is 'echoed in a moment by many others, but in tones so wild and discordant, that he desisted in involuntary terror’ (53). That 'echo' in effect sketches the stone floor and walls of Stanton's prison, and the 'many others' adding their voices to his serve to multiply that space. Presented with these ‘clues’, the reader can deduce a large and bare environment in which many are confined, in a state of anxiety. Again, it is possible to conceive of a dialogue between the unconscious experience of the reader, and that of the writer: stirred to unease by the depiction of a man confined and consigned to madness, caught in baroque narrative of tale within tale, it is perhaps possible to engage with Maturin’s own anxieties, trapped as he was in genteel clerical poverty.

Here Stanton encounters madness of quite distinct and separate kinds, which benefit from comparison with Michel Foucault's categorisations in *Madness and Civilisation*. The first kind, of 'madness by romantic identification', suggests an inability to distinguish effectively between art and reality:

The chimeras are transmitted from author to reader, but what was fantasy on one side becomes hallucination on the other; the writer's stratagem is quite naively accepted as an image of reality...just under the surface lies an enormous anxiety concerning the relationships, in a work of art, between the real and the imaginary, and perhaps also concerning the confused communication between fantastic invention and the fascinations of delirium[[42]](#footnote-42) (29).

Though this by no means fully accounts for Stanton's madness, it places the Wanderer in the position of storyteller (which he later explicitly fulfils, in relating the lovers' tale to Immalee's father): at the point at which Melmoth informs the Englishman of his fate, it has not yet happened and is in effect no more than a fantasy. Transferred to Stanton's consciousness, it becomes hallucinatory, so that when Melmoth enters his asylum cell the reader must pause to consider whether he is merely suffering 'the fascinations of delirium':

Between him and the light stood the figure of Melmoth, just as he had seen him from the first; the figure was the same; the expression of the face was the same, - cold, stony, and rigid; the eyes, with their infernal lustre, were still the same (Maturin 60, emphasis mine).

Crucially, there has been no development or alteration in Melmoth's appearance since his first encounter with Stanton - there is no additional information which might suggest that the apparition is anything more than a memory made 'solid'. Maturin's use of the mad-house as the setting for this encounter plays with the reader's judgement of whether Melmoth is merely a delusion – certainly the inclination is to align with Stanton's perception, but he is after all the inmate of an asylum, and delusions are to be expected.

The second and third kinds of madness outlined by Foucault are those of 'the madness of vain presumption’ (29) and 'the madness of just punishment’ (30). The second suggests an individual's narcissistic over-estimation of their own powers and achievements, like Stanton's Puritan asylum-neighbour, who, though merely a weaver, ‘imagined himself preaching in a conventicle with distinguished success’ (Maturin 55). The third suggests an insanity derived from an individual's own guilt overwhelming their reason: their ‘cries speak for their conscience’ (29). Foucault's fourth kind of madness is that of 'desperate passion':

Love disappointed in its excess, and especially love deceived by the fatality of death, has no other recourse but madness. As long as there was an object, mad love was more love than madness; left to itself, it pursues itself in the void of delirium (30).

The occupant of Stanton's mad-house who best exemplifies this last type of insanity is also the individual who most arouses pity in both Stanton and the reader – and yet also who most directly challenges perceptions of what it is to be truly mad. Baldly described as 'a maniac', she is the woman whose 'powerfully horrible' cries are heard each Saturday, as she descends into her 'weekly festival of insanity’ (58). Having lost husband and children in the Great Fire of 1666, she revisits the scene each week in a delirium of despair and grief; a delirium of love 'left to itself', with no physical object remaining to which her passion can be rationally directed. Maturin lends particular pathos to her plight by conjuring within the mad-house the place where the maniac's family met their tragedy. The distance between narrator and character is removed, so that the reader is directly exposed to her vision of a burning roof:

“...water, one drop of water for my youngest – he is but an infant – for my youngest, and let me burn!” She paused in horrid silence, to watch the fall of a blazing rafter which was about to shatter the staircase where she stood.- “The roof has fallen on my head!” she exclaimed (59).

Maturin does not write, ‘She paused in horrid silence, *believing herself to be watching* the fall of a blazing rafter’, but rather that she simply paused to watch it. The effect of this solid evocation of another place within the context of the mad-house is twofold: firstly, the reader's sympathy and terror are more directly engaged, since the peril appears as genuine to them as it does to the maniac; and secondly, we are invited to compare this delusion with Melmoth's appearance in Stanton's cell. Both are presented without 'distance': the reader has access to the consciousness of the character with no direct or implied comment from the narrator as to the reasonableness of their perceptions. At the same time, it should be noted that the reader here is plunging more deeply into a series of places within places, rather like a narrative matryoshka doll: the burning house is set within the mad-house, described on a manuscript being read by John Melmoth who sits in uncle's closet, which is part of the decaying shell of the family home. The effect on the reader of such narrative and spatial complexity will be explored later in this chapter.

The 'maniac' woman provides a further example of Maturin's playfulness with regard to the binary of reason/unreason that is a feature of the Gothic. No other of Stanton's asylum-mates are so explicitly described as mere 'maniacs', though their behaviour is no less irrational, and yet her malady invites an interrogation of what it is to be mad: what, after all, would be the 'rational' response to so great a tragedy? Maturin permits himself authorial intrusion sufficient to challenge the reader, drawing a clear distinction between the woman's 'ravings' and those of the others:

“But I have lost all my children – all!” It was remarkable, that when this sufferer began to rave, all the others became silent. The cry of nature hushed every other cry, - she was the only patient in the house who was not mad from politics, religion or ebriety (59).

The suggestion is plain: what is natural may not always be reasonable, and what is civilised may perhaps be barbarous. The conventional Gothic binaries of transgression/goodness, beauty/terror and madness/reason are interrogated and dismantled: had the woman conquered her grief, as 'civilised' manners may have demanded, would it not have been more irrational than her 'cry of nature'? That she is a woman is not incidental. This evokes Classical perceptions of the female mind as being more prone to disorder than the male, 'hysteria' having been 'attributed by Hippocrates to the movement of the womb (*hystera*) from its normal anatomical site into other parts of the body[[43]](#footnote-43)’. The woman's plight may be understood almost as an illustration of the notion of hysteria: her womb and its product having been removed from their normal site in the corpus of her physical world, they have instead moved into her consciousness. Here Maturin against demonstrates the extent to which he does not merely 'inherit' the Gothic, but both deepens and modifies it to permit penetrating examinations of the human psyche.

Foucault traces the history of shifting perceptions of madness and sanity, which he argues were to a certain extent defined according to the boundaries of an individual's cultural, social and religious orthodoxy. As Foucault notes, in the Middle Ages and the centuries following, the fool or simpleton was prized as having privileged access to a kind of wisdom denied the reasoned mind. Foucault says ‘He is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands centre stage as the guardian of truth’ (14). His natural setting was as likely to be a king's court as a cell, though all that his state was not to be envied: King Lear may have prized his Fool, but still he implored 'O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! I would not be mad[[44]](#footnote-44)’ (I.v.215). It is plain that here the king is thinking not of madness as a state of exhilarating freedom from the constraints of ordinary modes of thought, but as an absence of reason – ‘Keep me in temper, I would not be mad (I.v.215).’ This serves to demonstrate the distinction between madness as folly, which might be evidenced either by whimsical, wise asides (‘Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hast been wise’ (I.v.215), and madness as unreason, which suggests an absence or regression of the rational mind.

By the Enlightenment, the madman was to be policed and pitied, quarantined from the civilised as a result of what Foucault calls ‘The Great Confinement’ (45). It is thus clear that madness exists in relation – indeed in opposition - to contextual perceptions of what it is to be sane or civilised, a notion explored in *Melmoth*'s tale of Immalee, who exhibits what we may term a fifth kind of madness – that of the uncivilised, untutored 'natural' mind, which does not conform to accepted patterns of thought and being.

Immalee's tale – read by the escaped monk Moncada in a coded manuscript kept by Adonijah the Jew - inverts the Gothic trope of the ruined abbey or castle. It is set an island in the Indian Ocean[[45]](#footnote-45) where ‘the tamarind, the cocoa, and the palm-tree shed their blossoms, and exhaled their odours, and waved their leaves’ (307). It evokes an Eden, but nonetheless it is plainly a post-Lapsarian garden, with evidence of a disintegrated civilisation beneath the tamarind and palm. Rather than the familiar Gothic architecture of convent or castle, the reader is presented with the ruins of a Hindu temple, its pagoda 'burned to ashes' by lightning. These 'tropical-Gothic' remnants are 'haunted' by a 'goddess milder than Seeva', a 'female figure of supernatural loveliness' who 'glides and disappears amid the foliage which so luxuriantly overshadowed the rocks’ (304). Her image is worshipped by the region's inhabitants in a series of rituals both beautiful and terrible: their lamp-lit canoes appear 'like shooting stars of the deep', and yet their worship is '[rendered] effectual by striking sharp reeds into their arms, and tinging every bead with blood as they [speak]’ (304). The 'goddess' is no supernatural being, however, but the child of a Spaniard, abandoned as a baby on the isle and brought up with no human interaction in a (literally and figuratively) naked Edenic state. Her psyche has developed with no external influence, whether civilised or barbarous:

She could not be conscious of fear, for nothing of that world in which she lived had ever borne a hostile appearance to her. The sun and shade – the flowers and foliage – the tamarinds and figs that prolonged her delightful existence – the water she drank, wondering at the beautiful being who seemed to drink whenever she did – the peacocks, who spread out their rich and radiant plumage the moment they beheld her – and the loxia, who perched on her shoulder and hand as she walked, and answered her sweet voice with imitative chirpings – all these were her friends, and she knew none but these (311).

It is worth noting that her innocence stands in direct contradiction to the biblical doctrine of Original Sin - she may *appear* to inhabit an Eden, but she is (or ought to be) no more immune from the consequences of the Fall than the parents with whom she is later reunited.

Immalee’s behaviour is in its essence delusory and idiotic, and in any ‘civilised’ society would be marked out for pity or confinement: she cannot distinguish between another being and her own reflection, and she converses with animals as though they were her own species. Her understanding is limited to emotions which she has directly experienced herself: ‘Pain she had never felt – of death she had no idea – how, then, could she become acquainted with fear?’ (302). She weeps over lightning-blasted trees, having no conception of their being less sentient than she, while rare appearances of humans from neighbouring islands appear to ‘grow amid the beautiful flowers’;. The natural world which is her setting is the emblem of her innocence and 'uncivilised' existence. Her ‘unreason’ does not sit within the kinds of madness identified by Foucault, which either grant access to hidden wisdom or are to be shunned and put as literally outside the city walls as they are figuratively beyond the boundary, because it does not satisfactorily exist within the reason/unreason binary. She is neither rational nor irrational, but sits outside either state – she is as it were 'arational'. Maturin’s depiction of her untutored state, and of a mind developed without the external influences of society, religion or education, recalls the Enlightenment fascination with *l’enfant sauvage*. This fascination found a ready object in Victor of Aveyron, a feral boy discovered in France in 1797 and, as Harlan Lane records in *The Wild Boy of Aveyron[[46]](#footnote-46)*, ‘the wild boy was to help answer the central question of the Enlightenment: what is the nature of man?’ (Lane 19).

Since the Wanderer seeks to strike a bargain with those at their furthest extremities of suffering, his lighting on Immalee as a victim is problematic from the first – not least since the novel suggests that (as with Stanton) Melmoth's victims are themselves complicit in their downfall, if only by virtue of being part of a larger evil. Punter explains that ‘Melmoth is not a *principle* of evil in himself but rather an agent and indeed a product of the perennial evil of others; were it not for this greater evil he would have no hoped-for victims to whom to offer his bargain’ (Punter 206). Since Immalee sits outside the notion of evil, if she is to be of value to Melmoth he must first bring her out of her 'arational' state, in a clear evocation of Satan’s tempting of Eve. Her intellect is sharp as a 'weapon', but is in its innocence 'ill-poised'. Nonetheless it baffles and discomfits Melmoth 'more than if he had been compelled to encounter half the wranglers of the European academies of the day’ (318). In tutoring her out of her innocent barbarism and into civilisation, Melmoth shows her places beyond her Edenic home by the use of a semi-supernatural telescope. The faiths and civilisations beyond Immalee's comprehension are symbolised by their buildings, in a logical extension of the Gothic's use of place to signify ruination and forbidden behaviours:

There is the black pagoda of the Juggernaut, that enormous building on which your eye is first fixed. Behind it stands a Turkish mosque … at a small distance you may see a low building with a trident on its summit – that is the temple of the Maga-deva...(324)

Melmoth is explicit in his purpose: ‘Those buildings … are indicative of the various modes of thinking of those who frequent them. If it is into their thoughts you wish to look, you must see them expressed by their actions’ (327). The reader is placed in some difficulty: there is nothing deceitful in the Wanderer's words – indeed they recall the Biblical precept that ‘by their fruits ye shall know them’ (Matt. 7:16) - and yet his purpose is chillingly clear. He seeks to destroy Immalee's unreasoned innocence by exposing her to the 'madness' and brutality *of civilisation*, and of the social and religious structures that defy natural impulse. Maturin's prose here turns to horror, which Botting describes as 'the moment of the negative sublime.’ This is a moment of ‘freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject. As with the Burkean sublime, horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended’ (75). Maturin offers the following depiction of Hindu worship:

Immalee looked and saw a vast sandy plain, with the dark pagoda of Juggernaut in the perspective. On this plain lay the bones of a thousand skeletons, bleaching in the burning and unmoistened air. A thousand human bodies, hardly more alive, and scarce less emaciated, were trailing their charred and blackened bodies over the sands, to perish under the shadow of the temple, hopeless of ever reaching that of its walls...many tried, in their false and fanatical zeal, to double their torments, by crawling through the sands on their hands and knees; but hands through the back of which the nails had grown, and knees worn literally to the bone, struggled but feebly amid the sand and the skeletons, and the bodies that were soon to be skeletons, and the vultures that were to make them so (325).

The Gothic motif of challenging religious conventions and structures is here taken to its extreme through descriptions so horrific their effect is to 'freeze' the reader, as Botting suggests – the impulse is, like Immalee, to 'withhold [our] breath’ (325). It is almost impossible to conceive of a more barbaric scene: it far outstrips, as a vision of insanity, anything Stanton encounters in his madhouse. Worse, the madhouse here is not one of stone floors and barred windows, but on an open plain and entirely of their own making - the collective delirium of religious frenzy has 'constructed' the madhouse as effectively as bricks and mortar. In visual mimicry of the Gothic binaries of reason/unreason and goodness/transgression, the contrast between Immalee's paradisal island world and the 'burning and unmoistened air' in the shadow of the Juggernaut could hardly be more pronounced: Maturin does not so much invite an interrogation of where true madness lies as explicitly state that religious orthodoxy is in itself a kind of madness – at least where it demands or invites inversions of every natural instinct. Later Immalee witnesses mass suicide beneath the wheels of a 'moving palace’ (325), and 'newborn infants' hung from the branches of trees in the shadow of a temple, ‘to be devoured by birds while their mothers danced and sung in honour of the goddess’ (327). Whenever her eyes light on what is apparently ordered and rational behaviour – such as the 'stately Turks' whose 'thoughtful countenances, majestic habits, and lofty figures, formed an imposing contrast to the unintellectual expression...of some poor Hindoos’ (328) - her initial relief is instantly thwarted as the image is reversed: the Turks then 'spurned and spit at the unoffending and terrified Hindoos [and] cursed them in the name of God and the prophet’ (328). Immalee's response serves as a proxy for that of the reader: she weeps at 'the inversion of every principle of nature, and the disruption of every tie of the heart’ (329).

Punter is clear on *Melmoth*'s function as a polemic on religion:

To Melmoth, all religions are equally delusory in their promises of beneficence and salvation the only reality: behind religion is true vengeance … certainly the overall impression derived from the book is that Maturin vastly exceeds his brief against the Catholic Church[[47]](#footnote-47), and brings most of the edifice of religion, or perhaps indeed of belief itself in a more general sense, down on his head (Punter 204).

As Punter notes, the novel suggests that religion – indeed belief itself - is 'delusory'; no more so, in essence, than the delusions of the 'maniac' who every Saturday night observes the burning rafters falling from her house. It provokes extremes of behaviour that 'invert every principle' of nature, of which these brief glimpses shown to Immalee are only a few. The suggestion – a curious one from a cleric - is that Immalee's natural state, though 'arational' in exhibiting modes of behaviour that to more tutored minds appear 'mad', is nonetheless more 'reasoned' than that of one who has subjugated all natural impulse. The logical extension of this notion is that places of worship, whose purpose is to provide a setting for the celebration of a shared delusion, are no more than madhouses themselves. Certainly the events in the convent, where Moncada witnesses a young monk tortured into insanity for privileging the natural impulse of kindness above the demands of his order, might be thought more suited to a mad-house than in a place of consecration and worship.

In addition to the 'places of madness' which Maturin depicts in *Melmoth* – whether the Melmoth home, Stanton's madhouse, Immalee's unreasoning Eden, or the toils of the Inquisition – there is an extent to which the novel's effects may be said to construct a 'madhouse' beyond the fictional narrative and in the consciousness of the reader. Any commentary on Melmoth will focus on its narrative complexity. As Sage notes, the novel 'starts at a remote point in the action and then cultivates a labyrinthine form without a centre, embedding his stories one within the other until we are dizzy’ (Sage xi). Punter cites the challenge it represents to the reader, who must uncover 'that heavily encrusted principle of organisation which sustains its rococo decoration’ (203). The labyrinth is a key motif in the Gothic sense of place – and ‘Labyrinths, like novels, seduce, excite, confuse and disturb: they lead readers on “fatal paths”’ (Botting 84)[[48]](#footnote-48). Punter details the extent to which the sense of place in the Gothic is not incidental to the narrative and its themes, but may be seen as causal:

Other critics suggest that the emotions of characters in Gothic fiction are externalised through such things as … inanimate objects: in *Otranto* it is possible to see how architecture, the labyrinthine and claustrophobic spaces of castles, monasteries, ruins and prisons, will come to serve an important function in suggesting such emotions as fear and helplessness. When Isabelle flees from Manfred through the subterranean vaults of the castle, for example, her flight introduces a motif that will repeatedly recur in subsequent Gothic fiction. The castle has even been seen as the primary protagonist of Otranto; all the events take place either within or near it, and its physical presence dominates the text, creating a sense of oppression that emphasizes the powerlessness of the characters to control their own lives (179).

*Figure 1* overleaf attempts a visual demonstration of the extreme complexity of *Melmoth*’s narrative, which embeds tale within tale and place within place. The graphic covers only part of the narrative, and demonstrates how the reader's experience operates *simultaneously* alongside that of John Melmoth in County Wicklow, Moncada in his Inquisition cell, and Immalee on her island. Thus the labyrinthine form of *Melmoth the Wanderer* may be understood as replicating through a formal device the Gothic convention of the dark maze, exemplified by the vaults through which Isabella in *Otranto* and the doomed monk Moncada in *Melmoth the Wanderer* attempt their escapes. Undertaking the 'willing suspension of disbelief', and as Eco states '[pretending] that what has been narrated has taken place’ (75), requires entry into a formal labyrinth no less complex and daunting – and no less fraught with the experience of horror and terror – than that entered by Moncada himself. We are, in effect, within that 'madhouse'. Botting goes further, drawing on the conventional distinction between responses of terror and those of horror, but emphasising the essentially rational nature of the former and the unreasoning nature of the latter: where terror provokes the instinct for flight and self-preservation, '[leading] to the return of reason (84)', horror 'marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended’ (75). Botting quotes Radcliffe's 1826 essay 'On The Supernatural In Poetry', which again places horror within the scope of unreason:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them (Botting 74).

If the defining feature of the Gothic is that, since *'emotions are [its] events'*, the reader partakes of the horrors experienced by the agents in the narrative, then the horrified reader – buried like Moncada in a labyrinth of baroque complexity – may also be said to have his faculties 'nearly annihilated', and thus be confined – however willingly, and with whatever perverse pleasure - to a kind of narrative madhouse.

NARRATOR ADA

***Fig. 1: Complexity of Narrative Layers in* Melmoth the Wanderer*.***

**NOTES**

1Text indicates **NARRATOR:** FORM OF NARRATION/Location of tale (not necessarily teller)

2 (N) indicates page numbers. Some narratives are duplicated, thus (N[N]) indicates (page number of narrative version suggested here [narrative version elsewhere])

**MELMOTH**: ORAL/England

*Tale of Immalee (561/[302])*

**MONÇADA:** ORAL/Spain

*Stanton in the madhouse (332/[51])*

**MELMOTH**: ORAL/England

*The Lovers’ Tale (494)*

**MELMOTH**: ORAL/Spain

*Guzman’s Tale (442)*

**PARRICIDE MONK**: Oral/Convent vaults

*Parricide; immurement of lovers(226)*

**JUAN DI MONÇADA**: WRITTEN/Madrid

*Monçadan family history (143)*

**PRIEST**: ORAL/Wicklow

*Account of JM saved by Spaniard (78)*

**ADONIJAH THE JEW**: WRITTEN/The Island & Madrid

*The tale of Immalee/Isidora (302)*

**ADONIJAH THE JEW**: ORAL/Madrid

*Brief personal history (297)*

**MONÇADA**: ORAL/Madrid

*Family history; convent life; escape; imprisonment under Inquisition; further escape (88)*

**NARRATOR**: WRITTEN/Wicklow

*John Melmoth observes wreck; is saved by Spaniard (77)*

**2: The Unicorn**

At the opening of his comprehensive study of the Gothic, David Punter provides an exhaustive chronology of Gothic works, and works pertaining to the Gothic. These range from the publications of Burke's essay on the sublime and the beautiful via Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis to the crime-Gothic of Wilkie Collins, Angela Carter's magical realism, and the release of the film adaptation of Brett Easton Ellis' American Psycho. At no point does the fiction of Irish Murdoch appear in the chronology – and yet a reading of her novel *The Unicorn* is scarcely possible within an examination of its use of Gothic conventions and motifs, particularly with regard to the use of the sense of place.

We have seen that Murdoch considered herself an essentially realist novelist, with “QUOTE TAKEN FROM INTRO”, and yet Stephen Medcalfe in his introduction to *The Unicorn* explores in detail her preoccupation with, and exploration of, the notion of the

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**2: *The Unicorn* and the Gothic Castle**

At the opening of his comprehensive study of the Gothic, David Punter provides an exhaustive chronology of Gothic works, and works pertaining to the Gothic. These range from the publication of Burke's essay on the sublime and the beautiful via Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis to the crime-Gothic of Wilkie Collins, Angela Carter's magical realism, and the release of the film adaptation of Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. At no point does the fiction of Iris Murdoch appear in the chronology – and yet a reading of her novel *The Unicorn* is scarcely possible without an examination of its use of Gothic conventions and motifs, particularly with regard to the sense of place.

We have seen that Murdoch considered herself an essentially realist novelist, who thought that novels ‘[have]a duty to portray the world as it is, and to strive to tell the truth about it’ (Nicol 3), and yet Stephen Medcalfe in his introduction to *The Unicorn* explores in detail her preoccupation with, and exploration of, the notion of the sublime:

Kant thought of the sublime as part of our response to nature, to 'the spectacle of huge and appalling things', as Iris calls it in another essay 'On “God” and “Good”' - things like the Alps which 'the imagination and the senses cannot properly take in' so that 'they cannot satisfy the reason, which demands a total complete ordered picture.' Iris extends this response 'which brings about a sense initially of terror, and when properly understood of exhilaration and spiritual power' to include with nature 'the spectacle of human life' (ix).

For Murdoch, and for *The Unicorn's* characters, sublime nature is a significant agent in the novel, functioning much as we have seen Punter suggests *Otranto*'s Castle does, 'creating a sense of oppression that emphasizes the powerlessness of the characters to control their own lives’ (179).

The novel begins with that classic Gothic trope of an innocent outsider arriving at a site of oppressive beauty and disintegrating grandeur. As Marian Taylor passes ‘through an immense crenelated archway’ and beside ‘a lodge cottage with blank gaping windows and a sagging roof’, she is ‘suddenly overcome by an appalling crippling panic…frightened at the very idea of arriving’ (Murdoch 15-16).[[49]](#footnote-49) Here Murdoch plainly evokes the arrival of John Melmoth at his uncle’s home, Harker at Dracula’s door, and Katherine Moreland approaching Northanger Abbey. Again we experience that sense of inevitability noted in the opening of *Melmoth the Wanderer. S*uch is the resonance of Gothic protocols with respect to the sense of place that the few details observed by Marian as she approaches Gaze serve to ‘construct’ her destination – and all that is signalled *by* such a destination – before she even arrives.

For Murdoch, the natural world in which Gaze Castle is set is of equal importance to the structure and interior of Gaze itself: though the geographical location is never explicitly identified, it is plain from the patterns of speech (‘He spoke with the lilting accent of the region’ [33]) and from geographical curiosities such as the black bog that we are (like the young Melmoth) on the Irish coast. The setting is heavy with symbolism: before Marian reaches the ‘castle’ (which, in a logical extension of the Gothic preoccupation with ruin, is now merely a large house where the ruins of a castle once stood), she first passes a ‘repellent and frightening’ coastline in which the sandstone cliffs evoke the ‘huge buttresses’ of a Gothic cathedral (11), and a curious dolmen in the form of a door. A. S. Byatt in *Degrees of Freedom[[50]](#footnote-50)* describes the oppressive quality of the landscape around Gaze as being ‘a Romantic necessity…it is related both to our sense of that which is not human and thus mysterious, and to the uncompromising, again, non-messy, nature of the spiritual events which take place’ (148). Characters within the text feel its effects as a causal force: it evokes anticipation of events and suggests the fulfilment of that anticipation, as the romantically-minded Effingham Cooper discovers: ‘The landscape was just beginning to be familiar. Now each scene told him what was coming next. It was a moment that always affected him with pleasure and fear…’(67). The causal effect of place is also evidence in the novel’s place-names, which bestow on inanimate buildings a kind of character and conscious significance.[[51]](#footnote-51) Marian’s last contact with the ordinary world is at the railway station at the prosaic Greytown; ‘Gaze’ suggests the castle’s conscious outlook, an inescapable watchfulness even outside its doors; the neighbouring house, from which Pip Lejour turns his own hopeless gaze on the ‘imprisoned’ Hannah Crean-Smith, is named ‘Riders’ (a name which stands in ironic contrast to the stasis of its inhabitant, unable to progress from a long-ago affair); the small town to which escape-attempts are made is named ‘Blackport’, suggesting entry into another – and perhaps still darker – state. Similarly, Murdoch leaves the reader in no doubt as to the symbolic significance of the landscape:

The immense upright stones supported a vast capstone which protruded a long way on either side. It was a weird lop-sided structure, seemingly pointless *yet dreadfully significant* (15, emphasis mine).

We are left to ponder the ‘dreadful significance’ of this ‘pointless’ stone portal, which signifies simultaneously the marking and the blurring of a boundary – it is not clear what purpose it serves, nor whether there is any literal or symbolic distinction between what lies either side of the ‘door’.

As Botting notes, one of the key functions of the Gothic is precisely such a blurring of boundaries:

Gothic fiction can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulated social life, and interrogate, rather than restore, any imagined continuity between past and present, nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society (47).

This ‘blurring’ of boundaries is evident throughout the novel, not least in the evocation of its setting, which we know to be mid-twentieth century (there is reference to the contemporary and mundane: to cars, airports, and secretaries in their offices), and yet it is emphatically ‘other’. Murdoch repeatedly emphasises the almost magical nature of the land around Gaze: a seal encountered swimming appears like ‘a primitive sea-god, a portent’ (32); the cliffs ‘steam gently’ in the morning sun while a waterfall appears as ‘a bright line of trembling light’ (45); and the local folk are said to have ‘fairy blood’ (47). This directness and insistence on an otherworldy setting is explored by Marshall Brown in *The Gothic Text*, where he analyses Anne Radcliffe’s descriptions of the grounds of Salerno in *The Italian*:

[Here is] the most wonderfully puzzling display of self-assurance in the entire novel: “It was, in truth, a scene of fairy-land.” “In truth”, indeed. Here, if anywhere, is the gothic version of truth; the moment when all the pieces fall into place to form a scene at once so perfectly familiar and yet perfectly adapted to its mysterious occasion (Brown 171).[[52]](#footnote-52)

Key to Murdoch’s use of the geographic setting is precisely its ‘adaptation to its mysterious occasion’: it accurately depicts the ‘real’ features of the western coast of Ireland, but it is throughout adapted and ‘visioned’ in a specific way, to achieve a specific, otherworldly effect. Nicol explores this notion of Murdoch adapting the world to fit each novel’s particular narrative-myth:

A typical product of [Kant’s theory of the beautiful and the sublime] is what Murdoch calls ‘the crystalline novel’, a work in which each allusion and image fits in neatly to the structure of the underlying myth created by the author. The crystalline novel is a simplified version of the world, little more than the embodiment of a theory, a way to harness the enigmatic elements of life (the accidental forces of the world, the mystery of other people) by enveloping them in a theoretical structure (Nicol 5).

For Murdoch, the Gothic perhaps offers a ‘theoretical’ (or at least aesthetic) structure into which the naturally and psychologically ‘real’ can be better adapted to serve the purposes of her narrative.

In consummation of what is promised by the ‘castle’s’ location, the interior of the house is no less eerie and strange, with all the Gothic conventions of locked rooms, symbolic artefacts and curious quasi-religious rituals:

Scottow had ushered [Marian] into a large drawing-room on the ground floor where she now stood alone, fingering an unlit cigarette, and not at all looking forward to ‘the others’. The room smelt broodingly of the past, chilly and obscure in the warm September evening. Two tall sash-windows, which reached almost to the floor, and a high glass doorway communicated with the sunny terrace. They were draped and darkened by swathes of looped-up white lace which was slightly less than clean. Thick red curtains, stiff as fluted columns, emitted a dusty incense, and the fawn-and-yellow carpet gave out little puffs when stepped on. A dark mahogany erection containing a mirror surrounded the fireplace and reached almost to the dim ceiling in a converging series of shelves and brackets upon which small complicated brass objects were clustered. A jet-black piano was defended by a troop of little tables draped to their ankles in embroidered velvet cloths. Amid the jumble, pieces of cut glass glittered here and there, and a bookcase with formidable doors supported hazy rows of calf-bound volumes upon shelves with leather fringes. The clutter in the room had about it little suggestion of human use or occupation (19).

Again, there is the suggestion of animation and purpose in the house and its artefacts: small tables ‘defend’ the piano, and sport clothing to hide their ‘ankles’; the windows ‘communicate’ with a terrace, but are nonetheless ‘darkened’, suggesting that equivocal state of blurred boundaries which we have already noted in the Gothic; and the carpet ‘gives out’ puffs of dust almost as though it exhales. Later Marian senses a ‘watchful’ quality in the room, ‘and she almost feared to find that she had overlooked some person standing silently in a corner’ (19). Motifs of Gothic architecture are also apparent in the complex convergence of ‘shelves and brackets’ surmounting the mirror. The past intrudes on the present, suggesting to the impressionable Marian – and to readers familiar with the uses of Gothic conventions – that modes of behaviour unrestrained by modern manners or reason are to be expected. Interestingly, Marian’s response to her new home is a kind of inversion of Katherine Moreland’s response to her first sight of Northanger Abbey. Where Marian had not anticipated the brooding house with its uneasy atmosphere, but, once she sees it, begins to suspect that her stay will not be comfortable or easy, Katherine’s devotion to Gothic fiction has made her prepare, gleefully, for the worst, and thus she is disappointed to discover a bright-lit, well-kept abbey – ‘To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stonework, for painted glass, dirt and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing[[53]](#footnote-53)’ (117). Murdoch and Austen respectively make knowing but quite different use of that quality of expectation which has become an intrinsic part of the Gothic, both on the part of its readers, and the characters within the narrative.

Marian dreads meeting ‘the others’, who by association with the ‘otherness’ of the house and its grounds must surely be in some way to be feared. The ‘small complicated brass objects’ are unidentified, and in the context of the room seem more likely to be arcane paraphernalia associated with the ‘brooding past’ than with ordinary family life. The books on their shelves suggest hidden knowledge – and indeed when Marian attempts to open the case and discover the contents, she finds it is locked. Crucially, the reader is here observing the house wholly through Marian’s point of view, which is already implicitly disordered: the carpet does not exhale, nor are the small tables an army marshalled to defend the piano – these are products of an affected imagination. Marshall Brown notes the importance of perception to the categorisation of madness:

In what appears to be the first work written specifically on insanity, ‘Treatise on Madness’ (1758), William Battie carefully distinguishes madness from stupor or anxiety. Madness is a cognitive disorder, false perception or disordered sensation… (73).

Her response to the landscape - which seems ‘repellent and frightening’ (11) – and her fanciful viewing of the house are in marked contrast to her ‘other’ life, in which, when disappointed in love, ‘she faced her loss with fierce rationality’ (10). There appears to be a clear link between Marian’s immersion in the ‘fairy-landscape’ and her perception of the house and its inhabitants (later that link is affirmed, as one of the characters observes an aeroplane descending ‘with a sort of shock. There was life, indifferent life, beautiful free life going forward. But to what, in here, had he just pledged himself?’ [93].)

A kind of madness is intimated from the outset of *The Unicorn* and becomes, towards the end of the novel, explicit. Marian is met from the station by Gerald Scottow, who in due course reveals himself as having an almost devilish power over the occupants of Gaze, and by the young man Jamesie Evercreech, whose name echoes the odd laughter with which he accompanies almost every utterance in ‘a weird high-pitched noise’ (13), and which signals to Marian a potentially unbalanced intellect. At every turn there are strange small obsessions and apparently nonsensical conversations that even when explained to the satisfaction of the inhabitants of Gaze are perplexing to the reader. The following provides an early example of the subtly strange atmosphere of Gaze:

The man thrust the tin bowl forward and Marian saw with a little shock of surprise that it contained water and a sizeable goldfish. “Strawberry Nose.”

“Is Strawberry Nose going to be given a salt bath?”

“Yes, sir.” The man did not smile.

Scottow said, smiling enough for two, “Denis is a great fish man. You must see his fish ponds tomorrow….” (22).

Marian is presented with behaviour that, whilst not the product of violence or agitation, is certainly sufficiently beyond the boundary of ordinary drawing-room conversation to hint at future acts of unreason. That Scottow is not only unsurprised by the appearance of a goldfish, but ‘smiles enough for two’, suggests both knowledge and the facilitation of curious modes of behaviour. Crucially, the setting of this exchange provides – or at least inflates – its strangeness. Transplanted to a child’s playroom, or to a garden, it would not appear odd, but within the ‘blurred radiant interior’ (22) of Gaze it becomes peculiarly sinister. That immediately following this exchange Marian experiences ‘extreme agitation’ is scarcely surprising: it appears that within Gaze she is likely to encounter patterns of behaviour unconstrained by reason or convention. She is, of course, proved correct in her assumption. Incidents range from the mildly unsettling scene of Hannah Crean-Smith submitting herself to a haircut at the hands of Denis, who transpires (in an inversion of expectation typical of the novel) to be surprisingly deft with a pair of scissors, to the chillingly unreasoned - first in Hannah Crean-Smith’s animalistic and overtly unreasoned ‘howl, the scarcely human cry of a soul in agony’ (139), and ultimately in murder and suicide.

It is notable that the power and charm of the novel – that sense achieved by *Melmoth* of the reader’s having been subsumed into the narrative, becoming a willing inmate in the ‘mad-house’ – fractures at those places where madness is either explicitly foregrounded or denied. Pip Lejour’s summation of the events leading up to Hannah’s confinement supplies perhaps too bald an explanation for the atmosphere and tensions within Gaze:

‘Anyhow, Peter’s marriage didn’t stop Peter carrying on with Gerald, though at least he kept it from Hannah. Peter’s attitude to Gerald at that time was a sort of sexual feudalism. I dare say it has fancier names. Gerald was his man, his servant, his serf…and of course that was all part of the game. They both enjoyed themselves enormously… (111).

This exchange – delivered, it should be noted, not between the oppressive walls of Gaze, but beside the salmon-pools in the grounds – supplies almost an *excess* of reason: it explains, in basic terms, Hannah’s history, but cannot account for the curious atmosphere of the house. Pip’s lexis is colloquial, relaxed – ‘carrying on’; ‘they both enjoyed themselves *enormously*’ – striking a jarring note in the context of a narrative in which every character takes pride in strangeness, and every artefact is loaded with meaning. Equally, where the behaviour of the characters is directly addressed as - in William Battie’s terminology – ‘false perception’ or a ‘disordered sensation’ (Brown 73), Murdoch’s carefully ‘crystalline’ construction harnessing ‘the enigmatic elements of life’ (Nicol 5) comes to pieces. There is little enigmatic about the brutally Freudian analysis of Effingham Cooper’s attachment to Hannah, who ‘had been to him the chaste mother-goddess, the Virgin mother…because of his own mother’s sin of sex’ (233). At moments such as these Gaze, though retaining its hold on its occupants, perhaps loosens its grasp on the reader. It is perhaps possible to explain this loosening of its grasp by reference to the ‘layering’ of the real; that second, concealed layer – the ‘real’ truth of the psycho-sexual anxieties of the characters – has intruded too explicitly into the other, surface reality of Gaze’s fish-pools, dusty Persian carpets and heavy brass mirrors. With the breaking of the one into the other, both appear, perhaps, a little forced and absurd.

Yet Gaze is not an institution in the conventional sense – none are confined, like Maturin’s Stanton, by the means of bars and gratings: they inhabit their mad-house by choice. It represents Blake’s notion of ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ brought full circle: his was a plea for the liberty of imagination against the strictures and structures of contemporary life, but within Gaze the liberty to imagine has itself brought about a kind of shackling, to the house itself and to its rituals. Kum Kum Bajaj in his *Critical Study of Iris Murdoch’s Fiction[[54]](#footnote-54)* says, ‘Sometimes the intense drama of love results in the loss of self’ (248), and it is perhaps this notion of the ‘loss of self’ that properly describes the kind of unreason set loose in Gaze: the loss of all that is objective, considered and rational, with the ‘self’ – the chief locus of reason – being subsumed into another.

This function of the Gothic building as a place of confinement – whether madhouse, convent or castle, and whether that confinement is by choice or under duress - has been explored in depth by J. M. S. Tomkins. Imprisonment, she notes, is ‘perennially attractive to the romantic mind’ (268):

It is the dark frame that enhances whatever emotions are displayed within it; it is the supreme test of virtue and the expiation of the penitent; it provides that recess…that limited fragment of being, secluded from the complexities of social life, where consciousness is forced back on itself, friends are left alone with their love and enemies with their hatred (269).

In Murdoch’s fiction, and in *The Unicorn* especially, this notion of confinement being ‘perennially attractive to the romantic mind’ is crucial to understanding the role of Gothic allusion in the novel. The ‘romantic mind’ here is not simply that of the reader, but of the characters themselves: their willing confinement in the prison-madhouse of Gaze is the product of minds that seek out romance at the cost of an ordered and rational existence. The characters exist at a point in which the expectations of a fictional narrative style have infused their expectations of what ‘real’ life will deliver: Gaze, so resolutely equipped to function as a Gothic building, offers an opportunity to enter into the protocols of the Gothic.

Even Hannah Crean-Smith, about whom the characters circle in various states of bewilderment, devotion and resentment, is not detained by force, but, presented with the opportunity to cross the physical and symbolic threshold of Gaze, is drawn back to confinement as though in a drugged or somnolent daze, moving towards Gerald Scottow ‘like a sleepwalker’ (146). Throughout, the characters reference their own unreasoning states, to the extent of appearing almost to inhabit by choice the appearance of madness. Hannah adopts clothing which is self-consciously strange: when Marian firsts meet her she is ‘dressed in a flowing robe, which might have been either an evening dress or a dressing-gown’ (23). Later, Hannah decks out Marian in clothes she has chosen for her, symbolically bringing her within the ‘otherness’ of the house. Similarly, Effingham Cooper wills himself into a state of hopeless devotion on the basis of the myths surrounding Hannah and her confinement at Gaze:

Effingham was of course…stripped, prepared, keyed up, attuned, conditioned. No space-man about to step into his rocket was more meticulously fitted to go into orbit than Effingham at that moment was ready to fall in love with Hannah. He fell. It seemed in retrospect, as he tried to recall that meeting which was now so curiously confused in his memory, that he must have fallen literally at her feet and lain gasping…he could not conceal his condition…the odd spiritual tormented yet resigned beauty of Hannah seemed to him now the castle perilous toward which he had now all his days been faring (71).

Here is a reversal of the fourth kind of madness identified by Foucault, that of desperate passion (31): Foucault imagines a delusory state in which love continues once its object has been removed. Cooper has contrived to feel the delusory love of an object not yet encountered – and once the object is encountered, within the conscious ‘agent’ of Gaze, the delusion is affirmed. Note also that his ‘condition’ cannot be concealed – thus his love is cast as a malady – and that Hannah seems to him a ‘castle perilous’, herself the embodiment of a Gothic structure with hidden vaults to be discovered. It should be noted that, here, the notion of the ‘castle perilous’ suggests, in addition to the familiar Gothic conception of a castle fortress, that other understanding of the Gothic as evoking past ages of chivalry and romance, detailed in Bishop Hurd’s *Letters of Chivalry and Romance[[55]](#footnote-55)*. The phrase ‘castle perilous’ itself is taken from Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur:[[56]](#footnote-56)* ‘And Sir Gareth thought many times, Jesu, that the lady of the Castle Perilous were so fair as she was’ (VII.XX1. 212). Effingham Cooper has cast himself as Sir Gareth on his quest, a perhaps exasperating attempt to lend a kind of romantic credence to his besotted admiration of Hannah.

**2: *The Unicorn* and the Ship of Fools**

In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault explores the notion of the ship of fools, the subject of the *Narrenschiff*, a satiric 1494 poem by Sebastian Brandt and a historical method of simultaneously confining and release the insane:

Frequently (the insane) were handed over to boatmen: in Frankfurt, in 1399, seamen were instructed to rid the city of a madman who walked about the streets naked; in the first years of the fifteenth century, a criminal madman was expelled in the same manner from Mainz (9).

The implications of the madmen’s embarkation are complex. It does not suggest the confinement designed merely to ‘quarantine’ the unwell and protect the reasoned, leaving the madman in a condition of stasis, but rather permits a kind of liberty:

Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools’ boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. The madman’s voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage (11).

The idea of a ‘madman’s voyage’ inevitably brings to mind the passage of Captain Ahab on the *Pequod* in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick.* Critics frequently note the intensely Gothic atmosphere of the novel, in which the Gothic is transplanted from the cathedral or castle to a ship. As Kris Lackey[[57]](#footnote-57) notes, ‘The literary traditions contributing to the Gothic atmosphere of *Moby-Dick* are…knotted and independent, and the range of allusions with Gothic thrust … extensive’ (37). In the novel, Ahab’s removal from the constraints and demands of the law of the land, and his total command of the vessel, permit him to gain total mastery over the crew and passengers on board:

They were one man, not thirty… all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valour, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to[[58]](#footnote-58) (492)

As Ahab’s obsession with the great white whale becomes the ‘law’ by which the ship is governed, and as his mania becomes that of the crew also, the *Pequod* becomes a ‘ship of fools.’

This notion of the Ship of Fools provides a model by which we can understand the complex notion of madness as both captor and liberator. Furthermore, the idea of passage is central to this notion: it suggests that madness is a journey that alters the passenger. As Foucault says in *Madness and Civilisation*:

The madman is the Passenger *par excellence*: that is, the prisoner of the passage. And the land he will come to is unknown – as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes (11).

A passenger on the Ship of Fools could hardly expect to be unchanged, and indeed to find their perception of themselves (‘the land from which [they come]’) unchanged.

Sebastian Brandt’s parable (itself a satire on the corruptions of the established church) provides a framework in which Murdoch’s use of place in *The Unicorn* can be examined - certainly in respect of the consciousness of the characters and their relationship to their locale and to each other. Murdoch’s treatment of Gaze is strongly suggestive of a ship adrift in the surrounding seas of the Irish coast and the black bog which eventually proves so fatally significant. Water of every kind - whether the natural bodies of the sea and bog, or the man-made fish-pools and causeway - provides a boundary against the ordered contemporary world which the inhabitants of Gaze have discarded; a bar to escape; and means of passage. Throughout the novel, water is a sinister (if seductive) force – Marian’s first foray into the sea contributes to the novel’s atmosphere of just-suppressed violence:

In her bathing costume she approached the steep verge. The pebbles hurt her feet and it was hard to stand upright on the wet shifting slope. She was wetted by now by the cold spray, and the pounding foam touched her feet before it hurled violently back, ripping the black grinding pebbles into a great dark mass beneath the white breakneck foam of the next wave (33).

The language here conveys a kind of consciousness on the sea – it reaches out to ‘touch’ her before ‘hurling back’ with what seems like spiteful violence – that suggests the heightened, fearful state of Marian’s own consciousness. Later, other sources of water contribute to the sense of Gaze being isolated not merely on land (through which an escape would not be especially problematic) but on water, in which there are likely to be hidden other and more pressing dangers:

As she watched the rain falling on the wrecked garden and on the dull grass slope and on the gleaming streaming black cliffs and on the sullen iron-grey sea, Marian felt a shock of despair, a shock of mortality, as if Death were passing close before her face and, not yet ready to take her, had blown a chill breath into her mouth. The rain fell into the dark fish pools with a jumpy jerky rhythm. Would she have to stay here with Hannah perhaps forever? The real suffering was only beginning now (221).

Here again Murdoch depicts not merely the sense of Gaze being adrift amid rainstorms, fish-pools and a ‘sullen’ sea, but Marian’s own consciousness: the sea is sullen because she resents its threatening presence, and it is iron-grey, suggestive of bars and barriers. The unpunctuated headlong phrasing of the opening sentence mimics a certain incoherency of thought, as the young woman begins to realise the implications of having joined her fellow-passengers. In fact, it is her proximity to the inhabitants of Gaze that is the true threat: the ‘madness’ of unreasoning love and devotion, and of willing imprisonment (often, as in the case of Effingham, a ‘madness’ adopted by choice – ‘He was but too anxious to display it to everyone…Regardless of the pain he caused, he gave way to positive raving’ [71]) is contagious, much as any malady on board ship spreads through the crew. Marian recognises the threat early – ‘ “There is something to tell, then? But I must know, if I’m to stay on here and not become quite deranged…”’ (59) – and that threat is acknowledged: ‘ “Like the rest of us – ” [Nolan] said softly’ (59). In due course, she finds that she is modifying her behaviour to sit alongside that of her fellow-passengers: ‘ “I love you”, said Marian…It was not the sort of thing she came out with usually. Yet it seemed quite natural here’ (53).

When the inhabitants of Gaze finally attempt to break free from the confinements of the house and of their own unreasoning connection to it, it takes on the appearance of a kind of mutiny. Their rebellion is against Gerald Scottow, who has functioned as a kind of captain, engineering the confinement of Hannah Crean-Smith and in consequence that of the others (“You all attributed your own feelings to me. But I had no feelings, I was empty. I lived by your belief in my suffering…” [219]): ‘Marian felt at that instant how Gerald attracted the hatred of everyone in the room, and although no one moved it was as if they all swirled about him’ (225). But since the purpose of the Ship of Fools is simultaneously to confine and to provide a place of safety, the consequence of that mutiny is to release the fellow-travellers to other, greater perils: it is not only the loathed ‘captain’ Scottow that loses his life. Nonetheless, without that confinement in which each passenger is at liberty to indulge unreason, Marian – and all who ‘sailed’ in Gaze – would failed to have reached their moments of crises and revelation: as Foucault says, they had ‘embarked on a great symbolic voyage which would bring them, if not fortune, then at least the figure of their destiny or their truth’ (8).

**CHAPTER TWO: CONSECRATED GROUND**

**1: *The Monk***

As Punter records, the Gothic genre in its genesis stands in clear contradistinction to the cultural, scientific and philosophical developments and celebration of reason of the Age of Enlightenment:

The birth of Gothic…came about as a direct result of changes in cultural emphasis in the eighteenth century. The reputation of the eighteenth century has mainly been as an age of reliance on reason, as a time when enlightenment was seen as possible and the rational explanation of natural and human activities formed an agenda in the service of which most of the European intellectuals worked (7).

Crucially, that seeking after order and ‘rational explanation[s] of natural and human activities’ which was the chief pursuit of Enlightenment intellectuals neither precluded nor obscured Christian religious belief, despite being motivated in part by the perceived corruptions and obscurities of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the notion that the universe and its laws were governed by an omniscient, omnipresent supreme being was a clear motivating factor to many Enlightenment scholars, as the following preface to Gravesend’s *Mathematical Elements of Natural Philosophy[[59]](#footnote-59)* demonstrates:

Diversity of Opinions should not deter us from searching after Truth; since Labour and Study will find it out; and the more we are in love with it, the less we are liable Errors, excepting such as human Frailty renders unavoidable. We must proceed cautiously in Physics, since that Science considers the Works of the Supreme Wisdom, and sets forth ‘What Laws JEHOVAH to himself prescrib’d/And of his Work the firm Foundation made/ When He of Thing the first Design survey’d. How the whole Universe is govern’d by those Laws, and how the same Laws run thro’ all the Works of Nature, and are constantly observed with a wonderful Regularity. We must take care not to admit Fiction for Truth; for by that means we shut out all further Examination. No true Explanation of Phenomenae can spring out of a false Principle: and what a vast Difference there is betwixt learning the Fictions of whimsical Men, and examining the Works of the most wise God! (Gravesend vii).

This clear emphasis on ‘true explanations of phenomenae’ challenges that sense of 'the moment of the negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror’ (Botting 75) which is the effect of the Gothic sublime terror. In direct opposition to the notion that surveying all that is grand and apparently inexplicable in nature should stupefy and ‘freeze’ the mind, Christian Enlightenment philosophy suggests that it rather informs and develops the faculties, leading to a clearer understanding of the ‘Laws [that] run thro’ all the Works of Nature.’ In his preface to *Astronomy Explained Upon Isaac Newton’s Principle[[60]](#footnote-60),* published in 1756, the Scottish philosopher and astronomer James Ferguson wrote:

Our very faculties are enlarged with the grandeur of the ideas [astronomy] conveys , our minds exalted above the low contracted prejudices of the vulgar, and our understandings clearly convinced, and affected with the conviction of, the existence, wisdom, power, goodness, immutability, and superintendency of the SUPREME BEING! (1).

Here the pursuit of scientific knowledge – and note that Ferguson is specifically addressing astronomy, which of all the sciences might be considered most obscure and susceptible to that ‘freezing’ engendered by sensations of the sublime – is linked directly to the existence of a wise, powerful, good and immutable god.

The Enlightenment therefore simultaneously confirmed and rationalised religious faith, identifying and examining the order of a divinely created universe whilst challenging the obscure rituals and perceived corruptions of the Catholic Church. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks traces the origins of the Gothic as a response to this rejection of mystery and pursuit of clarity, suggesting it evoked a desire to re-establish that sense of sublime mystery which Enlightenment philosophy and reason challenged:

The Gothic novel stands most clearly in reaction to desacralisation and the pretensions of rationalism; it represents, in D. P. Varma’s phrase, a ‘quest for the numinous’. It reasserts the presence, in the world, of forces that cannot be accounted for by the daylight self and the self-sufficient mind.[[61]](#footnote-61) (16).

The ‘desacralisation’ suggested is here is that ‘removal of the sacred’ which comes from privileging reason and order above mystery – including ‘the mystery of Godliness’ (1 Tim. 3:16) of which St Paul wrote – leaving behind a longing for a return to that which cannot be accounted for by reason or by rational theology. The Gothic may therefore be seen to have been born out of this moment of tension – on the one hand, it challenged and satirised the corruptions of the established church, yet on the other represented a ‘quest for the numinous’; an attempt to regain that sense of ‘spiritual forces and occult issues hidden in the phenomenal world’ (Brooks, 16).

Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, written as the Age of Enlightenment was reaching its end, is perhaps the most compelling example of the Gothic straddling these two conflicting imperatives, particularly (as Brooks notes) ‘in relation to the problem of guilt and its definition’ (16).’ *The Monk’s* titular protagonist Ambrosio, whose chief sin (recalling the *hamartia* which propels the Greek tragic hero to his fate) is that of pride and satisfaction in his own piety and virtue, engages upon a series of sexual encounters which culminate in the rape and murder of a woman he discovers to be his own sister. Sexual desire is the motivating force, so much so that the novel reads as a condemnation of the unnatural demands of the celibate life: Ambrosio’s sensuous and passionate nature, denied natural sexual expression, first finds release in the adoration and caress of a portrait of the Virgin, then following his seduction by Matilda is perverted and corrupted, leading him to crimes of rape, murder and incest. Critical responses to *The Monk* were predictably negative, deploring the mingling of religious ritual and paraphernalia with explicitly sexual encounters and explicitly supernatural events. As David Hume records in his essay ‘Revaluation of the Gothic Novel’, ‘Coleridge seriously accused Lewis of blasphemy…and the book remained expurgated under the odium of blasphemy[[62]](#footnote-62)’ (Hume 287).

The setting of *The Monk* (which aside from some comparatively tedious diversions into forests and neighbouring villages is almost exclusively confined to convent and abbey) is essential to its exploration of themes of guilt and faith: the raising of a wall to preserve sanctity and piety both affirms and delineates the world of sin and licence on the other side. Indeed, within the relatively narrow confines – both literally and figuratively - of the narrative’s monastic setting, objects and rooms represent the externalisation of both the novel’s themes and the consciousness of the agents within the text: the abbey vaults provide a fitting visual metaphor for the novel’s narrative, descending as it does into deeper acts of depravity, but is suggestive also of the Monk’s consciousness, as he unearths successively more dark promptings of his mind. As Bal asserts, ‘It is possible to make a note of the places of each fabula, and then to investigate whether a connection exists between the kind of events, the identity of the actors, and the location’ (Bal 215). This ‘connection’ permits an immediate and instinctive understanding, by virtue of a kind of narrative ‘shorthand’ relying on a combination of symbolism and the ‘literant’s’ ‘variety of projections’ as explored by Holland and Sherman (182).

The reader’s first encounter with Ambrosio is at his spiritual and social peak, within the well-populated and bright-lit Capuchin Church. Strikingly, the Church itself is not

described, but rather the people and objects with which it is populated[[63]](#footnote-63):

Scarcely had the Abbey-Bell tolled for five minutes, and already was the Church of the Capuchins thronged with Auditors…Every corner was filled, every seat was occupied. The very Statues which ornamented the long aisles were pressed into the service. Boys suspended themselves upon the wings of Cherubims; St Francis and St Mark bore each a spectator on his shoulders…two Cavaliers …were leaning their backs against the seventh column from the Pulpit (Lewis 7-8).

The tolling of the abbey bell signifies the church, and we are drawn into its interior by the filled corners and occupied seats. The space being thus provided we throng it with carved statues of saints and angels, sufficiently large enough to bear two children apiece; these, together with columns numbering at least seven, serve to expand the space, and there is no doubt (on apparently comparatively scant evidence) that we are in a large, imposing, high-ceilinged and ornately adorned place of worship. There is a distinct levity of tone as Lewis satirises the attendees and by extension religious society: some come merely ‘to show themselves, some because they had no better means of employing their time till the play began; Some, from being assured that it would be impossible to find places in the Church’ (7). From the first there is the juxtaposition of the sacred and, if not the profane, certainly the less than pious: within that sacred space there is not pensive preparation for worship but rather vanity, wordliness and hypocrisy. Ambrosio’s arrival, in the context of the ‘two Cavaliers’ cruising for women to admire, and Leonella’s garrulous flirtations, brings a genuine piety and solemnity into the Abbey, altering its appearance and purpose both for those present within the narrative and for the reader:

He was a Man of noble port and commanding presence. His stature was lofty, and his features uncommonly handsome. His Nose was aquiline, his eyes large black and sparkling, and his dark brows almost joined together. His complexion was of a deep but clear Brown; Study and watching had entirely deprived his cheek of colour. Tranquillity reigned upon his smooth unwrinkled forehead; and Content, expressed upon every feature, seemed to announce the Man unacquainted with cares and crimes. He bowed himself with humility…Such was Ambrosio, Abbot of the Capuchins, and surnamed, ‘The Man of Holiness’ (18).

There is scant evidence of irony or levity of tone here, in marked contrast to the opening descriptions of the church and its attendees: the reader is impressed with a sense of combined strength of mind and genuine piety and ascetism, even if we do not quite (like Antonia) feel ‘pleasure fluttering in [our] bosom’ (18). This chapter will later explore the problematic nature of Ambrosio’s guilt: in later encounters with the Monk’s acts of extreme depravity, the recollection of this opening encounter – with its unequivocal depiction of a holy man – is troubling. The implication for the reader is that if so pious a man can fall so low, they ought not to consider themselves immune to vice. At this point, it should be noted, Ambrosio is literally as well as figuratively elevated: after his length and impassioned sermon he descends from the Pulpit, having been elevated above the congregation (19), which indulges in something like idolatry as they scrabble about for beads fallen from his rosary, and ‘whoever became possessor of a Bead, preserved it as a sacred relique’ (20). At this point in the narrative Ambrosio alone has been ‘pure’, whereas the innocent Antonia, in her confusedly sexual response to a celibate priest, ‘for which she in vain endeavoured to account’ (18), is perilously close to an act of unconscious immorality.

It is striking to note that the first quasi-supernatural event in the narrative comes within the boundaries of the Abbey, and yet is not an outcome of its religious function. The devoted, elated responses of the congregation to Ambrosio and his sermon appear not to be influenced by spiritual experience but by a human – and indeed physical – desire to admire a man. Since religious ritual does not supply the suggestion of external powers and supernatural experience, the desire to be elevated (or indeed lowered) to that which is beyond the physical and rational is apt to be filled by other sources – whether the exercise of the imagination, or the intrusion of the supernatural. As Brooks notes, the Gothic represents a desire to ‘[reassert] the presence, in the world, of forces that cannot be accounted for by the daylight self and the self-sufficient mind’ (Brooks 16). This ‘presence in the world’ of unaccountable forces manifests itself not in sanctified communion with the Christian God, but in a vivid daydream, signalled first by an alteration in the appearance and significance of the church:

The night was now fast advancing. The Lamps were not yet lighted. The faint beams of the rising Moon could scarcely pierce through the gothic obscurity of the Church. Lorenzo found himself unable to quit the Spot…A soft and cooling air breathed along the solitary Aisles: The Moon-beams darting into the Church through painted windows, tinged the fretted roofs and massy pillars with a thousand various tints of light and colours…(26).

Lewis turns his eye to the precise architectural motifs of a Gothic edifice, with ‘fretted roofs and massy pillars’ dwarfing the young man who ‘unable to quit the Spot’ is struck motionless – or ‘frozen’ – with something akin to the sublime. Crucially, there is not yet any intimation of the coming horrors; certainly there is ‘religious gloom’ (26) surrounding Lorenzo, but the darting moon-beams and cooling air are too evocative of the pastoral external world to explicitly evoke a sense of terror. Terror comes, however, in due course: Lorenzo’s vision of himself as bridegroom at the altar is shattered by the intrusion of a demonic ‘Unknown’ called into being by the threat of sexual consummation, even ‘before He had time to receive her’ (28). At once the gloomy but beautiful vision of the cathedral disintegrates: ‘The Lamps were extinguished, the Alter sank down, and in its place appeared an abyss vomiting forth clouds of flame’ (28). This gear-shift alters the tone of the novel from its first gently satiric notes as effectively as if the daydream had been a ‘real’ supernatural apparition: briefly fulfilling that ‘quest for the numinous’ identified by DP Varma (Brooks 16) by supplying intimations of that which is beyond reason and deduction, it whets the appetite for more (and worse). Though Lorenzo awakes from his stupor to find the cathedral once again ‘illuminated’, the lamps having been ‘lighted during his sleep’ (29), the reader’s perception of the cathedral is irrevocably altered: it is as if the walls have been breached, and are weakened, liable to dissolve at any moment and admit the intrusion of supernatural or malevolent forces.

The alterations continue. Having descended from his Pulpit, and that literally and symbolically elevated position from which his piety and virtue can be admired by congregation alike, Ambrosio enters his cell:

He was no sooner alone, than He gave free loose to the indulgence of his vanity. When He remembered the Enthusiasm which his discourse had excited, his heart swelled with rapture, and his imagination presented him with splendid visions of aggrandizement (40).

The cell functions simultaneously as confinement and liberation: here the Monk submits himself to the strictures of the celibate monastic life, but sequestered from the eyes and expectations of his flock can indulge his pride and sensuousness. The sophisticated reader of the Gothic, familiar with its device of sudden reversals, will doubtless have anticipated the revelation that the noble friar has a besetting sin, but (gratifyingly) Ambrosio exceeds expectation, addressing a portrait of the Virgin with patently - if unconsciously - sexual longing: ‘Oh! If such a creature existed, and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasure of that snowy bosom…Should I not barter for a single embrace that reward of my sufferings for thirty years?’ (41). His talk of bartering proves prescient, since the novel concludes with a Faustian pact of short duration and no value. The portrait itself is of far greater significance to the narrative than first appears: Matilda, the trans-gendered seductress and devil’s emissary who assists the Monk in taking his first step towards depravity, was the artist’s model, and the portrait itself a devilish device to prompt Ambrosio’s sexual awakening. Lisa Mulman cites the use of objects (such as the portrait) in *The Monk* as demonstrating an equivocal response to Catholic heritage and ritual on the part of Lewis: they are more than mere essential ‘props’ by which the sense of place is affirmed, but are invested with both a beauty and a status that seduce the reader whilst satirising the Church and its arcana:

While Lewis … appears…to vilify the Church through a depiction of carnal and corrupt monks and nuns, his actual (and quite profound) ambivalence towards Catholicism is manifested in the status of objects in the texts…the objects affiliated with the Catholic characters and plots obtain a kind of sensual, communal status…while the Protestant characters and plots subscribe to a logic…which is quite clearly different[[64]](#footnote-64) (1-2).

Parts of the Abbey and its grounds function quite distinctly and discretely, providing heavily symbolised contexts for the evocation of Ambrosio’s developing consciousness and increasing transgressions. It is significant that two of the Monk’s most important encounters with Matilda take place not within the consecrated confines of the abbey itself, but in the garden, which appears to alter its fabric and function with the alteration of Ambrosio’s mind. In his pious state early in the narrative, at a point at which the reader will be more aware of the profoundly sexual motives for his adoration of the Virgin’s portrait than the Monk himself, the garden provides the setting for an encounter with Matilda. Here nature is as moulded to rule and order as the human natures of the monks themselves, and an encounter with the sublime unthinkable:

In all Madrid there was no spot more beautiful or better regulated. It was laid out with the most exquisite taste; The choicest flowers adorned it in the height of luxuriance, and though artfully arranged, seemed only planted by the hand of Nature…the Walls were entirely covered by Jessamine, vines, and Honey-suckles…The Full Moon ranging through a blue and cloudless sky, shed upon the trees a trembling lustre…and the Nightingale poured forth her melodious murmur from the shelter of an artificial wilderness (50).

Here the boundaries between nature and artifice are blurred: in effect, there is no distinction between what has been ordered by God (in the movements of the moon and the growth of the plants) and what by man, illustrative of the tensions between Ambrosio’s natural impulse and the restraints of his order – though here there is the tentative suggestion of a possible harmony between the two. The full moon in the ‘blue and cloudless sky’ plainly evokes the Virgin, in her Catholic role of ‘Queen of Heaven’, and it is not roses or lilies that bloom, with their associations with love and death, but rather the modest rambling honeysuckle that grows in any country hedge. The atmosphere is not suggestive of sublime terror, but rather powerfully evocative of the merely beautiful, which Burke suggested ‘[Inspires] us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons... and we enter willingly into a kind of relation with them[[65]](#footnote-65)’. Ambrosio enters into ‘a kind of relation’ with his surroundings in that, in their ‘regularity and beauty’, they provoke a melancholy searching of himself; not the flight from reason which the sublime engenders but profound reasoning and self-examination: ‘Man was born to society. However little He may be attached to the World, He never can wholly forget it, or bear to be wholly forgotten by it…’(53). In this context he is not yet a villain, but a sympathetic character whose conflictions are presented to the reader in such terms that we are inclined to understand and even agree. His honest admission of loneliness, heard above the song of a nightingale, is surely intended to be genuinely moving – ‘After passing many a long hour in solitude, if I could express to you the joy which I feel at once more beholding a fellow-Creature!’ (54). Thus when the young Novice for whom he has conceived ‘all the affection of a Father’ (43) begins to make romantic advances (which, until she reveals herself to be a woman, are implicitly homoerotic), the reader is more likely to desire a narrative in which Ambrosio’s still-unconscious sexual desires will be consummated (‘...still less did He perceive that his heart throbbed with desire, while his hand was pressed gently by Matilda’s ivory fingers’ [62]) than revulsion and terror at a Monk tempted to the fatal breaking of his vows. If, as we have seen, the Gothic aesthetic in the use of buildings and ruins can act as an ‘agent’ in the narrative, provoking and inflating that sense of ‘frozen’ horror in both character and reader, here the garden[[66]](#footnote-66) in its essential un-Gothicness initially casts Ambrosio’s encounter with Matilda in a romantic and sympathetic light. Maria Purves in *The Gothic and Catholicism[[67]](#footnote-67)* notes the parallels between these first exchanges in the garden, and those of the ecclesiastical lovers Abélard and Héloïse (with which *The Monk’*s first readers would have been familiar[[68]](#footnote-68)):

In many scenes Matilda and Ambrosio imitate Abélard and Héloïse…Once Rosaria reveals ‘himself’ to be a woman, the cowled couple start to resemble Abélard and Héloïse more explicitly...It might be argued that, unlike their originals, these scenes are satirical: that Lewis is imitating these monastic romances simply to expose them. But, if so, the boundary between satire and sentiment is not clearly marked. These scenes work as straightforward romantic scenes (97).

The effect is to render the reader’s response to the Monk himself problematic: we witness the sexual awakening of a friar on what is essentially consecrated ground, but are perhaps conscious (more so than he – ‘still less did he perceive…’) of a desire to see it reach fulfilment. He is more innocent than we: the transgression, at this point, lies more with the reader than with the Monk. His ‘guilt’ is not unequivocal: the affection sincerely held for a companion who loves him in return would, on ‘unconsecrated ground’, be no more transgressive than the prelude to a love affair; it is the demands of the Church and of celibate life that pervert his instinctual attraction to Matilda. Guilt comes not from the impulse itself, but rather from its *context* – the ultimate extension of the Gothic sense of place functioning as agent in the text. As Stephen Blakemore notes in his essay on sexual and religious inversion in *The Monk*, the novel may be read as a meditation on the extent to which Catholicism perverts ‘true’ religion:

The novel’s thesis, however, what can be called the Black Legend of monastic Catholicism, was accepted by those hostile to the Catholic Church in England and France: Catholicism perverted ‘pure’ religion, producing deviant sexual practices originating from ‘unnatural’ vows of chastity violating ‘nature’[[69]](#footnote-69) (1).

It is this ‘inversion’ of our conception of what constitutes ‘consecrated ground’ – our suspicion that the abbey and its vaults and cells signify everything that is unnatural and indeed ‘impure’ – that renders our perception of the Monk’s guilt so problematic: from the first arousal of his sexual being, in that beautiful and ‘regulated’ context of the moonlit garden, there is a tension between the disgust that ought to be felt at the breaking of holy vows, and delight in seeing the unnatural ‘perversions’ of the church, with the pitiless demands of monastic life, challenged and inverted by natural affection and desires.

This first encounter with Matilda represents no more than a brief respite from the novel’s commitment to open transgression, and within moments the woman’s declarations of a pure and disinterested love – ‘I wish only for the liberty to be near you…to obtain your compassion, your friendship and your esteem. Surely my request is not unreasonable’ (62) – turn to ‘loud shrieks’, and acts of desperation:

She suddenly drew a poignard: She rent open her garment, and placed the weapon’s point against her bosom…The Friar’s eyes followed with dread the course of the dagger…The weapon’s point rested upon her left breast: And Oh! That was such a breast! The Moon-beams darting full upon it, enabled the Monk to observe its dazzling whiteness. His eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous Orb. A sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight: A raging fire shot through every limb; The blood boiled in his veins, and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination (65).

The moon which had previously ‘trembled’ with a lustre that evoked the gentle light of the Queen of Heaven here ‘darts’, mimicking the sharp thrust of the dagger, and illuminating Matilda’s breast: it is as if the sudden change in Matilda’s behaviour has irreversibly altered not merely the Monk’s consciousness but the world around him. The lengthy, coherent, reasoned debates in which he had moments before indulged in the peace of the garden are turned to expostulations of desire (‘Oh! That was such a breast!’) and the first promptings of his sexual nature become explicit, though still restricted to his ‘bewildered’ imagination. Lewis has achieved that ‘reversal’ typical of the Gothic narrative, which though almost exclusively within the confines of the consciousness of his characters nonetheless profoundly affects the reader with compassion for Ambrosio and dread for the inevitable decaying of his moral life. On returning to his cell, it no longer functions effectively as a physical and figurative barrier against the temptations of the world, and his confusedly devoted adoration of the portrait of the Virgin descends into sexual liberty and outright blasphemy as he ‘[riots] in joys till then unknown to him’ (67).

On next visiting the garden, Lewis gives no time to describing its beauty, which can no longer suggest quiet pensiveness and reason: it is merely the site of Ambrosio’s ‘embarrassing discovery’ (68) (and note the use of ‘discovery’, which suggests both the revelation of hidden knowledge and, in its archaic use, the ‘un-covering’ of Matilda’s breast). The Monk is not yet wholly lost, and he attempts a pious separation from the seductress and the regaining of his innocence – ‘I feel for you the warmest friendship, the truest compassion, and that you cannot feel more grieved than I do, when I declare to you that we must never meet again’ (69). But - inevitably – there is ‘concealed among the Roses…A Serpent…’(71), the Biblical symbol of temptation made flesh sealing the Monk’s transfer from the spiritual life to the wholly carnal.

It is notable that whilst the Monk’s first experiments in sexual intercourse take place within his cell, and thus on enclosed and consecrated ground, the function of the cell has changed, and become in effect a hospital ward for the care of Matilda, where she is attended by a surgeon and treated with lancet and bandage (73). Matilda herself makes use of this ‘de-sacralisation’ of the space (‘Accident has made you Master of a secret, which I never would have revealed but on the Bed of death…’ [81]) and it appears to give liberty to the Monk, who ‘clasped her rapturously in his arms; [and] forgot his vows, his sanctity, and his fame’ (90). This alteration in the function of his cell suggests that his descent into licentiousness still comes by degrees: he is not yet able to break his vows of chastity on ground that remains explicitly consecrated. On returning to the Chapel, his guilt is refined and sharpened, as though the physical environment affects his consciousness: ‘Ambrosio felt embarrassed, as he entered the Chapel. Guilt was new to him, and He fancied that every eye could read the transactions of the night upon his countenance’ (226).

As the Monk’s decent continues – both literally through the physical space of the abbey and its grounds, and figuratively through the sins which are now laid before him – he enters a cemetery which adjoins both the abbey and the neighbouring convent of St Clare’s. In keeping with his perpetual vacillation between the promptings of his carnal nature and his remaining attachment to the piety of his order (‘ “Dangerous woman!” said He; “Into what an abyss of misery you have plunged me…Fool that I was, to trust myself to your seductions! What atonement can purchase the pardon of my crime?”’ [223]), the cemetery is a liminal space, a boundary not simply between the mortal and immortal but between the abbey, where the friar might still retain hope of conserving his immortal soul, and the convent, where Matilda’s dabblings with the Devil will lead to certain damnation:

She passed through the Cloisters, and reached the Western side of the Garden…Then taking from him the Key, She unlocked the Door, and entered the Cemetery. It was a vast and spacious Square planted with yew-trees: Half of it belonged to the Abbey; The other half was the property of the sister-hood of St Clare, and was protected by a roof of Stone. The Division was marked by an iron railing, the wicket of which was generally left unlocked…(229)

As Ambrosio stands on the threshold of his final descent – from here, they move into the vaults beneath the Abbey, where witchcraft, rape and murder take place – he must first pass through a wicket gate, plainly evoking, with savage irony, the journey of Bunyan’s Pilgrim, for whom the wicket gate symbolises the beginning of the ‘strait and narrow way’ that leads, for him, to the Celestial City. That the gate is unlocked is significant, emphasising that the true constraints placed on the monks is not the stone and iron of physical boundaries, but rather the rules of convent life.

As Botting notes, it is the very equivocal nature of the novel’s depiction of what is to constitutes ‘consecrated ground’ - both of the mind and of place – that made it so problematic a narrative at the time of its publication:

Expressing several reservations, the *Analytical Review* (1796) observed that the novel elicited the reader’s sympathy for Ambrosio. The possibility of identifying with such a figure no doubt contributed to the very ambiguous morality of the novel. Its lack of a clearly stated and convincing moral, moreover, demanded that it be severely criticised… (79).

This ‘very ambiguous morality’ is felt throughout: we are never in any certainty as to the consecration or ‘desacralisation’ of the ground on which we stand as reader. As we have seen, Ambrosio himself is presented almost as a figure fit for romantic identification, and the provision of his personal history (including the knowingly poignant abandonment by his mother at the abbey gates) permits an almost sentimental leniency on the part of the reader. He is intensely human, to an extent far exceeding the humanity of *Otranto*’s Manfred or *Udulpho*’s Montoni, who in comparison function not as conflicted men with whom a reader might identify, but merely as repositories of the villainy necessary to the narrative – what E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* called ‘flat characters…constructed around a single idea or quality’[[70]](#footnote-70) (73). At every stage the Monk is riven with doubt, miserably caught between the demands of body and soul, so that, even in the vaults of the abbey, the darkness of the labyrinth – which by conventional use of the Gothic sense of place ought perhaps to conceal the promptings of conscience and give liberty to wickedness – rouses doubts at his own strength to continue his path to moral destruction:

They reached the foot of the Stair-case, and continued to proceed, feeling their way along the Walls. On turning a corner suddenly, they descried faint gleams of light, which seemed burning at a distance. Thither they bent their steps: The rays proceeded from a small sepulchral Lamp, which flamed unceasingly before the Statue of St Clare…Darkness the most profound surrounded [Ambrosio], and encouraged the doubts, which began to revive in his bosom…In this fearful dilemma, He would have implored God’s assistance, but was conscious that He had forfeited all claim to such protection (273).

Here Lewis deliberately inverts the traditional Gothic motif of the innocent victim – usually a woman, subject to the malevolent sexual advances of the villain – lost in the labyrinth of castle or convent: the ‘lost’ victim here is the supposed villain himself, without even the assistance of the God whose help he would otherwise have ‘implored’. The implied sexual inversion in the narrative, first set up in the garden where Matilda, in the guise of a male novice, first makes her sexual advances to an affectionate Ambrosio, is further explored: here, the sexual predator is the female Matilda, and the conflicted, frightened, almost vulnerable-seeming sexual object is the male friar. Indeed, not only is his humanity preserved even while he descends through the vaults to acts of witchcraft and sexual violence, but his own transgression leads him to reconsider his unbending condemnation of other sinners, and to develop compassion which in his pious state had been absent. On hearing the cries of the immured Agnes – whose pleas for clemency he had earlier rejected – he is moved for the first time to pity:

He heard a faint voice exclaim, ‘God! Oh! God! No hope! No succour!’

He started, and shuddered at himself. ‘Should it be possible, Oh what a Monster am I!’ He wishes to resolve his doubts, and to repair his fault, if it were not too late already: But these generous and compassionate sentiments were soon put to flight by the return of Matilda (274).

Lewis appears to suggest that the acts of depravity into which the Monk is tempted do not efface his humanity, but rather develop it; that his humanity has come at the cost of his immortal soul. The promptings of his natural inclination to compassion (once suppressed, it should be remembered, by the strictures of his Order) so swiftly followed by the rape and murder of Antonia presents something of a moral problem for the reader: our capacity to accommodate the notion of the truly evil and the truly good existing simultaneously – and indeed developing simultaneously – is challenged.

In her examination of the moral consciousness of the characters of Henry James, Dorothea Krook identifies this coexistence of evil and innocence as the primary source of horror in *The Turn of the Screw*, James’ homage to the Gothic. Though Krook explicitly addresses the problem of innocence and corruption in children, her analysis nonetheless has relevance here, since it is Ambrosio’s almost childlike inability to process and manage his sexual desires that contributes to his final degradation:

The children’s innocence is really innocent and their corruption really corrupt – of this James convinces us by his masterly rendering of both; and it is this real, indisputable co-presence of elements so grossly incompatible that accounts for the peculiar mystery and horror of the phenomenon[[71]](#footnote-71) (109).

The reader is invited to interrogate their sense of what is ‘really innocent’ (more properly, in the context of *The Monk*, what is really ‘good’), and what is ‘really corrupt’: is Ambrosio’s compassionate response to the immured Agnes entirely negated by the sexual violence that follows? Conversely, is that sexual violence lessened or mitigated by our conception of the Monk as being at every stage riven with doubt and terror at the consequences of his actions, and our knowledge that his capacity for pity and compassion appears to increase in tandem with his capacity for evil? If, as Botting suggests, the Gothic ‘can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulate social life’ (47), *The Monk* can be said to blur the boundaries between what it is to be evil, and what it is to be good, what is ‘consecrated ground’, and what is not – and it is perhaps at this point of blurring that the novel could be said to be most deserving of its first accusations of blasphemy.

As Hume notes, ‘The confusion of good and evil which the Gothic novel reflects in its villain-heroes produces a non-Christian or anti-clerical feeling’ (287) – shorn of a clear sense of the distinction between good and evil, or at least what of might be expected from a man who is wholly evil, the reader is left adrift from conventional Christian morality. Crucially, Ambrosio’s first sin is determined not by the act itself but by its context, and by its having taken place on consecrated ground (both the grounding of his sacred vows, and the literal ground of his abbey cell). Taken in the abstract, the consummation of his desire for Matilda, who has actively sought his advances (‘ “Ambrosio! Oh! My Ambrosio!” sighed Matilda’ [90]) is no more sinful than the love affairs of Romeo and Juliet, or Beatrice and Benedick. It is solely the demands of celibacy that pervert the action: remove Ambrosio from the bindings of his vows, and the act of love would be a satisfying – indeed almost an inevitable - development in the narrative. Conversely, the romance between Don Raymond and Agnes, which the reader is encouraged to urge to a happy conclusion, includes what is scarcely less than a rape:

“You will pardon me, when I acknowledge, that in an unguarded moment the honour of Agnes was sacrificed to my passion…Scarcely was the first burst of passion past, when Agnes recovering herself started from my arms with horror…’Touch me not!’ She cried with a violence which terrified me; ‘Monster of perfidy and ingratitude, how I have been deceived in you!’ (186-187).

Though the language is explicitly suggestive of violence – her honour was ‘sacrificed’; she started with ‘horror’ – Lorenzo’s outrage is little more than that of outraged propriety, and Don Raymond is not singled out for the torments reserved for Ambrosio. Lewis has achieved that same trick deployed by Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer*: where the latter invites an interrogation of what it is to be mad, Lewis forces a discomfiting assessment of which of his characters truly transgresses.

In her essay ‘Myself creating what I saw: morality and the spectator in eighteenth century Gothic’[[72]](#footnote-72), Fiona Price cites an eighteenth century model (defined by Shaftesbury in 1711) for understanding the complex relationship between a reader’s own moral code and sympathy for the sufferings of characters in the narrative:

Sympathy, then, ensures an involuntary moral reaction that exists independently of personal interest (4).

The engagement of our sympathies to the plight of the immured Agnes constitutes a basic act of human empathy and compassion: our ‘involuntary moral reaction’ (that of condemning the hypocrisy and cruelty of the order of St Clare) is straightforward, and awards a kind of moral status. Less straightforward is the sensation of sympathy felt for Ambrosio himself: with the provision of the story of his abandoned childhood, and the gender-inversions which cast him as feminised victim of Matilda’s satanic seductions, there comes a moral reaction that arguably lessens (if not wholly negates) our condemnation of his final acts of violence. It is as if Lewis attempts an alteration to the foundations of what the reader might term their own ‘consecrated ground.’

As Ambrosio descends further into the vaults of the convent, he participates in a series of rituals that visually evoke what Blakemore terms the novel’s ‘Black Mass’ – that ‘inversion and subversion of the traditional roles of religion and sex’ (1) which the novel displays throughout. The sensually seductive ornamentation and garments of Catholic ritual are ‘perverted’, as Matilda (again inverting the traditional sexual roles of the Church) plays the part of priest:

She had quitted her religious habit: She was now clothed in a long sable Robe, on which was traced in gold embroidery a variety of unknown characters: It was fastened by a girdle of previous stones, in which was fixed a poignard. Her neck and arms were uncovered. In her hand She bore a golden wand. Her hair was loose and flowed wildly upon her shoulders; Her eyes sparkled with terrific expression; and her whole Demeanour was calculated to inspire the beholder with awe and admiration…She placed the Lamp on the ground, near the Basket…She drew a circle round him, another round herself, and then taking a small Phial from the Basket poured a few drops on the ground before Her…and drawing the Poignard from her girdle plunged it into her left arm. The blood gushed out plentifully…(276).

The inversion (and indeed perversion) of Christian symbolism is explicit. The symbols and precious stones on Matilda’s robe evoke not merely the costume of the Catholic priest, but the High Priest’s garments in Old Testament ritual[[73]](#footnote-73), which Christian doctrine considers to foretell and symbolise aspects of the coming Messiah: Lewis here does not merely satirise the accoutrements of the Church, but appears to strike at the earliest basis of Christian theology. The lamp with which Matilda illuminates the vault suggests the Biblical verse comparing holy scriptures to a light shining on the paths of the righteous[[74]](#footnote-74), and the shedding of blood (at the point of the ‘poignard’ which was first drawn in the garden, when Ambrosio remained in comparatively Edenic innocence) purchases not redemption, as in the Christian doctrine (‘Without shedding of blood there can be no remission [of sins]’ [Hebrews 9: 22]), but transgression. Matilda’s ritual is the prelude to what is both the novel’s most supernatural and most absurd episode. Where the appearance of the Bleeding Nun in the carriage of the young lover Lorenzo contrives to combine first a pleasingly suspenseful ambiguity immediately followed by the novel’s most obvious joke, the Spirit conjured in the vaults recalls nothing so much as rather camp pantomime theatrics:

The cloud dispersed, and [Ambrosio] beheld a Figure more beautiful, than Fancy’s peril ever drew. It was a Youth seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled. He was perfectly naked: A bright Star sparkled upon his fore-head; Two crimson wings extended themselves from his shoulders; and his silken locks were confined by a band of many-coloured fires….Ambrosio gazed upon the Spirit with delight and wonder (276-277).

The very details with which this supernatural apparition is invested undermine its potential to affect the reader with what D. P. Varma called the ‘numinous’: the puff of smoke in which he arrives, the improbable scarlet wings and the ‘silver branch, imitating Myrtle’ which he carries appear like nothing so much as cheap stage props. If the function of the convent vaults has changed from place of prayer to place of sexual licence, here they take on the aspect of a theatre. With this suggestion of falsity the reader’s moral and sympathetic engagement with the Monk is threatened: he seems less a ‘real’ man subject to reasonable human faults, and more a pantomime villain of whom nothing but vice can be expected.

This intrusion of the supernatural is accounted for by Tzvetan Todorov’s clear distinctions between the fantastic and the marvellous[[75]](#footnote-75). He describes the fantastic as being a moment of poised, pained indecision on the part of the reader, ‘a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion’ (41). It is that moment when, presented with a curious and unsettling event or series of events, character and reader alike must determine if ‘the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described’, and thus the strangeness of the events are ‘uncanny’, and a product of altered or disordered perception, or if, on the other hand, ‘new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena’, in which case the narrative has entered the realms of the ‘marvellous’ (41). Both the uncanny and the fantastic place the reader/character in a participatory state: at the points of the fantastic, indecision and uncertainty ensures a state of tension and engagement, and if concluding that the events are uncanny, then their perceptions are profoundly altered by the text/events. The marvellous in effect releases both reader and character from the demands of the narrative: they need no longer wonder what is real, and what is not; and their perception has been quite clear and rational, after all.

In *The Monk*, this intrusion of the marvellous/supernatural is less than wholly successful as a device for further exploring the moral consciousness of the Monk. We might suspect Lewis of reverting to camp theatrics and the provision of an openly supernatural explanation for his hero-villain’s depravities, because he had encountered the perennial difficulty with explaining the nature and origin of evil. Dorothea Krook addresses this problem in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, in which fantastic[[76]](#footnote-76) events are either a consequence of a supernatural haunting of children, or merely externalise the obsessions and terrors of their governess by showing how these terrors alter and shape her perception of events:

What the supernatural is chiefly intended to express, I suggest, is Henry James’ sense of the mystery and final inexplicability of absolute evil as figured in Quint and Miss Jessel. This, the sheer inexplicability of the nature and origin of evil in the human soul, appears to have challenged and perplexed the minds of reflective men ever since reflection upon the phenomenon began … The ambiguity of *Turn of the Screw* is closely connected with the supernatural, the connexion being that of mutual reinforcement. What this expresses, I suggest, is James’s sense of a phenomenon as profoundly mysterious and finally inexplicable as absolute evil itself – namely, the co-existence or co-presence of good and evil in the human soul (109).

Krook here focuses on the highly ambiguous nature of the supernatural events in James’ novel – and of course the presence of the supernatural in *The Monk* is far from ambiguous (indeed, to a fault). Nonetheless Krook’s assessment of the function of the supernatural in *The Turn of the Screw* may be applied to its function in Lewis’ novel – it suggests that no application of natural laws, no theological reasoning and no compassionate understanding of his consciousness can finally explain the phenomenon of ‘the co-presence of good and evil in the human soul.’

It is significant that despite the novel’s setting being almost exclusively confined to consecrated ground – to those places where encounters with the Divine might be most expected – God himself, and any physical or supernatural manifestation of the ‘good’, are entirely absent. Visitations and representations of all that is demonic are plentiful, from the Bleeding Nun to the demonic spirit conjured by Matilda, and the appearance of Satan at Ambrosio’s final punishment. The interventionist God as agent of change, or source of help and comfort, is wholly absent; indeed Ambrosio is called ‘the God-abandoned’ (437) at the moment of his finally signing his soul over to the Devil, and not ‘he who abandoned God’. The implication (troubling indeed to a reader in the eighteenth century) here is that since the God he had first served had withdrawn help and governance, the Monk’s decline into transgression was, perhaps, inevitable.

**2: *The Bell* and the Pursuit of the Good**

In his essay ‘Tragedy, love and religion in Iris Murdoch’s *The Bell[[77]](#footnote-77)’*, Kenneth Masong identifies the novel’s particular preoccupation with the portrayals of faith and goodness – in effect, the fabric of the literal and figurative ‘consecrated ground’ which it depicts:

We discover, in the early part of her academic career, a gradual disclosure of the eclipse, or the substitution of God on her thought. No-one doubts the importance Murdoch gives to the religious dimension, both in her literary and philosophical works, but the striking character in her Platonic retrieval of the moral and the religious logically, and tragically, involves a certain ‘twilight of the gods’, what one may call, the ‘tragedy of the divine’, that is, displacing God in order to retrieve the Good (2).

If *The Monk* depicts the displacement of God, and the consequences of an interventionary divine power having been replaced by mere rule and order, *The Bell* suggests that the removal of God need not suggest an absence of the good. Further, it proposes that humanity’s capacity for worshipful pursuit of an objective moral ideal can persist even in the absence of belief in God.

In *The Sovereignty of Good[[78]](#footnote-78)* (the title of which mischievously mimics the Christian theology of the sovereignty of God), Murdoch’s critical examination of philosophical approaches to the idea of morality, she suggests that ‘good’ can be conceived of as an objective ideal, a concrete universal to sit alongside conceptions of (for instance) sound and colour: ‘My view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals. And if someone at this point were to say, well, why stop at moral concepts, why not claim that all universals are concrete, I would reply, why not indeed? Why not consider red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual concept of love?’ (29). For Murdoch, and for her characters, good is an object to be striven towards, not defined by the laws of God, but rather an indefinable (and largely unknowable) personal objective, attained by a series of acts of will that constitute ‘moral choice’ (34). That good is a hazy, slippery concept, impossible to define with any certainty even when it is apparently visible in the acts of a good or virtuous person, is central to the questions that a philosopher (or novelist) should seek to answer:

What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? Can we make ourselves morally better? These are questions the philosopher should try to answer. We realise on reflection we know little about good men. There are men in history who are thought of as having been good (Christ, Socrates, certain saints), but if we try to contemplate these men we find that the information about them is scanty and vague, and that, their great moments apart, it is the simplicity and directness of their diction which chiefly colours our conception of them as good. And if we consider contemporary candidates for goodness, if we know any, we are likely to find them obscure or else on closer inspection full of frailty (51).

That casual aside – ‘if we know any’ – demonstrates Murdoch’s conviction that ‘good’ is not merely the opposite of ‘bad’, part of the binary on which *The Monk* operates, but intrinsically equivocal and indefinable, to the extent that if we were to see a ‘good’ man we might not immediately know him by his actions.

In *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues[[79]](#footnote-79),* a pair of stage-plays not entirely successful as pieces of drama (‘Bags I sit next to Socrates!’ [16]), Murdoch questions the division between religion and faith, and the necessity of the latter for the former. Socrates asks: ‘Can we distinguish religion from belief in gods?’ (71). This question is addressed in some depth in The *Sovereignty of Good*, which provides a clear framework for understanding and developing the notion of religion – and even of worship – in the absence of belief in an objective God:

It is significant that the idea of goodness (and of virtue) has largely been superseded in Western moral philosophy...This is to some extent a natural outcome of the disappearance of a permanent background to human activity…whether provided by God…or by the self.

What becomes of [prayer] in a world without God? Prayer is not properly a petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love. With it goes the idea of grace, of a supernatural assistance to human endeavour[[80]](#footnote-80) which overcomes empirical limitations of personality…Let us take first the notion of an object of attention. The religious believer, especially if his God is conceived of as a person, is in the fortunate position of being able to focus his thought upon something which is a source of energy. Such focusing, with such results, is natural to human beings (53-54).

Murdoch suggests that prayer as part of religious life is the focusing of attention upon a personified objective. That objective functions as a ‘source of energy,’ supplying both a kind of direct assistance and a spur to further acts of moral choice (and it is possible to conceive of Hannah Crean-Smith in *The Unicorn* as occupying this position of a God-replacing focus of worshipful attention).

Bran Nicol notes the *The Bell’s[[81]](#footnote-81)* atmosphere as being more emphatically realist than that of novels such as *The Unicorn*: ‘Its sense of restraint renders it more like a ‘traditional’ version of realism than much of [Murdoch’s] early work’ (49). Nonetheless, it makes use of strikingly Gothic conventions, with the arrival of the two young ‘innocents’ Dora and Toby at Imber, a large and intimidating building isolated in the countryside that seems somehow to exist at an unspecific temporal distance from the ‘real world’ (aircraft appearing above Imber are described as ‘gleaming like angels’, and then ‘peel off like a flower’ [130], the imagery remaining resolutely timeless despite its twentieth-century subject, the planes themselves given a quality of strangeness and even of the supernatural). Dora Greenfield, leaving London to return to her estranged husband, shivers at first sight of Imber and its grounds, finding the contrast between the dense countryside and the benevolent bustle of the capital instantly threatening:

Dora shook herself and tried to look at the scene…She thought of far away London, and the friendly dirty and noise of the King’s Road on a summer evening, when the doors of the pubs stand wide to the pavement. She shivered … and wished they might never arrive (26).

Here again is that suggestion that the Gothic has become so absorbed in the cultural consciousness that a character might feel themselves to be at the mercy of its narrative thrust: it is as if the boundary between fiction and reality has become blurred, so that one might almost expect Dora to have paused at the threshold and said, “Why, I feel just as if I am a character in a Gothic novel![[82]](#footnote-82)” In due course Dora discovers the legend of the submerged Abbey bell, and its attendant myth; the prophecy that it will ring underwater to portend a death alerts both Dora and the reader to the possibility of tragedy. The bell itself recalls the appearance of the giant’s helmet in *The Castle of Otranto*: both are displaced from their proper location, suggesting a disruption to the proper order of things; both are heavy with meaning and threat, and though merely inanimate objects serve as causative agents within the narrative. Where the presence of the helmet fits emphatically within Todorov’s conception of ‘the marvellous’, the bell at Imber and the qualities and myths with which it is invested have a quality of the uncanny. Dora, however, is dissatisfied with the de-spiritualisation of twentieth-century life, and undertakes what D. P. Varma called ‘the quest for the numinous’: she plans to force upon the other residents of Imber a fantastic event which might reinstate their belief in the supernatural:

Her eyes were shining. “[Let’s] surprise everybody. Make a miracle. James said the age of miracles wasn’t over…it would be such a marvellous surprise.”

And indeed as she stood there in the moonlight, looking at the quiet water, she felt as if by the sheer force of her will she could make the great bell rise. Afer all and after her own fashion, she would fight. In this holy community she would play the witch (199).

Note Murdoch’s own use of the word ‘marvellous’, which ironically emphasises that the event will be nothing of the kind, but achieved through the prosaic laws of physics and the use of trolleys, levers, ramps and hawsers (213). This passage contrasts Dora’s conception of holiness as having been bereft of any visible quality of the marvellous/supernatural with a kind of psychological witchcraft which is instead her sole recourse. The bell does toll, once taken from the river, as Dora and Toby roll within it in a fumbling embrace: ‘A muted boom arose and echoed away across the lake whose waters had now once again subsided to rest’ (222). That boom retains a quality of the fantastic for those inhabitants of Imber unaware of Dora and Toby’s plan – Michael Meade is woken from his sleep and ‘had again that strange sense of impending evil’ (223). The reader, too, is caught somewhere between the knowledge that its ringing has no supernatural cause, and the suspicion that, narrative conventions being what they are, Murdoch having offered the possibility of death at the tolling of the bell is unlikely to leave the reader disappointed. When death comes it is determinedly devoid of the fantastic - ‘Nick had shot himself. He had emptied the shot-gun into his head. To make quite sure he had evidently put the barrel into his mouth’ (296-7). For Byatt, the bell itself is not a success: ‘My criticism of it could perhaps best be expressed by saying that the moment when Dora rings it – a symbolic sounding at night of “the truth-telling voice that must not be silenced” – one has the feeling, while reading, that a symbolic action has been substituted for a real one, that the climax which is seen to occur is greater than the occurrence’ (75). But I would argue that to conceive of the bell as merely symbolic, and of not having a proper place within the narrative, is to misunderstand its function. Dora and Toby’s ringing of the bell is necessary to the narrative: it serves to engage the reader more deeply by permitting that atmosphere of the fantastic to persist. Of course we know that there is nothing supernatural in the bell: we have seen its having been raised from the lake. But as the moment of its ringing we are roused, like Michael Meade, to a kind of anticipatory terror, and enjoy that effect of the Gothic which Maturin described: our emotions – aroused in empathy with this of the inhabitants of Imber, for whom the bell occupies a curious position poised between the uncanny and the marvellous - have become an event.

In *The Bell*, the novel’s Gothic sense of place is a crucial device in providing a framework for the exploration of Murdoch’s theories on the quality and pursuit of ‘the good’. Imber itself sits in a kind of limbo between the explicitly religious Abbey (set apart from Imber by a causeway, a typical Murdoch device using water as both border and potential means of passage). The Abbess herself calls Imber “A ‘buffer state’ between the Abbey and the world, a reflection, a benevolent and useful parasite, an intermediary form of life” (81). Here the Gothic binary of good/God versus evil/the world is queried; Murdoch proposes an alternative thesis, that within a Godless world there is nonetheless scope for the pursuit and even worship of an objective good, and literally ‘builds’ a model by which it can be demonstrated.

The novel goes on to suggest that with the removal of God, the human desire for a focus of loving attention is transformed into ‘worship’ of others, as characters seek after redemptive or spiritual experience without conventional faith. Forms of love are interrogated and transformed, without obedient recourse to the ‘doctrine, correction, reproof and instruction in righteousness’[[83]](#footnote-83) of scripture. Redemption is sought not by the making of pleas or sacrifices to God, but through the kinds of ‘moral choice’ which is one of the main props of Murdoch’s idea of the pursuit of the good. Michael Meade’s (largely non-physical) love affair with the schoolboy Nick Hawley having precluded him from a life in the priesthood, his renewed acquaintance with Hawley as a man offers an opportunity for a kind of redemption in the form of transforming his first erotic love into a purer, Platonic ideal:

He began, hazily, to reflect on how he had formerly felt that his religion and his passions sprang from the same source, and how this had seemed to infect his religion with corruption. It now seemed to him that he could turn the argument about: why should his passions not rather be purified by this proximity? He could not believe that there was anything inherently evil in the great love that he bore Nick: this love was something so strong, so radiant, it came from so deep it seemed of the very nature of goodness itself (105).

Murdoch again challenges the notion that there should be anything so simplistic as a polarised conception of good and evil, with the one to be pursued at the cost of the other, and the two being mutually exclusive. Michael’s ‘moral choice’ has been to focus on the ‘source of energy’ which Murdoch proposed in *The Sovereignty of Good* as being the true pursuit of religion. The ground of Imber is consecrated by degrees[[84]](#footnote-84), with each attempt made by its inhabitants to reach their own conception of the Good.

In *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, Bran Nicol says, ‘In *The Bell* the uncanny is not simply there to create a Gothic atmosphere. Instead it serves as a counterpoint to the passionate rational dialogue between James and Michael which is conducted across its pages’ (55). A reader may be forgiven for considering this ‘passionate rational dialogue’ the least successful and engaging element of the novel: in it, James and Michael demonstrate a prolixity and lexis suspiciously similar to that of Murdoch herself in her philosophical essays, and when Dora herself begins to lose interest – ‘it was all too abstract’ (132) – we are inclined to share her *ennui*. Murdoch’s theories are far more powerfully demonstrated in the actions of the characters – in Michael’s attempt to sanctify his love for Nick, in Dora’s attempt to reproduce the ‘numinous’, and even in Nick’s own suicide. Towards the close of the novel, and of his own life, Nick offers a vehement sermon of his own, which manages simultaneously to deny both the conventional Christianity represented by the Abbey, and the rather self-consciously academic philosophising of James and Michael (and, by inference, of Murdoch herself):

Dearly beloved, we are come of a fallen race, we are sinners one and all. Gone are the days in the Garden, the days of our innocence when we loved each other and were happy. Now we are set each man against his fellow and the mark of Cain is upon us, and with our sin comes grief and hatred and shame…

Wait, there is a consolation and a remedy, the very Word of God, the dayspring from on high...I speak beloved of the joys of repentance, the delights of confession, the delicious pleasure of writhing and grovelling in the dust. (257)

This bitterly sarcastic inversion of scripture (all the more effective for using the lexis of the evangelic preacher, with that ‘dayspring from on high’) approaches the quality of a raging visionary in its high emotion and savage anger: it recalls nothing so much as Melmoth’s sermonizing to Immalee:

They know that God cannot be acceptably worshipped but by pure hearts and crimeless hands; and though their religion gives every hope to the penitent guilty, it flatters none with false promises of external devotion supplying the homage of the heart; or artificial and picturesque religion standing in the place of that single devotion to God, before whose throne, though the proudest temples erected to his honour crumble into dust, the heart burns on the altar still, an inextinguishable and acceptable victim (Maturin 366).

For all his anger and self-destruction, it is perhaps possible to see Nick himself as a Christ-figure, whose suicide purchases for Michael freedom from the besetting ‘sin’ of his love. Michael himself sees it as little more than vengeance – ‘He had thought that Nick's revenge could not be more perfect. He had been wrong. It was perfect now’ (277) – but here we are privy to information that Michael himself is not. Of all the tentative, over-thought approaches made towards selflessness and Goodness in *The Bell*, it is Nick’s protective fury towards Toby that most nearly approaches an act of pure love, requiring as it does the abandonment of his pretence at nothing but callous cynicism: ‘Wretched child ... I wonder if you have any idea the harm you're causing? ... you are busy destroying a man's faith, undermining his life, preparing his ruin’ (259). That ‘the man’s faith’ is, so far as Nick is concerned, little more than a cruel delusion is no matter: his love for Michael, however equivocal, permits the suppression of his own moral code. There is a selflessness in his plea to Toby, and even in his suicide, that represents an act almost of redemptive love, so that, in defiance of the conventional church position that to end one’s own life is to commit an unforgivable sin, the scene of his violent death – however squalid – is perhaps the nearest Imber ever comes to truly ‘consecrated ground.’

If Nick’s love for Michael is imperfect, it nonetheless is of value in Murdoch’s framework for the pursuit of the Good. Indeed, in her ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts[[85]](#footnote-85)’, Murdoch equates the concept of the Good most closely with that of love. Thus Nick Fawley, in his final act of self-destruction, and Ambrosio in his first ‘natural’ affection for Rosario/Matilda, might be seen to have been standing on something like consecrated ground:

Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. False love moves to false good. False love embraces false death. When true good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened (384).

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Contextualising *Confusion*: The Gothic, and Faith in Crisis.**

I began this thesis by querying John Bayley’s assertion that the novelist must be ‘self-conscious’ (Bayley 515). When I began my research – both in drafting and refining my novel, and in examining aspects of the Gothic – I was quite convinced that Bayley was wrong: I had completed the second or third iteration of *Confusion* before I was alerted to the qualities of the Gothic that it displayed, and was both surprised and displeased. Writing (I thought) as truthfully as I could in representation of internal and external worlds as I experienced them, it had not occurred to me that so specific a genre as the Gothic could be arrived at by accident. But it would not be true to claim that upon reflection it was altogether surprising that a genre which thrives in the space between the real and imagined, between faith and reason, and in places suggestive of transgression and piety, should have been most akin to my own work.

The inevitable effect of accepting that I had unconsciously begun to deploy Gothic motifs and protocols was that I could not help but become a ‘self-conscious’ writer in precisely the way that Bayley describes. Indeed, so far from being resentful of what I had initially considered an accusation as much as an observation, I began to look on it as a kind of liberation. In revising *Confusion*, as it passed through several iterations, I became conscious of making a knowing use of the Gothic, particularly in respect of the uncanny. My second novel, on which I am currently working, makes still more conscious use of the Gothic, placing emphasis on Todorov’s notion of the fantastic: it deliberately exploits the moment poised between the explicitly supernatural and the merely strange.

Having become ‘self-conscious’, I naturally turned to an examination of my formative years, and the experiences and influences that might reasonably be thought to have formed my style and the themes with which my work is preoccupied. I have not found this either a natural or an easy area of study – perhaps by way of self-protection, I had avoided writing anything openly autobiographical – but it has proved both enlightening and instructive.

My upbringing was profoundly religious, characterised by a devout and exact attendance to Scripture, often identified through a series of outward acts which set members of the Strict Baptist church I attended apart not only from the irreligious (or ‘worldly’), but from the significant majority of other Christians. These acts included the exclusive use of the King James version of the Bible (modern translations were distrusted to the point of being considered almost of devilish purpose), and the use of a nineteenth century harmonium to accompany hymns (since modern instruments had affinities with pop and rock music, and were therefore not merely worldly but potentially Satanic). I had seen photographs of this harmonium floating in the chapel during the 1952 Essex floods, but it survived, so that as a child and teenager I pumped the thinly-carpeted pedals and worked the stained keys to accompany the Victorian hymns we sang.

Whilst our clothes were not cultish in the manner of the outfits adopted by the Amish or by the Plymouth Brethren, I certainly felt visibly identified as ‘other’, with a modest mode of dress and an absence of adornments such as makeup or fashionable hairstyles. The cultural context which was normal for girls and young women in the eighties and nineties was nothing at all to do with me: I was more likely to be singing from memory verses on the agonies of Calvary than humming a pop song.

This sense of separation from the popular culture which my school friends enjoyed had a dual effect: firstly, it left me with a feeling of strangeness, sometimes my own and sometimes that of others, which continues to this day; and secondly, it gave me access to a period of the arts which had far more in common with a young woman growing up at the turn of the nineteenth century than at the turn of the twentieth. With popular music, cinema, modern novels and television almost entirely absent, I instead read and absorbed religious texts such as Jonathan Edwards’ *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, or Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; I knew the tales in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* almost by heart, and had shuddered at the woodcuts from a very young age. I read *Jane Eyre* at eight and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* at nine; my walls were covered not in posters of whichever bands my friends admired but in Pre-Raphaelite prints and a poster of an Italianate garden which might have been imagined by Anne Radcliffe.

But all these influences are stylistic and peripheral: they might have contributed to the absence of modern cultural identifiers in *Confusion* – I am often asked, to my surprise, when it is set – but cannot adequately explain my apparent affinity for the Gothic, which as I have explored in this thesis relies not on the mere depiction of objects but upon the reader’s being affected in particular ways.

In Chapter Two, I quoted DP Varma’s assertion that some fiction might be considered as representing “a quest for the numinous”, affirming the presence in the world of “forces which cannot be accounted for by the daylight of self and the self-sufficient mind”[[86]](#footnote-86). And it is this which I think best explains the call of the Gothic on my own writing: I write out of a suspension between the certainties of my religious upbringing and the certainties of atheism. I have found it helpful to turn to Todorov’s model of the marvellous, the fantastic and the uncanny. In this model, the marvellous is that which is explicitly supernatural, such as the rather fey appearance of the golden-haired spirit towards the conclusion of Lewis’ *The Monk*. It is therefore possible to place religious faith alongside the marvellous, since it requires belief in a wholly supernatural God. By the same model, that which is fully explicable without recourse to the supernatural is merely ‘uncanny’, with any sense of strangeness being rooted not in events themselves, but in the mind which experiences and processes these events. I have come to think of myself as existing both as writer and individual in a version of ‘fantastic’, that place which hovers uncertainly between the marvellous (and Godly) and the uncanny. That is, I am not yet ready to assign every moment of strangeness and wonder to nothing more than a particular firing of the synapses, but neither can I in all good conscience say that I hold an unquestioning faith in the Divine.

It would be easy to assume that the religion which formed so significant a part of my youth was a place of mystery and strangeness, characterised by baffling concepts and visionary writings of uncertain meaning. Certainly many must experience religion in this way, but it was not the case for me, or for those with whom I shared my faith. The absolutely supernatural nature of a triune God, a divine incarnation in a virgin birth and an eventual second coming was treated – and believed – with all the clarity and matter-of-factness as the principles of gravity. As this thesis has explored, the Gothic frequently took a satirical turn, simultaneously mocking and revelling in the obscurities of the Catholic church[[87]](#footnote-87) - but this is not something with which I can identify: *Confusion* displays, so far as I am ‘self-consciously aware’, no preoccupation with religious ritual or iconography and no desire to satirise the established churches.

To members of the church into which I was born and baptised, and where I spent my childhood and youth, even a plain cross would have been considered idolatrous. The chapel itself is a simple grey-brick Victorian building, and determinedly plain. It has a vaulted black-beamed blue-painted roof (the paint had a tendency to flake away from the panelling, a pretty dereliction which I confess has made its way into *Confusion*) and a series of long narrow windows. The only concession to the stained glass normally associated with ecclesiastical buildings are single discs of plain coloured glass probably no broader than an inch or so in diameter set into the apex of each window. There is a baptistery, of course, lined in blue tiles, which when not in use is concealed by a kind of elevated wooden platform covered in thin brown carpet. On the platform is the communion table. This could easily be mistaken for a family dining table in pale oak, were it not for the inscription THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME[[88]](#footnote-88) along the side facing the congregation (again, it is possible to see that my determination to write nothing that was autobiographical in the novel was not only perhaps misguided, but also impossible[[89]](#footnote-89)). The congregation – which was not large then, and is rarely so now – sits on ranks of dark wooden pews, which are of precisely the right degree of comfort to support a worshipper through a sixty-minute sermon without either sleeping or developing backache. If, as Michael Hall states in his essay on the meaning and symbolism in Victorian ecclesiastical architecture, “Churches embodied religious meaning” (Hall, 78),[[90]](#footnote-90) the matter-of-fact un-strangeness of our faith was amply demonstrated by the building’s absence of decoration. The only substantial charge of wilful obscurity was the insistence on the use of the King James bible, which – ironically, given its origins in Tyndale’s translation, and his desire that even a ploughboy should have access to Scripture – is occasionally as impenetrable as it is beautiful. Above all, there was no room for doubt: what could be strange about a text which an omniscient God had written for the instruction and correction of his people, and was historically accurate to the last detail?

In his essay on *The Novelist’s Background*, Vardis Fisher writes about the necessity of the novelist converting his background into ‘myth’:

As I see it, the chief task of the novelist is sufficiently to liberate himself from his background to be able to see it in some kind of perspective…we have in some manner to break free, without on the one hand losing touch with the stuff that made us, without on the other mistaking our self-protective illusions for truth[[91]](#footnote-91).

This thesis has examined the Gothic from the perspective of the sense of place – a perspective which called out for exploration largely because of the centrality of a building to my own novel. In considering why it was that a physical space should have taken on such a crucial position in *Confusion*, I have come to understand it as indicative of an attempt on my part to ‘liberate [myself] from [my] background’. Since the chapel where my family worshipped had such a central role in my life – to the extent that, looking back, I seemed always to be indoors – the notion of a building affecting its inhabitants has always intrigued and puzzled me. The plainness and clarity of the chapel building seems to have been inextricably linked to the clarity of the faith expressed and shared in it: there was no need for dimness, or ornament, or beauty – any sense of wonder could be supplied from the worshippers’ internal experience of their faith. Having to a great extent departed the certainty of a faith which requires no prompting from iconography, it is as if, in writing *Confusion*, I have been constructing for myself a new place of worship - one which supplies the beauty and strangeness I’m afraid I have lost.

The house in *Confusion* is not of course a conventional place of worship, but – in line with Murdoch’s conception of good as being an objective ideal to be striven towards, with acts which constitute a kind of worship – it functions as a place of refuge and fellowship, in which individuals attempt to understand how they might best act towards their own good or that of others. In this sense it is a kind of church, and in keeping with the duality of the Gothic in architecture - in which a place devoted to the sacred nonetheless provokes near-profane sensations of awe and terror – the house is both a place of sanctity and a place of transgression.

Crucially, it is also the locus of the confusion from which the novel takes its title. The clarity and unquestioning faith of my childhood, reflected so austerely in the plainness of the chapel where that faith was celebrated and explored, is entirely absent from the novel: there is hardly a single impulse, action or relationship which is not in some way equivocal. That some of this equivocation and lack of clarity is a function of John as unreliable narrator confuses matters still further. As a newly self-conscious writer, as Bayley would have it, I have accepted that my own equivocal state – suspended, as I have said, between the certainties of the faithful and the certainties of the faithless – has found expression in the characters and themes of *Confusion*. The house itself is the clearest expression of this: where the chapel of my childhood was uncomplicated and plain, the house in *Confusion* has places that are often highly decorated (such as the red room with its ceiling mural) or decked out with semi-religious meaning (such as Elijah’s room). It is as if my creation of the house represents an attempt to re-create my own faith-state, as though I have returned to the place of worship which was so central to my upbringing, but, since I can no longer rely on my own faith to supply wonder and strangeness, I must instead embellish the building with allusive and suggestive objects which might supply that strangeness for me. It is in that sense that I might be seen to be converting my background into myth, an enterprise markedly different from that undertaken by Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit[[92]](#footnote-92)*, which in its explicitly autobiographical treatment of the author’s childhood is almost as much a purging as a transformation into myth.

Emerging from that certainty – not entirely, but to a great extent – was not to *escape* from strangeness and uncertainty, but to *enter* it. Where once everything had been explained, everything was now unaccounted for. Where once I had known my future to be already set out for me by a benevolent God, it was now uncertain, and there was no guarantee that anything would work out, as I had always believed, to my own good. Where glimpses of beauty or horror in the everyday could have been directly attributed to brief moments of communion with God or his adversary, I was left doubting having glimpsed anything at all.

The character of Elijah in *Confusion* is a barely disguised representation of this experience: that sensation of having once had a light shone on the path and a lamp on the feet[[93]](#footnote-93) and having that light almost extinguished. Elijah’s perception of the world has been profoundly altered: he has lost his faith (which, in common with the principles of Enlightenment thought touched upon in Chapter 1 of this thesis, supported the notion of order and reason at the hands of a wise God), but has found no substitute. He too finds himself in a place that aligns with Todorov’s notion of the fantastic: he cannot rely on a marvellously theistic model for what he sees and experiences, but nonetheless he is prone to terrors and intimations that the oppressive and unnatural weather are heralds of disaster.

Elijah’s faith-crisis is triggered by a chance remark which exposes the absurdity (in purely logical terms) of his belief that a number of repeated phrases in the Bible (365 appearances of the term ‘be not afraid’) aligning with the number of days per year in our calendar represents a sign of comfort from an omniscient God. That such an alignment owes more to translators and to the adoption of the current Gregorian calendar centuries after the scriptures were first written, and therefore could only have had relevance to those reading a particular Bible translation in English post 1585, had not occurred to him. Although I myself once heard a preacher encourage his congregation by just this sermon, at the time it seemed to me a wholly reasonable application of Scripture, and was not the cause of the first fracturing of my own certainties. This came when I realised – comparatively late in life, and certainly long after I had completed my first degree and read a certain amount of philosophy and theology which might be thought likely to prompt at least a re-evaluation of childhood faith – that the scriptures on which my belief had been so firmly founded had been selected at the Council of Nicaea. It simply had not occurred to me to question how it was that those particular 66 books - of all the religious and visionary writings preserved over the centuries - had been alighted upon as Divine writ: all I knew was that ‘all scripture was given by inspiration of God’.[[94]](#footnote-94) I operated in a kind of logical blind circle: since the book I held declared itself to be the complete and sufficient word of God, it must be so. The realisation that a collection of priests and scholars had decided for themselves what was fit to be held between the black leather covers of my battered Bible was a profound shock, the effects of which I still feel. Again, as with my now knowing use of Gothic protocols, I have become in Bayley’s terms ‘self-conscious’, in that whatever claims I might make to avoiding the autobiographical in my fiction, my own background – even if transformed into myth – is an essential part of the themes and motifs that recur in my writing.

Having come to understand the Gothic as having been my unconscious recourse in a moment of faith crisis, it has been instructive to attempt to examine how the Gothic in fiction might be seen to have emerged, or become more popular, at times of significant change in the status and nature of faith in society.

We have already seen that the publication of Walpole’s institutionary Gothic novel came immediately post-Enlightenment. Its deliberate obscurity and outright marvellous plot offered a direct challenge to the Enlightenment notion that, since God oversaw an ordered and logical universe, each apparent mystery must have a simultaneously scientific and theological explanation.[[95]](#footnote-95) Fiction of the Enlightenment era had reflected, rather than challenged, the scientific and theological context of clarity and scientific rigour. Writing on Enlightenment fiction and the scientific hypothesis, John Bender says:

Not only do the novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, for example, pretend to offer densely particular, virtually evidentiary accounts of the physical and mental circumstances that actuate their characters and motivate the causal sequences of their plots, but they also attempt to frame the subjectivity of their characters within editorial objectivity… these novels share a way of representing the world that Steven Shapin in Simon Schaffer call “virtual witnessing”, by which they mean the rhetorical and visual apparatus for communicating scientific experiments to a public and convincing that public of their authenticity.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Examining Enlightenment modes of thought, Rolf Reichardt refers to a 1793 French engraving showing the embodiment of the Enlightenment and emphasises the crucial importance of ‘light’ as a concept: “Translated into practice, ‘Enlightenment’ indeed calls upon the *fiat lux* of Genesis, but its advent is occasioned by ‘truth’ and by the illuminated object she holds – an object that signifies more the physics of light than the divine Creator” (Reichard 96).[[97]](#footnote-97) Otranto functions effectively as a refusal both of the importance of scientific verisimilitude and the ‘light’ of truth: it appears to undermine the logic of Christian morality and theology, and instead expose (or ‘encode’, as explored in the Introduction to this thesis) fears operating at a primal level – fears never properly examined or revealed, so that in the ‘darkness’ the reader encounters as much their own private passions and terrors as those of the characters in the text. Where the Enlightenment movement sought to cast the light of theological and logical truth, the Gothic in response provided a (welcome) source of shadow. Habermas writes that “the Enlightenment was supposed to contradict myth and thereby escape from its power” (Habermas 14)[[98]](#footnote-98); yet *Otranto* seems not to escape the power of myth but rather to make it flesh. If the Enlightenment worked towards demystification, *Otranto* in particular revelled not merely in a return to myth, but in an insistence that through myth transgressive behaviour could be explored and exposed.

Nor does the Gothic merely challenge progressive thought by inviting a looking-back – it appears also to provoke a consideration of what might replace the faith-model which it frequently challenges. For example, *Melmoth the Wanderer* does more than merely polemicise against the absurdities of religion followed to an unthinking degree: it is profoundly progressive, heralding the existentialist movement which would not formally emerge until the early existentialist work, later that same century, of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. If existentialism is, broadly speaking, an attempt to understand human existence from the perspective of the individual, Melmoth himself can be understood as a proto-existentialist, seizing upon individual after individual and faith after faith as a measure against which he might understand the meaning and purpose of his own existence. As Hennelly writes, “We should indicate the general kind of existential tone that Melmoth provides as it almost obsessively repeats the word ‘existence’ again and again on its pages” (666).[[99]](#footnote-99)

I have said that my childhood faith thrived not on the mystery of the Divine and obscurity of ritual, but on a belief in an interventionist God, who ordered lives as he had Creation: according to laws no more puzzling than those of gravity. If He did not precisely punish earthly misdeeds with immediate retribution, certainly virtue could be expected to find its reward. Coincidences were not mere happenstance, but the outworking of a benevolent Godly plan. Post-Enlightenment realist fiction of the eighteenth to early nineteenth century frequently relied upon Providence as plot-device or a kind of Christian *deus ex machina.* Novels might have been read by any churchgoer alongside Scripture for instruction in the paths of the righteous, as Melyvn New writes in *The Grease of God:* “The startling coincidences and accidents, discoveries and reconciliations that pervade 18th century novels … mirror a providential world, in which God’s hand is actively present for the protection and reward of virtue, and the thwarting and punishment of vice” (238).*[[100]](#footnote-100)* Though the hand of Providence is not always explicitly foregrounded, characters might nonetheless find themselves subject to a kind of long-term instructive censure for the good of the soul, which the reader would expect and accept as part of the Christian framework.

Even such a rationalist as George Eliot can be seen to make narrative use of the knowledge that the significant majority of her readership would frame their understanding of her fiction within a conventionally Christian paradigm, placing their confidence in a benign interventionist God. In *Silas Marner[[101]](#footnote-101)*, she achieves a kind of double meaning: while the narrative may be comfortably absorbed within the Christian theistic model, the plot does not openly rely on ‘marvellous’ divine intervention – though certainly it is there, should the reader care to look for it. In the novel, the eponymous weaver’s miserable loneliness is caused by his having been framed for theft, and in consequence losing his status and his family. Through years of humility and the instructive presence of the abandoned Eppie, his bitterness at the loss of his treasured hoard of gold is effaced, and he realises that it is the love of a child, and not the love of possessions, which is most precious. Where Godfrey rather condescendingly welcomes Marner’s being reunited with his gold – “It is a great comfort to me to see you with your money again, that you have been deprived of all these years” (Eliot, 300) – Marner’s response is almost saintly in its unworldliness: “It takes no hold of me now….the money doesn’t. I wonder if it ever could again – I doubt it might, if I lost you, Eppie. I might come to think I was forsaken again, and lose the feeling that God was good to me” (331). Attentively realist in its exploration of contemporary life, Eliot’s novel nonetheless appears to demonstrate a conventionally Christian morality, in which the internal worlds of characters might appear to be framed more or less for the purpose of conveying a message. The careful equivocation of its double meaning – poised between Eliot’s rationalism and the (likely) faith of her readers – is itself almost a version of Todorov’s fantastic: not quite marvellously Divine, and not quite merely of this world.

Again, it is crucial to emphasise that the hand of Providence in 18th/19th century fiction is supernatural – because it is of God – and therefore by Todorov’s model marvellous, but it is not strange. It is therefore possible for fiction to inhabit the marvellous, without troubling or referencing the Gothic. In attempting to understand the context from which my own fiction developed with an unconscious affinity for the Gothic, it has been necessary to clarify that to be rational one need not entirely negate the supernatural, where that supernatural intervention is that of conventional Christian theology. Such a notion is almost anathema to the educated Westerner’s early twenty-first century sensibility, which conceives of the rational as something which by definition cannot be supernatural.

The passage in *Jane Eyre[[102]](#footnote-102)* in which the governess is reunited with Rochester by means of a ‘mysterious summons’ demonstrates a moment at which the use of an interventionist God to explain (and therefore to negate) the strange begins to fracture. Where the presence of a Divine hand hovering over the text permits the use of those ‘startling coincidences and accidents’ whilst simultaneously explaining them away within the context of conventional Christian order, the final propulsion in Brontë’s novel comes not at the direction of Providence but rather an externalisation of Jane’s own suppressed longings.

Jane has, of course, been coming close to marriage to St John Rivers, who is a kind of embodiment of sparse, unquestioning, wholly rationalised Christian faith. His position as man of the cloth does not bring with it any great sense of wonder or mystery – quite the reverse: his declarations of ‘love’ for Jane are framed as pleas to the logic and good sense of a union between them, with no acknowledgement of the unaccountability and strangeness of falling in love: “[To go with me to India] you must have a coadjutor: not a brother – that is a loose tie – but a husband. I, too, do not want a sister: a sister might any day be taken from me. I want a wife: the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely until death” (Bronte, 401). Small wonder that Jane ‘shudders’ at such a coldly-put proposal; and it is shortly after that she hears the unearthly - and entirely impossible – summons from Thornfield:

All the house was still; for I believe all, except St John and myself, were now retired to rest. The one candle was dying out: the room was full of moonlight. My heart beat fast and thick: I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake. . . I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry –

“Jane! Jane! Jane!” – nothing more.

“Oh God! what is it?” I gasped.

(Brontë, 414).

This moment marks the emotional culmination of a novel which has made elegant use of Gothic protocols throughout, without ever trespassing upon the wholly marvellous or supernatural, in the manner of *Otranto*’s helmeted giant, or *Melmoth*’s time-traveller’s miraculous telescope. The motifs of ruin, madness, trespass and transgression have all been present, and lavishly present has been that crucial aspect of the Gothic in which emotions are events, both for reader and character. God has, of course, also been present – Jane herself is conventionally devout – but not the sole (or even chief) motivating or guiding force, and not beyond a little irreverence (on rejecting St John’s proposal Jane mutters sarcastically “‘I will give my heart to God…*you* do not want it.’” [401]).

When that ‘mysterious summons’ comes, it is the first (and only) moment in the novel in which what is strange cannot be explained away, either by ‘real’ acts and individuals, or by reference to the intervention of the Divine. Crucially, for a novel which pays due attention to the Victorian Christian context in which it is set, there is no suggestion at the moment Jane hears the summons that it might be the voice of God directing her to Rochester: it is figured as an entirely otherworldly incident – “It did not seem in the room, nor in the house, not in the garden; it did not come out of the air, not from under the earth, nor from overhead. I had heard it – where, or whence, for ever impossible to know!” (415). Jane does not pause to think it is God, but rejecting witchcraft concludes “it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did – no miracle – her best” (415). Such a Godless piece of the marvellous was potentially troubling to the contemporary reader at ease with the voice of a God that communed with Moses and Abraham, but likely to baulk at such “a thumping piece of Gothic claptrap” (Yeazell 127).

For me, Brontë’s moment of the marvellous is most instructive when attempting to understand the ways in which my own writing might be seen to have resorted to the Gothic at a moment of my own faith crisis. If, as we have seen, the defining feature of the Gothic is that ‘emotions are its events’, as Maturin insists, here emotion becomes a force with as much power as that guiding hand of God on which so much eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction relied. It invests the human mind and heart with all the power and strangeness of a divine hand, elevating it almost to the status of the supernatural. As Yeazell records, Brontë herself had described the novels of Jane Austen as ‘more real than true’, which is to say that she considered their attentiveness to the ‘real’ fabric of society came at the expense of what is ‘true’ in terms of the inner life of the characters. By contrast, “*Jane Eyre* can be said to be more true than real. For while the miraculous events which conclude this novel are scarcely realistic, they are ‘true’ – true to the vision of human experience which informs Brontë’s world, and true to the internally consistent laws by which that world is governed….its truth is the truth of the psyche “(Yeazell 130).[[103]](#footnote-103)

It is essential that this ‘mysterious summons’ is viewed within the framework of Brontë’s own faith system as it may be deduced from the novel. If her writing is essentially the Gothic rationalised – the cool-headed deployment of Gothic protocols to a particular effect, in which each eerie laugh in the night or creaking door appears ghostly, but is of entirely prosaic origin – then we are forced to the conclusion that Brontë herself saw this audible communion of souls as being no less unlikely, and no more marvellous or supernatural, than Rochester’s horse being startled at Jane’s first appearance on a twilit county lane. The lovers’ cries are a version of those matter-of-fact workings of Providence on which so much early eighteenth century fiction depended: to Brontë, it is no less strange than the notion of an interventionist God.

In *Jane Eyre*, the Gothic appears to have as much empowered the writer as it has affected the reader with the emotions of its events, and it is perhaps this quality of empowering the ‘irrational’ – for both reader and writer alike – which gives the Gothic a persisting validity as a novel form. As I have explored in this thesis, it has proved itself an infinitely adaptable genre, suited to satire on church and state, to myth-making and the encoding of the forbidden, and to a return to that quality of the ‘numinous’ which the rationality of both faith and reason threatens. For Iris Murdoch, it permitted an exploration of a substitute faith, a proposition that in the absence of God worship might instead be displaced to a striving for an objective good.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Newly self-conscious, I have begun to consider how Gothic protocols are put to use in what might be seen as our current faith-crisis. It is possible to view the early twenty-first century paradigm as one in which what it means to be radical, and what it means to be conventional, have been entirely inverted. In the post-Dawkins era, in which it is broadly accepted in the majority of Western media, academe and contemporary fiction that a rational mind must be an atheist one, a persisting belief in the marvellous – whether rooted in Christian theology or any other faith system – has become the radical position. And if the Gothic has been the recourse of those reacting against the *status quo*, it is possible to see it as having been the form to which I turned – unconsciously at first – in an act of rebellion against the world in which I suddenly found myself. I had been accustomed to a kind of spiritual rationalism in which a religious framework was structured as wholly logical, without room for doubt. Emerging from that paradigm into one which was (as I felt obliged to believe) as ordered and logical, but entirely material, has troubled me: it has had the curious effect of making the simple and plain faith of my youth seem in comparison strange and mysterious, and something to be quested after. I am ill-at-ease with the notion that there is no sensation or experience which cannot be accounted for by a trick of memory, or a function of neurobiology – I have become, to turn again to Varma’s phrase, someone constantly seeking after the ‘numinous.’

In this thesis I confined myself to an examination of the sense of place in the Gothic perhaps because it was the element of the genre which I most consciously exploited in my own work. The house portrayed in *Confusion* is not the setting for marvellous events, but it is persistently uncanny, in the most proper sense of the *unheimlich*: it is a home, and everything in it ought to be familiar, but is altered in accordance with John’s disordered consciousness. Seen through the filter of John’s perception it is also fantastic (though the rational reader will assume that he does not really believe himself to converse with a portrait or witness birds winking at him from the wallpaper). As I have said, in creating a building which would function as the locus of the spiritual, sexual and emotional confusion experienced by the characters in my novel, I acknowledge that I was constructing a kind of substitute place of worship, in which God is not quite supplanted, but in which I have attempted to set love for God alongside other kinds of love, and accord them equal validity, complexity, and strangeness.

**CONCLUSION**

In my opening chapter, I asserted that John Bayley’s notion of a writer’s being necessarily conscious of the kind of work they produce may doubtless have relevance for some, but did not for me. In drafting *Confusion* I had no desire other than to create, as truthfully and forcefully as I could, the consciousness and character of a man compelled by loneliness to take part in the lives strangers, in a setting which would both permit and provoke heightened emotion, and provide an immersive and eerie experience for the reader. I was not enamoured of the Gothic genre above any other, and I had read very little Iris Murdoch, so that when my fiction was first said to have affinities with hers I instinctively denied the connection (not least since it would have been hubristic to accept it). I was more familiar with the ‘accusation’ that I had written a Gothic novel – I accepted with pleasure that some elements of the Gothic were present – and it seemed to me that the two comparisons were mutually exclusive. On further reading Murdoch’s work, she seemed to offer a possible means of understanding better how *Confusion* fit between the realist and the Gothic. I was startled to discover that there is very little critical study of the Gothic in Murdoch’s work, despite the sense of place in particular seeming to indicate a conscious inheriting of Gothic protocols.

In *Confusion* I wanted particularly to explore notions of faith and madness. *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *The Unicorn* together demonstrated the extent to which the Gothic sense of place permits intense explorations of states of unreason and the disordered mind. More importantly, they demonstrated the causal link between the consciousness of characters and the function of the narrative’s environment: the characters’ perceptions of the places in which they find themselves alter the fabric of their environment, driving them forward to acts of unreason or freeing them to kinds of madness.

In *The Monk*, I discovered that depictions of human guilt are inescapably problematic, even within the apparently forgiving confines of the Gothic genre. Though the setting of the Abbey and the dark shadow of the Inquisition permit extremes of human behaviour that in a more banal setting might seem hysterically unlikely, there is sufficient subtlety and complexity in the depiction of Ambrosio’s developing sexual consciousness and increasing guilt to narrow the distance between the reader and the narrative: despite its fantastic (and ultimately outright marvellous) events, we are forced into an examination of our own capacities for evil and good, and for compassion towards those who commit acts of either kind. *The Bell*, in which the problem of human moral life is framed in contemporary terms, provides a counterpoint to *The Monk.* Though the objective Christian God has been removed and there are no ‘rules’, nonetheless the ground of Imber undergoes a kind of consecration as the characters make attempts to channel their various passions (often resembling religious ecstasy) into acts of striving for an objective Good.

In beginning this thesis I was both surprised and perplexed that my own fiction displays at times a resolutely Gothic treatment of the sense of place. As I examined in Chapter 3, I have come to understand that it is suggestive, not of my reading tastes, but of my own unconscious perception of the ‘real’ worlds I have inhabited, and perhaps more profoundly a means by which to examine the ‘fantastic’ place in which I have found myself, suspended between faith and reason. At heart, the study of the Gothic, and of the Gothic in Iris Murdoch, has contributed to a better ‘self-conscious’ understanding of my own writing process, crystallising for me what it means to take part in the shared experience of the novel: a desire to be, like Henry James’s ‘haunted’ governess, ‘rather easily carried away’[[105]](#footnote-105).

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19. Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897. London: Penguin, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Maturin, Charles Robert. *Melmoth the Wanderer*. 1820. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. The italics are Maturin’s, suggesting a moment of authorial intrusion, and that he intends the reader to fix upon this phrase as a comment on Gothic narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University Press, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nicol, Bran. *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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24. Miller, Frank. *Sin City Volume 1: The Hard Goodbye*. Los Angeles: Dark Horse Publications, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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27. Sage, Victor. Introduction. *Melmoth the Wanderer*. 1820. By Charles Robert Maturin. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Punter, David and Byron, Glennis. The Gothic. 2004. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Brown, Marshall. *The Gothic Text*. California: Stanford University Press, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Brown explores the link between Faust and the Gothic: “Faust self-evidently does share many elements with gothic novels dating from before, during and after its composition.” According to Brown, these include “an ambivalence of tone and a self-conscious playfulness (211)”, not dissimilar to that deployed by Maturin in *Melmoth*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See the parricide monk’s tale, Maturin, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Bal, Meike. *Narratology*. Toronto: University Press, 1997. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Robert Mighall cites the relative rarity of the urban Gothic setting, and the importance of Spanish cities in particular as conveying notions of irrationality: “Sublime rugged landscapes … were at the further remove from London or Bath; and were therefore the sanctioned preserve of terrors. Even when an incident takes places in Rome or Madrid, the Protestant mind assumed that such cities institutionalised unreason (Spooner, Catherine and McEvoy, Emma (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic*. London: Routledge, 2007. 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hogg, James. *The Private Confessions and Memoirs of a Justified Sinner*. 1824. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Eco, Umberto. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman. ‘Gothic Possibilities’*. New Literary History.* Vol. 8, No. 2, Explorations in Literary History (Winter, 1977), pp. 279-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Empson, William. ‘The Structure of Complex Words’.*The Sewanee Review.* Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring, 1948), pp. 230-250 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Edgeworth, Maria. 1800. *Castle Rackrent*. London: Macmillan, 1895. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Edgeworth also mocked the English distaste for names not readily pronounced by the English, and by extension the English unease with Irish culture: her novel mentions “the lands of Gruneaghoolaghan, and the lands of Crookagnawaturgh…(112).” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. 1909. <http://www.bartleby.com/24/2/>. 31 May 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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44. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Foakes, R. A. (ed.). London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The tropical setting of Immalee’s tale recalls William Beckford’s 1786 ‘oriental tale’ *Vathek*, which deploys many of the Gothic narrative conventions in an exotic, eastern setting. It is striking to note that the sense of place is as crucial to Beckford’s narrative as it is to Maturin’s, with the Caliph Vathek building a palace with a series of wings ‘destined for the particular gratification of each of the senses’ (Beckford, William. *Vathek*. 1786. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2005. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Lane, Harlan. *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*. Harvard: University Press. 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Summers notes, “Maturin was of French Protestant stock, he was curate of St Peter’s, Dublin, from which pulpit he preached Six Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church (193).” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. It is interesting to note briefly the paradox implicit here: the Gothic, in architectural terms, operates according to vertical planes that have often been interpreted as evoking 'a visual expression of the spiritual quest for heaven’ [Punter 33], where Gothic narrative almost invariably sinks lower and lower into spatial and moral depths. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Murdoch, Iris. *The Unicorn*. 1963. London: Vintage, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Byatt, A. S. *Degrees of Freedom*. London: Chatto & Windus. 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. A. S. Byatt wondered whether the place-names of Riders and Gaze in particular stood ‘respectively for Platonic religion – Riders recalling the horses of the Phaedrus – and Christian contemplation – Gaze sufficiently suggesting this…The beautiful golden maids at Riders, and the black maids at Gaze reinforce this allegorical feeling about it’ (159). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Brown, Marshall. *The Gothic Text*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. 1803. London: Wordsworth Editions, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Bajaj, Kum Kum. *A Critical Study of Iris Murdoch’s Fiction*. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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56. Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte D’Arthur*. 1485. London: Wordsworth World’s Classics, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
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61. Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. 1976. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
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63. Mieke Bal notes: “Events happen somewhere. The locations where things happen may in principle be deduced. When we read ‘John was pushing his shopping cart when suddenly he saw his hated neighbour at the check-out counter’ we may assume that the meeting place is the supermarket (Bal 215).” Thus the reader engages more actively in the text by supplying essential details. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Mulman, Lisa Naomi. ‘Sexuality on the Surface: Catholicism and the erotic object in Lewis’s *The Monk*’. *Bucknell Review.* 41:2 (1998). Lewisburg, Pennsylvania; Bucknall University, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Burke, Edmund. ‘A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful.’ 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. The Abbey garden as a setting for the expression of love and friendship recalls Maturin’s Tale of Immalee in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and the connection between nature and natural affection. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Purves, Maria. *The Gothic and Catholicism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Alexander Pope’s poem *Eloisa to Abelard*, inspired by the correspondence which ‘gives so lively a picture of the struggles of grace and nature, virtue and passion,’ was published in 1717 (Pope, Alexander. *The Poems*. Butt, John (ed.). London: Routledge, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
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70. Forster, EM. *Aspects of the Novel*. 1927. London: Penguin, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Krook, Dorothea. *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*. Cambridge: University Press, 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Price, Fiona. ‘”Myself Creating What I saw”: The Morality of the Spectator in Eighteenth Century Gothic’. In Gothic Studies. Manchester: Nov 2006. Vol. 8, Iss. 2; p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Exodus 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. ‘Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path’. Psalm 119:105. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Howard, Richard (tr.). New York: Cornell University Press, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Todorov applauds the manner in which James sustains the fantastic beyond that (usually comparatively brief) pause before character/reader settles on either the uncanny or the marvellous, through to (and beyond) the conclusion of the narrative: ‘The book is closed, the ambiguity persists (43). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Masong, Kenneth. ‘Tragedy, Love and Religion in Iris Murdoch’s *The Bell*.’ Kritike, Vol 2:1. 2008. 11-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Murdoch, Iris. 1970. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Murdoch, Iris. Acastos*: Two Platonic Dialogues*. London: Penguin, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. We have seen that such ‘supernatural assistance to human endeavour’, as the visible sign of an attentive and interventionist God, is lacking in *The Monk*. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Murdoch, Iris. *The Bell*. 1973. London: Vintage Classics, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. This notion is more explicitly foregrounded in *Confusion*, where John Cole attempts to equip himself with the logic and protocols of fiction in order to ‘read’ the ‘real’ narrative in which he has found himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. 2 Timothy 3: 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. An inversion of the narrative in *The Monk*, in which the ground of the Abbey is unconsecrated by degrees, as the Monk descends literally through its vaults, and spiritually into deeper acts of vice. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Murdoch, Iris. *Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Conradi, Peter (ed.). London: Penguin, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. 1976. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See this thesis, Chapter 1.1 on *Melmoth the Wanderer* and 2.1 on *The Monk*. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. 1 Corinthians 11:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See *Confusion*, p. 36 *et. al.* [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Hall, M. ‘What do Victorian Churches Mean? Symbolism and Sacramentalism in Victorian Church Architecture, 1850-1870’. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 59, No 1 Mar., 2009), pp. 78-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Fisher, V. ‘The Novelist and His Background’. *Western Folklore* , Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 1953), pp. 1-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. London: Vintage, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Psalm 119:105. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. 2. Timothy 3. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. In Chapter 2:1 I cite the introduction to an Enlightenment text, which states “that Science considers the Works of the Supreme Wisdom, and sets forth ‘What Laws JEHOVAH to himself prescrib’d/And of his Work the firm Foundation made’ (see this thesis, p. 284). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
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