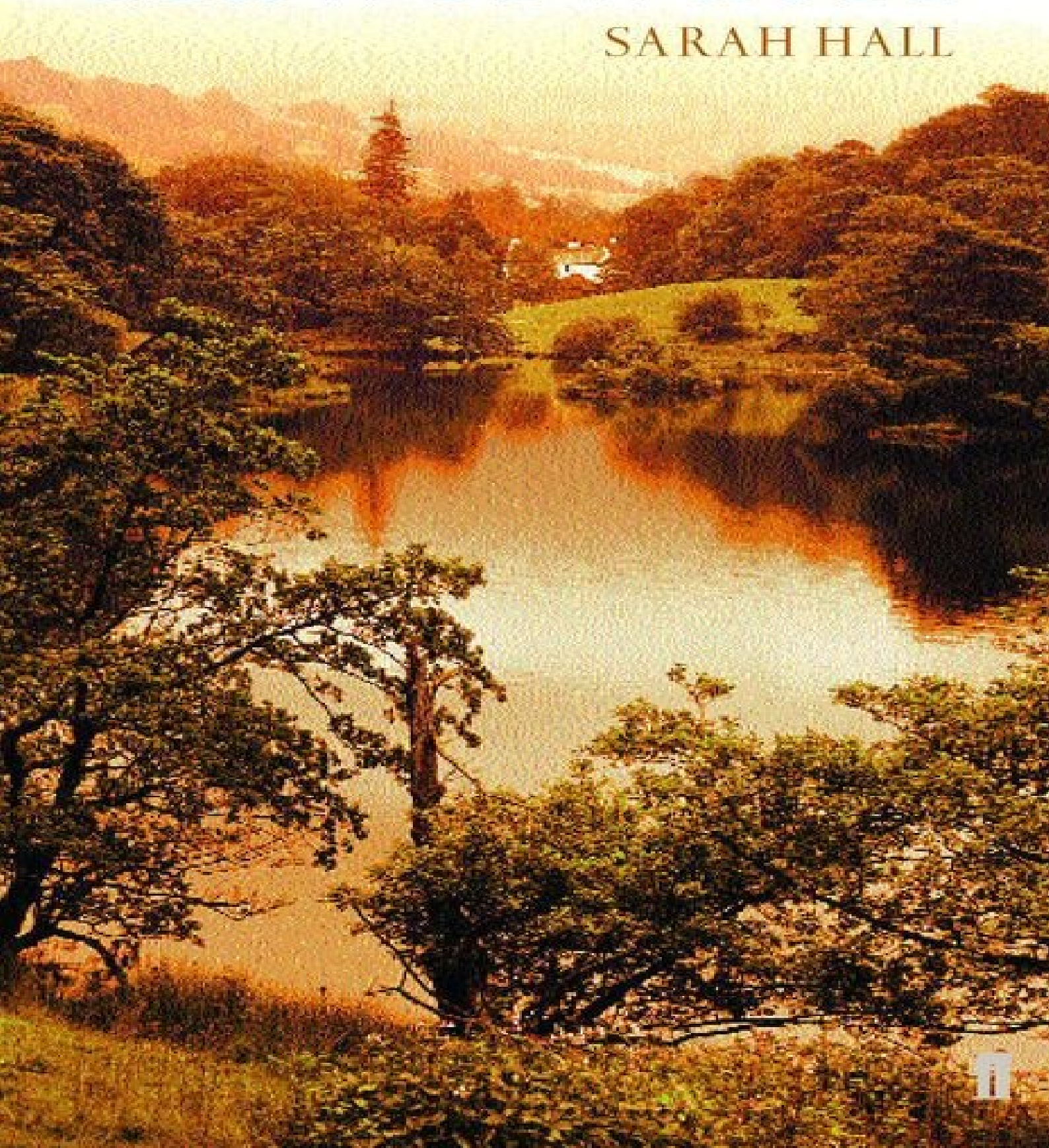


'A remarkable debut.' THE TIMES

# Haweswater

SARAH HALL



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# HAWESWATER



Sarah Hall

**ff**

*faber and faber*

---

*For my family*

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*I'm standing in a place where I once loved.  
The rain is falling. The rain is my home.  
I think words of longing: a landscape  
out to the very edge of what's possible.*

YEHUDA AMICH.

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## – Prologue –

The sound of water slipping through the wooden spokes of the cartwheels was like a slow, soft washing hum. The vehicle breached the surface, parting the liquid as it moved, and leaving behind a temporary wake. From his position on the cart's seat the man could see that he would have to drive through over four feet of water if he wanted to pass back along the village to the high farm track on the slopes of the mountains, which would take him home. There was no other route he could take out of the head of the valley. The new concrete road was cut off by the flood, it was completely inaccessible. He peered through the water, trying to remember if the slope under it was steeper than he predicted, so that the cart would up-end and sink, sucking the horse in with it.

The man was accustomed to driving through rivers and floods in this farm vehicle, he had done so before, many times, in order to reach remote parts of the terrain where his animals needed tending or a landslide had brought down the farm walls. His horse was sure footed, an obedient creature, and the cart was sturdy. He had confidence in his working of both. He shucked the reins and the horse and cart went deeper, out into the swirling water. The shallows fell upwards behind him.

This water had once been only a gentle, tumbling river. The man thought to himself that he had never noticed the constant sush-sushing of wheels cutting liquid then, when he crossed it, as he noticed it now. But now it was an inescapable noise, it had him encircled. He listened to the sound. The rise and fall of the water's tensile voice. Its sound was unusual, a continuance of text in a land of broken fluid, of forced rock. But it was not the sound that was unusual, thought the man, it was the water itself, because there was something dangerous and slow and final about it. Something eerie and unending.

This was a monumental flood, water of epic proportions. It turned through the wooden spokes relentlessly, and as it did so it became like a music that is accidental, deeply beautiful and made only once. Somatic music that fills in space and time. A corrugated harp of orchestral rivers. Like the long end-verses of a ballad, he thought, when the key voice is joined and overcome by others. And even though the man hated this water, he could not help but find it beautiful. It stood for more than itself and sang of its presence. But then, he was the kind of man who would have seen a mask of green fish struggling to get free from the throat of a dying bird.

Over the rippling surface of the flood he could see the uppermost skeletons of three ruptured buildings. He knew them to be a church, because he had prayed there, an old inn, where he had taken his draughts of a weekend, and a farm cottage, because he had helped a neighbour to re-hang the iron guttering after the mighty storm of two Septembers ago. In a matter of days or weeks they would be submerged, but for now they rose from the water like pieces of grey bone and he found himself divining in reverse, looking for old land. In the thick sky overhead, a dozen or so gulls were turning in heavy, inhibited loops. Two or three were bobbing on the water, far out in the middle of the lake. Their calls raucous and belonging to the coastal air, to stretches of open sea, the birds seemed out of place in the dense, wooded valley.

The man pulled back on the reins and the horse and the music stopped. He called down from his seat on the cart to a sheepdog that was eeling through the liquid a foot from the cart.

– Chase, Chase. Gudgirl, close.

As if words were needed to call the animal, though a whistle, short, short and long, would have articulated his message just the same. Perhaps he had wanted to hear his own voice right then, for

company, above the quiet expanse of water. And looking down to be certain, there was Chase, her slick seal's head slicing the waves, tufted ears held back, and her two bright eyes, one brown and one pale blue, looking up at her master, so that the thin moons of the white part of her eyes appeared to be cupping each iris. It made the dog look soulful. Gudog. Though it could have been the man's own soulfulness which he saw reflected in the eyes of his loyal companion. It was in everything now.

It began to rain, a fat slapping rain that ringed in the water and leapt up out of it. The air became blue with its speed. Rain hissed like soft glass coming from the sky. A cough of distant thunder in the throat of hills to the north-east. The man reached in his pocket, pulled out a flat cloth cap and put it over his straw hair. He resumed his course, past the sinking walls of the valley's sloped fields. And there again was the soft-washing music. Water sang below and above him now. He was surrounded and held within it. The wood of the cart spotted and soon turned dark, as if sweating from labour, and its old, oily wooden scent was released easily into the dampness. The rancid, buttery fragrance of wool grease crept from the corners of the cart where some fleece had collected, it lifted and found its way up to the man's nose. Rain camouflaged the stains on the cart's wooden planks, the blood, the fluid and discharge, made during the births and deaths of many animals.

The cart was a quarter full of hay, a poor load even in the wet summer of that year, but it was all that was left to take from this place beyond the water, soon to be out of reach. So he would not come back here again. The farm which he took his load from had once been his own, managed and worked by his family, and even though the rents had been paid to the estate, he had still felt a sense of right, of possession. After the flood these would cease to exist in this valley for the man, in all but memory. He didn't want the hay, it wasn't essential to his new farm and it was spoiling quickly in the rain, but he took it like a man takes bread to eat, absently and without thought because his stomach demands it. It was simply that time of year. The cycle of the land had come back around to ripeness, sweetening the long grass, then starching it. He could have stopped the cart and pulled some tarpaulin over it but he did not. He had told his wife that this was the reason for his return to the old farm, yet, being the woman she was, she had known it to be a lie, the gentlest deceit.

The man's face and his hair melted into each other and both were the colour of red straw. Children could have landed safely in this face from a high jump off a barn rafter. He was broad set and heavy with muscle, and his tweed jacket was worn on the shoulders where his full form stretched the fabric thin. His boots were old and the laces had been replaced many times. His hands were raw over the leather reins, their nails dwarfed inside wide, swollen fingers. He was not unlike many of the other farmers of the district in appearance.

Then there was the matter of his heart. Inside his old heart a new one was growing and pushing to get out, and inside that one another one, and another, all pushing to get out. So many hearts. And that was how grief worked inside the man. Filling his chest cavity so full of hearts that it almost became sore to touch on the outside and he stooped over with the weight. So much of his life was gone. More than his home and his fields, more than the valley which contained his familiars.

Behind him was the end of his village; in front of him a swelling lake of colourless water. The cart struggled against the fluid pressure, uncertain currents jostling for a place in the filling basin, the horse now rearing up, shoulder-deep. He tightened the reins, clicking his tongue. One wheel was no longer secure on the valley floor. The cart pitched, righted itself again as it caught a solid piece of land. A slight whinny from the horse, but it moved on.

He did not look back over his worn shoulder to the place he had just left. There was a better image, an older vision, that he preferred. The grey-black cottage that had once housed his family and which he had just departed was now an imperfect ring of rubble and slate. It was a quarter of its original height, perhaps less. There was no longer a name carved on a piece of slate by the door, no children inside the cottage laughing or jumping in the corners like trapped frogs. There was no roof to speak of

only a thin web of cloud that stretched a useless tent between the shallow walls. Whelter Farm had ceased to exist on the raised land to the west side of the valley, and water was half-way up the garden snaking at the foundations.

But underneath, the cellar was undamaged, save for a sheen of lime dust which covered the floor and a fast-dripping gable wall. On this last visit, the man had not spent long in the bowels of his old habitation. He simply removed a tatty book from his inside jacket pocket, brushed a rough palm over its cover. The man with the face of red straw put the book inside an old wooden tool box in the cellar alcove and locked it and left. He did not say a prayer, he had become unsure of God for the second time in his life. He left the book in the cellar where he used to keep his meat cold and hang his back for smoking, and hang his beef until it turned black and the juices collected in its centre. Then he went up the dusty stairs and out of the front door which was now formed in part by the sky.

He walked back along the path by the side of his house, his feet scuffling and crunching on the stone debris. A piece of wire coiled round the toe of his boot but he kept on walking, with the wire scraping on the ground, and eventually it released its grasp and came loose. There were pieces of timber in the wreckage, beams from the ceiling of the house or perhaps an oak window sill. The enormous blue rock, incorporated into the corner of the dwelling rather than moved when Whelter Farm was built in 1538, was buried with rubble.

As the man approached her, Chase whined and sat up, tucking her head. She did not like her master's gait, recognizing it for despondency. But he stroked his knuckles along her sleek nose as he passed by and she settled. At the foot of the new lake he paused and then threw the key to the tool box into the water. Then the man left in his cart, which was pulled by his only horse, the scruffy, leggy mare named Spider by the man's son, named so because of the thin buckling legs which at birth had been almost unable to support the foal's own weight. He made his departure through an unmarked exit of water, with his Gudog swimming by his side. He would not return. The water would see to it.

But the book would remain behind, locked in the safe box, preserved somehow, even as the mud slid in through the cellar door, then the water, which by then was fuller and colder and the colour of indigo ink. Though the blue-blond hair that the man had found caught on his jacket button three days earlier, that he placed between the last pages of his book, did not stay. It disintegrated into dust long before water robbed the house of air, because human hair always does disintegrate when it is removed from a human head.





The woman on the bed was screaming bold blue murder and Jesus Bastard Christ. Curses formed like saliva in her mouth and she spat them out on to the tangled sheets of the bed, a bed which had once belonged to her grandmother and in which her own mother had been born. The cotton under her head and body was saturated with her sweat and with her swearing. The woman's body was making colours that her husband had never seen before, colours he did not know a human being could make. Soft orange on her, like human blood should never be, and white and a precise burgundy. Samuel Lightburn watched his wife struggling as internal shapes moved through her body, saw her muscles damaging themselves as she struggled. Jesus Bastard Christ. The woman screamed and slowly she came apart. He could not stand it.

– Ella. Ella.

Samuel spoke gently, uselessly, for the woman still remembered her own name. She was still in her right mind.

He swayed in the shadows, in the corner of the bedroom, his thumbs stroking the rough stone wall behind him as if looking to be soothed. The room was chilly, the walls glowing with cold. She screamed on, cursing the Lord, not caring about faith or decency or her God, in whom she had trusted her whole life, not any of the things that usually made her a tight knot of a woman, firmly wrapped and bound tight at the core. On the bed she fought with her own body, with God, with nature, unmaking herself. This was what her husband could not bear. The close threads of her were coming unwound. A wave after wave of pain buckled up through her flesh and collected in her face. And her face was awful in its pain, a ripe beetroot dropped on the stone floor.

Women gathered in the room. Women in shawls and warm winter skirts. They told her to be calm and breathe. They placed the handle of a wooden spoon between her teeth as she raged and twisted. They instructed Ella Lightburn to control her pain. She could not. No more than she could control the snow falling fast and wet outside, smothering the valley. Joyce Carruthers had said to the companion four hours ago that the Shap doctor would be needed, and word had been sent. But Dr Saul Frith was absent and, surely by now, unreachable. January in this Westmorland valley. Even the new Lakeside road was blocked by thick drifts.

Another roll like hot metal came up through Ella's stomach. The old wooden bed creaked as she pushed her legs down, arched her back, her vast stomach breaching in the cold air. She fought on, cursing, spitting, almost eight hours more that day and into the night. There were deep wet troughs in the bed, made as her limbs turned this way and that, forwards and backwards. Her eyes red with pain she looked around the room for her husband. Had she not heard his voice a moment ago or an hour ago? She looked for him and was terrified.

Samuel Lightburn had been present for the birthing of many animals. He had witnessed the impossible feats of nature many times, had seen all strength from a beast draining into one part of its body, accumulating there, and using itself up. He was accustomed to intervention also, reaching inside the hot, rough canal of an animal himself with a bare greased arm, his fingers certain to find a loose ankle, a hand-hold. But never a woman before, it simply was not done. And only now her stubbornness, the direness of the situation, permitted him to stay in the room. He had never seen or heard human labour before and he stared out from the dark corner, his thumbs caressing the wall over and over. He was not prepared for this. He was not prepared for his wife's pain, or her colours, or for

her terror. Nor the inversion of her faith.

~~There was not one household of the village which had not represented itself at Whelter Farm Cottage that day as Ella Lightburn struggled with the passage of her first child into the world. The women came and went in the bedroom, gathering around the cursing woman, bringing water, cloth, fresh hope. They stood in twos and threes, leaving Joyce room enough to move around Ella as she needed to, taking turns in trying to usher Samuel out of the room, where he did not belong.~~

– Git. Git away, man. Go on with yer.

Trying to usher him downstairs into the large kitchen where the men of the village were sitting standing, smoking. These men were mainly farmers, young and old. They listened to the woman upstairs, carefully, counting the screams and looking for meaning as a soothsayer might open up and read the intestines of a bird. They compared Ella's sounds with the torrid calls of the cattle and sheep in their herds when their time came, a stuck bellow, a panicked bleat. In this way they tried to decipher her stages of labour. But they could not, because human birth is something unnatural, something beyond animal – female pain become self-conscious. They tried to know the situation practically, and without speaking of it, their teeth clenched over curved pipes and their fingers gripping the backs of chairs.

As Samuel passed them on his way to the front door, desperately looking out into the snow again for the doctor as he was, they placed, in turn, a simple hand on the back of his head, or on his shoulder. Thick hands, like pieces of beefsteak. There were no words. These were quiet men, economical with language, who spoke only in definites and who limited their actions to useful gestures or to work. Their individual faces wore a combination of expressions, each having many moods upon it at once, if scowls and laughter, lines of concentration and hardship were weathered one on top of another in a single, permanent façade. Every expression set and roughened and deepened by the wind and the rain, the sun, so that one could not be accompanied without its partners. Mirth within a grimace. A frown grafted on to the bridge of lines created from squinting hard against the sun. And underneath all these encompassing masks was the suggestion, as common throughout the district, of unreachable, keystone. Of distance.

The men were friends and colleagues. It was a small, remote district and they were joined by proximity, by community. Their wives were no different, nor their children. In the Mardale valley the bonds were strong and necessary and abundantly understood. To an outsider it might seem that the men and women of this dale were insular, as silent and self-sufficient as monks, closing ranks to outsiders, and uncommunicative and sullen with it. A joyless lot perhaps.



The villagers remained at Whelter Farm for as long as they were needed, as long as uncertainty remained, leaving only to fetch new equipment, or bring food for one another, or to check on the children and put them to bed under patchwork, woollen blankets.

Again Samuel Lightburn looked out of the farm door across the village, which stood a little way off, down in the bottom of the valley. He cast his eye over the black water of the small lake to the forested hills on the horizon. Chimneys were smoking, windows were illuminated by lamps, but there were no car headlights winding down the concrete road to Mardale. No doctor. The snow was easing off. The sky's yellow lessening, and the clouds parting. A few stars were beginning to appear. Night was coming on and that in turn would bring fresh problems. It would be bitter cold and harsh without cloud cover, the snowdrifts hardening into firm barricades, a night without the doctor's instruction, for certain. This was the situation. There were no miracles in this dale.

Nathaniel Holme, an old, wiry farmer, came to the doorway and stood beside Samuel. He brought

pipe out of his pocket and tapped it on the cottage wall to knock out the old, hardened tobacco. After filling it from a pouch, he lit the bowl.

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– No sign ova yonder?

His voice was thick up from his lungs in the cold, and gravelly.

Samuel shook his head, took out a rolled cigarette, lit it. Nathaniel spoke again.

– Teddy’s gone fer Frithy. Nowt else to dyah but wait. Thowt about garn misell, Sam. Twa arms better un yan, eh? Even auld bugger like misell.

The old man chuckled at the back of his throat and continued.

– Aye, til be a wunder if he gits there alive, poower bugger. But he’s a gud lad, that Teddy.

Samuel’s mouth moved a fraction upwards. His oldest friend had a way of lightening his spirit even in times of trouble. Now the old man was laughing openly, deeply, his arthritic, busted hand gripping Samuel’s elbow for balance as he shook.



Young Teddy Hindmarsh had left at two o’clock that afternoon with his motorcycle on the new road to the east of the valley. Twice he had lost control of the Excelsior in the snow, the second time breaking two fingers on his right hand but feeling the pain in his missing left. The appendage had been lost just below the shoulder joint during a shelling in the Great War, and he wore the sleeve of his coat flat, tucked into the pocket like a petal into a stem. He had finally abandoned the Excelsior in a ditch four miles from Mardale. He bound up his fingers with a birch twig and some twine, using his teeth as best he could to tighten the splint. He began walking the next six miles on foot along the road round Naddle forest, for he dared not take the short cut up over the Swindale pass in this weather, when the snow could cling in cornices to the top of the fells and form unstable bridges suspended over nothing but air. A foot anticipating the path might go straight through, pulling the body down with it in freefall to the crags below. He trudged along beside the lake and finally took to the trees, the entire front of him white with driven snow. The coverage of evergreen would provide him with some shelter during the trek, but Teddy would not return to Whelter Farm until the next morning with the doctor.

There was little activity in the household while he was gone. Just small episodes, a man leaving, a woman arriving with towels, a chair pulled out so that someone might sit, water boiled for more tea to sterilize Joyce Carruthers’s sewing scissors, the gathering of sweat and blood on the bed upstairs. The muffled contraction of cries.

Finally, Ella’s screams stopped. A close husky silence like that found in a forest’s centre settled about the house. Samuel threw his cigarette into the snow outside and strode from the kitchen doorway up the stairs. There had been so many people to help his wife, it had been a lengthy, fraught vigil. But it was Ella herself who made the last contribution to the day’s efforts. The child had almost travelled through her body when she suddenly sat up on the bed and became quiet and determined, her beetrose face contorted a last time. It seemed that her eyes were filled with an unholy scorn. She reached down and pushed the baby free of herself with her palm, as if ridding herself of a heavy stone that had been placed in her lap. The women of the village drew breath and kept to themselves that they suspected from this moment on a bitter and difficult relationship between mother and child. Neither did they speak later of Ella’s final whispered profanity against the Lord.

The tiny girl was blue and yellow from the cord wrapped tightly around her neck, but she needed no hand on her buttocks to start her new lungs. Blood colour quickly flooded through her, lighting the minute network of veins against her skin. Her cries were fierce, like the mews of a hungry cat. Samuel came into the room and folded down on to the bed. His wife was faint against the pillows. He took the slippery child in his one giant hand and the straw turned redder in his face. A girl. A tiny, angry

malcontent girl. He turned to the women in the room and thanked them all for his daughter, overcome and suddenly exhausted with relief. They looked away embarrassed by his sudden and unusual display of emotion, a man exhibiting such meekness, such altruism. Then Samuel turned to his wife and thanked her and he bent and kissed her wet brown hair.

But Ella was crying gently, which her husband had never before witnessed, and she was getting up from the mess of the bed, her arms lifting, tipping, to try to find her balance. She was crying for cursing Jesus, whom she loved above all, and she wanted to get away from the blood, and the baby, the scene of her crimes against Him. She wanted to limp to the church and pray for forgiveness. In those moments of guilt and regret she imagined that she felt that eternal freefall into nothingness, into isolation, and a keen desperation to be reunited with God overwhelmed her. She stood.

– No, Ella, lie back, there's more.

Joyce's words were paid no heed.

She was weak and pale and unstable as she opened the drawer of the dresser in the bedroom and took out the brass key to the church door, which she used every Saturday and Thursday when she carried out her cleaning duties. Her gown was yellow with sweat and a woman came to her and put a blanket around her shoulders. Ella steadied herself on the banister as she came down the stairs. She walked through the kitchen, past the table of empty cups, oblivious to the smoking crowd, and at the front door she paused to look back at the stunned, silent men, and at her husband, who had followed her down from the bedroom, not knowing what to say. He had their daughter in his arms. A small screaming, blue and yellow kitten, lit up with hurried blood.

The church key pressed its shape into Ella's fist as she held it tight. Her feet were bare on the flagstones. She lifted the latch and opened the door and an icy gust of wind swept into the kitchen. The freezing air seemed to bring her round a little. She stepped into a pair of shoes and hung at the door frame. Ella looked at the child held by its father and again looked out into the night. Then she called out a name which was half lost under the voice of the wind, and she was gone, down to the tiny church in the heart of the village.

As she said 'Janet' for her grandmother's namesake, Samuel, half-hearing the wind, mistook her word and thought he heard 'January', for the month of her birth, and even later, when the mistake had been rectified, he always did call his daughter that, when his wife was not around to hear. And when she could, he settled for Jan, which was neither here nor there. So Ella went to the church to pray for forgiveness, and she would not curse God again for another twelve years, not until her son Isaac was born. So Samuel Lightburn grew the first of many hearts for his daughter.



Before school, when she is six years old, she will accompany her father to the paddocks and the low fields backing up on the moors. It is early morning and a green dawn light covers the valley. There are flashes of dark green behind the night clouds, which she notices, looking up, as she walks next to her father. It is as if metal has found its way into the air and is burning. They walk on, down the rocky stone path, sightless, but aware of the distance of the walls on each side of the lane, their feet scuffing up loose pebbles. She takes three steps to his every long stride, a skip in the middle to keep pace. Their eyes strain and after a while adjust to the near-dark. At this time of day unnatural, optical physicality occurs, owl-like intuitions. Her father is a dim outline. When she looks at him, she sees his breath coming out in short bursts. From time to time he also looks down towards his breathing daughter. Behind and in front, two dogs slip silently along the drystone walls like ghosts swimming between their human keepers. Canine kelpies. She feels the presence of the near mountains, the pressure of them within the valley's space of air. If she were to peer into the darkness she might make

out the grey rock of Nan Bield pass or the ridges of High Street. She could summon their exact position from blindness. As the girl unhooks the latch of a wooden paddock gate, the cows, with half-remembered instinct, gather for the run up to the farm. Her father and the dogs begin moving them from the back.

Janet helps him drive the herd of cows upwards to the dairy barn each morning, slapping the hind flanks of the animals as they pass by if they rock too far out of the channel of their own traffic. Their gait is heavy and slow, their udder sacks swollen, a taut pink-white, so that the legs splay out further to avoid the underbelly. They slug towards the dyke and are smacked back by her small hand on their rumps. Tripping hooves on the uneven road and the occasional murmur of a cow are the only sounds in this dawn landscape. Not even birds sound from the hedgerows yet. The cows are huge forms compared with the thin young girl, with lolling pink tongues and soulful, black-lashed eyes that shimmer with a high polish in the early light. Gentle, harmless eyes, she thinks. But if she is too close to the passage the full cows may push into her, unwilling to halt the stoddering flow once they are moving, nudging her with a slow strength into the river of beasts. Or a stray hoof will cover her foot, the weight of an animal unbearable for the slow second until its next full step, her twisted ankle on fire. Her calls are similar to her father's, she has already learned his language of keeping animals.

– Cum to, cum long.

The lissom dogs weave in and out of legs, working up and down the herd. The older bitch is with a pup. Samuel anticipates a fine batch, as the male breeder is a good working dog from Heltondale. He whistles and she halts and then flows to the left of the herd, slower in her condition but no less accurate. The cows press upwards on the path, hooves clattering on the shale. From the window at Whelter Farm the movement of the beasts might appear biblical. Black spines crest the tops of the stone walls. Shoulder bones rolling under the hide.

Gradually, light smokes into the dale as the sun comes up over the fells to the east. The cows plodding in the thick air, are now forms filling in with detail. Mucus streams from their wide nostrils. Their slow heads nod with the effort of pushing up the hill, swollen and heavy with their milk stones as they are. They have the father's farm markings on the rump in a dark blue dye. This is the insignia of ownership: a cross-hatched L. Janet's hands slap across the lettering.

Pieces of colour also emerge now. Orange in the early sky. A purple foxglove towering against the edge of the path is eerie, it is capable of death, has within its tubular petals that treacherous, chemical secret. Her father's face and its beginning redness at the rear of the cows. She sees her own fingerprints coming out of darkness, under a yellow mantle of skin.



A shower has passed. The rain, as if used up from its long, vertical descent, thins and finally holds off. Her father is ahead in the farmyard with the cows and she links the last gate closed behind him. The path on the way back up to Whelter is pitted and covered with miniature cairns of sheep droppings and its pebbles shine in the sudden light. As Janet approaches the farmhouse the track disintegrates into a flat, grass-tufted field. She deftly steps over the deep ruts of mud. From the chimney of the farmhouse comes a thin trail of smoke; her mother must have just lit the fire – the damp wood spluttering to pick up flame. Whelter itself seems to stand in a damp silence, the house martins' nests under the gutter abandoned at this time of year, but as she comes closer to home there is the sound of water seeping around the house, attempting to find ground from its higher position. The walls are a murky eggshell colour, stained green-yellow from mildew under the drains of the guttering. Moss is growing on the wall, as if the wall itself is a living thing providing nutrients. Around the back in the dairy barn she can hear the lowing of restless cows as her father begins work, and the clanking of cattle against chains.

Janet walks in through the back door of the farm and a few drops of rain, mint cold, fall on to her neck from the pools collected on the roof. She is already wet enough not to notice them. She closes the door on the trickle and patter of nature dripping.

Almost immediately she becomes aware of her mother's scent. The smell of her is buried deep in the house, somewhere between the bitter rock walls and the wet grease of the dogs' coats and the dusty character of the old building. A rich odour that is just as much a presence as the woman herself, so vital, in fact, that it is as if Ella Lightburn could be summoned from that sense alone. Her human fragrance, coming from just under her skin perhaps, or from the original sacks of fat and fur lining her body, blood aroma. It is comforting and disarming also, this scent, as it contributes to and finally dominates the household. Janet thinks of the dogs outside when they have been separated a while after a run up the fell, pressing muzzles close, as if inhaling will determine the other's mood or intent. And such referencing can lead to playfulness, front legs tucked under, shoulders down and a lolling tongue or to snarling confrontation, mostly between the female members of the group. A balance that is fine and easily swung one way or the other. The friendly tug at the collar suddenly becoming a brash one near teeth.

She pulls off her boots and leaves them on the stained boards by the door, enters the kitchen. Blue smoke curls up from the open stove door. Her mother is pulling out the drying rack.

– Lets have it, then. Tek it off.

Janet slips out of her damp wool coat and passes it to Ella. Her mother runs a quick hand over it for fibres.

– T'll not be dry fer school. Neither will you, by all looks. Yer soaked through, lass.

She gestures for her daughter to come to her and Janet pauses before crossing the room. A dog-like tension twitching between the two, mineral water dripping from the younger's forehead on to the floor. Ella reaches for a towel hung on the sink and begins to rub at her daughter's loose hair. The sensation of it is firm against her scalp and Janet lets her head move accordingly under the pressure.

– Mam. I'll gan with Da t'put the tups out. Tom's up at Goosemire and father'll need help, eh?

– School fer you, lass. Yer father'll manage.

Her mother's voice is smoky, dispirited, like blackened stone. The brush begins to bite through the tattered strands of hair and flicks painfully past Janet's ears. She doesn't wince, but a cottony, internal itch starts in the small of her lower-left back, as it always does when her hair is brushed. A squirm of muscle. She buckles a little to one side and her mother rights her.

– Give ower, Jan. I've a dozen things niver dun yet this morning.

Ella twists the yellow mass into three separate parts and begins to braid. Her daughter does not mind this. It is like the pleasant numbness of a bee sting after butter is applied.

– Red or green?

– Red! Tup day, Mam!

Ella takes a piece of red rag out of her apron pocket and secures the end of the plait. She spins her daughter round to face her. For a moment there is an embarrassed, halting smile on her lips that starts to falter and begins again as if she is struggling in both releasing and stopping the expression.

– Daft lassie.

The administering complete, her daughter moves to the table, butters some bread and tears it in half. She scoops jam on to the larger half and folds the smaller down over it, then runs a tongue around the edges where the jam has spilled out. Ella pours out tea for herself and a cup of milk for her daughter. They drink in a willing quiet. She pours a second cup of tea.

– Tek this out to Samuel, will ya, on yer way down. Gudgirl.

Janet puts her breakfast in her pocket and picks up her satchel from a chair, slings it over her back and lifts the tea between the fingers and thumbs of both her hands. She moves to the door.

– Jan! Coat.

– Mam! Can't carry ivrything, eh?

Ella removes the wet, warm coat from the drying rack next to the stove and places it over the satchel, her actions circumventing any bickering.

– When I see you on that path back from t'shed, I want to see you wearin' it an' all.

Her dispassionate tone has returned and Janet knows that the brief interlude of lightness in her mother has departed. She is the first female of the house and as such there seems to be little room for the easy humour that her father often displays. She has within her a weightiness, as if carrying the combined stones of many riverbeds. As if gravity is the duty of a mother, not a father.

Outside, the fragrances of the farmyard and the weather and the season remove any memory of her mother's scent and she will not be able to recall and recognize it until in its presence again. She mutters to herself on the path, Sam, Sam, tea's up, Sam, her voice flexing inwards. Janet hands the cup to her father at the shed gate. His own hands are glowing from work, candid with heat. For a moment she considers asking her father if she can help with the sheep but her mother has already refused and in fact, she does not mind attending school, far from it. Today that is the priority. She is allowed only some invasions of farm work into school time – busier periods than this, the introduction of the breeders. Lambing and dipping constitute an emergent occasion. Or an unforeseen event, the volatile weather. Her father is leaning on the gate, slurping his tea as if it is hot, which it isn't.

– Rite bonny y'look, Jan. Tek off the muck an' yer cud near pass as a lass.

She laughs uncertainly as if a joke has been made. She has never thought of herself as bonny before. It does not occur to her that her father might not be teasing. She enjoys her father's humour though there are times when she cannot quite grasp it and meet it head on, as if reciprocation remains a little beyond her. His head is held to one side, his eyes stacked with energy.

– Gotta minute bifer class? Cum see this.

He sets the cup on the lip of a metal basin. Her father lifts her up over the dairy shed gate and sets her on to his big booted feet. Then he walks her over to the corner of the construction, through the mess of the cows, through their sweet, rank smell, which seems to solidify in the air when they are kept inside. The older dog has given birth to her litter on the straw in the corner, safely away from the heavy press of hooves. Three or four tiny, blind forms are tumbled over each other, breathing rapidly, letting out an occasional yip and crawling blindly further in towards the pink, distended stomach for warmth and milk.

– Shouldn't pick 'em up yit, eh?

Her father shakes his head in agreement.

– How long til their eyes open?

– Coupla days. Week. I'll git yer fer it. Fust thing pups'll see is bonny January with her clarty neck.

Her father flicks the tip of her nose with a balloon thumb. Janet's mother is calling from the window of Whelter for her to hurry. She steps back through the mud and vaults the gate untidily. As she passes the farm's kitchen window she has her coat pulled on backwards, over her chest, and her scowl pulled over her dry forehead.



As yet, she is an only child and there are just two other farmhands at Whelter, both of whom work part-time at several properties in the district. There is no question that she will help her father before poring over the literature and the old atlas in the tiny classroom of the school, eager as she is for more academic education. She has a deep love for the time spent writing or reading in the cheerful compact building with her classmates. Twenty-one pupils in all, mostly the children of farmers and



labourers in the area, a substantial number for a village school and a recent increase since the closure of the Swindale institution.

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On spring days the tall windows let in an abundance of sunlight and the single classroom of the school swims with brightness, trapped shafts of sun warming the back of her neck as she sits bent over the day's text, the illuminated writing. On rainy days she will gaze out of the smeared window pane to the fields and the fells beyond the school gates. The sky a deep saturated yellow, dark, greyish blue to the west where the weather comes in from rocks with layers of water. The drenched bracken and foliage on the banks of the hill find their own patterns in the wind, and at this distance look like wind-blown velvet. There is mist low in the valley over the river, then mountains, the spine of High Street and finally mist again, dissolving into nothing. She imagines her father wrestling with tarpaulin by the feed, her mother rushing washing in from the line in the garden, wooden pegs in her mouth. She knows when she goes outside that the earth will have been turned loose by water. It will smell over-ripe, too full of itself, like a matured, dropped apple. And this is the only distraction she allows herself from the school books. An eye cast slowly over the external world, so slowly that it is as if the enormous brown-red sweep of fells becomes a view that somehow belongs inside. A gentle cough from the chalkboard at front of the room. Then she returns to the page, to the old wars of the continent, or a tightly woven sonnet that she will have to peel apart, weigh, then piece back together.

Her teacher is a middle-aged lady called Hazel Bowman, who drives down from Bampton each day. Her wage is not generous, though her enthusiasm for the education of the children of Mardale is not reflected in this. Textbooks and funding for the tiny school are both limited, and the teacher encourages the older members of the class to assist with reading lessons and arithmetic, sharing their knowledge within the group. A true pragmatist, she has such ways of dealing with things. Hazel Bowman brings with her newspapers for the class to read, both new and old, saved in piles in her reading room, so that the children will become familiar with history as it passes and recognize their place within it. On weekday mornings she arrives early and sweeps the floor of the classroom, lays out the books of the day, or the folded newspapers. On fairer days she will sit outside for a spell on the wall circling the small building and breakfast on bread, or a little smoked fish, watching the reflections in the lake. What she thinks of during these moments is the small number of children that will go on to college or university. This is her greatest pleasure, though she remains in touch with many who stay on in the district to farm. Hers is not solely an academic pride. Then she clasps the roped clanger of the iron bell in the porch of Mardale school and rings out the call for assembly clear across the dale. Her summons will bring boys and girls running along the streams and paths toward the lakeside building, satchels banging on the backs of their knees, sisters and brothers trying to push past each other at the gate. After an address and prayers, class will begin. History and geography. The atlas falls open with a soft thump, the leather spine cracking a fraction more. Pages rustle.

In the newspapers, the names from the old Bartholomew's atlas are brought to life, illustrated with event and nationality. Sometimes the world's place names are changed and Hazel Bowman will make the changes into the atlas with her small square handwriting, careful not to smudge her ink or spoil the page. Poetic, colourful names become practical, or flavoured with a different poetry, another country, mother-tongue. The shift and tussle of monopolies in this era.

Janet Lightburn approaches this volume of flat sections of the world with vague awe and wonder, most of all at the pink shading of the Empire. It seems impossible that they, in their remote corner of this tiny island, should belong to such a vast expanse, such a sprawling, political colour, which includes far-off islands and archipelagos, obese, jutting land masses. It seems a wrong colour to her. It seems ineffectual, like a piece of cherry blossom, a streak of blood in water. A lurid purple would better suit, or a heavy, inching green. But such as it is, the tepid, inoffensive pink will, in her mind, always represent the impossible, a stray, romantic idea, like that of the colonial glacier.

The older yellowing newspapers describe the labour movements in the south, as well as the north and women protesting for a younger vote, for family allowance. Cotton workers forming mass picket lines, stand-offs, the resistance to wage cuts in the textile industry. These are notable events, relevant to the north, Hazel Bowman says, effecting. Ask your parents about market prices. The Great War has been succeeded by other conflicts or schisms of the same bad spirits. There are occasional group photographs of Flappers in bell hats with faces like flowers of war. The recent papers are bought from local towns, the *Gazette* from Kendal, the *Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* from Penrith. In the city of Carlisle they are bought from the man who stands in the market square near the citadel shouting 'Ther's nit miny lift' over the groaning stack of three hundred or more broad folded sheets. Hazel Bowman rides the mainline train up to the city to visit the library and the Roman museum, to collect news for her children. But in these papers history is less dramatic and their region seems uncomplicated. London papers shipped north are the real treasures, the ones that her class will devour and squabble over.

In them there are stories and events which fascinate and captivate the class, and so the pupils will cut out the articles, paste them into scrapbooks or on to the walls of the school building. Janet has her choices, already her mind is settling on fractures within tradition, the painful underbelly of the sick elderly world as it rolls over in surrender to a new one growling above. In the year of her brother Isaac's birth Clyde Tombaugh discovers the ninth planet in the solar system and christens it Pluto. Such an old, extraordinary sounding name. She searches for it in the night sky, eyes blinded by the million other stars and deaths of stars in space, mouth slow over the long vowels. Pl-u-to. Twelve years old and sitting on the pointed roof of the cattle shed. Most of all she wants a telescope, like the one in the Greenwich observatory, with all its scientific precision, its ability to suck in long tunnels of the night sky, so that she can magnify location, lift out the erratic planet from the darkness and with certainty say it exists. In 1930 also, fragrant May, Amy Johnson, the pioneer aviator, arrives in Australia after twenty days of flying. Hazel Bowman smiles, compliments the girl's interests, the back of her eyes filled with sparkling grey light. In 1932 De Valera becomes president of the Irish Free State. October that same year and hunger marchers fight the police in Hyde Park, blood is spilled on the brown grass of London. And, a favourite, tragic article, almost two years later, Bonnie and Clyde are killed in an ambush in Louisiana, America. And the British press loves it, loves the simple unlikeliness and animation of it.

In the following months, close to the end of her schooling, Janet becomes aware of the dark figure emerging in Europe, across the icy North Sea, tightening the belts of his philosophy as he does so purging his party of suspected traitors; this is 'the night of long knives', the papers announce, and the girl carefully cuts along the borders of Hitler's rise.

The changing world is illustrated on the walls of Mardale school, murder and hatred and valour and a stratum of ideals find their way into the quiet countryside of the Lakeland, like silent modern friezes set against the slow lap of the lake, the patter of rain. It is strange that the children should be familiar with the clockwork cogs and wheels of the outside world, as familiar as with their Latin verbs from Homer, Keats and Shakespeare, though their parents also are now reminded daily of the world's machinations, the airwaves lit up with news. Dislocated voices chip into their lives, issuing statements, reporting unrest, uniting the county. Bringing husbands and wives into the same room for long minutes before they move off towards the separate corners of their convenient lives.

Hazel Bowman has no husband, and though she is endeared to many in the area she has chosen a single life. She lives alone in a bungalow in Bampton Grange, with four baying otter hounds and towering bookshelves. Hers is a passionate and self-fulfilling existence. She brings the bouncing troubled light of a new era into the remote valley, carrying it in her arms like a paper lantern, signed by a thousand men and women of the country. She brings with her a brilliant energy and liberating

words, ideals belonging to the New World, perhaps, or the Antipodes. And there are off-kilter tones in her speeches, also; she has her demons. Let the class take note. Mary Shelley's husband altered the last sentence of *Frankenstein*, commanding the reader to breathe a sigh of relief where it was not intended. Never breathe a sigh of relief, she warns. In this world there is always the intrusion of one structure or another into the sacred, self-governing heart. When she leaves this valley it will be without regret, with her bright arms open towards the Spanish Civil War, late in the summer of 1936. Behind her a legacy of unique and brilliant education. The space between this bowed rack of fells having become an unprecedented arena of learning.



By then, Janet Lightburn will be grown, she will have benefited from the influence of an exceptional woman. But in these dawn hours of her own childhood and before the school bell there are other small, hard lessons to be learned. From her father, from the way his hands move smoothly across an animal superior, stewarding, so that there can be no question of his authority. There are signs of sickness she will be taught to recognize in beasts, fluid coming from eyes, lumps on the flat surface of a tongue. Caring for a sheep unable to get up, unable to back out of the corner of a wall, having strayed from its heft. Caring for the scars and lower fells she often comes across the carcasses of dead sheep, immediately recognizing the stench coming off the earth. At first they are only missing eyes, the wool thinning off the face and a hurricane of flies anticipating above their bellies. With time their bodies roll into oblique positions and open like rotting flowers, dry flesh stretches and bones spread out over the rough grass. She kicks them with a shoe, back into close proximity, to create rudimentary maps of the world. She finds India, the Sargasso Sea, Tasmania, shaped by the ribcage of a Swaledale over heather. Eventually even the grey bones are removed, half-buried, or grown over with bracken. Nothing remains as a monument to death here. The land sucks back in what it once issued.

In these early hours she learns skills without knowing that it is an education of one form. The way to hold down a ewe for clipping, with the upper body a brace and one leg an anchor, the strong arm free. She will pry open the mouth of an orphaned lamb, hold its tongue down with a finger and thumb to introduce milk through a fake teat. The point on the side of a head to place the rifle barrel, exact inches from an eye, where the bullet will meet with least resistance. She will not ask if it is the same for humans. Already she understands limits.

One morning she watches her father kill a lame cow. It is still upright in the field, but one hind hoof is rotten. It will not move and cannot be saved, must be destroyed before it destroys the herd, her father says. It sways and lets out an occasional quiet bellow. The decision is made quickly and without remorse, her father leaves for Whelter Farm to get some cartridges and the gun. For a time she is left alone with the animal. During the wait she prays that the cow will somehow recover and move from the middle of the field where it is stuck. Even two rotten steps to the left might mean it could be saved, so that she could take her father by his cuff and say, See, see, it is still capable. Salvation. Her mother would say the word, the place, is reserved for humans, for they alone can be redeemed through God. Not the animals who have not been blessed under His Mercy. What, then, of this beast without choice or hope of mercy? Only a bullet in the brain to stop its energy and the eventual spread of its bones across the soil. And the land will borrow back that which was lent, as always. She tries not to notice the creature's gentle, living eyes, but keeps a blind company for it in these last minutes. She can see her father coming back down the lane, shotgun cracked open over his arm. He is inserting cartridge cases, looking down. And at the back of her mind she knows better than to hope for the impossible. She knows she won't beg her father not to shoot it. He would not mind her pleas, but certainly he would tell her to leave because of them. As her position as guardian it is vital that she

stays, a witness to the events entire. And she does not want to disappoint him, he has no son. She wonders if she will cover her ears when he raises the gun. Her father's boots on the gravel track a louder, and she thinks, thinks hard about the motionless cow, and salvation falling away, perhaps never existing at all.

He bends down to her, the gun like a broken branch in his arm. It's such a strange and foreign object, half natural, half abhorrently man-made, cast metal. Later, she will be proficient in its handling, able to clean and load it. Later still, and her aim will be better than her father's. Crows will tumble out of the branches as she fires.

– Right? Right, lass. Gudgirl. Yer mam wants yer in. But stop here if y'like. S'up to thee.

The girl nods, barely a nod. Her father walks to the middle of the field. The cow is falling before she hears the shot.



There is a smooth white scar on her forehead. It is shaped like a raised star to the right on the plate of bone. A little too far out across the skin for a piece of loose hair to pass over it as she leans forward and so it usually remains visible. On her body there are several such masculine scars, she has spent too much time with the daily, impersonal violence of livestock and has laboured with heavy equipment too many times in poor light to come away unscathed. Her knees have been lacerated against a lifted plough and there are fingers which do not grow straight, but crook towards her palm like the bent bars of a cage. A broken rib from a frisky goat, its slight indentation in her stomach. Perpetually bruised cheeks, missing nails. Swollen ankles. These are accidents of minor proportions, unexceptional in the farming community. Even to her they are normal and acceptable. She does not consider herself unlucky or particularly broken in comparison with the rest of the valley's female population, nor is she possessed of damages out of proportion with other women of the area. As she grows, her father will gradually wean her out of farm work and instead a brother will help to move the full herd. She will begin tutoring more often at the school, write the occasional commentary for the *Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* under an assumed name, and avoid early marriage, much to the chagrin of her mother. The welts and old scars will heal and diminish, shifting position on her body as she grows.

But the star is the deepest of the collection. It sits against her head as a reminder that her life has included the sporadic brutality of her family's trade. It is the clearest mark perhaps, the key, touchstone by which her father always finds his way back to her. He holds high regard for the scar, reverence, the way a man might invest powerful emotion in a small icon or that ruptured portion of the past captured in a single object which he has inherited from a dear relation.



She was eight years old and Samuel had already begun to suspect that there were things at work in his daughter a man should be wary of. At times, if he concentrated hard, he thought he could hear a low growl coming from her, emitted from a non-specific region of her chest, like the sound of snow about to move off a mountain in large pieces. As if she was tempered wrong. Her ways were not in keeping with her youth or her sex. She was seldom frightened as a small child will be during a new experience and she had developed a disturbing habit of staring at things, staring clear into them, so that her eyes never dropped during chastisement or argument. Her mother noticed this too, felt her face being eaten by the look as she chided her daughter for the carelessness with which she brought filth into the house. Often she bit her lip and clenched a hand at her side as if preparing to slap the stare away, though El had never laid an ill hand to her child. The pair butted heads like two rams on a narrow bridge as the

met in conversation. Janet would not swallow God like her daily liver oil. She wanted to be shown His evidence, as if He were worms in the ground that would come up through loose soil seeking solace during the rain. She wanted her proof, a telescope to locate Him in the darkness. Ella warned her against false idols which she would find in such looking, and against straying too far, against her fearlessness. An uneasy tension grew between them, as if they were both in themselves too charged, too magnetic to be in a room together. As if their forces would push against each other like invisible gravity from separate poles and damage the delicate balance of the known world. So their time together took the form of brief intervals, both understanding this to be the only way.

That morning, of Samuel's remembering, Janet had wanted to come to move the cows as she usually did, but she was running a slight fever. Measles was spreading through the children of the adjoining Shap and Bampton valleys and her mother was worried it had now reached Mardale. Ella was acquainted with fevers of many varieties and the ones heralding trouble came with characteristics gently different from those of a simple head cold. A slight discolouration in the sweat along the temples, the eyes labouring between focus and vacancy. Influenza and child-killers made subtle alterations within the body's subtext of massive heat. But the girl was up and dressed at five o'clock and would not hear of going back to bed and riding the fever out in comfort. She would not be talked into sickness. She would not be nursed. In truth, it may have been only exasperation over her daughter's stubbornness that allowed her mother to let her go. Git out of my sight then, lass, she said, turning from the bold gaze of the small fevered face. And the maternal anger was stored away for a later time.

It was more than just a blustery autumnal morning, her father remembers, because the wind in the leaves of the great sycamores by Measand Hall was threatening sombre repercussions in the brooding darkness. There were invisible ills going on, he knew it. Slates being loosened. Fencing being rocked out of its foundation. The roses newly planted in front of the cottage must have been coming away from their crutches. He could hear foliage creaking and bending, the land of the valley itself was distressed.

Samuel held a lantern, which was flickering and threatening to blow out and would probably not last for the duration of the task. So he set it back in the shed, extinguished. Without the distraction of light, the surrounding murk became accessible to the eye. His daughter came out of the farmhouse towards him. She had on a pair of boys' breeches, which suited better the work of these early mornings. She was dressed warmly, but as he laid a hand on her head he found her hair was damp with sweat along her brow and she may have been shivering. He asked her again, would she go inside? No. She would not.

With the absence of a lantern, navigation of the path down to the paddock would be a question of relied-upon familiarity and concentrated vision. The daylight that morning was faltering, the clouds were racing across the sky. They set off down the lane. Samuel had with him a rope, wound in coils over his shoulder. Heavy wind in the valley often sent cattle and horses wild, they would take off in whatever direction the gusting force propelled them, filled with a frantic spirit. If this was the case they would need to be bound round the neck and calmed, kept close. His daughter was walking next to him, her pace quickening as she was blown a little forward from time to time.

Samuel noticed the moving form first, a shape that was out of accord with the surrounding scenery. It had movement unrelated to the wind. Then he recognized the density of withers, the curve of horn. A bullock had loosened itself from a nearby field by trampling down an old section of wall. Samuel saw it coming up the path towards them, bucking up its hind legs and cutting the rough air with its head. He gave his daughter a savage push to the side.

– Quick, lass, git up that tree.

The animal picked up its trot as it saw them, it shook its head and snorted. Janet had reached the

rowan tree and climbed half-way up it within seconds, moving like a startled cat. She called for her father to join her, but he was standing his ground, removing the rope from his shoulder. He quickly fashioned a noose at the end of it. The bullock continued forward and, as it did so, Samuel tried to skirt it and come at it from the side, where there would be no horns, no hind legs to wrestle with. But the animal was twisting to face him, its thick-packed muscle shifting under the skin. There was no chance of getting the rope around its neck head-on. After almost a full circle the bullock had his head trapped against the rowan. It butted him twice, the horns finding his left forearm. From the low branches of the tree, his daughter saw the blood starting there, dark red through his torn shirt, snaking down his fingers. Samuel had his right hand on a horn and he was trying to pull the large animal down. His left arm hung at his side, dripping and fractured.

He tries to remember the next part of the dreamlike sequence accurately, but there is an unreality quality which is hard to clarify.

It was only a moment later that he heard the cry, a throaty half-growl, half-hiss, and then there was a flash of yellow down from the branches of the tree, on to the neck of the bullock and off, bringing enough weight against the animal for its head to drop with the shock of it. He quickly slipped the rope over the neck of the dazed beast, looped it around the tree. After a few tugs against its bindings the bullock became subdued. For a moment Samuel thought that it had been a lynx which had leapt from the tree. A rare and fantastic creature. Only the corner of his eye had caught it and the morning light was stormy at best. Until he turned and saw the cub of his daughter lying on the ground, with torn breeches and a deep puncture in her head which was beginning to spill.

By the time father and daughter had reached the Shap surgery in the Hindmarshes' old Morriestown their wounds had nearly stopped bleeding, but the puncture, unlike the gash on the arm, had been too obscure a shape to stitch closed. And Dr Saul Frith had been more concerned with the girl's apparently fully developed measles than with the damage done to her head. He was less interested in tales of bravery than he was concerned with a potentially lethal epidemic, he told them.

In 1936 the village of Mardale consisted mostly of tenant farmers, as it had for a few hundred years and the land surrounding it was devoted to the grazing of sheep, cattle and mountain ponies, a little agriculture where the soil was deep enough and rich on the slopes beneath the farmhouses. The villagers lived quietly, independently from the rest of the county, almost separate from the world, save for a weekend trip into town, to the cinema, the dancehall, a Tuesday excursion to the market. Or a visit from an adventurous explorer, a climber, the odd geological surveyor, a meteorologist, studying rainfall charts. The farmers were hard-working men, eking a hard living from the land, wholly dependent on the outcome of their husbandry. On Sundays they visited the church with their wives and in the week their children went to the small, blue-walled school, where they were taught to read and write, arithmetic and a little Latin. Although these were not a people bound by the mountains on the horizon, they were conscious of their landscape in a way that led them to live by it and from it.

The buildings of the village were squat, stout and tucked into woody enclaves, designed to withstand the ravages of the seasons, the rough, unpredictable weather common to this part of the country. There was an inn at the south end of the village called the Dun Bull which advertised in the Midland papers for boarders and occasionally received them. At the Dun Bull Inn gatherings took place, the shepherd's meet, the Mardale Hunt, evening assemblies where old men sang ballads with their rough, low voices softening like the air in spring. The inn was as much a centre for congregation as the church. And it stood almost opposite St Patrick's church on the other side of the main, muck-wheel-rutted road.

Ella Lightburn would not set foot inside the inn; indeed, she would cross over to the other side of the street when she passed by it. Though she had delivered the placenta of Janet's birth in its snowbound doorway, there was no endearment. A place of ill intent, she called it, certainly not suitable for women, not even for men, come to it. Hers was an inflexible faith which ruled out liquor of any kind as a sin, even though she was aware that the parish vicar, Reverend Wood, himself imbibed a jar or two on Tuesday and Thursday evenings as a reward if the preparation of his Sunday sermon was going well. And sometimes as a consolation if it wasn't. It was said that Ella complained more about the grimy state of the copper pans hung over the fireplace, and the dust on the woodwork than the moral state of the souls who frequented the Dun Bull, though how she reached these informal conclusions without first-hand experience remains a mystery. Samuel Lightburn was not so much a stickler in such matters, either divine or hygienic. He kept a tankard hung on the wall behind the bar from which he always took his ale and, as his wife visited the church often, so he propped up the bar of the Bull regularly, with his soft cap left like the wing of a bird on the counter beside his pint.

The Dun Bull Inn stood next to a small hill that was covered loosely with ash trees. It stood a little higher than the church, the tower of which was only twenty-nine and a half feet tall, excluding the spire. It was the newest of the buildings in the area, constructed in 1865 from Pennine granite and the traditional Westmorland blue slate. A tennis court had been built next to it at the turn of the century on the whim of a previous owner, the flat shale of which now provided straggling tourists with a decent car-parking facility. Tennis was a neglected sport in Mardale. Over the main entrance of the establishment hung a painted sign sporting an enormous brown bull of prize-winning proportions, and not unlike the agricultural monstrosities found depicted in the eighteenth-century wing of the National Gallery. For sixty years the Dun Bull had been host to farmers, travellers and tourists, now furnishing

them with ale and spirits and terrible pies made with meat of uncertain origin. The present publican was a large and bawdy Scotsman with huge, herniated testicles, whose name was Jake McGill. He was rotund and bearded, with small, bright, brown eyes and a wicked sense of humour.

Jake, as he told the tale himself, had left his homeland in the dead of one misty spring night in 1929, to escape from an enraged wife. The reason for her rage was never fully explained, but local rumour guessed at unfair play on his behalf. He arrived in the quiet blue-green valley a few weeks after becoming a fugitive, with the intention of lying low for a spell in the borderlands before catching the Maryport steamer to Ireland, only to discover that the Dun Bull had been without a landlord for over a year. So he stayed on, because he felt he was needed to take care of the poor, dry unfortunates there, he called, he said. Within three months he had imported a good quantity of ferociously rough whisky into the valley, which his cousin brought down from the last of the illegal Lowland distilleries and which proved fiery enough to strip a man's stomach lining after two fingers, taken quickly. The whisky was undisputedly revolting but rapidly acquired novelty value, as the two public houses in the adjacent villages of Bampton and Bampton Grange were licensed to sell only beer. Thus the Dun Bull, tucked into the isolated north-west English countryside, was, for a time, home to some of the most potent whisky in the whole of the British Isles.

Jake McGill was not a culinary master, but he would wake each morning at seven and rise with the discipline of a drill sergeant (indeed, it was rumoured that he had some form of loose military training) and then spend two hours in the kitchen, engaged in the surreptitious preparation of his pie before he opened the Dun Bull's doors to the public at one.

Within two years his pies had achieved legendary status throughout Westmorland, and arguably Cumberland also, for sending cattle lame if they stepped on one, or bugging up a man for a week should he have the misfortune to consume a whole one. Jake also created his own beer-like concoction in his spare time, outside in a shoddy greenhouse behind the inn, which he offered to his customers at the truly magnificently low price of a halfpenny a pot. It was termed, simply, 'Brew'.

The proprietor had a live-in girl called Jenny Wade, who stayed at the Bull on the pretext of cleaning for him. She helped out in the bar on busy nights and she cooked breakfast for any guests who might be staying at the inn during the warmer seasons. Dutifully, she warned them against the pies, all the while complimenting Jake as she tested their thick pastry crusts and soggy intestines herself. And when his testicles were not too painfully swollen, she encouraged Jake, in many ways, to forget about the Wretched Woman Harpy who had plagued his past life. She encouraged him to re-examine the various advantages of womankind through her plump and warm self.

The floor of the Dun Bull was uncarpeted, which was probably a blessing as it became a seabed for the tides of filth and mud brought in from the fields and farms. The odour of manure was never quite absent from its lower rooms. It had cavernous ceilings with dark wooden beams and most of its corners were lost in deep shadows. There was a variety of fox heads on the wall with fur of ranging colour, from blonde-amber to mahogany. They were the trophies of successful Mardale hunts, their jaws set in a last violent expression of defence against the hounds. A flail and a hoe were mounted above the entrance doorway, for no particular reason, and a set of huge copper pans was hung over the fireplace, spilling a dull copper light into the room when the setting sun found the right angle into the building before disappearing behind the mountains. The Dun Bull's interior was not dissimilar to many other drinking establishments of the region. Its punters, in Jake's opinion, however, were not lacking in originality, they were altogether a little rarer.



Across the road stood St Patrick's, a beautiful, ancient church, built at the end of the fifteenth century.



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