

A young couple engages in a literary romance set in 1970's Britain. Can life match Literature? Our couple's bold experiment in the field of applied literature draws widely from the literary canon as they attempt to reconcile the two.

A Song For Jo

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*A Song For Jo*  
*Bertrand Holland*

# **A SONG FOR JO**

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## APRIL COME SHE WILL

This was the poem over which Jo North, eighteen, had laboured for the best part of a morning:

Daffodil, dark in absent yellow,  
Proud stem, gaping mouth,  
Saying nothing.  
The cloud shields you from what you really are,  
Unseen,  
You are foreign to the land.  
Friendless, insubstantial,  
Your pollen powdered like sulphur,  
But dark, like grains of black sand.

Daffodil, bright in radiant yellow,  
The dust on your ragged lips,  
Potent, glistens.  
And your fluted trumpet sings,  
A lemon tongue that stings.  
You and me alone,  
Flower of early spring,  
Why do I yearn  
For the darkness  
A cloud might bring?

She nibbled the end of her pencil and regarded her creation. Her "A" Level head was full of "Romantic Poetry", while her heart yearned for the real thing. She dreamed of escape from Hayworth, her flight a poem upon an iambic horse. The man, when he came, would take her in tongues to the flowering place, to the spinning centre where all was still. From her dry books would spring the poet man with trochaic eyes and a head full of hyperbole. She would leaf through him, together

they would poeticise the world, so that in their loving should the finest poem be spun.

She sighed, put her slight poem to one side. How could she be discovered in the shade? The twentieth century was so glittery, a massive distraction. She was ripe, yet like the sweetest of fruit, remained hidden, undiscovered. Would she wither into rotting old age? Would she care? She felt a streak of contempt for a world that passed her by. If there was no one, then the world was empty, she too dark to see. To become a poem, however, spoken on ancient lips, each stress a beat of her heart, that would be consummation and in the sacred place where he and she would be thou and thee, he would be found in Byronic splendour. She shuddered, the dream it ran so strongly, her flesh opening to let his images, like yeast, rise within her.

Chris Hurst, full of want and fear, approached the house of the object of desire on the first bright day of spring.

Mrs. North, a plump body in a tweed skirt, put on the kettle, and wondered for which of her daughters he came. While she informed them of his arrival, he patted an old dog curled on a seat tucked into the bay of a window. The animal caught the smell of Chris's dog, stretched forward and sniffed with purpose.

The dog's was not the only nose to twitch, expectant, in the air.

"Who's he come to see?" Jennie asked, too precipitately.

Jo, finger to her lips, slipped from the bed to listen at the door, and with a look prevailed upon her sister not to speak until certain their mother had gone.

"He's come for you," Jennie observed, delight in her eyes.

Jo replied, doubt puckering her chin, "It cannot be."

"Well, he must know I'm going out with someone and you're free."

Jo regarded her sister wistfully. "Yes. But I don't know if I want him. I don't want any extra commitments at the moment."

"You're incredible Jo! He's just a boy looking for a date. He hasn't come to ask you to marry him!"

"Huh! I shouldn't think he would have me." And she added, in her mind, "What is he to me?"

"Well? Are you coming?" Jennie's voice was light. It nettled Jo that her sister derived amusement from her discomfiture.

"You go. I have plenty to do."

"Oh no! He's come for you. It would be rude to hide."

And before Jo had time to think Jennie was propelling her through the door, not entirely against her will.

Jo, coloured with doubt, grace and longing, seemed to Chris a thing of beauty. Attending to the kettle soothed her nerves.

The conversation was desultory, avoided the issue of why he had come. They talked of their first meeting, at a party the winter before. He recalled how pretty Jo had looked, how the girl had drawn him, as if his longing had chimed with hers. Meanwhile she considered him. Two years her elder he had started work after "A" Levels, yet had an academic bearing not distasteful to her. She imagined his bookish hands upon her. He carried a sense of the town, was unlike her father and the men who worked the fields beyond her door; his class, antithetical to one of agrarian stock. Now he was laughing, yet about him a darkness, a gathering of the brow, that suggested intelligence and self-knowledge. She would know him better.

Jo's mother noticed how he tended to direct himself toward the younger of the two, towards Jo. She saw how bashful the girl was in serving the tea, always averting her eyes and choosing a seat far from him. In all she took a motherly concern, gauging the response of her daughter to the boy. She asked questions about his home, parents, work; approved of his middle class credentials.

The sun had descended and now strode full into the room. When Jo rose to take the cups it darkened her figure, but her hair caught the light and shone like a halo round a face he could no longer see.

When he left the house the air was damp with descending dew, the dusk a palpable thing. Back in the car his success was recounted to a tail-wagging dog.



Arriving at "The White Hart" early Chris and Jo entered the saloon bar, he ordering drinks. Jo's blonde hair, long and straight, fell onto the white cotton shoulders of a sleeveless top, the fabric gathering about her delicate breasts. Her long velveteen skirt of blue and white swirls, tight around a narrow waist, caught upon hips as wide as a smile. The look of her made him giddy and a little proud.

She drank mead and got a little drunk. She trusted him, was warm in the warm pub with the jukebox playing love songs in her head. She loved the tweed of his jacket, it softened him. His working shirt and corduroy trousers blunted his edges. His long hair and fuzzy beard made him indistinct. He had his arm around her and she liked this visible claim upon her as if she could be owned. She leant into him, felt him quick, like liquid, receive her form. He was as insubstantial as the melting wine. Her body shuddered, her head dizzy, in twist. And like water, he would leave a mark, change her.

"I like this song," he whispered, the back of her neck moist and alive, as his breath played out upon her. It was Simon and Garfunkel's arrangement of "April Come She Will".

"Did you put it on?" She knew he had. It was her first night out with him, it was April, he was playing her sad love songs - she was ecstatic with him. "Will you," she asked as the song faded, "remember me next September?"

Yes," he replied, "though I hope you'll not have gone!"

"In June she'll change her tune! In July she shall fly! Is this how it will be?" Her colour rose as she teased him.

"My Lady, if it is, then in August die you must!" Again she sensed his breath, hot on her ear.

While he bought more drinks she found the fuzzy jukebox. He noticed the curve of the zip of her skirt rise from proud buttocks to a button at the base of her spine. She wouldn't say which songs she had chosen. She was a little drunk with him.

"Do you write?" she asked as they returned to their table.

"Poetry and stuff?"

She nodded.

"A bit. I'm not much good at it."

She was intense, looked at him direct. "Nor am I!"

"Sometimes I need to - I don't know why. I feel a certain way and ideas come rushing in, but I never seem to do much with them."

"I know!" Her eyes were like blue stones. "I think the most beautiful and sad things in my head," she said, sipping her drink, "but when it comes to putting them on paper it's useless." Bob Dylan's "My Back Pages" filled the bar. "Then you hear something like this and you wonder why you bother."

He was becoming animated, his skin colouring, his arms gesticulating. "Yeah. But it can't stop you. I spend all night on a poem, even kid myself I've really created something, then in the morning when I read it, it's garbage. And I tear it up. But the next night, I'm writing again."

Jo did not sense his exaggeration. "I don't write that much, with my exams and everything," she said, deferential. "Will you show me some of your poems?"

He was uncertain, knew their worth. "Yes, but you mustn't be too critical." He paused. "I'd like to see some of yours."

She flushed, but was pleased. She was impressed with him.

Briefly, between "Lay Lady Lay" and "Like A Rolling Stone", the folk group they had come to see could be heard playing in an adjacent bar. She detected a new passivity in herself: she wanted to be kissed by him. Letting him take her arm, she was far more aware of the symbolic nature of her actions than he. Again the urge to be kissed swept through her: she wanted him close, the smell of him in her lungs. And he keeping her in this state of want, his not realising her desire, this denial of need made her want him more - so much more, that the denial itself became an ecstasy to her.

At the door leading to the room where the folk group was playing he paused to let her through. How many of her friends would have hated, or claimed to have hated, this "chivalry"? Yet she shuddered as she passed in front of him, had so strongly the sense of him. This new way of relating to a man excited her, made her feel differently, be less certain of herself.

Once, during the performance, he cast a sideways glance at her in the dim room. She was intent upon the music as if in communion. He wondered who she might be.

Later, parked outside her parents' house, they planned when they would next meet. She had essays to do, time was short. They would see a film and the following weekend go for a walk.

She said, "Write to me. Send me your poems and I'll send you some of mine."

The idea seemed strange, yet appealed to him. Why not write to someone who lived but ten minutes away? He wanted to kiss her, but was uncomfortable with the thought of lurching across the seat to grab her. Sensing this, she leaned closer to him, so that his movement should appear natural. "Don't delay," she smiled, teasing, "with the letter I mean!"

He slipped his arm around her neck, drew her to him. "I'll send it tomorrow night after work." His eyes were above her white face. She was evanescent. It would be like, he thought, kissing a ghost. He studied her lips, wanted to kiss them so much his ache became disembodied, ricocheted round the metal car, he fearing it might wound them. His dog, Woody, who'd had a pretty boring evening, snorted. Closing her eyes, she raised her head a little and parted her lips. She would deny herself no more. His soft beard upon her face thrilled her, the taste of his sweet lips, like dew, upon her own, maddened her blood. Yet she did not fear these new, powerful sensations, knew that the greater the need, the greater the will required to subdue it. And she would subdue the frenzy that scrambled her body and mind, her will should triumph, the ecstasy of denial greater for the knowledge of its cost. He was in the air, insubstantial about her, like a spirit entering her. Emitting a small groan, she yielded to him.

The kiss was long and lingering. Inwardly she smiled; it would take such a lot of denying!

On the Thursday came his keenly anticipated letter. She poured over his brief note and three poems, all handwritten. Her favourite she decided to write out herself, as if caressing his words with her own pen, so that his images could speed through pen and arm, be injected into her brain.

And happy I was in those earth long days,  
Her face a fantasy of flight and free.  
A friend whirling through fields of awe,  
Daffodil free, she beauty searched.  
The hedgerows buzzed, the spinning world, it turned  
For me.

And what of those mind days, summer sweet?  
Wild scents arrest the air, her perfume, her body there.  
These were the milk white days and she was true.  
But in ciderous night, a blank moon bleached our bodies bare,  
While time, like a winged serpent wormed deep,  
The broad hand marked time to another beat,  
In the owl screech, tearing, wrenching night.

The morning time: a dispelling light like the first.  
The chorus, the wild plumes of sound, the first chaos  
To which we are bound. Summer breeze on summer dew,  
Wisps of hair cross her woman's face.  
Soft eyes, earth brown, and elsewhere the burgeoning day,  
I and she alone, separate, having lost more than we gained.

She felt the rush of it, like the wind over skin. Inside her giddy head there was a tune, both sweet and sad. Who was the girl with "soft eyes, earth brown" who had such power over him? She changed the eyes from "earth brown" to "sky blue". It could be anyone after all, so why could it not be her?

She felt he would be the first. She still had doubts; his strength, mental and physical was untried. Physically he was tall, but slight and this did trouble her. As for his mind only time would tell. Yet the poem entered her with a seductive ease. She wished to be lulled by his kissing words, be his phantastic friend. She knew she was like winter, that with him she could discover herself better, change her form, like the land in thaw.

He loved her "Daffodil" poem. The hint of darkness, the desire, that when all that the world had to offer had been sampled, she would prefer the shade, appealed to his neo-romanticism. He loved daffodils, free in a spring breeze,

heads bobbing in joy at a world that was only just beginning. Yet, he knew, that under this surrender of winter to yellow lay an older order; one that would carry them through the hay days of summer, through to the disintegrating world of autumn and beyond to the dead lands of winter. She had told him that she had been born on the shortest day, how could such a one warm in the sun, share with him the joy of watching the petals of the flowers, quick in a spring breeze? But he wanted her, to discover her in the shade, dark under daffodils. She was as beautiful as a daffodil, her hair blonde like its flowerhead, her back straight and supple as its stem. He dreamed of kissing her lemon tongue, seizing her body from the icy wastes, breathing new life into her, their skin touching, burning in the dark place, the centre of all delight.

He wanted her as any boy would, yet wanted his desire to be coloured, textured, empowered with the force of a literary romance. The girl with the earth brown eyes, and others, had given him sex, but where was the magic? He wanted to love beautifully, thought perhaps he had found the one. He would wait for her.

By late June her exams were finished. Walking together, they were approaching a wooded valley. Upon reaching the first tree, its branch arching over them, he felt a sudden invigoration as if possessed by new purpose. The coolness of the wood touched Jo too, lent to her senses a new conduciveness that had been in abeyance in the sun.

The smell of lilac came to her, the cones of scent exploding from the plant like a firework. It aroused within her a sudden strong sense of being, each flower limp, yet alive with some secret, exciting potency. She noticed his way of touching the flower and she too cupped one in her hands drawing the perfume down deep into her lungs. It sent a dizzying wave through her, from head to spine, like a long, sensual caress.

He stooped to pick up a broken branch and quickly stripped its side shoots, tearing the bark in thin strands as he did so. She saw his way of working the wood, how it softened, became a supple, yielding thing. He smoothed and then curved it back

like a bow, about an inch in diameter, three feet in length. He flexed it and then, drawing back his arm, whipped the stick across the space before them. She heard the rush of sound as it cut through the air, felt her breath catch and her throat dry. He was holding the thing still now. She wanted to touch it, but he drew away from her. She flushed in sudden irritation, wanted to bite, wound; yet stayed, entranced, obedient to him.

"You see how, when I lay this stick in my hands, it moves, seemingly of its own volition, to find its perfect resting place. It's like a woman, always fidgeting, always dissatisfied and yet I can hold it still...there." He paused. "There you see how she falls into my arms. Look how happy she is!"

The girl lay in his arms and would not resist. She acquiesced in this subjugation of her will. She could serve him. She leaned, her body bowed to him, as they continued their walk. He felt the weight of her as she linked her arm under his and laid her head upon his shoulder. He started playing with the woman in his hands. He caressed the bark, skilfully he anticipated every roll of her body; met it tenderly, but firmly. And as the woman remained, fixed, two becoming one, there was a yielding of her will to his which lent to him a greater strength.

This display by the Laurentian male quelled the female by his side. She was submissive, newly responsive to his will. In moments such as these they touched. It was what she had chosen, but the time was fleeting, for as he returned from his subterranean world so her will, re-emergent, bit back at the one who had sought this control. In his failure to sustain this darker world he embittered her. She needed to be subsumed by the man, each lost in the other; but thus cheated, her doubts resurfaced. She broke from him.

In October she would be gone. She had accepted a provisional offer from Pont-a-Dovey University to read English. Her exams were finished; she felt listless. A long summer of uncertainty yawned before her. It would not be until the middle of August, when the results were announced, that she would know her fate. Then she could plan. Now she was caught in an in between time with no clear idea of what to do, where to go. So much of herself had pitched towards the taking of the exams that now they were done life seemed unreal. In the last

frenetic weeks, on the odd evening she had snatched from her revision timetable, when that unremitting tyrant had been inclined to let her go, she had escaped to him.

Or, in a break from work, unexpectedly perhaps, she would find her thoughts centred upon him. Sometimes she had written to him. She had, in her mind, set aside this time to be spent with him, so that each should learn more about the other. The need to deny him would cease. They would be free. But it was not so. What did she find? This habitual denial of him lay still inside her. She wondered about the bother of it. Another life beckoned her, one in which he would not figure at all. So why stay? Why put up with the nuisance of it? Happier, less complicated times were to be had walking her father's dog. He didn't try to control you or, if he did, it was in such a pathetically obvious way it made you laugh. He didn't ask you to share in his destiny or start using pieces of wood metaphorically. A pat on the head and a chocolate drop were all he needed. Would the one who walked with her now be so easily satisfied?

Chris drew back the stick and flung it in the air. Woody followed with his eye the line of the ascending object as it spun, blurring the distinctions between itself and the space surrounding it. The animal moved to catch it as it fell. For a second they all waited; then puzzlement replaced expectancy on the dog's brow. Instead of dropping it tore into the soft leaves of a beech, catching fast.

"I'm thinking of making a late application to uni."

This she had not been expecting.

"I feel I'm stagnating here. I need to do something fresh."

"To do what?" She was not displeased.

"English, I think."

"You've left it a bit late. Most of the places will have gone."

"I know. I probably won't get anything until clearing."

She now asked the question that really interested her, "Where are you thinking of applying?"

His brow rucked just discernibly as if she had pulled a string that gathered there. "I thought about Wales."

"Pont-a-Dovey?"

"Or, if they won't take me, Abertowi is a possibility. Sam has just moved near there."

Jo considered this. It was obvious he had been thinking. Sam was an old friend of his who had moved to South Wales after getting engaged to a Welsh girl he had met on holiday. She realised with some chagrin that his choice of Wales was not perhaps entirely influenced by her.

He put his arm about her shoulder and drew her to him a little roughly. He had lost the finesse of the moments before. Her body moved to him woodenly and when their lips met it was harshly, sexlessly. He drew her down fully to the ground and she lay stiff beside him. Again it was done clumsily with no account taken of her; his need unknowing, decontextualised, distressed the girl. She, passive, let him, like the gale, run over her, until feeling his hand between her legs, pushed him away. "Not now."

He lay on his back, ardour subsiding, anger rising, "When then?"

"When I feel right with you. When there is more love than lust in you." She turned over onto her stomach and with raised head on open palms, elbows piercing the ground, continued, "When I am more like September and you less like March." She smiled remembering the song. "You know I want to." She paused feeling she could say no more. She did not want to lose him.

He lay, silent, unmoving, as his passion seeped back to the soft earth. What replaced it came from elsewhere; a retrenchment in his mind, a refuge quickly built, where he could be safe from her; a dead place where the self feeds upon itself.

The shriek of a pheasant distracted them. Chris whistled and Woody came trotting back obediently to be rewarded with a stroke. Now she became jealous of the attention given to the dog. It roused her that she should be disregarded so. She noticed, as they walked on, how the dog kept close to his side and she, diffidently, took his arm on the other. Still she didn't have his attention. He was talking to his dog, who gave little excited leaps and wagged his tail with a cavorting joy. Chris stopped, withdrew his arm from her, squatted on his haunches and started playing with the animal.

He was irritated with her. Something small inside goaded him. She stood a little distance off. Sensing a certain strangeness in



him she became unsure. She hardly knew him and now he was angry with her. She felt she had given him no cause, yet in spite or perhaps because of this, it made her want to placate him. He, locked in the killing place, sought only to be even with her; saw that the greater his show of indifference the more she would yield to him. He mocked her fine romance: a romance of clay, dry and impenetrable. Then he caught sight of her, suppliant, her forehead fair, her eyes of aquamarine where a man might drown. He thought of the fair Ophelia and despite his bitterness began to speak; ostensibly to Woody, in a language foreign to the dog. "See my fine Lady; see how she stands off, barred from us."

She detected the venom in his voice, but instantly picked up the style. This she could match. "Why my Lord, what have I done?"

"You would do better to please than set yourself apart from me."

She flushed deeply. She knew what he meant. "Oh sire; ask not from a maiden what she hath not power to give."

"See this maid, how she keeps her favours. Lady me-thinks you are well favoured."

"Sweet sir! It is surely no favour to feel your scornful tongue!" she parried.

"Is it our tongue that does not suit or some other thing that shall speak when darkness comes?"

"For now it is light, sir, and I can hear no thing. Come the night there'll be no noise, I'll warrant thee, that will be worth the subscription," she observed drily.

"You do well to hear nothing, Lady, for there is much clamour in this nothing."

"Less clamour, my Lord, and more control will open the gate to my heart!"

"Open the gate? I should rather turn the lock and discard the key. Go to, I say! Be a nun! And with your dark cloak snuff out the flame that is young, that is free."

"So this is how you use me sir. Am I to be chided thus every time I fail to please?" She paused. "A nun! I should be a fine one for a nunnery with you as my priest!" He saw her laugh, her blue eyes aflame.

Woody peered quizzically at them and deciding the panic was over wandered off. Chris took her hand and smiled. She intrigued him, like a drug she invigorated him. She had taken his conceits and matched them everyone.

Jo felt sure that she would know him. Her fears were dispelling; soon she would be ready for him. Oh to ripen in the sun for him! And yet the denial was an ecstasy to her.

"I shall go on the pill," she announced. This took him by surprise, did not displease. "But you will need to be patient. It takes a whole month before it's safe."

"What about the risks?" There had been much talk in the press about cancer.

"Oh, I do not intend to stay on it for ever, but I mustn't get pregnant and it's the safest method."

On their return, at one point, she walked ahead of him. He saw her long, thin, virgin's body; how her skirt pinched her narrow waist and then bunched out below, the material cascading over wide, womanly hips. It gave him a strange sense to see her so, in the fading light of day she became more real to him. He was happy, as any young man would be, knowing his girl would not refuse him.

She turned, smiling, as if she had sensed his thoughts, "You see. I will keep my promise to you. You shall be my gardener and tend this fragile plant all the hot summer long; water me if I wilt," she looked at him mischievously, taking delight in the spinning out of her metaphor, "trim me if I grow too profuse, tend my delicate flower! And in the fall when I am ripe it will be the time to gather the harvest of your labour."

"I hope it will not be a bitter fruit," he said taking her arm.

"No. It will be as sweet as he that makes it." She leant to him. "Already I grow heavy for you, am swollen with the want of you." They stopped and kissed, gentle kisses of damson, about them something wild in the air. "The first wind of autumn shall take me." She pressed close, felt the heat of his breath upon her skin. "I shall fall free into your arms." She shuddered, the words tumbling, each whispered so softly that he was sure she did not speak but that he heard the thoughts in her head: "I think that I begin to fall in love with thee."

Things, however, were not that smooth. Even as early as that night Jo was fretting. Had she gone too far, said too much? She would not wish to deceive him. She was happy with him, though not perfectly so. On the Tuesday morning there was a letter.

“It is now twelve o'clock and some four hours since you left me. I have gone over in my mind, again and again, the events of the day and how I felt towards you. Forgive me for I am so fickle. I am surprised you put up with me. You could have the pick of the charms of any young lady. Please wait awhile. Do not forsake me for I feel a stranger to the world when I am without you. But there is still a part of me that will not accept you. It wrenches at my poor heart: I fear 'twill break for thee. Like a worm it has burrowed deep into my happiness and feeds from it. I fear the more I feel for you the stronger this parasite will grow. It laughs at me when it hears words like the ones I whispered to you as we kissed. And though I try I cannot ignore what it says. For you see that to make love with you I need to love you and I want to love you so very much. But to love you means to me to love forever. But I need to have other relationships so that I can grow, learn more about myself and men. You have had a number of close relationships and I envy you this, for it means that you can compare, you have explored your emotions, understand them more fully. I would not deceive you and so I write. Yet as I look over what I have written I wonder if it is not myself I deceive. You mean more to me than any other. I am selfish to want more. I feel so easy with you and together we often walk and talk as if we were one.

There! I have told you my innermost fears. What of you? Do you have doubts too? Do not hold back from me, even though I fear what you might say, from your changeling, with love, Jo.”

On a Saturday in early August they had planned a full day out together. Chris was to arrive early and, with packed lunches, they would walk the down lands. He had it in mind to ask her to go to Wales with him. He was timid, however, of broaching the idea for she might not approve. The desire and fear he held in uneasy equilibrium, but the division caused him pain. He would

await the moment to arrive when he could reveal his plan. As the car cut through the Sussex countryside he saw in his peripheral vision the trees shoot fleetingly by. A fear seized him that perhaps all life's critical moments were like these Sussex trees, flashing by while one anguished, rendered inactive.

Chris parked in Harting and they walked, following the road back up a steep hill before joining a footpath on the left. Though still early it was already warm and the climb fatiguing. He slipped behind her, pushing her up the last stretch, her skirt soft to his touch. She laughed as she was propelled forward, suddenly light, unburdened, his fingers branding her buttocks. At the giddy summit, flushed with the effort of him, she felt the air sharp, cool upon her hot skin. Breathless, she watched Chris pull a map from the bag. He followed, with finger and thumb, their route, matching the view to the map; Harting itself to the north, the spire of Chichester cathedral in the distance to the south east and to the south west the city of Portsmouth spilling into the sea.

They continued east to a fork in the path. Chris suggested left. It would be, he declared, an excellent place for lunch, showing her the map. She saw the red dots lead from his fingernail to a square of green. She laughed to see the name: "Venus Wood".

They approached a stile. Woody, who was ahead, negotiated it first. With considerable agility he climbed to the top only to fall in an undignified heap on the far side. As Chris and Jo came over he twisted around at their feet, almost demolishing Jo as she simultaneously coped with the combined dangers of long skirt, stile and mad dog.

They lunched in a gently sloping meadow, overlooking the wood. Jo offered him a sandwich. He took a second, noticing she had not yet finished her first.

"I'm on a diet," she explained.

Woody, who was not, pricked up his ears, furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes upon the sandwich in her hand.

"I'm allowed a thousand calories a day."

Chris regarded her slim figure. "How many does that make?"

"I'm on five hundred already and it's only one o'clock!" She passed him a third sandwich and opened a box of dry biscuits. Almost apologetically she said, "I can have one of these."

She took a delight in watching him eat food she had prepared. A pang of hunger was quelled with a drink of water. She would not eat the remaining sandwich. It was as if to be in a state of want was finer than to yield to desire and be satisfied.

"You know I am going to Abertowi." He had been offered a place.

"Mmm," Jo was searching for a knife with which to cut the fruit.

"Well I'm hoping to go up there and look around for somewhere to live. I also thought that I might call in at Sam's."

Jo continued to rummage. "You haven't seen the knife have you?" she asked.

"No I haven't used it." Woody came over briskly, tail wagging, as if he had not seen his master all day. Chris was unsure of pursuing the subject of Wales. He wanted her to travel up with him to Drefi, Sam's place. They could, he hoped, spend a week together there. He knew this was a big step and was nervous about asking again when he so obviously did not have her full attention.

"I can't find it. I must've forgotten to take it," she betrayed a slight annoyance with herself. "Oh well, we'll just have to make do." She passed him a Spanish peach and took one for herself. "You were saying?"

Chris declared his intentions and added, "We could go on to Pont-a-Dovey afterwards if you want." He knew her mother would disapprove so was surprised by her rapid acceptance.

"We can sleep in separate rooms if it'll make it easier," he offered.

She turned to him, her lips broad with an impish delight, "I don't think that will be necessary!"

The fear of her refusal was gone. He lay back. Above his head he saw the yellow heads of meadowsweet rocking gently in the lightest of summer breezes. Drawing deep into his lungs the soothing fragrance of the flowers, he smiled.

"Eat your peach and stop looking so smug!" Jo teased.

The dry skin of the fruit tingled his teeth. He bit through to the softness inside, the sweet taste of crushed flesh drenching his tongue; lips blooded, wet from secret joy.

"I'll phone Sam then, saying that we would like to stay." He slurped the last few words; he was so full of the fruit it seemed to make him drunk.

"Yes. I'll check at home first then let you know. Don't say anything about it tonight, but I don't imagine there'll be any problem." Then, passing him a tissue, and laughing, "You've made a meal of that! Why rush at it so?"

He took her, as yet untouched, peach and held it in his hand.

"Careful! You'll bruise it."

He squeezed it gently, just enough to feel its soft resistance and then opening his palm said, "See how red it is; such a deep hue, like wine or blood or..." he paused, "the blush of a maiden." With his free hand he raised her chin so her eyes would meet his own. "She is soft, she blushes and her skin is dry, without life. But underneath there is a sea of passion. Inside, her flesh is yielding, compliant, fluid with need." His eyes searched for a secret that was not his to own. He continued, drawing words as if from some other place, "But at her very centre, at the core of her, there is something hard and cold that will not let her be, will not countenance surrender."

She sighed, "I fear this, though I hope it is not so. You are very clever to discover me. Sometimes I feel that you know me so well, better than I know myself." This pleased her. Then picking up his discarded peach stone she proceeded to bury it in the earth. "There," she said when she had finished, "even a stone may grow!"

"Then I shall tend thee," he replied. He took a handful of the soil she had disturbed, brought it to her forehead, and enacting a deeply ingrained remembrance, made the sign of the cross, letting the friable earth tumble over her face. "I anoint thee with the earth. It shall protect thee, be a haven for thee."

The song of a wood warbler calling from the valley below poured into the silence that followed. Walking towards the trees, dazed, they now moved through a world that had taken one shift from reality, so that things were both familiar and

strange. Arm in arm, as they entered the wood, a bird sang high above them "three notes bodiless sweet".

They came to a point where the path was crossed by another. Chris could not find the map. "Shall we go back?"

She did not wish to return. "No. Let's follow Woody!" The dog had turned right, towards the valley and the heart of the wood.

The path soon narrowed and curved to right and left through an opening in the trees, with, at the edges of the path, splashes of colour from celandine, forget-me-not and stitchwort. The canopy of trees returned. Still in descent they followed a small stream along the valley floor.

Near water Chris became aware of a change in the air: a moistness that filled the space between ground and tree, that cloyed at the skin, confused the head. As their path took them deeper into the wood so the light lost its sharpness, was less able to define the borders between objects. Already Chris and Jo moved as one, with Jo so close to him that the whole of his sense was enrapt. Her soft fragrance merged with the smell of the wood and the earth so that his head rocked. With every step she felt a losing of her sacred identity, a rendering up of herself. Her body became fluid, to run with the river and never be caught.

Occasionally the light broke through the tree cover and odd patches of the ground were incongruously illuminated, sharply defined, super real. A foxglove flared before them. Against the sombre greens and browns it stood fully extended; its pink and white flowers glistening like quartz caught in a pillar of phosphorescent light. And all the while a whirling in their heads as the wood drove out the bearings of human consciousness, drew them like the gurgling stream to its spinning centre.

They leaned over a bridge where the stream narrowed and water gathered, before the rush, mad and free, through the arch. He looked at his Jo throwing a stick over the edge, now separate from him, her womanly form like the water, a supple, joyous thing. A light wind ran through sighing trees as if on a journey home. It was as if they were sentient; the creaking trees at one with the ache of human desire. Jo tossed a stick into the air; spinning and free it rose and then, as if it had chosen, fell to earth, towards the stream. It cut through the

water re-emerging newly coloured, twirling, uncertain of its direction upon the flat surface. Then it was seized by the current, pulled down and through the accelerating water. They turned, saw it languid, graceful, yet drifting inexorably away.

They lay upon a grassy bank where the sun had broken through to earth in the space created by the fall of a mighty tree. Chris picked a buttercup, following with flower head the contour of Jo's neck, where it left a fine trail of pollen, golden and yellow upon her skin. She picked daisies which he made into a chain. She saw the stems, slight, vulnerable, covered in the finest white hairs and how he pressed his thumbnail into each one. She felt the bruising of the flower's stalk, the release of juice, the darkening of flesh. Sometimes he seemed clumsy, lacking care, and would tear the skin to the edge. These she saw him discard. Only into those with a perfect slit would he thread another. Jo found the most beautiful daisies, then watched, transfixed, as each was pierced by the man. Her poor flowers! She could not resist, wished herself a daisy to be taken so.

In an ecstasy at every union, she wished to die from the pleasure, the pain, the need of it. Her body became a fluid thing, a rushing of water, beyond control.

And yet, deep inside, there was a ship of doubt swept along, unwilling. She distrusted this passion in herself. She could not navigate. Better to throw oneself to the waters, trust to fortune, ride the rapids, yield to the one who was now placing a ring of daisies upon her head, as if she were Ophelia, decked in wild flowers.

"You would not deceive me?"

He looked at her puzzled, then realising, "My heart is true, my daisies a ring, with which to conjoin with you."

The girl was in an ecstasy. He spoke so reverentially he might be reading from a book. She smiled, "'Before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed.'"

Chris answered, laughing, "'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun, An thou hadst not come to my bed!'"

He had teased out her final resistance, she was maid for him. And in the centre, where the world is new, it was not possible to



know who deceived whom. Arching her neck, upon her parted lips fine droplets of honeydew, his head full of stings.

His kiss was as sweet as bird song. She cried a little, losing her maidenhead, but not in sorrow. He had asked her if she wished to stop, but she was beyond self-denial. She would give him her blood as if in sacrifice.

Afterwards, his limp body seeping still further into her, she stared beyond his shoulder to the ageless trees above. She had known him as countless generations of women had known their men, with their naked backs pressed to the naked earth, each of his thrusts as vital, quick with new life as the regeneration of the earth. She felt strongly a continuity and an affinity with the millions of women past and future. She placed her hand round the back of his neck and played with his hair. He had been so gentle. Stirred, he lifted himself and looked down upon her face, broad with joy, red as the sunset.

"I love you."

She was frightened he would declare he wanted to marry her. "You don't have to say that if you don't want to."

"But I do want to." Chris was unsure.

"Well then. Let it be, if it is so." Her chin puckered.

"And you?" he asked.

"Ah!" she said softly. "I don't know if I can ever love you."

Betrayed, he picked up the daisy ring.

"Don't be upset. It has been the most marvellous thing for me. And you are such a good lover!" She flattered him.

With a sudden, involuntary, movement he broke the chain.

"That's fennel for me!" he joked coldly.

Jo continued, "And rue for me! I don't know what love is. Perhaps I do love you and do not realise it yet."

He was preoccupied, trying to repair the damage to the chain and not looking at her.

Gently she removed the flowers from his fingers. "Look at me. I feel so strongly for you. I cannot imagine what life would be like without you. I fear your leaving as the mother fears losing her child. There would be such emptiness inside. Is this love? Can you tell me?"

He was mollified. "You will try then," he paused, "to love me?"

She gave a sigh and laughed, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but surely that's what I've been trying to do all afternoon!"

He returned her smile.

"But be still. Be patient with me. I'm still in awe of you. I can still feel you inside me as if we have yet to part, as if we will never part."

He looked deep into her eyes, saw his reflection there. "I feel as if the whole of my life has been a kind of sleep from which I am only now awakening."

"I wish," she said, "our love to resemble the eternal rocks beneath."

## DREFI

In early September Jennie accompanied them on their first visit to Drefi, an old farmhouse rented by Sam, hidden in the hills to the east of the market town of Trefyrddin. Jo, who thought she knew her sister well, was genuinely shocked that within twelve hours of their arrival Jennie would be sharing her bed with Sam, especially given his engagement to the daughter of a local farmer.

Woody broke from the car, a blur upon the track. He stopped, clockwise tail whirling. His back legs, almost reaching his front paws, rucked the skin along his spine. The dog vanished in a commotion of dust, from which, as it were, dismembered portions of his body could be seen, the mad barks at nothing could be heard. He then marked his territory.

In her room Jennie discarded her jeans, put on a dress so full of movement and colour it might ensnare a man. Eventually she emerged, face fresh as morning dew.

Jo, sensing something afoot, was nettled to see Jennie so engrossed with this man, her body leaning to him as if he were the sun, her laughter ringing through the house. This had pleased her greatly. She had even emitted a squeal of delight upon discovering the kitchen, with its flagstone floor and Aga cooker. The centre of the house, however, was the front room. It offered a refuge from the flirting couple. She liked Sam, but a sisterly fear had overtaken her. Vowing, to tackle this dalliance later, she emerged from her silence just once to enquire of Sam, rather pointedly, how his fiancée was and whether they could expect a visit.

She found that Chris irritated her. He was in flippant mood, pleased to be seeing his old friend again and this, too, tended to exclude her. But the ancient room offered compensations into which she gradually retreated. She spent her time studying its features: the stone seat dark in the recessed fireplace; the bread oven, built into the wall, with the most exquisite dome of bricks; the wooden staircase, narrow and steep, serving three bedrooms; the single sash window set in a stone wall three feet deep. On the floor the flagstones were partially covered by a

carpet, while on the ceiling thick wooden beams spanned the room.

Later, Jo tackled her sister, "Don't you think you'd better be careful with Sam?"

Jennie pretended not to understand.

Jo frowned.

"I know, but you needn't fret - nothing's going to happen." Jennie felt she need not receive this opprobrium from her younger sister.

"Plenty has happened. You've spent the whole evening drooling over him."

"Oh come on Jo. I like him, but it's not that obvious." She saw upon her sister, one of her stern, disapproving looks. "Is it?"

Jo's face altered from disapproving to withering with scarcely a movement of muscle. "You might as well have had a sign on you saying, 'Come and take me - I'm yours!'"

"But he's not interested in me. He's engaged!"

"That doesn't seem to stop him being interested in you."

"I didn't notice," said Jennie disingenuously, "specially."

Jo's face sojourned briefly in disbelief, before ending its perambulations in reproof.

"But it won't go anywhere. It can't. So I don't know what you're fussing about. Sometimes Jo I think you're worse than mother!"

Jo could see she was unlikely to get very far, was tired from the long journey and the tension of the unforeseen situation. "So I can put my mind at rest?"

"Most certainly!" And, then sensing she had said this too lightly, added, "Don't worry. I know you're only concerned for me and I'm grateful. Nothing will happen - I promise." And, changing the subject, said, "What about Chris? How are things between you?"

"Sometimes we're very close. I care for him very much."

"But?" Jennie was experienced in egging her sister on.

"Well, he can't be all men to me."

Jennie resisted saying that being one man was quite enough provided he was true. Jo sensed this mild reproof for she said, "I know that perhaps I'm being overly fussy. He is so good for me, that any criticism I might make seems churlish."

"I can see that you've been happier with him than with any other," Jennie observed.

"Yes, but he is weak..."

"...that's men for you!" Jennie interrupted, glee in her eye.

"He doesn't seem to value denial of the self."

"Who does?" Jennie quipped. "Why deny oneself? Honestly Jo, the world's out there - you'll only be happy if you go out and grab it."

Jo was not so sure. "But to succumb to every desire in a futile chase for happiness is not my way."

"You're being a bit hard on him. I don't think he's so bad."

"No, you're right Jennie, and it wouldn't matter to me but for the fact that we're in a serious relationship. It's hard. If he were a character in a novel then I could dissect him coldly, weigh him. But I just begin thinking of him one way and he starts doing something amazing that contradicts my neat theorising."

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"No. Though I may fall in love with him. I need him so much sometimes, Jennie, that I delude myself into thinking I am in love. But when I have him by my side I'm not so sure." Jennie saw the skin of her sister's chin gather, as if all her doubt were expressed there.

"You're a fool, Jo. You'll lose him. Then what'll you think of all these fine distinctions?"

"You may be right for yourself. For me I must go my own way. I'm prepared to suffer the consequences if, through always holding back, I lose him." Jo smiled wanly. "Still we have a long way to go together. For the present it is sufficient, it is what I want."

"And you talk about him being selfish!" Jennie admonished her.

"I know!" Jo's face filled with a resigned despair. "For God's sake Jennie I must be mad! Sometimes when I'm with him he takes me half way to oblivion and when I'm alone, my heart so full of sorrow - missing him so much, I go the rest of the way on my own. Have you never felt this? But to ask me whether this is love is to ask me what I do not know. Yet it is the very thing I crave to know."

Jennie took her sister's hand. "This is love and you're just too pigheaded not to see it!" They laughed at each other then, so as to escape what they both saw; the horrifying uncertainty of human feeling, the vortex of emotion, that rarely releases its captives. Yet Jo sensed she was strong enough to deny emotion, transcend the self.

In bed together Jo looked at her man in the half-light. All the journey long she had imagined herself thus. For the first time she was not alone, there was a man with whom to share the night. She wore her Victorian nightdress, retrieved from a school jumble sale, thought herself pretty in white. His first touch was timorous and cold, yet she did not pull away. Emboldened he drew her to his nakedness, the soft cotton of her dress a rapture. Rising, she kissed him, and he saw her, like a white flame, shining incandescent, above him. And she leant to him, a flame to wood, while his fingers, under her dress, explored her arching back. She wished to dissolve into him. As he pierced moist lips, she, opening her eyes, saw his fuzzy head, indistinct, against the white of the pillow. She quickened on him, her breathing rapid, full of cry, felt his wild release, like hot wax, spurting new life into her. He, senses returning, saw her as a scintillating pool of light reforming in the air above him, like a candle he could never blow out.

She lay beside him, had his sperm inside her. She wished they could be safe, grow fat in her belly. She remembered the first time they had made love, how she had left him, yet carried him inside her. She had sat in the kitchen at home, talking with her parents, with Jennie, and all the while she was aware of him, his impregnation of her, that he had left a part of himself inside her for her to tend. And she had become greedy for his sperm. Yet she was fearful. Her chin, that with her, organ of doubt, quivered. All this want was of no use until she could be sure of the man. And the one who lay beside her now was so sweet. He had taken her virgin's blood, as if in baptism. She felt she would never be free of him.

She was roused to the sound of the front door closing. As if following a partly formed idea she got up and found, as she had thought, the door to her sister's room open and the room empty. Back in her own room she moved quietly to the window

and looked out into the half-light of early morning. She saw Jennie and Sam, hand in hand, walking away from the house towards a gate that led to the fields beyond.

In the morning she awoke to the smell of a fried breakfast. She regarded Chris's face, smooth in untroubled sleep. Still dressed simply in her nightdress she was greeted downstairs by the tang of bacon and the mustier odour of mushroom.

"Where did you get these?" she asked picking up one the size of her hand, its flat, white skin stretched and rubbery, its underside brown and flaccid.

"Stacks in the fields out the back," Sam said. "Want me to do you one?"

She assented and sat at the table while her sister poured tea from a badly stained pot.

"Have you been to sleep yet?" Jo asked.

"No," Jennie replied. "We've been up all night, talking."

Jo took a draught of the tea. She hunched over the mug, narrow upper arms tight to her chest, letting the hot vapour from the tea rise over her face. Chris saw her thus as he entered the room: the soft fabric of her nightdress rucked over her shoulders; the open sleeves, falling back, revealing her thin forearms. Her hair, dishevelled in a way he had not seen before, lay over her back, partially obscuring the nacre buttons on her dress. He yearned to touch the soft cotton, soft as milk, tender as a maiden's breast, white with want, white with obliterating need.

She knew, with a sister's sense, that Jennie had slept with Sam. She teased Chris, "While you've been abed others have been up picking mushrooms!" She continued, her voice tinged with annoyance, "Draw up a chair and join us. Then we can all share in their folly."

Sam glanced at his friend, while Jennie lay the food in front of her sister and said, "Come on little Miss Disapproval!" recalling a phrase from childhood days. "You know that it will taste beautiful!"

Jo looked at her in a kind of despair, then laughed. She loved her sister, though this did not alter her view that she had behaved like a fool.

It was not until late October that Jo and Chris again met. He was living some thirty miles from Drefi, renting a caravan close to the university at Abertowi, where he was studying. Often, at weekends, he would drive down to Drefi. This Friday she joined him in the early evening.

Sam was working on the Saturday so they had the day to themselves. They drove out to the mountains beyond Trefach. Ascending the narrow mountain road south of the town a heady excitement grew in them. They were leaving behind the golden colours of the valley in autumn and climbing upon currents of expectation, like eagles on the air. They were being pulled from the cosy forms of ash and elder into a landscape bleak, shorn of colour, brittle as human hope, indifferent to human need. They passed slabs of blue stone fixed like borderland sentries, distrustful of the invader.

Then they saw it. Suddenly on the right, like a hawk perched on an outcrop of stone; a ruined castle lying broken backed on a promontory of rock under a granite sky.

Leaving the car they walked past a barred toilet block and heard the squeaking of a rusted ice cream sign swinging without purpose in the biting wind. As they ascended the hill path Chris kept Woody close as they approached sheep. Reaching a stile they kissed momentarily, lips dry as stone, Jo's eyes as cold as blue quartz. The wind caught her coat and it flapped bird like. Turning, he saw beyond her shoulder, to the derelict fortifications stretching above them, like a great black wing.

They entered the friendless ruin, passed the creosoted Ministry of Works shed. Closed. A notice gave summer opening times and a name: Castel Cennen. A faded guidebook was displayed behind glass.

Chris had a cigarette while Jo walked to a turret and peered through the slits made for the crossbow. Her face brushed against the cold wall and she, shuddering in pleasure and surprise, let her long fingers run over its rough surface. Deliberately she rested her head upon the stone, felt quieted by the stillness of rock, shared its hardness against the unremitting wind. It was a cold delight.



The familiar smell of tobacco smoke cut into her reverie. With a stab of guilt she turned and smiled at him. He saw the blue glint in her eye and the contradictory smile, took her hand and led her to the outer wall.

"It's difficult...", she seemed to stretch herself into the words she uttered as if afraid the wind might take them to some other place. "It is hard to imagine this castle full of people, living here, dying here..." Her words petered out like the lives of those who had defended this land, ripped from her before the due time.

Briefly Chris thought of the car, parked in another century. He saw Jo's blonde hair blowing across a red cheek. They reached the gaping lip, a kiss of five hundred feet. Chris leant into a horizontal wind, his weight pressed to an invisible wall. He wished to fly. Looking down, he saw a stream barely visible in the dizzy light, and below, intimate trees close upon naked rock. He was gripped by a fear, not of falling, but of never being able to let go.

He came to, Jo's lips at his ear, her breath hot, her tongue quick on his skin. The wind tore their clothes as it had the leaves from the trees below, would leave them bare upon the rock.

"I should survive," she said as if they had spoken of it.

"You could let go, die."

"The trees don't." She looked at him rather helplessly. Her chin puckered. Taking his face in her hands, she kissed him, and the wind blew all around them, wildly.

The light was failing. They returned to the car. At one point Chris rushed ahead. Then, turning, he saw the beauty of the girl in her coat, long scarf wrapped round long hair. This beauty transcended her single existence, reached out and was part of some other thing. It was not hers, she was not conscious of it; she would wear it for such a short time.

He opened the door to the car. Jo stepped in. The vehicle drove off. Two white beams picked a way through a Welsh night. This is the story of all our lives.

In the evening they saw Sam and Brenda. Her presence seemed at odds with the house. She was modern in spirit, out

of sympathy with the unnecessary of much of the place. She abhorred the dark corners, the cold flagstones, the bare beams across the ceiling, the steps between every room. She would like to sweep away the clutter, clear all out in her antiseptic way. She would bring light, order, cleanliness. She would ensure that the differences between objects would be sharply defined. With a bottle of bleach, a bucket and a cloth she could change all their lives!

"How's your sister?" she asked of Jo.

Jo replied that she was well.

"It's a pity I wasn't able to see her when she came. She's a nurse isn't she?"

"Yes. She's back in Portsmouth, working at the general hospital."

Sam sat in the shades of the room, patting Woody, and said nothing.

Chris and Jo both spent Christmas in Hayworth. On the shortest day he called on her. They had planned a walk together. It was early - an icy, bright morning. She was ready for him. He gave her a card, present and birthday kiss.

She was dressed in a thick, midwinter coat with her long skirt gathered by the narrower cut of the coat at her knees. She seldom used make up, this morning her cheeks reddening in the icy air. Her eyes glinted blue, under her woollen hat, in pleasure at being out on such a cold day.

They walked down the garden to a whitened hedge. Jo stopped to study the tracery of hoar frost upon its clipped leaves. In the car the temperature had dropped rapidly. Woody lay curled up on the driver's seat.

They drove into a land whitened as if in snowstorm. Five days of frost on frost and the soul, desolate, wailed in fear. Thoughts of Christina's hymn filled her as they walked.

Climbing, her breath became deeper. The cold air roughened her tongue, tightened her throat. The grass stood stiff, each blade crisp with a thousand white needles, uncorrupted by the shards of ice. The sun, at a low trajectory, shone through a

windless sky for the first time in a week, transformed her breath into a crystal cloud, into fragments of freezing light.

As they entered woodland Chris retrieved a fallen leaf, a perfectly proportioned tracery overlaying the sunken flesh, veins protruding like bone at the back of a human hand.

Jo smiled.

"What are you thinking about?" he said, dropping the leaf.

"Just that it's a year ago today that I first saw you and we've survived your song!"

"Yes, I know. I can't be right all the time! I'm glad of it; though I was surprised you agreed to come out with me after that party."

"You were drunk!" She took his arm.

"I've never been drunk," he replied. "Merry perhaps, not drunk."

"How do you explain your behaviour then?" He sensed she was teasing him.

"You mean with the mistletoe?" he asked innocently.

"With the mistletoe and half the girls in the sixth form!"

"You exaggerate surely," he smiled. "I remember only five!"

"Precisely!"

"It wasn't such a good night!"

"No, I did not think much of you. Certainly I did not think I should be walking out with you here on this day one year later!"

"I was unhappy."

"That much was obvious. I think I remember you telling us all that much. To every girl you kissed you opened your heart."

"And stole a kiss from each!" his eyes twinkled.

"And so this is how you treat us?"

"How?"

"By taking five impressionable girls and kissing them in turn under a dead plant, a parasite to boot, with white berries of poison. Is this a nice thing to do?"

"Put like that I suppose not. However you only have half the story. It was all part of a ritual as I recall."

Jo burst into laughter. "Well that makes it worse, if it was all part of some pagan rite."

"I had drunk cider; things were a little hazy."

"You surprise me!"

"I liked the unity of it all; the apples fermenting in my head, the mistletoe drawing life from those same apples, and those ciderous kisses; each girl, an Eve, with the sting of apple upon her lips and forbidden thoughts in her head."

"You romanticise too much. They only did it to placate you; they were sorry for you." She took her arm from him, slipping it inside his coat. She tickled him and he pulled away involuntarily.

He ran while she chased him. The dog, excited, raced to him, impeding his escape by leaping up at his side.

He returned to her theme, "What I do remember is that I saw little of you."

"Well that's hardly surprising! One minute you had Louise in your lap and Deirdre in your eyes and the next it was the other way round."

"No, but I did search you out."

"I kept low. I didn't want to be involved. All this light-headedness goes heavy with me, as you know."

"Then why did you agree to come out with me when I asked you?"

She thought of telling him of her obliterating need.

The sun had ascended part of the sky. The path took them by the side of a large bramble bush encrusted with frost. The sunlight at that moment cleared the top of a tree and at the extremity of the bush a band of brightness, like one-half of a halo, caught their eye. They stopped to watch the spreading of the light; each crystal of ice iridescent in the rendering up of itself, in the dying, the melting away. Then, with his arm around the girl, he felt her suddenly stiffen and utter a cry. At first he could see nothing, then he had it. Rising from the bramble was a delicate plume of vapour, smoke like. As the sun rose higher still, enlightening more of the frost, so the whole bush seemed to become alive, as if it had breath. The steam spiralled in the eddies of hot air, giddy with life, coloured the air white about them.

"I shall always remember this," Jo said as the air thickened, her blue eyes softening in the sun.

He kissed her lips, moist, newly revealed.

"I have no mistletoe to place above your head, with which to sanctify this kiss!"

The land cracked as it does in fire and thaw. She drew back her head from his embrace. "Trust a man to forget the most important thing!"

Sam was thinking of Jennie and the time they had spent together in February. Staying with his parents in Hayworth he had bumped into her and they had renewed the brief affair of the autumn before. His head was full of her, ached for her. He was swollen with the want of her. No matter that he'd insisted the relationship could not continue, every caress had told her something different. And with two women from which to choose, in his mind he now went for the one he had discarded. He imagined her with him so strongly, had the scent of her in the air about him, the sound of her heavy breath a rush in his ears. Close to him, her hungry face flickered and then faded as the phone rang. In guilt, subsiding, Sam rushed downstairs thinking it would be Brenda.

"Come and fetch me."

"Is that you? Jennie?"

"Yes. I'm at the railway station."

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to visit you. Don't be angry!"

Sam's head was in a spin. The house was safe, no impending arrival from Brenda. He could bring her back.

It was March, dark already, as he drove to the station. She greeted him with a kiss behind his ear. He was self-conscious, frightened of being seen. He noticed her luggage. It looked as if she were intending to stay for more than just a couple of days.

Outside he saw her hair shine in the light of the street lamps. He hurried her into the car, turned to her, but she spoke first. "I've quit my job. I want to move up here!"

He said nothing, stunned.

"I can look round for somewhere to live, but I need to stay with you while I do."

He shook his head. "What are you doing Jennie?"

"Don't be cross with me. I haven't stopped thinking about you since last we met. The last month I've spent in a kind of haze, every waking moment I've been thinking of you and at night, in all my dreams, I dream of you."

"Why didn't you phone?"

It was her turn to shake her head. "No, I told no one. I'd made up my mind, had done from the moment we parted. I knew everyone, even you, would try to stop me."

"Yes of course I would've." He paused, saw her head drop, felt he would break her. He was amazed at her. "I'm pleased to see you, though I don't know where we go from here."

"Let's talk about it later, Sam. Start the car up and take us home. It's freezing and I'm dying for a cup of tea."

He felt her hand on his as he located first. The brake lights of the car in front burned bright, threw their faces into red relief. Belisha beacons flashed, under sodium lights that marked a path through the old town, while Sam pondered how this new situation would be resolved.

At the front door she kissed him full on the lips. She roused him with her passion, borne of the weeks of hoping and planning.

In the house she made tea and a snack for herself.

He retrieved cups from a cupboard. "You can't have quit your job just like that?"

"I resigned the morning after you left. My resignation was on the table at nine o'clock. They were all a bit shocked. They even asked me if I was feeling all right and to be honest I must've looked a state since I'd been up all the night thinking about what I should do."

"But why didn't you let me know - a letter or something?"

"Well you said that I could perhaps come up and stay..."

"...for a few days." So this was what had done it!

"And yes it will be just for a few days if you don't want me. I will go if you tell me to. I'll take the first flat that comes up in the paper."

He took her in his arms, "I don't want you to go, but I don't see how you can stay."

The kettle had boiled. They took the tea things into the front room. "If it's impossible I'll go," she said.

"Well I can hide you up here for a few days, but not for ever. Brenda doesn't like it here, so she doesn't come all that often, but she does come every now and then."

"Yes, I've been thinking about that. I thought you could say I'm a lodger. You told me you were looking for someone to share the rent with."

"Yes, but she knows who you are. She'd be suspicious."

"Then say that Chris asked you to put me up while I looked round the area for work and my own flat."

An audacious plan he thought. He was unconvinced, but would let things rest for the moment. He was tired of thinking and the happy girl by his side, now on the sofa, was so beckoning.

"Well if you are to be my lodger," he said, "we'd better check your rooms!"

She put her fingers around the back of his neck, under his collar length hair and drew him to her.

"Sam, you do understand. I'm hopelessly in love with you!"

## INTO WHITE

On a cold March morning they drove straight from Chris's caravan to the Preseli Hills. The overnight rain had lain on the hills as snow. The moor was snow streaked, with deeper drifts hollowed into white pools. The road climbed into a rolling landscape, the occasional stunted tree clamped to the ground, with its branches reaching to the east in prayer. Chris parked on the infinitesimal moor, the winter heather and gorse darkening from underneath the thin covering of snow.

The sun shone through a fierce wind. It pulled at their hair, burnt their ears, stung weeping eyes, dried chaffed lips. Chris and Jo, hand in hand, walked out into the obliterating landscape. And the wind played with them, drove out their human moisture, sucked from them their human warmth. From the safety of the parked car there was none to see two figures merging into a landscape being transformed by a light that was rapidly failing.

Sam pulled the curtains back. A hard sun lit the farmstead. In the clear light he could see the two barns that together, at their further end, formed the apex of a triangle that dropped sharply to the valley floor. The path that led round the front of the house was wet with overnight rain. Looking straight ahead, over the roof of the barn on the left, he could see the land steeply rising on the other side of the valley.

The woman in his bed opened her eyes and looked at her naked man. She saw the line of his back, strong, slightly curved at the meeting of shoulder blades; his chest and legs covered in a fine downy blackness. Such legs! Like powerful pistons. She let herself fall into the space he had left in the bed. She regarded the whole of him; his beautiful head, his long hair, the glory of his firm buttocks!

"What's it like?" she asked.

"Clear blue sky from here, quite cold." As he spoke she saw his breath catch on the window, fan out, and smear the glass. Jennie thought of herself, naked, standing beside him, drawing



with her finger his name in bold clear letters upon the misty pane.

However she said, "Come back to bed."

The man came to her and she held his cold body, felt the chilled sweat on his skin, looked into man eyes that prised light. Their bodies close, she had the smell of him in her head and in her dreams.

He stroked her woman's hair, long, glistening, alive in the morning light. Her breasts touched him sending tingles across his chest. Her thighs enveloped him in caressing movements. He sensed the aroma of summer flowers, the hot gasps of air, the burning heat of a June sun scorched his opened, vulnerable skin. There was nothing now except the wild rushing in his ears, the mad climb upon the barebacked horse, the chaotic galloping through fields of blurring green and a shuddering, shuddering to a halt. All the time an escaping, a flight from the mind which was now returning, ordering, attaching meaning, decoding the images from the storm in his head.

Yet he would not marry this woman. He was contracted to another. Jennie knew this; it grieved her soul. She would fight the other in his heart, but sensed, already, that it might be too late. So she clung to her man as the seaweed clings to the rocks on the shoreline, enwrapped him, entwined her whole self about him, but like the sea there was always a falling away, her beautiful fingers could not hold him, the beautiful flower of the sea could not hold to these stones that shifted so.

The telephone rang. She would not let him answer. In the end he broke from her, just a little more forcibly than intended. It would be his fiancée.

"Hello Sam. What took you so long? I was just about to hang up."

"I was out in the wood shed." The lie slipped out easy.

Brenda was ringing from her flat at the hospital where she worked as a cook. This week she was rotaed on nights. "I'm just going to bed, but I wanted to remind you about the invitations. Have you picked them up yet?"

He did not wish to admit that he had forgotten. "I'll do it today. Chris and Jo are coming over later for the weekend and I've got

to get some food in. I'll pick them up then. How are you? Have a good night?"

Jennie went into the kitchen to prepare the breakfast things. She looked forward to her sister's arrival. She and Jo had never been as close. Yet there was a pain in the pit of her stomach. She listened to Sam and Brenda talking about their impending marriage. Had he decided on the ushers yet? Was his brother and family going to spend the whole weekend in Wales? If she had been a hard woman it would have chiselled her soul, something inside would have crystalised out. If she had been her sister! But she was not, could not be, would not want to be.

Not once did she regret her decision to return to Drefi. She had dropped everything, from job to family in something approaching a frenzy. The only thing that saddened her was that Sam prevaricated about when the best time would be to tell her. And with the passing of each day the wedding came closer. She wanted to shout out across the room to Brenda that she was here, she existed, that she loved Sam.

Jennie could feel her growing presence. It was as if she was pouring herself down the phone, spilling out so incongruously into the front room of this old farmhouse. It jarred Jennie's senses to hear the tinny rattle of Brenda's voice. And so, Jennie, distraught and confused, cried for fear of what she might lose.

"See you at your flat at seven tonight then," Sam concurred. There was a pause as she replied.

"Bye! Yes I love you too."

He put the phone down as his words spun round the room. He found Jennie in the kitchen very still, silent tears in two tracks upon her face. He came to her, full of sorrow and regret, yet conscious of a gap between them. He could not really touch her now. She hung herself around his neck and continued her weeping.

For him there was such a confusion in his mind. He felt he loved, needed both, so could relinquish neither.

"Don't! Don't go to her! I want you, I need you here," she implored.

"You know I can't."

"All I know is that you feel you have a duty to her - no more than that. You do not love her. You love me. Say it! Say it! It is so, is it not?"

He looked white, his face lined in anguish. "I can't leave her. It will destroy her."

"What about me? Don't you think you're leaving will destroy me? Can't you see she's wrong for you? She doesn't want you - the real you - just some idea of you."

"Bren and I don't agree on everything..."

"Don't I know that?" The words, ripped from her, were spoken with a completeness of purpose that intimidated him.

"Look," he said, "I need Bren. I'm frightened that if I don't marry her I'll just drift. I'm happy here now with you and Chris, but it can't go anywhere for me."

She heard the opinions of another in these words. It made her sick. Hers were bitter tears. He is a man, she thought. Why doesn't he take the woman he loves? Why doesn't he take me?

"How can you spend the rest of your life with someone you do not love?" she pleaded. Such a bloody simple question, she thought.

"If you're not going to tell her about me then I must go," she said distraught.

In her eyes he saw her desolation, the redness and wetness from tears that had smudged innocence.

"No! I love you!"

He pulled her to him and raised her onto the kitchen table. In seconds he was inside her as his need was sated by her. She held him tight, weeping.

After breakfast Sam and Jennie set off to Llandulais. The town was about five miles distant. A rutted track, just negotiable by car, led from the house and then the track wound round a hill and took a sharp turn to the left before they crossed a bridge over a small stream. They passed a deserted church and turned left onto the lane.

After turning right onto the main road the view changed. Here they followed the flood plain of the Ederne westwards, where river, road and railway, lay like snakes twisting to Milford and

the sea. Elsewhere, over acres of green Welsh fields, lay the spreading South Wales conurbation: Neath, Swansea, Llanelli in the south, to the east Cardiff.

They passed the pub, the dairy, the Eisteddfod field, the bridge over the river. At the turreted castle and below on the road that clung to the castle wall Sam and Jennie waited for the green; then on and back up into the town to find a parking slot behind the new Tesco store.

Now how could Jennie be happy? He was shopping for wedding paraphernalia and she could not, would not go with him. Still there was the town itself, so rich with life. In the street she heard the voices of the Welsh; the cadences gently rocking through her head. She went to a vast market hall; where there were butchers, fishmongers, fruiterers, grocers, and local craftsmen and women, who had brought wares from candles to cloths, from paintings to pipes. These largely came from the English who had since the sixties in ever greater numbers settled in the hills of Dyfed. There were exotic perfumes, incense, joss sticks, second hand "Laura Ashley" peasant dresses and Victorian nightgowns, old records, brass fittings and herbal remedies. This was a place to lose oneself in; the size of a hypermarket, but with a soul, scruffy, unsanitised, human. Certainly there would be enough noise and activity, Jennie considered, to block out thought and pain.

Outside the streets were wet from a shower, glistening now in the sun. She returned to the parked car and awaited Sam's arrival. Then she saw him, threading his way through the crowded pavement, carrier bag in his hand. She noticed his sureness as if the whole of him was purposed in the simple task of walking the street. Then he was beside her in the car, giving her a kiss on the cheek as he leaned over to the back seat, dropping the bag there. She was hardly conscious of the traces of guilt these actions concealed.

Back at the farm they heard Chris's car coming up the track. There was something different, otherworldly about them as they entered. Jo's eyes reflected a subdued excitement; Chris's movements were clear and confident. They were both happy;

faces full of smiles. Chris put their coats on the hanger on the door, turned to greet his friends. Sam and Chris went into the kitchen to prepare tea, while Jennie placed a new record she had bought on the player. Soon the room was full of the voice of Carole King.

"How are you coping?" asked Jo.

"I'm fine. Sam'll be seeing Brenda tonight. We can talk more freely then."

"Is he going to tell her about you?"

"I'm not sure. He says he needs her."

Jo changed the subject as she heard Sam return, "We stopped for a walk in the Preselis. It's been snowing up there,"

"I'm not surprised," said Sam, bringing the cups. "It was nearly cold enough in town for snow too."

In the pause that followed Jo refamiliarised herself with the old, dark room. Its darkness was not heavy or oppressive, rather it soothed. The light was soft; it did not penetrate. With the light from fire and candle the sharpness of objects would be diminished; with the smell of wood smoke and candle wax so too could the differences between people be smoothed.

"It was beautiful there," Jo said remembering the hills and the snow.

"Tell me about you and Chris. You looked so happy when you came in. What's happened?"

"I'm sorry. I know it's hard for you Jennie to see us happy while you are sad yourself."

"I'm working on him. He might change his mind."

While Chris brought in the tea Sam went to the fireplace. He took the axe and chopped some of the smaller logs vertically. His movements were quick and sure, self-contained. He did it so naturally as if his spirit were inviolable. The tearing wood filled the room with a sound like the splitting of an apple.

He arranged the wood in a spire over balls of paper, struck a match and held it to the base. The whole became one conflagration, burning, consumed in one loving, all encompassing lick of flame; metamorphosing heat without warmth. The light played itself out on the distant walls of the room. Woody wandered to the fire; his shadow grotesquely enlarged. Meanwhile the agent of change had seized the spire,

twisting around the wooden frame in a joyous knowing of it and then, inflamed, swept through the centre. The spire collapsed. Sam added more wood carefully and the smoke increased, rising, in movement like liquid.

The record stopped playing, the arm making a series of clanking noises as it moved to its position of rest.

A single voice filled the room. It was Chris, talking about the Preselis. "We had walked for about half an hour. I looked behind us; saw a black cloud amassing in the north, growing, as if feeding upon itself, a black cord trailing to the earth." The image of it was like a mountain in his mind, bleak, unforgiving. The wood in the fire began to hiss as if it sought to silence him. "The sky overhead was blue and the sun bright. And behind was this giant spot of blackness, moving towards us so fast that I knew we would not be able to run or find shelter in time."

Jo recalled how they had huddled together, calling the dog to them, like sailors batten down in preparation for the obliterating storm. "Suddenly the sun was blotted out. It was as if it did not exist anymore. It was cold and where we had moments before been able to see the rolling moorland for miles around, now we could see no further than a few feet. We were in a blizzard; a white gloom surrounded us, inside we were strangely caught, as if held in a special land."

A crack filled the room. A glowing ember was thrown from the fire, hitting the flagstone and then spinning like a Catherine wheel, spitting sparks across the floor. She remembered the swirling snow; the violence of it as it cut her eyes and lips. Like a lover to her; so cold and deep searching, as if it reached down into every part of her; that even now she felt roused by it, felt as if she could still be overwhelmed, felt her bowels contract, her flesh shudder, with the harsh desire of it. She ran her hand up the back of her neck, lifting her hair, aware that each follicle was erect. She thought of the wild flurries, the transforming snow. It was as if there was a dark hand that had snuffed out their existence, that had reduced their physical laws, that had removed their colours and understanding. It had been just them, woman and man and the mad fury of an annihilating master. She had felt so small, so crushed by a

power that could deny everything about them, could change the composition of all that surrounded them, turn all into white.

Jo heard him pour his voice into the room, like the dark replacing the light, in stealth taking her to the darkest place, where difference can be denied, where she could find the spinning centre, where there would be rest from the spinning world. "The light was unreal. It came from nowhere, like the stranger without a home. There was the bustling snow, each flake integral, luminous as phlox on a night of moon. The further away one looked the darker it became, as if a cloak had been drawn over our lives and that we two had been left alone on this planet to persevere, to fight against an elemental, mindless, transfiguring passion, that cared nothing for human need, that was not of us, but that we were part of, that was slowly, but remorselessly beating the life from us, altering us, bending us to its will, constructing a new order under a unifying white."

Jo wanted him. She remembered how closely they had held one another, how their inner warmth had grown in darkness, remained intact, still, against the blistering onslaught.

"Then, as suddenly, the cloud was gone. The sun shone again through a clear blue sky. It was as though nothing had happened, except that everywhere the land had been transformed. It was as if there had been a submission of the earth, a yielding into white. A white that exterminated thought, that demanded continuity; a unifying whiteness of the yielded up earth. The contours of land were new, undifferentiated, simple."

They had walked on in this new world, destroying the perfection of snow at their feet as they went. They had stopped and kissed many times on the cold earth, their human passion rising in hot waves, incongruous against the new world. They had said little, overawed perhaps, but conscious of a complete naturalness in each other's company. In the extremity they had been together, the cold had welded them, had strengthened them, not frozen out their human warmth. No, they had guarded against that.

"It happened again - a further two times, on our way back to the car," Jo added. "The same ominous cloud, the blizzard, the same whitening experience."

"Yes, though we played about in it as well - when we got used to it. I felt as though it was sweeping me up. I ran around and around, swirling with the snow."

Jo smiled, "Then I snowballed you!"

Chris saw again the redness of her face, her china blue eyes reflecting the white, the childish games, the playing about in the new world. "At times, when you were running away from me, I saw you disappear into the snow as if it had claimed you. I would call you, but you could not hear. My voice was muffled by the snow, ripped from my lips by the wind. I was frightened of losing you." He wanted to touch her as if he brought something of that fear with him into the room. "Then you would emerge from the darkness all around and I was happy, as if you had just been found."

After lunch the four took a walk in the fields around the house. Sam and Chris were ahead of the women.

"What's happening then Sam? I take it you're going ahead with the wedding?"

"Yes. Well I think so. Too many arrangements have been made."

"They can be unmade if you want them to be."

"I know. But it's not so easy. Here with you and Jennie and Jo I feel the marriage is not right. I have doubts. But when I'm with Brenda I can't see it any other way."

Chris regarded his friend. It pained him to see him letting things slide. Brenda was a good person, yet so antithetical to him. She loved the light, liked all to be bright, clear. This, he knew, was so different from his friend who was never as sure as she, had less self-belief than her. He summoned up the courage to say what was on his mind. "I don't think you should marry her. She's not your type. She'll snuff the life out of you."

Chris felt this to be an awful presumption. He was not sure how his friend would react to his interference. This had concerned him much, but Sam was not angry.



After a pause he replied, "Why do you say that?"

"Because I know you, I know the things that interest you and I know that many of those interests are not shared by Brenda."

"We are different, I know. There is common ground though. Marriages are often compromises."

"There is a danger of compromising too much. And what of Jennie? What are you going to do about her? She loves you. You can't keep on living in the same house as her if you're going to marry Brenda." He stopped himself, and then with a little despairing wave of the hand, finished speaking rather abruptly, "Tell me if it's none of my business and I'll shut up."

"No, you are involved. I know how strongly Jennie feels for me and if I was free there'd be no problem. But I need both of them in different ways."

Chris saw his friend torn to make a decision. He felt it likely that if things remained as they were Sam would stay with Brenda. This after all would be the easier to do. Sam would like most humans avoid the most pain. If Jennie had arrived earlier then it would have all been so different.

They had been walking across a field that sloped down to a gate. At the gate the mud had been churned up by the wheels of tractors and feet of cattle. They slowed here, picking a way to the latch, which Sam prised open.

He spoke as Chris came through. "What about Jo? You two seem very close now."

"Yes it does seem so. I can never be absolutely sure of her though. Sometimes she tears me apart. One minute she is madly in love with me, the next she is full of doubt. My feelings towards her are constant and enduring. I think it shall always be so." Sam saw him, vulnerable, in the wan light of fading day.

"What about marriage? Have you talked about it?"

"I don't think I will ever marry Jo. I doubt that she is the one for me. Things are different for us - we're living a hundred odd miles apart - and neither of us really knows what we want to do with the rest of our lives. We are getting closer though."

A thin moon was visible in the eastern sky, hung over the heads of the sisters as they approached. Chris saw the sky behind them, such a deepening blue that it seemed limitless. He could be drawn up into it and lose himself. He could almost

feel himself petering out into the blue powder paint sky. He was tired; there was no will to resist that gentle pulling towards some other place, where he would cease to be individuated, would be free of all longing.

Jo and Jennie caught up with them, looking like characters from a novel set in Edwardian times. Jennie took Sam and walked on ahead with her arm wrapped around his back. Jo closed the gate and said, "What have you been gossiping about?"

"Marriage."

He chose not to elaborate and Jo assumed, as he thought she would, that it was Sam's marriage that had been discussed. He sensed her intense interest, her blue eyes wide, deepening in colour gradually, imperceptibly, like the darkening sky. "What did he say? He can't really be still thinking of it. Look at them."

Ahead Sam and Jennie kissed gently to a backdrop of bare branched trees that clustered at the valley bottom.

"He certainly is."

"Why? If I was him I'd have so many doubts I couldn't go ahead with it. I don't understand."

"He loves both of them."

"Yes, but Jennie..."

"...I know, I told him I thought the marriage business was a big mistake."

"You told him! What did he say?"

"He talked about compromise being necessary in any relationship."

Jo's clear forehead furrowed into a frown. "I see. What do you think?"

"I suppose there's an element of compromise about all marriages. I think he's prepared to compromise too much though."

"Jennie is very sad. I'm worried about her. She seems to fluctuate so; when she is with him she is so happy, but when he is away, particularly with you know who, then she is so quiet, alone, removed from us all."

Jo took his hand. He turned and looked at her open face, saw her blue eyes deliquescent. She looked into his, saw the green

and hazel, like new growth bursting forth, drawn to her for the water only she could provide. She kissed him on the cheek, felt upon her own the soft, downy hair of his beard brush against her skin. The distance grew between the two couples as Chris and Jo slowed. They entered the wood and stopped. It was almost dark here. They raised their eyes and picked out the branches of a tree against the night sky. Black against blue, these colours impregnated the night around them. Chris closed his eyes and saw blue blotches, like pools, against a black background. He wanted to take her and swing her round and round in his arms, till the world would be no more than a spinning madness, an eddy of blackness in a blue river. He felt the giddy power of it, like a pouring of himself and her into the night.

"I only feel real when I am in your arms," he said. The words spilt from him, to be gathered by the night. "The world is a magical place when I am with you. Everything is enlivened, becomes super real.

She felt the whole of him quiver as if filled with an unexpressed need. She drew him to her, cloaked him, yielded like the fluid thing she was with him. The cold, moist air thickened with being. And in the darkest, most impenetrable place Chris and Jo were close, sheltered.

They lingered in the wood, reluctant to return to the farm. They climbed out of the valley, the air sharper as the trees were left behind. Eventually they achieved the house, its white walls dimly luminous in the faint light of the moon. Inside the electric lamp was harsh to their eyes, picked out their flushed looks; the brush strokes of redness across their faces. Sam was in the front room collecting together his things in readiness for going out. He was dressed smartly, with well cut trousers, a crisp jacket, well-polished brown shoes. As they came in they saw Jennie putting the polish away in the cupboard. Jo's eyes hardened imperceptibly.

The Sunday came clear and blue, a strong sun already warming a dew bound earth. They walked down to the church and turned through the gate into the churchyard. Here they

spotted daffodils, fresh fleshed, yellow trumpets new in the yellow sun. Chris saw Jo, as if in pagan ritual, kneel at the flowers. The picture of his golden haired girl leaning to the flower head was framed in his mind; it would never fade.

"Look how radiant they are in the sun!" Jo squealed in delight. She caressed them as if they were her children, little heads bobbing in the sun. Chris was moved to see it so, his eyes watered, blurring his vision, so that all seemed contained in a single glow, all discandying in the sun.

At the gravestones he was puzzled, "I don't understand. It feels as if these stones have a kind of power. Like when you're in a stone circle, but the configuration is different here, of course."

Jo said, "Both are places where people have believed. That's the same and it's been with the same type of belief; a belief in something that is beyond us, a belief in something spiritual that is outside of us, yet to which we belong, to which we are always drawn."

"And they confront you with death in a way we, as humans, tend to avoid," he said.

Chris stepped back from one stone, dizzy. He steadied himself and looked for the inscription, just discernible from the lichen, still on that journey to oblivion where all is indistinct. He found dates and names, etched in another century, calling to them as a voice from the next room; the one that is always locked. Faint, no more than a murmuring, an echo that still has life when the thing that created it has gone. Jo moved behind him, let her chin rest upon his shoulder, drew him to herself. He was quick in her arms, it made her gasp a little as she pressed herself to him; imagined herself a flower, a wild daffodil to be spread out, to have her petals played out upon him. She wanted to sing, felt herself so full of the joy of him, wished to let her spirit melt into him as winter melts into spring.

Chris began to read from the inscription, "Richard Isaac Evans born September the 17th 1798, died June 1st 1851. Rest In Peace. Anne Florence Evans, born February 26th 1805, died November 12th 1881. Reunited In Our Lord's Loving Grace."

Chris pondered what this had meant. The man had waited thirty long years in that cold earth for her. She had tended her husband's last resting place for those weary months and years, waiting for the eternity she would share with him. The mystery of other people's lives pervaded him. He speculated; what had happened to these people in their lives? Their passions, their love, their fears, what was left of these now? Was it all just reduced to these hard facts engraved upon the stone before him? What about their faith? Did that constitute anything now? Sure enough here was a human statement of that faith that spoke from that time, their time, and projected itself into the present, to be given a new reality by his life, his consciousness. He looked around at the graveyard, the flowers, the church, the hills beyond. These things had all been here then, were all a part of the landscape of their lives just as now they were a part his and Jo's. He became aware of her presence behind him.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I'm just wondering what it'll be like in a hundred years from now. Will there be two people, like you and me, looking at a gravestone that bears our names. And will they be wondering about our lives, our concerns, our love." He let it out, that, to them, sacred word.

"Do you feel that? That we shall continue through time like these two?"

"We should agree to try and love one another. We should fall in love and be in love with each other." He spoke with a slow intensity that thrilled her. "I want you. I need you. You stand so close to me. I can feel you press yourself into me. I am as close as you are to me to loving you. But I want more. I want to feel that I am one with you. I want to be oblivious of everything, but you. I want to say without complication or qualification, 'I love you.'"

His words sent her swimming. Into them he put all of his loneliness and fear of death. He was in a turmoil of anticipation waiting for her response.

"Yes," she replied. He could feel the warmth of her upon him. "It is what I want. I can't imagine myself wanting anyone else. Things seem so right with us. I will try."

So it was agreed. They would try and fall in love with each other.

They walked along the hedge that bordered the cemetery. Here they came across smaller graves. The stones were harder to read, until Jo understood.

"Oh the poor children!"

Some had died barely a few weeks old, others could number the years. Chris averted his eyes to the hills beyond. Where had all this grief gone, all this pain of being human? Was this something that faded like the inscriptions on the stones?

How many adults here had known the pain of the death of a child, who amongst these ordinary people had suffered that extraordinary grief, had carried their loss to the grave? Now they lay in the ground they had worked on, had struggled with for the whole of their lives. What was left of all this? He looked for an imprint of their lives upon the surrounding landscape. The fields, the church itself, the tracks, the farmhouses told only of a general human activity over a period of time. Is this it then? Is there nothing then? Nothing except that you are alive and because you have life you share with these people the intimate secret of life. That in you the common concerns of humanity for all time again find their perfect expression. That your love is a continuation of that great love that has always been part of human existence and that your grief, when it comes, will also be part of that greater whole.

Chris felt a chilling of the air as the sun was obscured by a cloud. He looked at the girl at his side. Was there not something timeless in that? Turning they made their way out, not observing Jo's daffodils, now yellow and dark.

## TY MAWR

Jo was living a few miles from Pont-a-Dovey in a remote cottage built on the edge of open moorland. Jo often walked the paths that crossed the moor. She grew to love the land; the gorse, the jagged rock recrudescing, the heather hidden peat bogs. The aspect invigorated her; the sky and the heath filled the vision, with a sense of immense emptiness. Then, at her feet, would be tiny stems of heather leaping from a single trunk like flame; then re-dividing into myriad branches, minute and twisting in upward thrust, tinged on the surface with flecks of purple fire in summer. These walks became an increasing refuge for her, offering her a place to escape from the pressures of the cycle of essay writing and set text reading, and later from the growing tensions in the house.

Geoff and Alma had a childless marriage. The renovation of the cottage had filled that void, but now it was finished they both needed to find new direction. Geoff worked in Pont-a-Dovey, while Alma started a degree course at the university in English. She and Jo were in the same tutorial group. They had recognised a kindness of spirit and after a visit to the house Jo had been offered a room. This she had gladly exchanged for the drab lodgings she had shared with two other students in the town.

Alma was older than Jo. They shared an avid curiosity about people and their relationships. The less generous might call it gossiping, but it was more than that. It was an absolute need to know as if by knowing they could be empowered. Chris was often mentioned as was Geoff. They were not judgemental and in the early days the assessments were fair, for there was no feeling of being bound unwillingly to the man. The two women were happy in their choice. To be sure these men were not perfect. After all how could they be! They were just men; the very word itself seemed to be value loaded. They were men and thus inevitably a little self-seeking, a little inconsiderate, a little weak and a little vain. These weaknesses could be forgiven when the whole was favourably looked upon; indeed there was even a security in the knowledge of these faults.

These traits were reassuring, could almost be relied upon. So while it may have been irritating to see this selfishness it gave the women a way of defining their men. It was perhaps better than a paradigm of purity by your side, who would be nothing but a constant reproach, for they knew themselves to be imperfect too.

Alma was a tall woman of slim build, with shoulder length brown hair that curled at the neck. Her face was adult; it had lost some of its youthful complexion, yet retained its strong lines, displaying a fine underlying bone structure. This combined with the straightness of her back gave her an air of slight superiority. There was a fineness of living in all her bones, a proportion about her frame that is so attractive in those who have mental equilibrium too. Her clothes, the long skirts and braided blouses, so popular with the new English peasantry of the sixties and seventies, hung perfectly upon her. She looked distant, unapproachable. Her eyes, however, revealed the secrets of her soul. In them there was a wilfulness, a gaiety, a childish irreverence.

Jo, initially, had been a little in awe of her. She had been particularly impressed by an essay of Alma's she had read. The variety of expression, the wide vocabulary had made Jo view her own efforts with some shame. Later, after she had moved in, she saw Alma writing an essay. Jo had been mildly shocked to see her reach for the thesaurus, for she was used to only choosing a word if she had thought of it and had felt it was right.

On Saturday the long awaited letter came from Chris. She had anticipated its arrival every morning, ensuring she was up when the postman came. She picked it up, curious and happy at its thickness. She took it, still unopened, to the kitchen where she propped it up against the bread bin, while she made herself a cup of tea and some toast. She then took her breakfast and the letter to her room. All the while her body had been energising in a glorious rising tide of excitement. She had missed him greatly in the five days they had been apart. Now she had his letter before her she had a sudden fear; would his sentiments be in line with hers? Then, as she with tremulous fingers opened the letter, she thought, do I really know who it is



who writes to me? He was as if a stranger to her mind. The events of the past weekend, over which she had been time and again, seemed to blur. The man who had been at her side, with whom she had felt so comfortable, had now grown indistinct. How many times in the loneliness of the night had she held his image close to her for reassurance, but now the thought struck her, lent urgency by the rising of an irrational fear, that perhaps there was not anyone really there at all, that there never had been.

The letter contained two sheets of A4 paper, folded, and, her heart raced in wild pleasure, a pressed flower.

Dear Jo,

I have been thinking of last weekend, going over in my mind the places we visited and the things we said. You have been a constant companion in my thoughts. Now that you have gone I feel a decline into the ordinary, a dulling of sense. Without you there is no colour, no permanence, no reality.

I took Woody for a walk this afternoon and discovered a beautiful bay at Hud just up the coast. I was happy there thinking of you and the events of the last weekend. I do not know if we are destined to love one another. I don't know whether we ever can ever wholly love one another, but in moments. If this is so then I want one of those moments to be at Hud.

On my walk back to the car I found a celandine amongst a bunch of celandines. This one had been broken, trampled by another's foot and lay unregarded to the side of my path. I thought I heard it call in a language foreign to me. I knelt before it and, gently, lifted it from its bed of grass. Its colour, such a pale yellow, seemed to speak to me of a fading glory, as if we could be young once only in the sun. And there she had lain, broken backed, unregarded, to wilt and die in the sun. I felt that my love was a flower, to be found on the byways, to be reviled so by the world, unthought of, unvalued by our common currency. And I had found her, hidden from the world, like a wounded animal seeking anonymity. So I brought her to me, held her close, whispered that I would care for her. When I got home I placed her between the leaves of a hard backed book,

pressed her, so that in the drying a part of her would always remain. Perhaps it will be so for us, that our love, as fluid as flesh, shall dry in the sun, shall be pressed into the folds of a story that shall always remain. She is my gift to thee.

I feel so strongly for you now. In the middle of last night I woke and reached out for you, but you were not there. I think perhaps one day you will leave me and I, in my own way, will drift away from you, but the intensity of my emotions makes me wonder...

I'm going to Drefi again this weekend. It will be strange to be there without you. I will keep you apprised of any developments. Please write back soon.

Jo warmed to his letter. It confirmed her own feelings and remembrance. Every one of his words she could have penned herself. He had been brought close, as if she could touch him now. It was her deepest wish; that the man on paper, the man with whom she had lain, could match the ideal man in her head.

Jo pondered Lawrence's "Rainbow" Ursula. Was it destiny that dictated the one you would love? Was there a controlling force that had for centuries spoken to women and men directly so that they knew, "Yes this is the one"? What use would their human will be against such a power? They may want to love, oh they may want it with all their hearts and minds, but was that in the end going to mean anything at all? There might be something that was crushingly indifferent to them and their desire for love.

She heard approaching footsteps and quickly hid the letter. There was a knock and a head popped round the door. It was Geoff.

"Good morning Jo. You look happy!"

The girl flushed. "Yes, I've had a letter from Chris."

"Not only that," he said, picking up the flower Jo had left on the table. "It's beautiful," he said, a smile lighting his face. "I'm just going to make a cup of coffee for her ladyship. Do you want one?"

Jo thanked him, but declined; she had not finished her tea.

Jo regarded the celandine. The yellow petals seemed to draw her. She took the flower to the window and letting it rest in her palm, saw the rays of the morning sun enwrap and invigorate it. The yellow was bathed in yellow and revelled in the affirmation of itself. The little flower seemed to be enriched, to be throbbing with colour. Jo was mad in ecstasy, the colour and form reached deep within her. She felt the sun play upon her petals, making her glisten. She placed the flower on the windowsill and saw a fine yellow dust upon her upturned palm. As if in response to some dim remembrance, she licked the tip of her finger, dabbed it in the dust, crossed herself on the forehead, closed her eyes as her body began to shiver, her head to spin.

She sensed something tearing through her, bursting, bubbling up, like sulphur breaking through the earth, alive, hot, vital. He had poured his passion into her and now it filled her, spread to every limb. She had the sense of him, coursing through her, as if he would take each part of her. He had come and gathered her, swept her up like the wind under a cover of leaves. She felt a rendering up of herself, as if she would merge with him, that she could become one with him. And everywhere there was an intense yellow, a bathing in it, a surrender to it. Her every sense was alert for him, the very air about her seemed to prickle with the presence of him. The woman in her ached and, she knew, she would burn for him.

To some extent it had always been so. The writing out of their experiences lent them substance and permanence. Then their own lives would come to them with the force of literary heroes and heroines. The written word could be poured over, a passage reread, a nuance picked up on a third reading, the flower imagery understood. And that little celandine, compressed like a poem, did that not say at least as much?

Chris arrived at Drefi, on a Friday night in early May, for the weekend. Sam greeted him with the news that Bethan, an old school friend of Jennie's, was due to arrive the following afternoon.

"Is she still going out with Mike?"

"I think so, but she's coming up on her own." Sam's eyes gleamed, twin pricks of light in a world that was dark.

Chris laughed too. He was happy to be with his friend again.

Woody trotted up to Sam and presented his head for approval. "How are you, boy?" Sam was rewarded with an excited wag of the tail and a nudge to suggest it was time for a walk.

"Brenda will also be here then."

"She hasn't met Jennie yet, has she?" Chris asked sharply.

"No, though she knows she's up here; looking for work she believes."

"Are you sure she believes that?"

Sam let out a sigh, "I can't be absolutely sure, but, yes, I think so. Later I'll tell her that Jennie has found work and decided to stay on and find her own accommodation up here. As far as Brenda is concerned, at the moment, she's here as your guest."

"Thanks, buddy! I'll really cop it when the shit hits the fan!"

Sam laughed at the idea of it.

More seriously Chris asked, "How's it all going to work out?"

"God knows! We'll just have to see."

Chris sat on the sofa. "Where's Jennie now?" he asked.

"In the bath," Sam answered.

Chris paused. This was going to be a difficult situation. He doubted if he could carry it off. Moving from the arms of one woman to another was surely enough of a strain, but to have them both in the room at the same time was not going to be easy for his friend to manage.

"Well I hope it goes all right for you. I don't know if I could cope with it. I would want to resolve it, bring it all out in the open."

"Yes, and in the end I'm sure that's what will have to happen. But this situation has arisen. I know that nothing would have happened hadn't I slept with Jennie, but it seemed so right at the time - still feels right. So I've just let things ride to see what happens."

Chris said softly, "Meanwhile Jennie is kept in hope and Brenda in the dark..."

"I know," interrupted Sam, "but this is not of my choosing. You know Jennie - if I leave her now then it will cause her an immense amount of pain."

"I know it will, but that pain is inevitable if you are going to go ahead with the wedding. Delaying it will only make it harder for her to bear in the end."

"Yes I agree, but I may stay with her. I might leave Bren. I just don't know how it will work out, but I do know that I love them both. That's why I say it is best to let it ride for the moment. There will be a time soon enough for making decisions."

Upstairs they could hear the sound of water gurgling away, a sharp twisting noise like blowing air through a reed, followed by a sound of hissing and then a deeper, throatier call, breathless and setting up vibrations in the rest of the ancient waste system.

In the kitchen Sam had already made a start on the preparation of the evening meal; the kidney beans were in soak, a slab of frozen mincemeat was thawing on the drainer, sliced potatoes and diced carrots, prepared earlier in the day, stood in a bowl of water with a slight scum on the surface, sliced peppers and onions were arranged in pyramids on a board.

"It won't be long before we can start eating our own food again," observed Sam. The brussels sprouts had been the last thing the garden at the back of the house had produced, but now it was full with every type of vegetable.

Sam was the driving force behind the decision by the inhabitants of Drefi to move towards greater self-sufficiency. Chris had been reading about Coleridge's and Southey's ideas for a pantisocracy and the labour for him was elevated to an ideal.

These ideas were very fine, but they did not grow vegetables. Sam loved growing things, just for the sake of it. The process filled him with awe. Sam had an aptitude for the garden in the same way that Chris had an aptitude for ideas. Sam had an economy of movement, a kind of reverence, as he dug the ground ready for planting. The spade was pushed into the Welsh turf and turned aside in one deliberate, smooth action. The ground was then spiked and broken up with a fork. In the

half-light it would be impossible to say where his limbs left off and where the tool began.

At Ty Mawr, on the Saturday, Jo joined Geoff and Alma on a shopping trip to Pont-a-Dovey. The couple were looking for mats for the cottage and Jo planned to treat herself to an afternoon of browsing in, firstly, the university bookshop and then in a number of second hand shops. She spent an hour in the English Literature section looking through the poetry and in the end buying a slim volume of Edward Thomas. She lingered further by the fiction, wrestling with herself over a John Fowles novel, deciding finally it was really an extravagance she could not afford; her twentieth century literature course petering out somewhere in the mid fifties. She then went to her favourite junk shops and saw in the window of one some Victorian nightdresses being arranged in the window. Jo stood at the window in awe of them, drew an amused smile from the assistant and a beckoning sign to come in. There were three or four that she could have willingly bought, but in the end she narrowed her choice down to one, with such a delicate inlay that she just could not resist it. Any feelings of guilt quickly evaporated in her elation at making such a find. As she made her way back to the car she thought of what Chris would think of her new nightdress and imagined herself wearing it while lying next to him. It was because she was lost in her own world for a moment that she did not espy the danger ahead.

She found herself in a precinct and could see a small crowd gathered around some spectacle. As she drew closer she saw that there was a sort of impromptu show taking place. A jostling crowd was something that she generally avoided so she altered course so as to skirt around the disturbance. It became clear that it was some fund raising event organised by students from the university. It looked like a scene from the circus for the students were dressed as a variety of animals and were cavorting to music. A tiger had just run round the perimeter of an imaginary stage when for some reason the horse bolted. It broke through the encircling crowd at its thinnest point and headed straight for her. For a moment the onlookers did not

know what to make of this sudden and most unexpected bid for freedom by the animal, but when they saw the object of its attentions there were nods of approval and cries of "Give her a ride!" from one or two of the less sophisticated.

Jo was in utter confusion. She had a hundred eyes upon her and much to her horror was the centre of everyone's attention. "He won't bite!" was a further comment proffered. The crowd were beginning to enjoy this sideshow. The girl's obvious discomfiture did nothing to dispel their curiosity; they wanted to see what would happen, The shopping could wait! Another voice, this time more Welsh, "Give him a lump of sugar, love!" Jo trembled. Her cheeks flushed in bright crimson blotches, her lips assumed a contorted smile and her eyes, like something that is trapped, announced fear. Yet there was worse to follow. The horse began to nudge her with its head, made stamping movements and then attempted to rear. As Jo tried to escape the horse moved alongside her and then pounced. She was suddenly inside the beast, caught between the bodies of two young men. She felt the one behind fix his grip upon her waist and then she was off, galloping. She twisted through a series of convoluted steps performed by the horse and then, still helpless in its power, found herself doing a lap of honour as the animal played to an enthusiastic audience.

Eventually she was freed to another call of having been "broken in". The girl set off quickly for an adjoining street and was soon lost in the anonymity of Saturday afternoon shoppers. Her brain was in fever. She felt violated, humiliated and vulnerable. Gradually the storm in her head began to subside. She became more conscious of her surroundings and saw that she had, unknowingly, reached the edge of town and was now descending to the main road. She remembered Chris, felt the lack of him, longed for the reassurance and comfort only he could bring. Retracing her steps, the buildings high above, the traffic passing heedless by, she was filled with the desire to see a face she could trust, someone in whom she could confide her secret fear. At that moment she felt she would die for the want of him.

At Drefi, Chris left Jennie alone in the house. Bethan was expected to arrive at four, while Sam was not due back with Brenda till early evening. Chris intended to spend a solitary hour or two walking. He gathered the lead and called Woody. The day was still, the farm quiet. Chris followed the track that led away from the farm buildings and out to the fields beyond. As he closed the gate he followed the path that he and his friends had taken only a week before. His thoughts turned to each and the particular flavour each would give to a walk.

Walking with Sam one became like a hunter, conscious through him of the natural world and its activity, leaving the well established paths looking for badger setts, fox dens, rabbit burrows. The hunt was to discover and not to harm, to learn and not to kill. On one occasion the friends had come across a baby bird, bereft of feathers, squawking with gaping beak, its body thrashing about in the unfamiliar earth at the base of a tree. He had picked it up, ascended the tree in a few, long, fluid movements and replaced the chick in its nest high in the branches. Another time a wounded bird, dragged down by the wheels of a car, and left to die was quickly and humanely killed.

Walking with Jo was very different. It was not that walking with her the world became a passive thing, far from it. She had a strong engagement with nature, an involvement that did not seek to impose its own will upon the external world, yet would enter into it intensely, experience in an intimate way the form of a landscape, the colour of a flower, the bedraggled beauty of a sunset. She was a conduit to a mystical communion with nature.

Walking alone was different again. Sometimes when the world seemed flat it was mechanical, perhaps just task specific, like walking the dog. This may bring its own joy, to see the sleek animal in a kind of bliss. Other times the walk may be used to work on some problem and then the mental activity would blot out all external phenomena. His mind would track a stream and in a giddy delight be taken upon on the current of thought, wade out into the middle of an idea and let it sweep him through a landscape of infinite possibility. At other times he would be filled with a half formed foreboding; the vastness and his isolated insignificance within it pricked him with a tangible



fear. Then sometimes he would be gripped by the integrity of another object; a flower, bush or tree would impress him with its thatness, its self-assuredness.

Down in the wood, he was alone now, save for thoughts of Jo. A fine mist hung about the trees in streaks, unmoving. He stopped in the damp, cloying air very conscious of the warmth of his body. His mind was filled with the presence of her. He searched for her in the mist, cut away from the path, through the burgeoning bracken, disturbing the white air, making it plunge and twist in eddies around him, like the white arms of a lost lover forlornly trying to reach for him as if he were a refuge from the intrusive world.

He wrapped the mist round himself, was impregnated by it, inhaled it like the long draught of smoke from a cigarette. His pulse raced under the influence of his narcotic dream. He felt her to be here, close by. What was that behind the tree - a gathering of the air, something sighing, beginning itself, wresting itself from the nothingness, emptying itself into form, like long wisps of fine hair extending into streams of light? He felt her need as a manifest thing about him; a pang in the darkening boughs that swooped to the ground in declensions of desire. She wanted him. Wherever she was, he had that supreme knowing. She was utterly lost and from this void of nothingness, isolation, he knew her inner need trembled for him.

He moved towards the vision, again drew the air from her deep into his lungs. Not knowing why, his arms reached to the line of her, turned slowly in the mystery of her; as he comforted her, loved her.

He found himself kneeling, priest-like, calm in a kind of natural divinity. What thing had happened? Jo. He caught her name in the trailing clouds of glory. She had been with him in this affirmation. They had been close, as close as the river and the bank. She had run through him, had followed the course of him, had enlivened him with her vitality, her life force, as it had tumbled through him. He had held the storm water though it had threatened to flood over him. He had held her wildness, had defined it, though he knew that this would not always be; that one day she would change him, rip away his tidy banks,

destroy his winding and gradual ways, tear at the rocks that gave support, alter all before her on her path to the sea.

That this should happen he was powerless to affect. Damn up the river, divert its flow - all these ploys were useless. And why should he attempt them? To feel the rush of her as she spilt her life into his; this was the joy of it. To still the waters would be to quell the energy they generated within him.

His mind declined one further stage. She had not, in any real sense, been here. He had imagined it, imagined her yearning, her fear, her isolation coming to him for warmth, for human comfort. He had recreated her, a wild untrammelled thing, from water, air and wood, compounded these elements into her frame, with some mysterious force that he could invoke, yet was not of him, could not be controlled by him. In his calm he saw the space between the two of them, a distance that could not be measured against the one hundred and fifty physical miles that separated them. No, that was nothing; it could not prevent their intimacy. And as the mist withdrew, and all he had was the memory of her in that moment, he wondered if they could ever be as one in every day life in a domestic setting. Here the idea of the other would have a hard time of it; the constant reminders of imperfection in the loved one, the petty failings, the little selfishnesses, the ego always obtruding.

As he came round further he began to feel the presence of another. The familiar objects about him had grown unfamiliar. It was as if there was some other thing that shared this wood with him now. He looked from tree to tree, back along the path, strained his sight to the extremity of the wood where the open fields lay. No, there was nothing here except a world suddenly strange. The comfort of being in the wood was gone; he felt a friendless eye cast a cold glance across all that he could see. And yet where that eye came from he could not say. It was a transforming thing. it dulled colour, greyed beauty in its examination. Still there was nothing here. Was it the lack of Jo he felt? The contrast, perhaps, between having had her here with him in subliminal communion and now the knowledge of the want of her? He could not be sure; all he knew, through every sense, was that something indifferent, calculating, cold, spied upon him.

Returning to Drefi from the wood Chris thought it looked like a temple. He could see the rear of the house, as if emergent, growing out of the hillside. He saw the flaking paint of the whitewashed walls, the chimneys like spires, the slated roof, damp, glistening in the sunlight, the trees like sheltering angels ranged round, rooted in the higher ground to the back.

For centuries the house had stood thus, a refuge, a place merged with its natural surroundings, not seeking to impose itself upon them. It had been built with local stone, by the people of that land. These people had known this land for generations, back to a time when Wales had been free. And from this intimacy had come fine, strong buildings that served their humble needs, became part of the land they worked.

It gave Chris such joy to look upon this beautiful home. He knew by modern standards it was cold and draughty. Yet it had been built so well that even the flagstones in the front room, that had been lain straight onto the earth were never damp. Cold, yes, but never moist, despite the wetness of the Welsh climate.

In spite of his pleasure in living in such a house there was an incongruity. He, an Englishman from the south of his country, would always find it hard to be accepted by a dwindling rural Welsh community. Then to be a student, to be concerned with books and the literature of a foreign country, these were not features that would be understood, let alone welcomed by the Welsh farmer whose family had stayed in the land of their birth, while others had perforce moved to the cities of Swansea and Cardiff to the south or the larger English cities to the east. Chris knew this, but only as if he had apprehended it in a book. He, as yet, had no feeling of it in his life, did not fully appreciate that he, in his academic Englishness was not welcome. He did not see that he, as part of a dominant culture that was distrusted, would be judged not by who he was, but by what he was. His simple love for the Welsh countryside, his naive belief in the essential goodness of ordinary people, could not bridge the divide that this racial difference caused. His aesthetic response to the beauty of the land differed markedly from a people who had served the land with their toil for centuries; it was rooted within them and they worshipped not with poems and fine

thoughts and feelings, but with the plough and the spade and there was a different beauty in that.

Jo closed the door behind her. Alone in her room at last! Other people's lives! They intruded and disturbed seemingly without concern for their effect upon one. "The past is a foreign country" - well that could be equally applied to other people. So what was it this time? She had just spent the evening with Geoff and Alma and a friend of Alma, John. Jo had wondered about this invitation. She had suspected matchmaking and had been secretly annoyed with Alma.

"You're not going out next Saturday night are you?" The question had been framed so innocently. Of course she wasn't going anywhere; she rarely went out in the evening. Having ascertained this Alma moved in with the announcement that a friend, who worked on one of the neighbouring farms, would be having a meal with them. There followed a description of the man as "pastorally interesting". Alma's eyes had lightened in the telling. Jo believed she could detect the beginnings of a little game to be played upon her.

The men she knew were disappointing generally. They seemed weak, so unlike her father with his strong, independent spirit. There was in them an immense propensity to seem to be more than they actually were. One could so easily be taken in by the look of a man. He could be physically strong, unkempt in hair and dress, bearded, be in action sensitive, gentle, look for all the world the one who could transcend petty desires. And yet what did you find when you tasted this marvellous sweet? He always wanted things, his world was built upon ephemeral want; the ephemeral man living in his ephemeral century. Then he would want you. The worst of them would want you to serve their egos, the pretty thing on the arm. That wasn't really the problem though. That type of man didn't reckon at all. It was the group who seemed to promise more. Where was there a man who had power, not the empty power of a man living in a society organised around male desire, but the man who had power over himself, who would be like herself?

Then there was sex. The problem was that it was so often just sex. Sex was great, like eating candyfloss as a child. This was it; that it often was no more than a defined act, enjoyed for no purpose further than the pleasure it gave. Then one could sentimentalize it and call it 'making love'. But there were a million ways you could make love. You made love when you walked together, shared a flower, looked at your man in the light of a log fire, wrote him a poem. You couldn't make love like you made soap; it simply was not a mechanical process like sex. She said the words "make love" slowly in her mind, and then rolled them out from her tongue into the empty room, removing from them contexts, changing their meanings. You make, create, generate, produce; then you have the product of this directed activity: love. Well, what was it you'd made? Jo looked at the cushion on the bed; she had made that and there it lay as evidence of having been made. She had also made love, but where was that? On the bed too! Love was an abstract concept, "making" implied some activity carried out on the physical plane. The two words sat uneasily side by side. She looked again at the cushion. What was there to say that she had ever made it? It was not part of her; true there were perhaps some stylistic features that could be attributed to her, but there it lay separate from her, differentiated. So what of the love she had created? Was that too now apart from her, existing elsewhere, remote from her? Did it dwell within her, no more than an imagining, a series of chemical interactions that created a feeling? If so it was not a stable compound. True, at present, her feelings of love for Chris were high, but this would change. The desperate need of him she had felt that afternoon, when she would have mocked space and time, would have, did in her mind, taken him to her and branded the words "I love you" upon his soul; this had subsided. Tomorrow it may be gone.

There would be a time she felt when all these doubts and preoccupations would be removed, when she had found the man. Increasingly, however, she was starting to think that there was a chance he may already have been found.

This evening she had prepared the meal with Alma, who had been in a silly, girlish mood. Something had definitely been afoot, yet Jo still had not apprehended the cause until John had arrived. From that point on the reason for Alma's suppressed excitement had become clear. The evening had caused Jo a lot of pain. She had had to witness Alma's obvious attraction to John all the while wondering to what extent Geoff was aware of the situation. And as the evening had worn on Alma's inhibitions had disappeared with the wine. Jo had been amazed at the open flirting that had gone on at the table without, it appeared to Jo, any regard on Alma's part to what Geoff may be feeling.

On returning from his walk Chris espied Bethan through the lounge window as he walked up the driveway to the door. He saw her slender, like willow, golden hair curling at the neck, a loose blouse flattening her chest; a twenties girl washed up in the wrong half of the century.

Turning suddenly as he entered, her hair in a swirl, he saw her diaphanous blouse tighten over fleeting breasts, revealing their girlish form. She saw the story in his eyes; the sudden dilation, the look that lasts for a second, but lingers for all time.

Bethan talked. The boyfriend could not be prevailed upon to come; the job with the social security was a bore. She didn't, Chris thought, look like a civil servant at all, with her long skirt of Indian design and joint in her hand.

The room had impressed her with its tranquillity, its patience with her quick ways, its waiting for her to be still, to find a new centre. She recalled the long journey up across southern England; the joining of the motorway at Bath and the long haul through South Wales only relieved upon turning north at Swansea. From the stuffy car and constant droning of the engine she had walked into another world. It was not threatening, although she had found the transition from the twentieth century into something more closely approaching the eighteenth disorientating at first.

Speaking of her work felt incongruous, at odds with the room. "Sometimes, when a claimant gets upset - he may be drunk

too - we get some dangerous situations. We have security glass, of course, and all the chairs are screwed down..." The room soaked up her words, deadened her sounds, softly extinguished her speech.

"You make it sound like a prison," Jennie said.

A muffled sigh came from Bethan. Chris took from her the joint and inhaled the smoke deeply. It gave his head a twist and as the thoughts began to rush, in a beautiful chaos, he looked at the girl, her tiredness falling.

Woody scratched the door to be let in. She continued as he walked to the door. "I am not happy. The people who work there - 'my colleagues' - they seem to spend all their time loathing their fellow human beings. It makes me so mad to see it; the pettiness, the betrayal of the human spirit, the waste of human potentiality. I hate it."

"So what will you do?" Chris asked.

"Oh I don't know. I need money..." she tailed off as if this explained everything.

She was being slowly corrupted. "That's the system," he said. "We all need to survive, we need money, and so we find a job that entails doing things we don't approve of."

"I know. But how can we escape from it?"

"I'm not sure that you can."

"But what are you doing here? Haven't you broken away - free to do as you like."

"It's not as easy as that! What we are doing here may develop into something grander; we may become self-sufficient. But even if we were successful we'd still have to use systems outside our own. We couldn't ignore the world outside. At the moment I'm a student on a grant, funded by the government. Sam is working; Jennie is claiming the dole. We haven't escaped from anything. We have just chosen another prison, one we hope we'll be happier in."

"I think you've been holding on to that joint too long!" joked Jennie.

"Sorry!" He smiled stupidly and passed it over.

He thought that Bethan, as she talked with Jennie about Sam, was as yet lambent, a flame waiting to be seized, to burn anew. He sensed her pulse, a soft beat, fill the spinning room.

Jennie, agitated, her care a shadow thrown back from the time Sam and his fiancée were expected, left the room. Bethan, quick, slid next to Chris and whispered, "So she's decided to fight for him. What do you think of her chances?"

He felt her hot as breath on him, lazy like sex on a summer afternoon. "Not good."

"I hope you're wrong. She'll take it badly - she's obsessed with him. You should have seen her when she came back from here the first time. I've never seen anyone so changed. And then, after his visit, I couldn't stop her giving her job up and coming up here. It was as if she couldn't help herself."

"I know. And what happens if he stays with Brenda?"

"She thinks she will succeed."

"Well, may be, but it will be hard for Sam to break off with all the wedding arrangements made."

Bethan lay back, in yellows and reds beside him. "I understand her better now."

She could almost touch Chris's tousled hair, feel his soft beard kindle her cheek. And, thinking of herself, said, "In Portsmouth she was dead."

Brenda entered the house first, with Sam standing slightly back, in the shadows of the room. Sheepish, Jennie thought.

Sam fetched wine, while Jennie put on a Joni Mitchell album to annoy Brenda. There was a certain piquancy as it was one she often listened to with Sam. Brenda couldn't see the point of this type of music; unless it was danceable, it was worse than useless. This is what she should have expected, she thought, a look of benign resignation on her face. Sam's friends seemed to spend half their lives sitting around listening to records!

Brenda's obsession was knitting. She rummaged in her bag for her current piece of work. It would settle her in unfamiliar company.

Sam heard the music filter into the kitchen and smiled grimly. He had, however, other things on his mind. The purchase of the house they were moving into after the wedding had been delayed for three weeks. They had to find somewhere to live for that time. Drefi was the best option.

Outside, night came in stealth, pawed at the window, at the door. Brenda picked up her knitting, an electric light burning



fiercely above her head. The music faded as if bleached, the room became stark and uninviting.

"Sam, could you please fetch me my carrier bag from the car?" He, dutifully, went, while Brenda turned to Jennie. "I hear you've moved up here. Sam told me all about it. You came up here because you fell in love with the house?" Brenda's eyes narrowed.

"Yes I did fall in love...with it all, with the house, the countryside, the people..."

Chris noticed the pause - was it deliberate? He studied a nonchalant Jennie, sensed in the flippant edge to her tongue, in her ambiguity of expression that she was ready for a showdown.

"...one particular person in fact," continued Jennie evenly.

Bethan and Chris glanced at each other, uncertainly.

"Really?" Brenda said in a tone of genuine surprise. "Who is it? Do I know him?"

"Oh no. You don't know him at all."

Bethan reached for a packet of cigarettes and offered Chris one. As he took a light from her Chris heard the sound of the door opening and his friend returning. "Was this the one?" Sam asked."

"Thank you, yes." Brenda retrieved a second smaller pair of needles and placed the bag by her feet. "I think we're out of wine, Sam."

He went to the kitchen to fetch a new bottle from the fridge.

"Where does he live then?" Brenda continued, her eye drawn to a dropped stitch, but her ear twisting back to catch what Jennie might say.

"Oh, he lives quite near here in fact."

Sam returned with the wine and distributed it. As he was pouring Chris's Brenda said, "Did you know that Jennie has a man up here? She's just been telling us about him."

Sam blanched.

"Sam, why didn't you tell me?" The voice was almost gentle.

For a second Sam caught Chris's eye. "There was nothing to say really."

"Well it explains everything, don't you see?" said the lilting Welsh voice. "How many times have I said to you that I couldn't

understand why Jennie should come up here, on a whim, so to speak, pull up her roots and make a new life here. Isn't it just typical of a man not to tell you the most important thing? You're a dark one Jennie, I must say. The whole family have been talking about you, trying to guess your secret. My mum said they'd be a man at the bottom of it, but I couldn't see it as Sam had said nothing."

Sam poured wine into Jennie's glass and stared hard at her, grim faced. Jennie seemed to mouth words at him. Chris could not be sure at first, then he was: "I love you". Jennie's eyes softened, as if in candlelight, became like soft pools of brimming wax, their light full of desire and supplication. Then more words came; ones which Chris could hear. "I want to go to bed with you now." She spoke these, beyond caring, with a fearlessness that only comes to those who know they have absolutely nothing to lose.

Nobody really knew what happened next. Did Sam simply forget to stop pouring the wine or did Jennie deliberately move her glass? Whatever, the result was the same. With a squeal the disaster was announced to the room. Sam took Jennie to the kitchen to clean up.

Bethan drew long on her cigarette and saw Chris, through wreathes of smoke, change the record. Brenda continued, unperturbed, still deeply involved in her subplot of needles and wool. He chose something quickly so as to drown the voices that were already leeching from kitchen to lounge. In a moment they would be listening to Grace Slick singing "Triad".

The kitchen door closed, the wood at the base scuffing the stone step. Bethan launched into conversation.

"What are you making, Brenda?"

"A jumper for Sam."

Chris studied her long dark hair draped around her neck and shoulders, her green eyes and angular face. She could be beautiful, he thought, certainly was pretty. What was it she lacked? He felt no transcendental power in her, that she had never been to extremity, to the point where the distinction between things begin to blur, where the integrity of objects starts to diminish; in the dark place, in the spinning centre. In this Chris underestimated her.

Her clothes were smart, sharp. Her blouse was crisp edged; her maxi length skirt cut the air in uncompromising lines about her. She had a slight abrasiveness, something of the smell of hospitals; clean, clinical, bitter to the taste. He did not dislike her, but never could be at ease with her.

She was the same age as Sam, but to Chris she could be in her forties. Something in her stifled light, youth, irresponsibility.

"But with all the wedding arrangements I've not had time to finish it."

"How are your plans going?" inquired Bethan.

"Well. We've had replies from most people we've invited. My dress will be ready to collect next week. We're finalising the church arrangements with the vicar tomorrow. The banns will have to be read and I hope nobody will object!"

"I suppose it's difficult to imagine it's really happening," Bethan averred.

Brenda gave a short laugh. "Well I hope not. We both know what we want. There seems little point in hanging around," Brenda said just a trifle antiseptically. She couldn't bear wasting time. You either got on with one thing or another. Time was too valuable a commodity for it to be spent in reflection, doubt, analysis.

In the kitchen much time was being wasted.

"If you don't tell her now then I will, Sam. She's got to know sometime - why not now?" Jennie was dabbing off the wine from her skirt, not looking at him. He stood apart from her, leaning back against the cooker.

"No, Jennie, please not now. I promise you I will tell her."

"When?" she looked up at him, direct, without fear.

"Not now. I don't know. Tomorrow after we've seen the priest."

"More deception. God, I can't stand it. She's out there in another world. I don't want to hurt her Sam, but everything she says just makes me want to scream."

"I'll tell her tomorrow."

"And when she asks you to choose what will you say?"

"I will choose you."

With a wild flurry she threw herself around him. She wailed, the words of love now free. And he too felt his burden lifted.

Muddled, with the woman weeping, his garden path life overturned, yet happy, his face in revelation, he kissed her gently upon the head, "Softly Jennie, or the others may hear."

"No!" She could not bear more secrecy.

Disengaging her slowly he looked into her eyes, "Be patient, my love. It will all be settled tomorrow."

"Take her home now and tell her on the way."

"No, I need time to think about what I'll say to all the reasons she'll give for staying together."

"That's easy," Jennie replied, her heart light in joy, "tell her that you love another. To every difficulty she raises tell her you love me. Say you will." To emphasise the last three words, on each she gave him a light tap on the nose.

"I will try," but Jennie heard the doubt in his words.

"You'll not play with me? You will be true?"

"Yes. I shall be true. Everything is moving so fast. I just need time to think on my own. You wouldn't want me to hurt Brenda more than necessary, would you?"

Jennie felt her impatience swell. "Why not hurt her? I've been hurt. Stop all this messing around" is what she wanted to say. Instead she steeled herself, nipped his ear as gently as only a lover can, and whispered, "No, my love."

"We must get back to the front room or she'll be suspicious," he said.

Jennie handed him the bottle of wine with a purposeful look. As he opened the door she said in a voice that could be overheard, "I'll go upstairs and change my clothes."

"Ah there you are Sam. We wondered whether we were going to see that bottle of wine again," Chris joked weakly. There was a silence.

"Should I take your car and drive back, if you've drunk too much?" asked Brenda, serious.

"Yes, that'll be for the best," Sam muttered.

"You'll have to speak up. I can't hear you above the music."

"Yes I said," he replied, just a little more strongly than he had intended.

Brenda, looking up from her knitting quizzically, said nothing.

Upstairs Jennie heard Grace Slick sing, "I don't really see/Why can't we go on as three?"

Brenda was thinking of the new house. This delay in their moving was a nuisance. She hoped the sale would not fall through for she had lots of plans already forming in her mind: the carpets, the decor, the arrangement of the furniture and so on. She wished Sam would hurry up and broach the subject with Chris. She decided to set the thing in motion. "Has Sam told you that we've hit problems with the house we are buying?"

It was like wrenching oneself from one level of existence where one was concerned with love and philosophy to another more practical world of everyday occurrence when talking with Brenda. Chris managed the switch with some difficulty. "What? Have they let you down?"

"Oh no, nothing quite so serious, but we are going to face a delay. It looks as though we will not be moving until at least a couple of weeks after the wedding." Brenda looked pointedly at Sam. "You have something to say here, I believe."

"Sorry, I was lost."

"The house, remember."

"Oh yes. We can't move in because..."

"I've already explained all that," Brenda's reedy Welsh voice rose a pitch.

"Well the only place we can stay is here as they don't allow couples where Brenda works. We wondered whether you minded giving up your room Chris, as it is the only one big enough for two."

"No, I don't mind. After all, I'm not here half the time anyway," Chris said, conscious of Jennie's return to the room. If she had heard something she did not let it show. She smiled when asked about the spillage, shrugging it off. It was Bethan who noticed in her friend a strange, suppressed excitement.

"Good," said Brenda in a kind of summing up. "It's just for three weeks maximum."

Jennie offered coffee to break an awkward pause, but Brenda had already packed her knitting, declaring it time for her to go. She would return in the morning in time for the visit to the priest.

As soon as Sam had gone, seeing Brenda to the car, Jennie spoke, her voice uneven and happy, "I think I've managed to do what you've all been trying to do for months."

She was prevented from saying more by Sam's return. They stopped at the stairs and bade Chris and Bethan a good night.

Chris observed drily, "You don't want my double bed now, do you?"

"No a single's fine for us. I might lose him again in a double," laughed Jennie, kissing Sam on the cheek.

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