

The girl awoke in the night. She awoke to the sound of driving rain, gusting at her window in a foul and flustering wind. She thought of the reeds as they bent to the fury, howling lament, cowering beneath the brutal, bullying sky. She thought of the birds within the reeds, of how they would survive the storm, of how they rode the torment out, tossed in a tottering nest like a ship at sea.

And now, in that thinking, she had slipped from her bed; already she had started to dress. In the hall she put on her waterproofs, then opened the door and was there in the yard. It was pitch, save for a single light that burned at the end of the stable block. Within that tiny universe, the girl could see sharp slivers of rain cutting, diagonal, at the earth. As she rounded the gate and came to the field, the full force of a pummelling wind thumped into her body and beat her back. Pinpricks of rain were stinging her chin, smacking crude music against her mac. She lowered her head and bent her waist, steering her steps at the blast. The flap of her storm-shocked waterproofs like the sound of a motor which drove her on.

In the ley she could see whole patches of reed collapsing beneath the furious gusts – at times so submissive they were prone in the water, then rising again in the teeth of the wind, bearing its hate on their backs. Their wretched scream was an endless crescendo, an interminable shriek which bounced off the skies, which cried up the valley and hid in the earth-hedge, filled with immeasurable pain.

When she came to the dune, she crouched in a hollow tucked in the leeward side. She watched as the ley spewed out its soul. She could hear the crush of the labouring sea – each wave which pounded and shook the fabric of the

sheltering nook where she lay. She glanced at the unfathomable skies above her, seeing yet denser, darker shapes descending on the deepening darkness, sweeping irresistibly over the land. There were no stars, no moon. No hope of life, of light, of day. Here was a dungeon of despair, playing its agonies out before her, screaming ecstatic anguish and grief.

In front of it all stood the man. He had come from the beach and over the dune. In the turmoil, he had come unseen. Now he was here, he was standing before her, staring at her as she crouched in the sand, spat at and swallowed by the storm. They looked at each other, but didn't speak. Then he beckoned to her, and they rode with the wind, over the dune and along the track, till they reached the shelter of the hut.

She watched him enter. For a moment she stood uncertain, in the fist of raw nature, then she followed him into the blackness. Shielded from the cacophony, the room was awkward and still. The girl stood in the endless silence, the roof and the floor and the wall one body of indistinguishable black. She could hear the man's breath, his shuffling feet; she could hear his searching hands. Then he struck a match against the darkness, shocking the hut with light.

She saw him, massive, in silhouette, lighting the wick of a lamp. The flame rose furious, incongruous, conjuring shadows against the walls, revealing the spartan room. There was a bench, a desk, a bag, some books, some implements on a shelf. No more. No other rooms. She turned back to the man. He was busy removing his waterproof trousers, hanging them over the desk to dry.

She watched, uncertain, then did the same. Then they sat together on the long low bench, one at either end –

You shouldn't be here.

Why not?

It's early. There's a storm.

You're here.

He turned away and looked at the floor, as though unable to grasp her logic, or find the words to reply. Here was a man, so confident when in the reeds, so sure when working his nets. Yet now, so hesitant, so unsure. Even with her, a girl of ten. Uncertain. His speech seemed to mirror his awkward left arm; it was unused and broken, unfit. And now – here before her – his whole flighty body was shrinking and turning away –

I didn't think you'd come.

Why not?

You didn't like it yesterday.

You didn't want me to like it. But I liked it all the same.

–

Why did you invite me if you didn't want me here?

The storm should soon blow over. Would you like some soup?

No, thank you.

She watched him take a flask from his bag. She watched as he unscrewed the lid and poured soup into the cup. It looked creamy, warm and thick. She could sense his insides break in a smile as its richness spread its gradual succour through to the tips of his limbs. She could feel

the heat which rose from his cup. She could smell its goodness – wrapping around like a hug from her aunt – and she longed for it greedily.

He had turned away and was staring out through the stretch of window cut in the wall. The storm was lessening, the pitch receding to the indistinct pattern of day. Blotchy and ugly, and all washed out. When he had drained the cup of soup he reached for his waterproof clothes. She understood it was time to go. As she dressed beside him she told herself to be strong, to keep up; she told herself that she wouldn't be shamed by showing herself weak to the man.

On the track the wind blew at their backs, forcing them, urging them on. The girl's feet raced on the ground beneath her. She tried to slow down by leaning back, pressing her body into the gale. She feared that a gust would knock her sideways, or thrust her into the man. She watched the motion of his feet, his steady footfall in the grass, from the wind-whipped tunnel of her hood, following three paces behind.

He sought early refuge in the reeds. In the ley the water was frantic and fast; bridges seemed softer and smaller, less certain; reeds bent low, and thrashed about them, blocking and battering their path. She lost her foothold, once – just once – and her boot was sucked into a pool. Her momentum carried her body forwards; she slipped and came to her knees. He turned, and looked at her. She pulled herself out without his help, and nodded at him to go on. Instead, he stopped and shouted at her. He shouted above the shrieking reeds. She bent her head in an effort to hear him –

You – watch – step – dangerous.

I know.

The water – dangerous.

I know.

You – be careful. If you fall – water – drown.

I understand.

Can't swim – drown. Stay – path.

Yes.

He continued on, pushing through the tortured reeds till they came to a single net. It was empty. They returned to the track, blown towards the beaten ruin by the unforgiving wind. The girl followed dutifully behind, punching a path in his wake. She was angry. Angry and ashamed. Angry he must think her weak; angry he had seen her stumble; angry he was angry with her. Why should he be hard on her? She felt the tears of mute self-pity rise unchecked from deep inside her; a sorrow she couldn't suppress. An indignation. She knew the danger. Of course she knew. She knew if she fell she'd be carried away, borne beneath the mantle of reed, regardless of whether or not she could swim. That was the truth; the beginning and end. Nothing could save her. Not even him.

The man stopped at the mouth of a reed path, close to where the ruin lay. He turned to her; he looked at her – giving a look that spoke without words, which told her to stay on the bank. She refused to meet his eyes. Instead, she waited until he was gone, waited until he couldn't see, then she forced behind him through the reeds.

They came to a net, and there, distinctly, she saw the shape of a captured bird, just above the tips of the reed. It didn't struggle. It lay inert, twitching and swaying, as the net ballooned in the wind.

This path was broader than the others, allowing the girl to come up close and watch the man as he worked. His right hand wove the delicate netting away from the bird's snared limbs, whilst with his left he stretched to his bag to pick out a small white sack. Out it came, and just as it came, it fluttered from his grip to the ground. The girl stooped swiftly to catch it up and handed it back to the man. He looked at her briefly; he took it from her. Then he placed the bird he had caught inside, and tied the sack to his waist. They continued, inspecting two more nets, and finding birds in each. Then they turned back into the fragile dawn, and retraced their path to the hut.

The wind was dying, and a hint of light reflecting off the swollen clouds, as they entered their sanctuary. The man laid his bag on the bench with care, so the dancing sacks hung free to its side. In all, there were five of them. They removed their waterproofs. Then he reached to the shelf to take down a book and some tools that lay to its side.

The girl sat on the bench. Not too close, but at an angle from where she could see all he did. She saw him open his book; she saw him laying out his tools with precision. She saw his movements were quick, but not hurried. She saw his right hand pick up a sack, and his fingers feel blindly within. She saw the sack as it fell away, and there in his fingers a bird. She saw its head and breast were yellow, its wings and back an infinite blend of yellow and

green and brown. She saw its tail was thin and long; its legs like delicate twigs.

The man looked over the bird minutely. He teased its tucked wing into a stretch, then laid it out against a ruler to measure its underside. He put the bird back in its sack, and hung it from a metal tube. As the sack pulled down the tube extended, giving a measure of weight. Again he hung the sack from his bag. He took up his pen and turned to his book. He wrote 'yellow wagtail' there on the page. And beside it he wrote other things. A weight, a wingspan, an age, a time. He opened a box of small metal rings, and placed one in the teeth of some pliers. He took the bird once more from its sack, holding it still in the light-firm grasp she had seen him use before. He turned the creature on its back, extending its left leg with his thumb, with a touch more soft than sound. His awkward left hand raised the pliers, and brought them over the leg. He squeezed the head of the instrument firm. The bird looked round with curious indifference, a metal ring clipped round its leg. He inspected the bird once more; he stroked its head with the edge of his knuckle, as if unwilling to let it go. Then he brought it up towards the window, holding it out and through. For an instant, both bird and man were one. Then he opened his hands; his palms fell away. It was gone.

Without pause, he picked up a second sack. This bird was smaller than the last. Its upper parts all warm brown feathers; its underside a creamy-buff; the tips of its wing and tail deep brown; its eyebrow almost white. The girl sat mute beside the man – tirelessly watching him, watching the bird, watching them both as they came together; sharing the same sudden-startled movement,

sharing the same steady stare. Here was a wild thing prised from the wild, captured in mid-flight whilst skidding the reeds, plucked out of nothing by intricate fingers, put in a sack, raised, held and measured, then freed once more to the wild.

The girl watched, enchanted by it all, by the ritual unfolding before her. It seemed at once unnatural, yet with nature completely at one. Both together, confused and entwined, perfect and senseless and whole. She dared not talk, she dared not breathe, in case the man should notice her, in case he saw her and sent her away. In case he remembered her there. She wanted only to watch, to see. To guess the shape, the colour, the size of those that still danced in their sacks. To watch as each was held and caressed; to watch as each was turned in his hands; to watch at that instant each stood in his palms; to watch as each opened its wings and was gone.

The man had opened the fourth white sack. When he reached for the ruler, she handed it to him. She did the same with the scales. When he sought his pliers, she gave them to him already prepared with a ring. He made no comment, but took them from her. When the final bird had been set free, he removed his tools, and returned the book to its shelf.

Outside the day was bright and pale. The sun had risen, but hid beyond a bulbous shield of cloud. There was no morning mist. The wind was tame, teasing the reeds to twirl their tassels as they swirled together in the ley. In silence, the two stepped out of the hut and strode back up the track. There was no urgency now. The girl watched the man looking over the ley. She knew he was

watching his nets. She felt she was beginning to know them too, just as she knew of the partings and paths, of the trails that led to its heart.

One final time they came down the track, inspecting the nets from the fringe of the reeds. At the hut they collected their rain-damp jackets, then made their way to the dune. The sun was breaking through the clouds as they went their separate ways. As she watched him go, the girl could feel the sun's gradual warmth caressing her shoulders, and stealing into her skin.