

Rain drips like a mist from the faceless sky, silent, like the shadow of rain. So faint I scarcely feel its print on my face, on my splintered hands. Raindrops stand like dust in the sun, proud on the arms of my fleece. Crystalline; sparkling transparent wetness. Even here, in the wind-worn desert of a half-woken field, ecstatic, luminous on the tips of the leaves, shimmering, glittering in the breeze. The rain teases the face of the soil with an instant effervescence, with bubbles of light amidst the blind sheet of broken earth. It feeds my plants like bread and wine, like milk and honey, like blood.

Behind me lies my treasured plot. So raw, so bare; such a thing of beauty. For another full week, with spade and rake, with these two hands – these hands of mine, these claws – I have shaped the earth. And now it is nearly done. I have scooped manure from the Faradays' stable; I have spread it onto the sunken earth. I have thrust my spade at this dumb, blind body, splitting its skull and letting it breathe. Through the gaps of its flesh I have plucked out stones; I have snatched deep roots from beneath its skin. I have watched the worms crease agony; I have watched the bloated robins feed. I have left its clods to the freeze of the frost, to its frigid fingers, which works invisibly to unpick the stubborn stitch of its seams. I have smashed it all, I have broken it down to a crumbled carpet, a fine flat-weave, a soft smooth tith, a bed. I have fed the body with lime and bone; I have nurtured it like a child.

Now I summon the courage to look. To look on the soft, smooth flesh of the soil; to look on this thing I have brought into being; to look on its needy but empty face. I struggle to look, for so great is my love. Tomorrow, in the full of that love, I will furrow lines within its brow and sow

the waiting seed. Here I will plant the joyous roots: lines of carrots and parsnip and beetroot. They will be joined in the coming weeks by potato tubers, which stretch even now towards the sun in the still-born shed, nesting in egg trays from Bill. Beyond the roots I will plant the brassicas: seedlings of cabbage and cauliflower and sprout, which struggle for life in trays in the kitchen, watching the world from the warmth of the sill. At the end of the patch will be rocket and lettuce. There too I will plant my onions; I will drill my peas. Then, when the soil is ready to receive them, when the earth is as warm as our Sunday bed, I will fill the vacant space with tomatoes and a clump of tender courgettes.

On the farther side of my patch I will weave sweet peas up the skeletal trellis which stands bare-boned in the idle rain. I will line some sunflowers to its side, to guard the patch with their thousand eyes, to nod their heads as the summer sweats and the earth reveals its store. Tomorrow it will all be born: the cycle of life will begin.

I imagine Jack, the prophet of nature, the wizard who conjures this seasonal store, holding his arms aloft to the heavens. This land is not a thing, but a being. We who serve it are passing through. We touch upon it for a while, consumed by its beauty, its infinite bounty, and then we are torn away. The land is the body to which we are born; our mother, our brother, our master, our home. The land is the body in which we are buried, to feed our children, our children's children, to start the cycle anew.

My boots sink into the sodden earth; they crush the clumps of knotted grass. The weight of the cloud is on my back, closing and pressing upon me. I am walking round the side

of Six Bells, across the track which leads to the farm – which winks and shifts in the delicate breeze – beyond the tranquillity of the Rectory’s lawns, to the edge of the churchyard, and then to the wood.

I pass the depleting stack of logs, swollen and stained by insistent rain, stung with the stench of mould. I walk beside the fringe of Road Field, its lines of beet in frantic motion, stretching to a point beyond sight. I come to a belt of nettle and thorn, woven into an impenetrable thicket around the base of the wood. Beyond this rush of angry green, somewhere beyond, is Matty.

The trees are clothed in early leaf; they shuffle a song which is fickle and tuneless, which drowns the hollow creak of their trunks. Their shadow obscures the heart of the wood, it spills on the decomposing floor, till all but the first few steps are hidden. I come to an entrance, a bite in the thicket, and coax myself into its breast.

Inside the air is muffled and thick; the breeze is spent, and without its breath the harsh chatter of leaves dies away. The floor around me has sprung into being, with stunted growth that catches my feet as if it would pull me down. The moan of the trunks seems almost moist; the dry splintering sound of its barren bone has grown to a supple, sappy cry of pain from that which has come alive. I can feel it breathing, the beat of its heart, the life that is stirring within.

– Matty!

The thick-fleshed trees and the creeping floor absorb the sound of my voice. I hear an unnatural flurry of wings as a bird retreats to blind skies. I enter further and call once more. The collapsing trunks, the broken branches – all that

is strewn on the ground, or is buried – are struggling to revive. Moss and fungi grow like a cancer. Armies of insects march on parade, hoarding their booty or seeking out prey. Every inch of this aching wood – the floor, the trees, the leaves, the vault – is shifting with motion, is stretching for life.

– I’m over here.

– Where?

– Here. Can’t you see?

– Where?

– Here. Right in front of you.

It is Matty. He steps out, detaching himself from the trees. I can see him clearly before me. He is wearing jeans and an old red sweater; his unkempt hair is tangled with twigs. He isn’t trying to hide from me, yet he blends with the wood, he seems to become it, as if they are one and the same. It is only by focusing on his sweater that I can distinguish him. He moves, he fades back into the trees, becoming a part of their broader movement: his sound their sound, his breathing as theirs.

I follow the thread-bare red of his sweater as he steers us both through the wood. I cannot keep apace with him, but he knows I am here and compensates; his path is gentler than if he were alone. I sense we trace a familiar track, though I do not know where it leads. Around me the saplings are bursting with leaf. Brambles scratch at my naked arms, creepers wind around my legs, thin pools of nettle snatch at my feet.

I follow Matty, trusting his judgement, trusting his knowledge and strength. In front of us the receding gloom shivers and creaks with anticipation. Above us, roof after

roof of twisting leaves block out all semblance of sky. Beneath us, an undulating floor which cracks with my weight and snares my feet, which threatens to draw me down.

We have arrived. Matty has turned; he is signalling me to approach. Here is the place where his den once stood. I recognise the fallen trunk he used as a central beam. It rests in the angle of a nearby tree, and is absorbed in a hill of green.

Matty grins. In a single movement he sinks to the ground, slips down an incline and disappears.

I stare after him, at where he should be, searching for his sweater amidst the leaves.

I shuffle forward, approaching the mound. Now, though I cannot see, I can hear. I can hear his voice from within the ground. He is in there, buried deep within: beneath a roof of living matter, of earthen walls which are fused with fern. His den has grown; it has come alive. It is woven into the wood.

Matty reappears. He stands before me, pointing round in all directions, showing me rooms and tunnels and towers. I try to comprehend; I follow his arm; but all I can see are trees and leaves, are patches thick with undergrowth, are ditches and mounds which trace the wood, carved through the course of time.

He sees that I do not understand. He points again more vigorously, urging me to look through the trees and see what lies within. He leads me to a trunk and points in the air. There, above us, is a splay of branches, tangled with murmuring leaf. It is a tree, yet he would have it a staircase

which spirals upwards to a tower. He tries to show me the steps of a ladder, the railing, the ramparts, the impregnable walls, but I see no more than a clutter of branches couched in a chaos of nascent leaves.

Matty stands at the base of the trunk, looking at me with pride and hope. Then he throws out his arms and begins to scale the solid wall of its side. He climbs up the snarling bark with ease, and melts in a sheath of bright leaves. He is gone. I can hear his feet on the clattering trunk, the sudden gasp of the startled leaves as the branches take his weight. His sound is the same as the sound of the wood; he mirrors its aching, its unnatural creaking, its abrupt and tortured surprise.

I search for the comforting red of his sweater through the arches of new-born leaf. I sense he is there, high up in the trees, his body suspended in a pocket of nothing, his feet as if standing on air. The wood groans and sways with irregular motion, each tree as a part of a single body, sharing a single pain.

Now, from somewhere close beside I can hear him calling to me. He appears for an instant, he falters and waves, then he fades back into the rustling leaf and is fused with the shadow once more. Again, far off to my right this time, I hear a call, I see shuddering leaves as he creeps invisibly through the trees. Now all is alive, it is creased in motion, sharing an agony brought to life by the terror and tremor he brings.

Silence. I have lost him again. I feel that eyes are focused upon me; I feel I am being watched. I turn around. I sense Matty is close. His eyes like the eyes of the wood, all-seeing; his supple body like that of the trees. And now he appears,

he resumes his shape, he steps from the trees and stands by my side. He beckons to me, and once more I follow, close behind him, each foot in his print, till we reach the far edge of the wood.

Matty puts out an arm to halt me. He points to the base of a singular tree, tight on the fringe of the wood.

About two feet from its base is a switch tied to the trunk by a cord, and bent back, held in the clutch of a post. At the end of the switch is a small wooden cross, with an arm sharpened into a spike. A thin line of wire leads from there to the tree, only inches above the ground. I stare at it uncomprehendingly. Then, in my mind, I see. I see an animal tripping the wire, I see the cross detach from the post, I see it fly with the strength of the switch, I see the spike as it enters the flesh, as it pins a body to the trunk. I see the animal skewered clean through, bleeding to death whilst nailed to the tree.

– Who did this?

– It's Uriah's.

– It's barbaric. It shouldn't be allowed.

– I don't think it is, but he doesn't care.

– Are there others like this?

– Others, yes.

– You can't come here. Not ever again. It's not safe when there're things like this.

– It's perfectly safe if you know where they are. And I do. I know all of them.

– He has shown you?

– Yes.

– What has he shown you?

– These snares.

- Has he shown you how they work? How to make them?
- Yes.
- And what do you think of them?
- I don't think I would like to be caught.
- Can you dismantle it?
- I could, but it's pretty dangerous. Anyway, he would just put up more if I did.
- Have you seen anything caught in a snare?
- No, but I don't come to this part of the wood very often, and all the snares are this side. Come, I want to show you something else.

Matty steers his way round the tree towards a patch of light and the field beyond. I follow. I want to be his counsellor, but all I can do is feel a revulsion, a sense of foreboding which creeps through my flesh. I can see, but I cannot understand, I cannot begin to make sense. I wonder if it is Matty or me who is losing our reason, our sense of control. I think, if you were here, you would reprimand Matty, you would help him to see right from wrong. But maybe instead you would turn towards me, you would say it is me who is losing her grasp, who has lost all sense of what's right.

Matty carves through the living green wall, and we come to the fringe of a field. The sky is dull, the day in decline; the earth has smudged to a colourless form, a single, amorphous entity. Matty stands on a belt of cropped grass between the wood and the field. He waits until I am watching him, till I'm looking at him as he stands upright, a half-dozen paces before me. Then he jumps to one side, and is gone. Here before me, he's consumed by the land. He was here; and now he has gone.

I lurch through the grass to the place where he stood. Searching and wanting to find him out. Daring, not daring, to see. Now here, here's an opening: a small hole in the ground. And inside the hole here is Matty.

He climbs out, grinning a wide grin at me, grinning at my confusion.

– There are lots of them. All along here. In a line.

– What are they?

– Tunnels, I think. They're all underground.

– What's in them?

– I don't know. But they're man-made. Look, they're made of concrete. They've got walls.

– Has Uriah explained what they are?

– No. He doesn't know I come this far. He's told me there's nothing here. He says I shouldn't come this side. Especially not here.

– He's right. I don't think you should go inside. You don't know what might be in them. You don't know where they lead.

– There's nothing in them. I don't think. They haven't been used for years. They're all grown over. No one would ever think to come down here.

– Let's go back. It's getting late. We can ask Jack when we see him next. He'll know.

The afternoon is thickening; the skies are growing denser and darker; slow rain is settling in. We walk round the wood towards Road Field, seeing the island of Rose House Farm emerge through a grey wall of rain. We come to the stack of sodden logs, to the track which leads towards the church. I follow Matty, feeling a lightness, a lessening of fear the further we walk from the wood. At the corner of

the graveyard I glance behind me, stealing a final look at the trees as they vanish into the dusk. There, at their foot, I can see the outline of a man standing motionless. He appears to be shouldering a gun.

I try to keep the same pace as Matty as we walk back along the road. I feel the need to talk to him, but I'm uncertain how to begin. We bend our heads to the strengthening rain which is driven towards us on the breeze as we walk up the slope of the road past Six Bells till we reach the cottage lawn.

Matty has run on ahead of me; he's inside before I am close. He seems not to have noticed the latest offering, laid here on the wall by the door. Joyce has come and gone once more, leaving a gift of flowers. This time it's a bunch of anemones. The wind flower, sprung from the blood of dying Adonis, stabbed by the tusk of a boar. She has left them, caught in a soft blue ribbon, like treasure to brighten my world.

I pick up the flowers and take them inside, placing them in a jug of their own beside the daffodils.

I lay my coat on the back of a chair, and kick off my boots in the hall. In the kitchen I fill and turn on the kettle, hearing the reassuring whirr of the boiler blasting to breathe its heat. I cut slabs of bread for the idle toaster. I open two cans of beans. Then I go to the bathroom to dry my hair. Once in there I lock the door.

I stand at the mirror and look at my face. At the limp hair clung about my cheeks, at the pale cracked lips, at the flakes of dry skin on either side of my nose. I put out a hand

towards the mirror, tracing my image in the reflection of glass. I recognise neither the hand nor the face.

Where are you, Sarah? Where have you gone? You, who are buried and lost.

I run the bath. I sit hunched on the loo as the water flows, as steam curls into the room. I feel my body convulse with a motion beyond my power to control. I let go. I feel the burn of my useless tears as they break against my thighs. I feel the forced inhale of my breath, the rub of the air on the back of my throat, the shudder of my labouring chest. How could it ever have come to this? How has it happened this way? Turning so far and so fast from the known, that where we are now makes no sense.