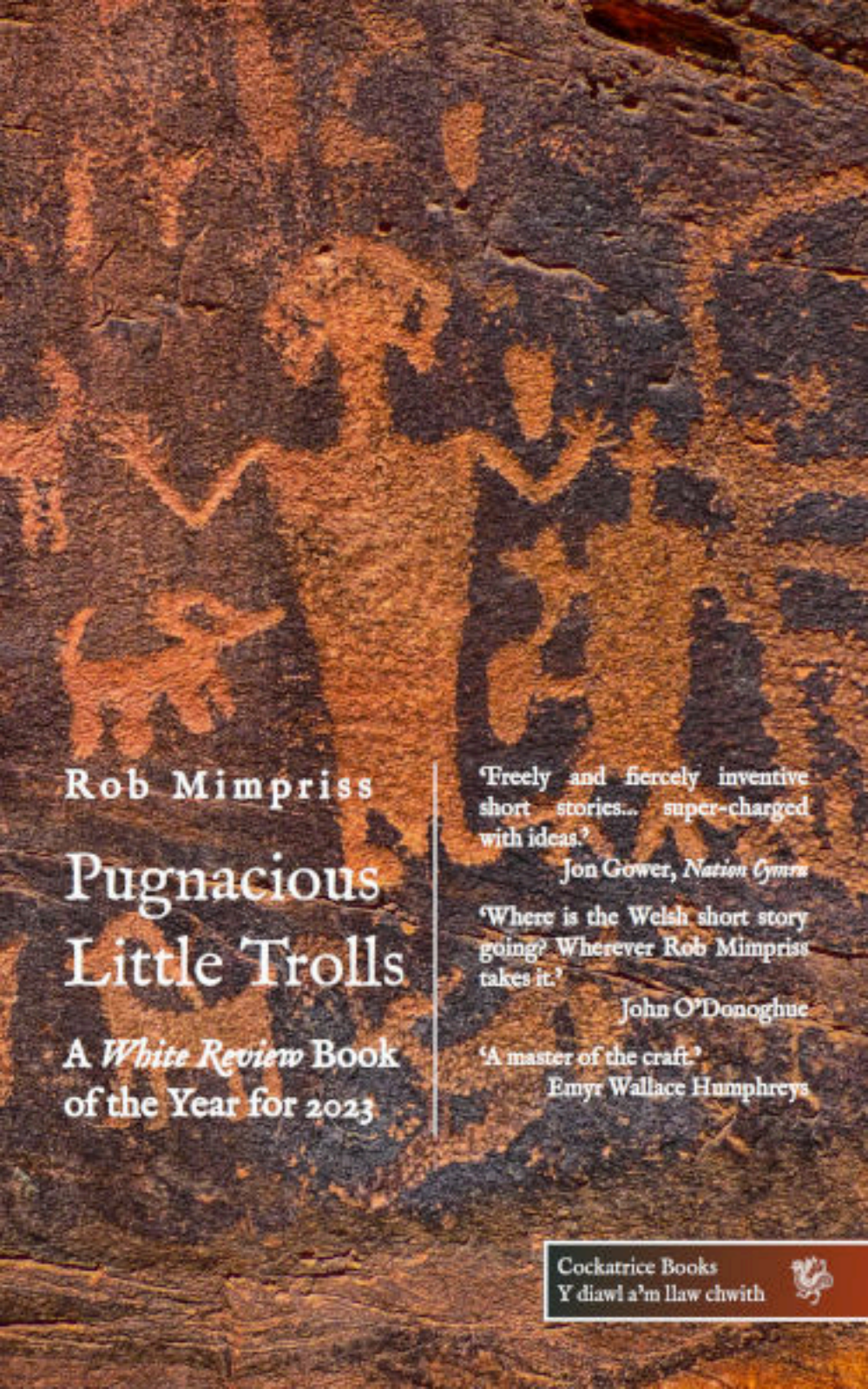

Rob Mimpriss

Pugnacious Little Trolls

A *White Review* Book of the Year for 2023

'Freely and fiercely inventive short stories... super-charged with ideas.'
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'A master of the craft.'
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PUGNACIOUS LITTLE TROLLS

Rob Mimpriss is the author of *Reasoning: Twenty Stories, For His Warriors: Thirty Stories, Prayer at the End: Twenty-Three Stories* and *Pugnacious Little Trolls;* the editor of *Dangerous Asylums,* an anthology of fiction by Gee Williams, Glenda Beagan, Carys Bray and others, commissioned by the North Wales Mental Health Research Project; and a contributor to *Land of Change,* an anthology of Welsh radical prose forthcoming from Culture Matters, and to *Brush With Fate,* an anthology of short fiction by Tristan Hughes, Rachel Trezise, Nigel Jarrett and others in Arabic translation by Hala Salah Eldin Hussein. He has reviewed for *New Welsh Review,* published criticism of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford and Robert Olmstead, and translated prose by Gwenallt Jones, Angharad Tomos and Manon Steffan Ros. His translations of Morgan Llwyd, Owen Wynne Jones and Richard Hughes Williams are also published by Cockatrice. He is a Member of the Welsh Academy.

PUGNACIOUS LITTLE TROLLS

ROB MIMPRISS

Cockatrice Books
Y diawl a'm llaw chwith

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I Ruth Graham,
a ddangosodd i mi werth
gwneud y pethau bychain

THE CONQUEST OF ANGLES A AND B BY THE SUPERIOR PEOPLE OF ANGLE C

> These stars... these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could.
>
> Cecil Rhodes

Let history know that in the ninetieth year of our habitation, the people adjacent to Angle C mounted an expedition against the peoples of Angle A and Angle B, whose chants and imprecations were a nuisance by day, and whose concupiscence disturbed our sleep by night. Let it show that we marched from the vertex of Angle C towards the hypotenuse, broke in two at the point where our territory met theirs, and set upon their people in their lechery and slumber, just as the light was increasing. Let history know also that People A and People B sued for peace, and ceded to us one third of their territories along the Euler line. Finally, let it tell that we evicted the people we found there, set up camp at the median M of the hypotenuse, brought our supplies and settlers from Angle C, and so established our civilisation in the farthest corner of our new territory. Towards the third meal there was a brief uprising. Fighters from Angle B advanced towards Point M, meeting their allies

from Angle A: attacked from both sides, our settlers defended themselves with cooking pots and knives, killed some, and took others captive, whom they stripped and bound at hand and foot, beating them as the light decreased, until their groans and curses echoed through the Triangle.

Then, for the first time our ancients could remember, the hours of darkness were broken not by the taunts and provocations of their warriors, nor by the moaning and crying of their lovers, but by the sounds of their lamentation as they lay by their unlit cooking stoves, and took stock of their shared defeat. We heard their poets denounce the perfidy of People C, while their women cried out the cowardice of their warriors who had quit the field, and our captives added their voices to the clamour, proclaiming their nakedness and bonds an insult to the honour of their peoples. By the ruddy light of torches which gleamed on the hypotenuse, and dimly lit the Triangle's roof, we dragged our captives home to the vertex. There we stood resting our backs against the catheti *a* and *b,* while the most stertorous of our leaders raised his voice above the clamour, threatening a total war to which the violence of that morning would seem like a pale tranquillity. Such were his threats that a quietude fell over People A and People B, broken only by the murmurs of their discontent, by the attempts of their poets to find nobility in defeat, and by a woman who raised her voice in piercing ululation as she cried out the name of her lover. One of our hostages gave reply, but was silenced with a blow, and at last even those protests faded into silence, as our defeated peoples consoled themselves in an exhausted sleep, and we, the victors of

Angle C, were left to discuss our discipline and fortitude in conflict, our prudence and intelligence in peace.

That we, the people of Angle C, are rightful leaders of the Triangle is confirmed by vulgar observation, and by the doctrines of our trigonometers. First, we are the most numerous of its three peoples, amounting always to exactly half its one hundred and eighty souls, for always the rasping breaths of the ancients cease at the wailing of the new born. Second, we now rule over half its area, from the vertex of Angle C to the median points of the catheti, and from there to the bisecting point of the hypotenuse in lines that form a perfect square. From this it will be seen, third, that our point of origin, Angle C, is also a perfect right angle, superior in its radius to the acute angles, A and B, and asserting its uniqueness against their conformity. And we observe that what is true of the angles is true of the peoples which they have borne: for we, the people of Angle C, concern our minds with what is right and fair, and busy ourselves with the practical arts, while the peoples of Angles A and B fritter their time in wrestling and boasting, in antic fables, and in the shadow-plays of their illusionists, cast in the flickering light of their cooking stoves on the wall of the hypotenuse.

When we gaze towards the vertex of Angle C, we find ourselves consoled by the perfection of its ninety degrees; when we pace back and forward along its rays, we find our minds made right and straight in a model of our habitation. We are likewise refreshed in the number and the quality of our kind, in the clarity of our speech and the probity of our dealings; when we turn our gaze along the catheti, we observe the wretched acuteness of Angles A and B, and the harshness of manner and the contraction of mind that they

instil in their inhabitants. Yet if we glance up along the Euler line, we confront the grim expanse of the hypotenuse, one thousand paces from end to end, and infinite, as we believe, in depth. This hypotenuse is ever present in the darkest of our thoughts, and more so in the thoughts of our settlers at Point M, defying the order and comfort of Angle C, and terrifying, or so we infer, those half-wretched peoples whose angles are beneath it, separated from each other by its gargantuan breadth.

A little after the first meal, we dispatched couriers to appeal to such intelligence as Peoples A and B possessed, and to impress upon them the justice of our expanded rule. We demonstrated the elegance of the new geometry, replacing the forms of their old trapezoids with models of the Triangle itself, joined by and abutting our perfect square, which henceforth would maintain a peace between them. We flattered the quaint acuteness of Angles A and B, and the sublimity of the hypotenuse, which exalts the peoples A and B, we claimed, to their genius in the arts. We even encouraged a little laughter at the simplicity of our customs, depicting a future in which all three peoples would live as one, augmenting the sense and good order of People C with the energy and spirit of its neighbours. And we demanded their submission on behalf of our captives, whose lives we could take hostage in retribution for revolt, or make comfortable in their slavery. Later the peoples of Angles A and B sent heralds to sit at our third meal. Our captives brought food, and our guests displayed their grandiloquence with slaps and petty kicks, boasting to each other of their future importance in the new geometry. A voice arose from Angle A in crude and jeering rhyme. A few of the heralds fell

to brawling among themselves. One of our own number attempted to intervene, and as a hidden blade lashed out, we heard the moans of a woman just beginning labour. We arrested the heralds, and as the light faded on our dying man, his head cradled in the hands of his lover, we spent the hours of sleep in growing discord.

And now let history understand the contentions that then arose between the people of Angle C. There were disagreements, first, over whether we should execute all of the heralds as a warning to their peoples, or the one most likely to have wielded the knife. Then some among us began to dispute the new geometry, which had doubled the size of our territory, yet sacrificed its form; there were those who now felt stricken with remorse for the blood we had shed. Still others feared the revenge of Peoples A and B, whose numbers combine to rival our own, and who exceed us in guile and malice. Then our arguments came almost to blows as some demanded that we release our slaves, withdraw our settlers and sue for peace, and others that we assimilate Peoples A and B into our own people, and exterminate their cultures, or even that we wage pre-emptive war against them, and claim the whole of the Triangle as our own.

Where do Angles A and B begin? Our patrols set out from the vertex of Angle C, proceed along the catheti towards the median points, and there turn inward to converge upon our settlement. Yet if they were to continue along the catheti, they would encounter no barrier to our expanded rule until they met the vertices of Angles A and B themselves. And if our enemies, who fear and hate us, combined their forces and advanced, they too would meet no impediment except

the vertex of Angle C, and except the steadfast courage of our warriors.

So now we prepare ourselves for war.

Where does Angle C end, if it can be said to end? Our trigonometers have begun to doubt that the hypotenuse is real. Rather than a barrier of infinite depth, it is, they suggest, a mere line, or even another shadow cast by the illusionists of Angles A and B in some cowardly and duplicitous plot to cheat us of our greatness. And if the illusionists were put to death, or the whole of their peoples were put to death, then the illusion might be dispelled, as ignorance is dispelled in a child when it is instructed.

If the wall of the hypotenuse were to disappear, then we would face no limits to our advancement as a people. Behind us would be the vertex of Angle C, from which we come, and from which we claim our destiny, and on either side of us would be its rays, stretching away beyond the Triangle into a limitless habitation, peopled perhaps by our future slaves, towards infinity.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DESTINY OF THE BRITISH RACE

You ask, in your more expansive times, what it is like for us who live so close to the end of all things. In the billions of years that have passed between your time and ours, your fifty billion light years of expanse have dwindled, so that the weight of what were once galaxies is pressed into a few light years. The background heat has risen until the very stars have exploded, and we who have kept our form swim through a dense and searing gas, churned into constant motion by the spinning of black holes, and hotter than your stars were. As I speak, the universe continues its collapse. Within minutes, we and all things will be crushed. A visionary from a time before yours saw the whole of creation in the palm of her hand, the size of a hazelnut. The universe will contract to that size, and then shrink yet smaller. Like the godhead, it will shrink to a point.

Yet for us, the moments that lie between ourselves and destruction stretch out to almost a lifetime. Immersed as we are in an abundance of energy, we have quickened our minds to such a fervour of speed that seconds seem like the stately turning of your planets round their suns. Neither are we idle. For as the rate of contraction rises towards the speed of light,

as areas of greater cool grow warmer and are lost, our bodies must race from cold spot to cold spot almost as fast as our minds, and in a moment of miscalculation, our lives are forfeit.

Imagine, if you will, a tendril of electromagnetic force, a thousand kilometres in length, flashing out from the cool spot where it has been at rest. Its path lies between two black holes that grope towards their mutual destruction, and whose gravity almost tears it apart as it races along that narrow path between the two. They merge, and now their combined mass begins to draw it backward, bringing it to rest in a cool spot that once lay between galaxies. Its journey has lasted a few moments of time. Travelling at almost the speed of light, it has experienced less time than that. Yet with an intelligence no doubt strange to you, for whom the outer world is so full of richness and potential, and the working of the inner world so slow, it has explored some aspect of mathematics or physics from which in future it will take its name, or a whole race will take its name, or in an instant when its flight took it close to another of its kind, has conveyed, in a flickering of light, a wealth of thought and a richness of feeling that to your kind would seem like the fruit of a lifetime.

If the three largest black holes in the cosmos continue their current trajectories, each bearing approximately a billionth part of its mass, they will combine in the last few seconds before the final conflagration. Yet if their mass is increased through collision with certain black holes, some of which we have guided into their paths, they will form a somewhat larger black hole a whole sixty seconds earlier. They will do so with such rapidity that their spin will

likewise increase, and the matter within them become a vast rotating torus, within which a passing body will begin to travel backward in time. If our calculations are correct — for nothing which has fallen into a black hole has yet returned to us — that body will emerge when the universe is still filled with stars scattered across a cool void, and when it is approaching its maximum expansion. And if beings as insubstantial as ourselves survive such a voyage, emerging at the correct point in time, and distributed to significant points in the cosmos, then they should be able to wrest control of its collapse from force and chance, to manipulate dark energy in such a way that contraction is slower and entropy reduced, and we, who must live to see the cosmos purged of life, can foresee a future for our civilisation.

That such an experiment is worth the attempt is commonly held among my race, the $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$, who emerged a few thousand generations ago from the convolutions of matter charged by radiation from black holes. Having known no universe but this one, we seek to improve and preserve it, because in doing so, we improve and preserve ourselves. Yet the $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2} + F_{n-3}$, who evolved from organic life, and whose traditions are ancient although their natural philosophy is less advanced, consider any such meddling a threat. They remind us how uncertain it is that the past can even be altered, or if altered, give rise to our own kind again; how little we understand the forces which give the universe energy and mass; how easily such an experiment might bring about its end at a time long before our own, or even

precipitate its endless expansion into emptiness, darkness and cold.

We were almost half way through the experiment when a faction of the $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2} + F_{n-3}$ launched their war of extinction against us. They advanced on us where we had based ourselves near a cluster of black holes, driving us inward with their squadrons where the tidal forces were strongest, the radiation most intense. Even as our comrades succumbed to the heat, dying with coruscations of pain that still echo through the cosmos, they set upon us, tearing the weakest of us apart; and meanwhile their jeers and insults rose in pitch as they denounced us as saboteurs, as traitors, as insurrectionists and conspirators for declaring that their dying world could live, if it were changed. Soon the siege was over. The strongest of us had been killed, or had chosen the dive into the nearest black hole as a quicker, more merciful death, while the rest of us, giving ourselves up to our enemies early in the conflict, had submitted to mutilation and slavery in exchange for our lives. And since the gateway to the past is now closed, nothing remains but to enjoy the time that is left to us, and to take such consolation as we can find.

Contraction becomes more rapid as we approach the singularity. The light of our voices and movements traverses the dwindling cosmos and returns with ever-increasing speed, so that space seems to fill with our reflections and shadows, and we constantly meet our own past selves, while their light merges with ours. Meanwhile, black holes converge, adding their searing radiation to a medium that becomes brighter and denser even as I speak, forcing those of us who still survive to live faster, and to risk more. We know

ourselves to be living in three separate speeds: the speed at which we move from cool spot to cool spot, approaching light, the speed at which we live our journeys, and the motion of time, relative to your time, which will end completely at the singularity, and which, though we cannot feel it, already slows.

The future dissolves in a brightness which effaces all remnants of the past. The flickerings of light from wars and civilisations become harder to discern, until some of us begin to question what has been established as true, that an asteroid struck a planet, and in its fires gave birth to the life of the mind, that from a people and its subjects a nation emerged, that from a nation an empire emerged, and this empire, after a period of quiescence, took control of a world, a galaxy, the cosmos as a whole. Yet the incandescence dazzles us. Even as our universe narrows, bringing body closer to body, the contact of mind with mind is lost, and we become lonelier. Already conflicts arise between the $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2} + F_{n-3}$, as the signals they exchange become garbled and unpleasant. Some, arriving in some cool spot which is already colonised, have been set upon and injured by those who believed themselves attacked.

We expect to die soon of the pressure and heat, and to die in fear and pain. What will happen after that, we do not know. Perhaps when the cosmos has reached its singularity, both the past and the future will cease to be, and even the fact that we once lived will be a fact no more; or perhaps the concentration of dark energy will force a second expansion, so that time itself will run backward, and our lives be played

out once again. But if by some skill as yet unknown the consciousness could be preserved, then all minds would converge. All times and places would be united, all races and factions melt into one, their differences resolved and their minds united, for eternity.

COFFEE IN THE COLONEL'S LIBRARY

The colonel is in his library.

He is standing erect and motionless with his back to the window, facing the hearth where there is a smouldering fire. Morning sunlight casts his shadow towards the armchair and bookshelves to the right of the fire, and over the oak table in front of him where the maid is placing his coffee tray. A spider drops itself on a line, hangs twisting in the sunlight an inch above his head, and draws itself up again.

The gardener is sitting in a window seat behind him, holding a leather-bound book. He moves a finger down the page, reading aloud with great emphasis, and occasionally he glances up to see if the colonel will respond. He mis-pronounces a word, and the maid interrupts him with the correct pronunciation, guiding him through it syllable by syllable as she sweetens the colonel's coffee with silver tongs. The gardener pronounces the new word correctly. The maid addresses him in a language of their own. He looks up, pauses for a moment, and resumes his reading, still moving his finger down the page as he does so.

Framing the coffee tray at either end of the table are a spinning globe showing the territories of the empire which the colonel once served, and a bust of the imperatrix whom

the colonel once obeyed. A clockwork soldier is marching round the table top at random, beating a tiny drum. Having sweetened the coffee, the maid gives the spinning globe a turn, winds up the soldier with the key in his side, picks up the tray containing the coffee and takes it out of the room, admitting a cat, which subsequently she takes out of the room. A gong sounds somewhere in the house, and the maid returns with a cloth, with which she wipes the imperial bust and polishes the table.

The globe is a little larger than the maid's splayed hand. The soldier wears a tin red coat and a tin beaver hat, and he smiles a little behind his tin black moustache as he patrols the table top, beating his drum. The colonel's eyes bulge a little whenever the soldier strays too close to the table edge. Perhaps he remembers a time when he marched as perilously, a key in his side, but always the maid picks up the soldier in time, addressing him in the language in which she addressed the gardener, with playful reproof and with mockery in her hands. She keeps the globe spinning with the gentlest of touches, and when she is not tending to the tin soldier or the globe, she kneels to stoke the fire, or climbs a step ladder to dust the books, or stoops to pick up a piece of dust from the carpet. A gong sounds somewhere in the house. The evening sun throws the colonel's shadow on the left-hand side of the fire.

Perhaps the colonel has suffered some form of stroke. Perhaps he has been taken in a cataleptic fit, or perhaps his life has reached such a perfection, with his globe, his tin soldier, his gardener, and his maid, that time itself has ceased for him in deference to his accomplishments, and moves in circles for the gardener and the maid and even the cat while

they maintain the order he has created. Is the maid reliable? Can she keep the globe always spinning, the soldier always marching, even though his motor threatens to wind down, and even though he comes so perilously close to falling off the table? And what of the soldier himself? Does he imagine that the table top is the world, that his random marching is a march of conquest to its limits, watched over by that imperial bust? Or if the globe has taught him that the world is round, does he imagine that one can pillage and destroy indefinitely, without eventually returning to one's starting point, and pillaging and destroying oneself?

Is the maid obedient? Will she always bring the colonel his coffee and tea and take them away untasted, even though he has not moved since she lit the fire this morning? Does she respect him enough to do so? Will she not somehow cheat him? She speaks a language which is not of the colonel and his books, but of a neighbouring people whom his people conquered, and whose language they are trying to destroy. Does speaking it not teach her impertinence? If she must needs address the gardener in her own language, should she not address the soldier in the language of his colonel, the language of clockwork and tin? What if she is his sweetheart? What if, when she addresses him with such gentle mockery, she is corrupting his tiny mind with thoughts of revolt?

The maid takes the book from the gardener's hand, and instantly he falls silent. She climbs the stepladder to re-shelve the book, and begins to tidy the colonel's moustaches and hair with her fingers, wiping his face with her apron. His eyes bulge. His chin jerks as he swallows his saliva. The maid puts the stepladder away in a cupboard, and goes to sit in a window seat opposite the gardener. The room darkens. The

colonel still stares at the dying fire. The soldier's motor whirs as he patrols the table top, beating his tin drum.

TRAVELLER M. IN THE LAND OF THE CYNOCEPHALI

> the 'colonised do not know how to breathe'... 'the people here don't know how to walk; they make tiny little steps which don't get them ahead.'
>
> Albert Memmi

A child slips down from its mother's lap, and toddles between the empty tables to the table where I am sitting. I feel myself stiffen at her approach, looking down at the grey-check tablecloth and my tea until she clambers onto the seat opposite mine at the bark of her mother's warning. I glance up. She is wearing a tee-shirt showing the characters from some Hollywood children's film, with a dolly-bead necklace round her neck, and as my eyes meet hers, the jaw drops open, showing pointed teeth, and the long tongue flicks at the end of the nose. I keep very still, hardly daring to breathe. Again there is a bark from her mother, and a waitress passing in front of my table stops and offers her hand to the child with a grunt of invitation. She glances over her shoulder at me as she does so, her other hand with its wedding ring scratching at the point where her fur lightens over the muzzle, and leads the child away down the aisle

towards her mother. For a moment we have been the centre of attention. A robed man a few tables down yaps a few remarks to his wife, and laps from his drinking bowl. The atmosphere in the breakfast room returns to normal: the growl of Cynocephalic voices, the smell of tobacco and of cooking fat from the heater, the steam cooling on the windows, the cold.

The girl's mother is one of a crowd which gathers round the heater every morning. Neither staff nor guests, they come into the breakfast room off the street in their outdoor clothes, and sit and drink tea from their thermos flasks or illicit vodka from unmarked bottles while they warm themselves: the indigent, the lazy and the unemployed claiming the traditional rights of nomads on the steppe. More reserved, since they prefer to sit apart from each other and at tables towards the door, are the professionals in robes or western suits, up from the smaller cities on business, and a little suspicious of the guest workers, engineers and geologists, with whom they share this hotel. At present there are just three of us. The Russian bends over his dumplings and gravy at a table closer to the heater than mine; the Dutchman is eating salted mutton behind me, at a table by the door. The hotel is shunned by foreign workers because of its Cynocephalic menu: meat and vegetables and vodka are served in abundance, but amidst the bitter, the salt and the sour, the human tongue yearns for sweetness. Perhaps, like me, the Russian and Dutchman long to move to the Marriott or the Hilton closer to the centre; perhaps they feel abandoned here by their employers as some obscure penalty for some unknown offence. If so, they are wise to avoid me, for there is guilt in association. I have been here for longer

than any other guest; I have been in this hotel for almost six weeks.

An accordion partition separates the breakfast room from the foyer, where the receptionist sits and reads his paper in the slack half hour before checkout, and where the sliding doors roll endlessly open and closed, a problem which will be repaired, so I am told, when a replacement control mechanism is available. The lift works, if anything in the land of the Cynocephali works, but the lurching and groaning of its motor is such that I prefer to use the staircase by the foyer. My bedroom overlooks parkland to the rear of the hotel. The carpet and bedding are of unbleached wool, while the walls are painted a light grey that to a race without colour vision is soothing. A few pictures of hunting scenes, hieroglyphic and stylised, adorn the walls, the famous Cynocephalic line art. The radiator looks new, but the room is cold at night, and I spread my coat over the counterpane and watch the late shows with the sound turned low while I drink rice or potato vodka from the convenience store down the road. In the two dimensions of the TV, Cynocephalic life is reduced to a children's cartoon. Suited pundits lounge in black leather chairs and give their verdicts on current affairs, muzzles raised and ears cocked in consideration of each others' whining. Celebrities in fashionable Western dress preside over their talk shows and game shows, heads to one side, tongues lolling at the hilarity. Footballers, surgeons, labourers, policemen — all are made ridiculous by the grinning, panting faces of dogs.

Our conversations are bilingual. I address the Cynocephali in halting Chinese or Russian, and they reply in their own tongue: they can study any language on earth, but

they speak no language except their own. In this juxtaposition of the foreign and the alien I learn that my radiator is cold because water pressure in the city is low; that there are warmer rooms downstairs if I wish to ask my employers to upgrade me; that the warmer bedding I asked for has been ordered, and will be delivered soon, and in the meantime, perhaps I can suggest to my employers that they pay a small advance on my bill... Cynocephalic grammar does not lend itself to accountability. We engage, not as receptionist and guest, but as representatives of our kinds; it is impossible to tell whether the cold in my room is the responsibility of the receptionist, or the hotel staff, or the whole of the Cynocephalic nation, while my simple demand for warmer bedding becomes a diplomatic problem of sprawling complexity, a matter of providing bedding for the Androcephalic race.

Yet it is not that they have no history of dealing with the outside world. Egyptian art depicts them, a fragment of Old Welsh poetry deals with them, and Scandinavian legend tells of a Cynocephalus installed by the conquering Swedes as their puppet king of Norway. They were conscripted by Genghis Khan on his expansion into the west, fought as mercenaries in the armies of the Turks, and later joined the Roma people on their wanderings into Europe, leaving small settlements scattered across Central Asia and as far as the Carpathian Alps. Meanwhile, in the Land of the Cynocephali (which like the Basque Country or the Palestinian Territories has no name except that), they have repelled the Russians, the Mongolians, and the Chinese; and now, with the help of foreign investment and expertise, they expand their cities, build airports and roads, and begin to extract the rare earths

that will modernise their economy, and make it possible, perhaps, to heat my room and provide an extra blanket for my bed. Meanwhile, outside the hotel, in their filthy and sprawling capital city, in government offices, ticket offices, libraries and shops, I encounter the same badly maintained machinery, the same cold and the smell of cooking oil, the same bureaucratic indifference to it all.

I have heard a rumour that they are selling wine today in one of the shops trading in dollars with the Androcephali, so I will look in there once I have visited the Ministry of Labour to see if my work permit is ready. After shopping, I will call on my employers, where if I have my work permit I can move into an office and start work, and if not, mention that advance on my hotel bill, and ask to be upgraded to a warmer room. When I have finished my errands in town, I will have dinner at the restaurant opposite the hotel, and perhaps watch a film on one of the American channels before I turn out my light. I get on the trolley-bus by the railway bridge round the corner, and I sit behind three teenagers with skateboards, and shiver as it inches its way into town, stopping for labourers on their way between building sites; housewives and schoolchildren with dust masks over their muzzles as though someone fears they might bite; and, like stray dogs, the same ragged kind who congregate in the breakfast room for the mere chance to sit somewhere warm. Meanwhile, the city grinds past my window: a boarding school where children taken from nomads on the steppe are trained to work as waiters and cleaners in the city; old cottages shaped like tumuli still clinging among the tower blocks; the city's first American church, and everywhere,

new buildings — their colours drab or stark in appeal to the colourless eyes of the Cynocephali, or streaked and splashed at random with imported paints.

I get off at the edge of the Silk Merchants' Quarter a few minutes' walk from the Ministry.

A man is roasting a marmot over a brazier formed from an oil barrel. As I pass, he bastes it with oil from a jug, and the young man in front of me stops abruptly, his muzzle raised with a rapt look: a cartoon dog sniffing the cartoon air. I step round him, and into the path of three young women, emerging from the new Gucci store with their shopping bags in their hands. Another food stall is selling pigs' trotters and beef tea, and a businessman crosses the street with a paper drinking bowl in his hand, yapping into his mobile phone. I cross the main road into wooded parkland. A light snow is falling, and a white-collared crow struts across my path, and takes flight towards a line of elms. The memorial to some warrior hero has been defaced by a graffiti artist's scrawl, and as I pass the outdoor swimming pool I see the rough sleepers under the galleries. One of them raises his head as I pass, and I see that he is human. And something in his gaze — not appeal, not even self-pity, but the simple acceptance of suffering — weighs down my shoulders as I climb the steps into the Ministry of Labour.

A long, rather dusty hallway with a waiting area at the near end and officials seated behind desks at the far. Beside the entrance, a machine dispensing numbered tickets, and opposite, a mural depicting more industry and progress than I have seen in the land of the Cynocephali since I arrived. Voices, blurred and obscure. From the officials at the far end, the grunts and growls of hopes deferred, requests denied,

rising in attacks of bureaucratic annoyance, and drowned out at intervals by the bark of the tannoy calling the next ticket holder forward. On galleries lined with bookshelves, runners weaving past each other with files to be taken downstairs for reference or upstairs to be re-shelved, a system unchanged since the days of gas lighting. And competing with all this, the yapping and mewling of those who have come to find work, or to plead that they cannot work, or that there is no work to be found. I take my ticket, and sit down on the nearest bench. A woman edges away from me, drawing the folds of her lurid green dress beneath her, her gaze averted: does she find my flat and hairless ape's face as discomforting as I find hers? Then a bark from the tannoy that makes me jump, and a double amputee wheels past me in his chair, a relic of Communist days, and no doubt of Communist wars. I could sit here for an hour, three hours, and again I could leave empty-handed: the simple stamped permit that is all I require seems as far beyond the capacities of this place as the digitisation of its records. The Cynocephali think nothing of waiting. A whole family sit by the oil burner, eating dumplings and blood sausage sliced with a knife; two old men near them are playing billiards on the floor. And then, as the amputee wheels his way back towards the exit, someone breaks into song. It is a low drone at first, incessant and desolate, joined by other notes that break and merge in microtonal harmonies, the famous polyphonic overtones of Cynocephalic keening. The singer seems not even to breathe. Yet after a few moments he falls silent, and another singer elsewhere in the hall takes up the song with not even a pause, with not even a hint that this dirge need ever end. It catches my breath. And for an hour I sit there, scarcely

moving as singer after singer takes the note, listening to themes that my mind can barely follow though they haunt me, as aloof and moving as the howling of wolves.

I have been to the shop that sells Androcephalic produce, where I bought three bottles of Uzbek wine, and I have been to my employers to ask if they can help obtain my work permit or are willing to pay an advance on my bill. I sat in the senior manager's office in a leather mahogany chair, as I explained that the Ministry of Labour have not stamped my work permit because the Ministry of the Interior have not released my entry papers, while the aged Cynocephalus under whose direction I will work poured salted tea into two lacquered drinking bowls. There was a pause. He pushed my bowl across the table towards me, apologising for the lack of sugar and milk. Perhaps, he said, the Ministry of Labour will have my work permit ready tomorrow, or perhaps I can call at the Ministry of the Interior to see if my entry papers are there; and in the mean time, he assured me, the room at the hotel is mine. I mentioned the cold in my room, and the hotel's request for an advance on my bill. His ears pricked, a show of surprise. The company was paying my bill weekly, he said; could it be that the hotel were mistaken? No doubt there had been some delay at the bank, some mistake in their records, unfortunate but easily rectified. He would ask the accounts department to make due enquiries. His staff would contact theirs. And since my duties would be cared for by his existing staff until my situation was clearer, I could do worse than to spend my time in language study, or take one of the coach tours into the hinterland so I can see what the Cynocephalic people are achieving for their beautiful

country. A recitation of one of the epics begins at the Opera House tonight: the country's most famous epic vocalist, accompanied by the state chorale — perhaps he will see me there?

He rose, and shook my hand with infinite courtesy.

I was assaulted on the way home. Three youths, leaning with their backs to the wall under the railway bridge, waited until I was passing them and tripped me up, kicked me in the hip as I lay on the cobblestones and clutched my bag, and scattered with barks of delight. I was not robbed. The attack had no purpose I can understand. Yet if I were to report the matter to the local police, if I were to give a description of my assailants (the upper lip curled back to reveal the fangs of the one who kicked me, the cocked left ear of the one who tripped me first), I would convey nothing more, perhaps, than my own confusion, and my own rising hate and fear of this country... The hoodie was *red,* sir; what texture is that? And were the kids who assaulted you black or white?

I lie in bed with the TV on, rubbing the bruise on my hip, when I am overwhelmed by longing for human faces and human speech. The channel is religious, its presenters slick with the power of dollars and God, and I raise my glass to the screen in wry salute. And then it strikes me. If a cat wandered onto the set, would these dog-heads cast the new religion aside? Would they leap from their chairs on all fours, tongues lolling, would they drive it from the studio in the ecstasy of the chase? Catch her, Mr Peanut Butter! Get her, Trixie Woo! The snow is thick outside now, and I am giggling at my tasteless joke as I gulp down the Uzbek wine.

THE PEBBLES AT HIS FEET

1.

He drove his son to court that morning to begin a prison sentence. That afternoon he was due for a meal with a former pupil and her son. He had asked to be invited, as fearful of the empty house as he was drawn to their company, and on the drive from Bryntaeog to Mold he had told his silent, brooding son nothing about his plans. By evening, Ben would be settling in, perhaps making new friends and beginning to forget his father. Or if he claimed his right to use the phone, then he could decide for himself whether Stone had gone to the shop, or was taking a walk, or had his own life apart from Ben's needs.

It was a cold day in February. Drizzle turned to rain as a small group of language activists gathered around one of their number who was summoned to appear in court, and there was a damp, bedraggled look to the witnesses and victims in the foyer. Ben's girlfriend Nia sat huddled in her raincoat during sentencing, and a reporter from the local paper wiped his nose on his sleeve and snuffled. Two years. A representative from the local council looked up and gave Stone a curt nod, as though concluding some arrangement satisfactory to both. Ben smiled at Stone, almost shyly,

before being led away to the cells. For all his rage, all his burning defiance, his trial had been witnessed by half a dozen people at most.

'I'll see if I can find out what's happening for you,' said Yvonne. She slipped away with a quick tapping of heels, and Stone waited, sitting on a bench outside the courtroom. And this was his son's rite of passage, he thought; this was how Ben left home. An opening office door revealed a union flag, a surge of voices, and he started when Yvonne touched his shoulder.

'There's some good news,' she said; 'he won't have to wait around in a holding cell; he'll be leaving almost straight away.' Stone got up slowly, and she matched his own slow pace towards the exit. 'I know this isn't easy for you, Tom, but it could be a lot worse. Two years is a little harsh, especially under the circumstances, but I'm sure we can bring it down on appeal.'

'I understand,' said Tom.

'They won't be taking him far. The place in Shropshire I mentioned, probably, less than an hour's drive. The unit for young offenders isn't perfect, but I know some of the educational staff — they're very caring.'

'I remember. You said,' said Stone.

'I've a meeting there in three or four days. I can have a chat with him then, maybe; we can look at the sentencing guidelines together.' They were outside. She gave him a small, cool hand to shake, and a prison van turned out of the car park, heading south towards a blur of hills.

He stopped for petrol on the outskirts of Mold. A youth with a bored look and a wisp of moustache opened the till, and on an impulse Stone added a chocolate bar and a gâteau

and a bottle of wine to his purchase. Two years. He sat in the car and ate chocolate until he was nauseated, and then he drove the rest of the way home to Bryntaeog, parking outside Lindsay's building on Bath Road as the rain stopped and a shaft of sunlight showed between banks of cloud. She had seen him pull up. He had barely touched the intercom when she buzzed him inside.

'Hello, Tom,' she said. She was standing at the top of the stairs, outside the door to her flat, and when her son Troy saw Stone he buried his face in her thigh. 'That's Uncle Tom,' she told him.

Troy turned round, and gave Stone a suspicious look. '*Taid*?' he asked.

'That's not *taid;* it's Uncle Tom. Why don't you say, "Hello, Uncle Tom"?'

'Not *taid,'* said Troy. His lip quivered.

'Come on, then, goblin.' She hoisted the boy onto her hip and came forward, hesitantly reaching an arm round his back in embrace as her son tugged his thinning hair. 'Do you want to tell me about it?'

'Later. After dinner.'

'Come on in. You can sit and rest for a while, if Troy leaves you alone, or you can chat to me while I boil the peas.'

'It looks as if you've gone to a lot of trouble,' said Stone.

The vacuum cleaner was still plugged in, tucked away by the kitchen door, and Troy's toys had been stacked neatly under the window. The whole flat was filled with the smell of roasting chicken, and only the table still waited to be laid. Troy began to struggle, and Lindsay let him down to stumble away towards a toy carpenter's workbench. Lindsay's voice

came from the kitchen. ‘Do you know what I’m supposed to do with the gâteau, Tom?’

‘Chill it, I suppose. Is there room in the freezer?’

‘My mum keeps buying me frozen chickens. It’s the only way I can get Troy to eat.’

‘It all smells delicious, anyway,’ said Stone.

‘I’ll serve in the kitchen.’ She had cleared away Troy’s drawings and scooped his crayons into a cup, and she was laying the table. Her young arms in her turquoise sweater moved lithely, dispensing place mats, glasses and forks, while a bracelet dangled on her wrist, lighting up in the afternoon sun. Troy climbed onto the back of the sofa to watch, clutching Stone’s shoulder, fascinated.

He was taking after Lindsay in looks. He had her blonde hair and blue eyes, though in a darker, dirtier shade, her stocky build and ruddy complexion. And so far, Troy shared her stolid personality: he would make mistakes, as she had, but he would make the best of the consequences. It was a cause for thanks, thought Stone, who was reminded of his wife’s beauty and his own mistakes whenever he looked at Ben. She picked up her son to carry him to the high chair, a signal for Stone too to come to the table, and took her first few mouthfuls thoughtfully.

‘I overdid the peas,’ she said.

‘It’s easily done.’

‘I can only ever give half my attention to anything. I needn’t tell you this; you know what it’s like. Are you going to eat your nice chicken, goblin?’

‘Don’t like it,’ Troy said. He stared at Stone, and a dribble of chewed carrot slid down his chin. Lindsay caught it deftly in a napkin.

'You seem to be managing,' said Stone. 'I wasn't expecting to find the flat as homely as this.'

'Oh yes, it's homely *now*. But it's the first time I've mopped the kitchen floor in a month, and I'm lucky if I change my clothes once a week. I don't know how other mothers hold down jobs.' She was shredding the chicken on Troy's plate and dousing it with gravy. 'I can't remember what it was like with Ben, but I'm sure you kept the house nice for him.'

Stone laughed, a long, grating sound. 'He couldn't wait to get away.'

'Get down,' said Troy.

'Not till you've eaten your dinner, Troy… You're not blaming yourself, are you, Tom? What he did was his own choice.'

'I was too stern, especially in the early years. Everything was a fault in him.'

'It can't have been easy after Faye's death,' said Lindsay. 'Shall we try the carrot now, goblin?'

'Do you still get to see Troy's dad at all?'

Troy leaned forward, his mouth still open, allowing a mess of chicken and gravy to fall down his bib and onto his plate. The tail end of it caught the sleeve of her jumper, and Troy laughed, his tiny feet kicking the underside of the table. Lindsay put the spoon down and sat back, staring at Troy levelly.

'Do you want to eat?' she demanded.

'Time to play,' said Troy.

She glanced at Stone. 'No,' she said. 'No, I don't get to see Troy's dad at all. Well, Troy? Do you want to be shut in your room for spitting your food?'

The scream was protracted, piercing. Lindsay stood up, scooping him out of his high chair as he kicked at his plate, and carried him out of the room. Stone finished his meal in silence. The screaming continued as Lindsay sat down, dabbing ruefully at her sleeve with a tissue.

'By the time I've finished a meal I'm more of a mess than he is. I'll have to put this in the wash later.'

'Thank God for washing machines,' said Stone.

'I'll look at the cake and make coffee in a minute.' She glanced at Troy's plate. 'We're going to have to have a second go with the chicken.'

'Do you really want to try and make him eat chicken when we two are eating cake?'

'No... No, I don't.' She leaned back, suddenly weary. 'He gets his cake, then,' she said, and it seemed a defeat.

They passed the school on their afternoon stroll. Troy slumbered with his face turned upward and his fist curled around a favourite toy, as calm and quiet as Ben had been after any of his childhood tantrums, or after his crime. The lights were on in the classrooms, but the playground was deserted, and Stone's workshop, the target of Ben's rage, was a charred and boarded ruin. Lindsay stooped over the buggy to wipe a trail of mucus from Troy's upper lip, and straightened up and saw the place.

'Oh my god, Tom,' she said, 'I'm sorry. I always take him this way; I just didn't think.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Stone.

'We can walk to the park from here... Troy can play on the swings for a bit. I'm sorry, Tom; I was on autopilot.'

'I'm not avoiding the place,' said Stone.

Yet he had visited the school only twice since Ben's arrest, going early in the morning or late in the afternoon to formalise his sick leave, to finalise his resignation. And now he was overwhelmed by memories. The slam of the swollen door on winter mornings, the rattling of the windows on windy afternoons. Sawdust and dead flies gathered in the spiders' webs under the wiring, and the strip lights flickered during his classes. The floor was uneven, and there was a constant creaking and scuffling as his pupils worked.

The faces of his pupils overwhelmed him too: those newly arrived from primary school, still only children; older boys from the lower sets hoping to gain a little skill with tools and wood before moving on to college and learning a trade; girls, though not many, keen to prove their worth, to train as carpenters, or even enlist. Others rangy, neglected, bored of school, learning as Stone had learnt that in the turn of the hand round some piece of polished wood there was forgetfulness and something like joy. The extra-curricular work had come later. Weekends spent camping while repairing dry-stone walls on the Denbigh moors, laying footpaths on the Carneddau or in Llŷn. And then the slow accretion of duties — careers guidance, the homework club, tuition for excluded pupils — as though his successes as a teacher could atone for for his failure with Ben.

Ben had accompanied him on the first few trips, and then dropped out. He had moved from the school where his father taught to the Welsh-medium school at the age of fourteen, and by that time, it seemed, he was removing Stone from his life outside the school also, preferring to stay at home, to cook meals from the freezer and take them upstairs to his room, than to spend those weekends in his company. This

was in the early days, before the absences from home and the truancy and the exclusions from school.

He was seventeen years old. There was the whisper of hail as he sat at the dinner table with Stone, and he picked at his liver and bacon, drained his glass and stood up. 'This sucks,' he said. 'I'm going out.'

'Sit down, Ben.' Stone kept his voice even. 'It's raining, it's dark, and you've not finished your meal. If you don't want to eat, you can sit at the table and talk to me.'

'I've already told you. I'm going out.' He looked down at his father and put on a wheedling tone. '*What did you do in school today, Ben? What did they give you for homework?* Fucking talk to yourself.'

'What did you say?' said Stone.

'I'll see you later,' said Ben. Stone put down his fork and followed his son upstairs, reaching his bedroom door as Ben slung a sports bag over his shoulder. Stone saw him holding the pendant he had taken from his room, and flushed.

'Give me that,' he ordered. 'Fuck you,' said Ben. And in Stone's mind a line had been crossed: he had tried Faye's way, the way of sweetness and trust, and now the only way left was punishment. Later he sat in the armchair, his hands on his knees, obdurate in his justice. He heard, but scarcely noticed, when his son went out. And after the arrest he would marvel at Ben's calmness when he returned, saying goodnight to his father and going to his room as though some weight had been shaken from his mind, some crushing problem dealt with. Lindsay picked up on his mood. 'Are you all right, Tom? Do you want to go back?' Troy opened his dirty blue eyes, and looked up at his mother and whimpered.

'Go back,' he said.

‘He’s cold,’ said Lindsay. ‘Are you all right, Tom? Perhaps you’d rather go home and phone Ben or something.’

‘No,’ said Stone. ‘No, he’ll be finding his feet tonight. He’ll be best off left alone.’

She glanced at him with concern. ‘It’s up to you, Tom,’ she said.

She resisted his efforts to wash up. Later, when she seemed drawn once again into a battle of wills with her son, Stone took his coat and prepared to leave, and Lindsay suddenly clung to him, not wanting him to go. Once again it was raining. He remembered a holiday he had taken when Ben was still small, one winter on the coast of Llŷn where he and Faye had once searched for sea-glass along the beach, and where later he had scattered her ashes. They had walked through wind and rain under cliffs of boulder clay, and Ben had turned to look where the islands loomed in the mist, and the sea wind had hurled the salt spray in his eyes, and he had begun to cry. To distract him, Stone had shown him the pebbles at his feet: rhyolite red as chestnuts, specked with a darker brown; granite circled with quartz, a perfect wish-stone; and a piece of white sandstone, delicately striated with orange and pink and blue. The pressure of ages had compacted it, the erosion of ages had polished it to smoothness, and one day would reduce it to sand again, an unending cycle of hurt hardened into pride, and pride worn down in hurt. He held this stone in the palm of a hand roughened by sawdust and chapped by the cold, tracing its flaws with a thumb until Ben, drowning in the dissimilarity of things, had begun to scream, and Stone had cast it aside: the pebble once more a discarded pebble, the moment lost in his anger at a crying child.

2.

He hung his coat over the back of a chair, and made his way between the tables to the bar of the Philip Yorke. It was a Wednesday, more than an hour before noon, and the pub was still quiet: a couple from the sheltered flats nearby sat hunched and murmuring over their fried breakfasts; a businessman at the opposite table leafed through his papers, his briefcase open in front of him, scowling. There was no sign of Nia. Louise, a former pupil of his, was drying glasses behind the bar, but she turned and came over to where he was standing. 'Hello, Mr Stone,' she said. 'I don't think I've ever seen you in here before. What can I get you?'

'A pint of stout,' said Stone. 'And it's good to see you, Louise. It must be what — five years?'

'Very nearly,' said Louise. 'I did my resits four years ago, and I remember the letter you wrote for me so I could get my first job... Is there anything else I can get you, Mr Stone?'

'Maybe later. I'm waiting for someone.'

She would have hated the place. The soullessness of the modern building, the heavy carvery menu and the tiny selection of beers, the fruit machines and the flat-screen TVs and the ball pit for the children: they would have argued, Faye for the fun of it, amused by her own disdain, while Stone felt himself riled by pride of class and place to defend what he himself found tasteless. Outside was a row of picnic tables, a car park, and a suburban lane heading out of Bryntaeog towards meadows by the river beyond which lay the gardens and parks of the Yorke estate. There was a click of the door, and soft footsteps behind him, before Nia pulled out the chair opposite.

'Well, here I am,' she said.

She had prepared herself carefully for the meeting. A silver crucifix at her throat, a little makeup, clothes better suited to the office than the pub, and an air that this meeting with Ben's father was one she approached as a duty, if willingly undertaken. And despite the difference of age, despite the distant manner and the tight, uncomfortable-looking clothes, he felt old aches stirring, and to distract himself he asked, 'What can I get you, Nia? The kitchen's open, if you're hungry.'

'Just a coffee for me,' said Nia. 'But I'll go if you watch my bag, Mr Stone.' He toyed with the menu, and tried to assess the scale of his mistake. She was quite calm. She put down a tray with her coffee things, and sat down.

She was two years older than Ben. Her father, tattooed and muscular, had been a bouncer in his youth and now worked at a bookmaker's in Bryntaeog; her mother was a cook at the local leisure centre, and Nia had taken a clerical job in the county offices after leaving school. 'I saw you at the trial,' said Stone.

She hesitated, stirring her coffee. She rose to brush a lock of black hair from her face.

'I wasn't sure who you were,' he continued. 'I called on your mum and dad two or three years ago, but you were in school at the time. He never introduced you after that.'

She resumed stirring. She had rehearsed this conversation repeatedly in her mind: she had considered every possible question he might raise. 'It was never about meeting parents,' she said. 'I wasn't allowed to have him at my house, not after he'd stayed there, but we'd never wanted to be indoors much. It was easier by the river or in the park; we could talk about things the way we wanted.'

‘He walked to your house in a hailstorm so you could sit in a park?’

She raised her cup with slow care to her lips, drank, and put it down. ‘He asked to come in. I said no. I was working, and he was still in school, and I wasn’t seeing him much anyway. Why did you ask to meet me, Mr Stone?’

She had met Ben when he switched to the Welsh school when he was fourteen, and her parents’ house on Norman Road was ten minutes’ walk from Stone’s. There were terraces on either side of the road, front yards pebbled and filled with planters. Her parents displayed Labour posters before elections, and flew the *draig goch* on match days. He lowered his eyes. ‘It’s been a long time since the trial,’ he told her. ‘I was wondering when I’m going to hear from my son.’

‘You’ll have to ask to him that — I don’t know what his plans are.’ She took another drink of her coffee, eying him levelly over the rim of the cup. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Stone. I don’t know your son as well as you think I do. If he isn’t talking to you, you’ll have to sort it out yourself.’

‘I understand it’s not your problem,’ said Stone; ‘I’m not asking you to be a go-between. But he walked to your house in a hail-storm and asked to come in, because he felt it was you he could turn to. Maybe he said something, something that could help — not even that night, necessarily. At least show me the place by the river where you used to talk.’ He made himself smile. ‘I’d like to see that.’

‘We were kids,’ she told him. ‘We complained about our teachers, we complained about Bryntaeog, we told each other who was fit and what we wanted to do when we left school. It was nothing. It felt special to us because we were kids.’ She hesitated, and for a moment it could have been

Faye, a few weeks after the referendum, standing on the footpath that led to Dinas Brân.

He parked the car at the north end of Wern Road, and followed her over the stile into the field at the foot of Bron Ddinas. He saw her in the golden light of an April evening, swinging the restraint from her arms and legs, letting her feet sink deep in the mud as she led the way up the hill. He was thirty-seven years old. They had been dating for a little over two years. He called, 'Faye!' and she stopped, turning with a broad, unconscious smile. She was wearing the sea-glass pendant that day, and she fingered it for a moment as she waited for him to catch up. She had put down her rucksack. Her patchwork skirt swayed in the evening breeze, came to rest on a bramble tip, swayed again, and caught it.

'So you saw it happen?' he asked her.

'I saw it happen. I know it doesn't look good, but he was goading him, Tom.'

'Goading him? Goading him how?'

Faye sighed. 'You know what Elfyn's like; he's in your registration group. His parents are Plaid people; Tony's been on his back about the referendum for months. Nasty, jeering comments, Tom. About politics. About the Welsh language.'

'Elfyn's a fool,' said Stone. 'He's not even Welsh. His parents are a couple of hippies who moved from Bracknell twenty years ago. He can't even vote, and he gets in a fight.'

'So he was actually born in Wales?' said Faye.

'They called him Elfyn because they thought it meant *elfin.* They believe in natural childbirth. His mother gave birth in an inflatable paddling pool in their front room.'

A tone of calm amusement. ‘I take it you don’t think natural childbirth is a good thing, Tom.’

Before them, the path skirted woodland and climbed through pastures vivid in the sunset towards the jagged ramparts of Dinas Brân; behind them, Mynydd Eglwyseg rose steep and green towards its limestone bluffs. Faye was silent for a moment, falling back as they broached the climb. ‘There’s politics,’ she said, ‘and then there’s bullying. With Tony it’s bullying, Tom; he was doing it to hurt.’

‘And Elfyn decked him,’ said Stone.

The path narrowed and steepened as they entered rougher ground. Where it briefly divided in two a man was descending in haste, the hood of his anorak up, his face turned down towards the rubble at his feet. Faye greeted him as he passed, and Stone heard his muttered reply.

‘It wasn’t—’ he began.

‘Herbert Price? I think it was.’

‘We’re miles from Bryntaeog. I thought we’d be safe.’

‘Herbie won’t breathe a word. He hates emotion; he’ll make believe he never saw us.’

‘Things start in the staffroom and spread to the playground. I don’t want this to be gossip,’ said Stone.

They walked in silence for a moment. The earthworks came first, a labyrinth of ditches and dykes following the contour of the hillside, and then, as the path turned aside to guide them through a break, the grey stone mass of the fortress. Someone had sprayed a symbol on a boulder close to the path, a hooked asterisk in white paint representing an eagle in flight. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ said Stone.

‘Tom — it isn’t like you to swear.’ She stopped, also seeing the *eryr wen.* ‘That’s new, I’m sure,’ she said.

‘They tried to kill Prince Charles, and they failed. They tried to get a toy parliament, and they failed. Why can’t they just leave us alone now?’

She put an arm round his waist and guided him inside the fortress. The sun was just touching the Berwyn hills. A woman called her Labrador, ‘Baxter! Baxter!’ and Faye laughed as it put its paws on her chest and licked her face. A little thrift was growing in a cleft in the wall, and Faye said, ‘Look, Tom — there’ve been wild flowers on these walls since the Middle Ages, probably. The whole Kingdom of Powys was ruled from here — doesn’t that fill you with something?’

She plucked one of the flowers and held it before her until he drew close. He sniffed the flower, then touched the pendant at her throat. ‘Sea-glass among the pebbles,’ he told her.

She laughed. ‘Such chivalry...’

‘I know I shouldn’t find fault,’ said Stone. ‘I’ve got a meeting Monday night with Elfyn’s parents, and I have to explain why their son isn’t welcome back in school.’

‘Monday’s Monday. The referendum was last month. Forget about your job for once; come and watch the sunset with me.’

Someone had stuck a *Yes for Wales* sticker to the footpath sign by the meadows, and the sticker, clinging as tenaciously to the metal as the nationalists had clung to their cause, had been crudely scratched over with the union jack. Nia stopped for a moment, facing the river, and for a moment Stone wondered what she thought about politics, if the graffito offended her more than the sticker, if the question that had put him at odds first with Faye and later with Ben would put

him at odds with her also. She said nothing. After a moment she continued walking. 'You were going to tell me about that night,' he reminded her.

'My mum answered the door. It was raining by then. He asked to come inside, but my mum said no. She called me down, and I had to stand in the doorway and talk to him.'

'Carry on,' said Stone.

'He told me you'd had a fight. He said he'd had enough, said he never wanted to speak to you again. I thought there'd just been an argument, so I told him to go home. He said he was afraid to. He said he'd tried to take something of yours, and you'd given him a beating.'

'Did he say what it was he'd tried to take?'

'I didn't ask, Mr Stone.'

She paused. 'I told him my dad used to use the belt on me. I said it was between the two of you, but if he didn't want to go home he should tell the police. He stood on the doorstep for a moment and wiped his hair from his eyes, and then he asked if he could come in. He said he had his night things; he said if he spent the night on the floor he'd decide what to do in the morning. I told him he couldn't. I said he ought to go home, but if he didn't go home, the police would help. So he stood on the doorstep and wiped his hair from his eyes again, and then he thanked me. He said I'd helped him make a decision. He said he might be busy for a while, but he'd catch up with me later. I asked him about a book I'd lent him, and he said he'd drop it off when he could.'

'When did you speak to him last?' said Stone.

'When he came to my door. He wrote to me from prison. He said he was thinking about me a lot, and had asked the Home Office to give me visiting rights. I'm not going, Mr

Stone. It's a long way to the prison, and I don't think I want to.'

'Did he mention me?'

'If he'd mentioned you I'd already have told you.'

He believed her. She had done everything in her power to discourage his curiosity, taken every possible step to stay on the fringes of Ben's crime, but the very dullness of her testimony made it impossible to doubt its truth: in just the same way, grudgingly yet unstintingly, she had told the police what they wanted to know. She had her job to protect; she was a civil servant, after all. She understood Ben's story in the same matter-of-fact way that she had dealt with her father's beatings, and it was as hard to imagine her giving Ben any succour as it was ludicrous to imagine her offering absolution to Stone. 'One more question, Nia,' he said. 'Has he ever tried to give you gifts?'

She gave him a curious look. 'Gifts like what, Mr Stone?'

Again she mentioned her book. She listed the places from which it would find its way back to her: the canteen where her mother worked, the county offices, the places her father drank. And the book had become famous when it was published a year before: a reformed drug smuggler's autobiography, no doubt crammed with life lessons in resilience and determination, the very thing for a bouncer's and bookmaker's daughter to give to a terrorised schoolboy to inspire and console him. She pointed to the path that would take her back to town; she would walk alone from here. She thanked him for his company. She hoped his son would be in touch with him soon.

He lingered for a moment before turning home. It struck him that the day was warm, that he had no lessons to

prepare for, no son in the house, that for the first time since Faye's pregnancy he could spend his time as he pleased. He took the longer path past the Yorke hunting lodge. A falconer was displaying his birds, and he stopped to buy a coffee and pasty from the snack bar. He turned round, flakes of pastry already on his lips, and came face to face with Lindsay.

'My mum told me about the falcons,' she told him, 'and we thought we'd give Troy something to look at. It's a bit old for him, though — he thinks it should be like a petting zoo, and he isn't allowed to touch the birds... How are you, Tom? I've not seen you for weeks.'

'Enjoying my retirement.' He tried to smile. 'It's good to see you, Lindsay. It's good to see you relaxed and enjoying the open air.'

'Your students will be missing you. But I suppose, if it gives you time to visit your son... Oh, Tom, you don't look in a good way. Come and meet my mum. Come and sit with us. After you've had your pasty we'll take Troy to play on the slides.'

3.

The sound of raised voices came to Stone from downstairs, then a gunshot, followed by screaming. The screams cut off abruptly; there was a moment of calm, replaced by the clamour of rock music. He opened his eyes. His bedroom was washed in the septic glow of the street light, and his bedside clock showed the time, 2 a.m. He put on his bathrobe and slippers, and went downstairs to where Ben was rifling through the video collection. He glanced over his shoulder as Stone sat down.

‘It’s two in the morning, Ben,’ he said.

‘I’m watching a film,’ said Ben.

‘It’s a week night. You have school in the morning. I want you to turn off the music and go to bed.’

‘I won’t sleep,’ said Ben. He gave his father a longer glance. ‘You go to bed if you want to.’

‘What are we supposed to do if we can’t sleep? What are the things we’ve talked about doing?’

‘I can make you a cup of hot chocolate if you like. Or I can read you a story.’ Ben sniggered. ‘Once upon a time there were three little bears...’

Stone picked up the remote control. He turned off the TV and turned down the sound on the music, and for a moment the ugliness showed on Ben’s face before he threw himself down on the sofa. ‘Well, dad,’ he said. ‘This is nice.’

‘I am almost out of my mind,’ Stone told him. ‘I am exhausted from lack of sleep.’ Ben crossed his arms, raising his eyes to the ceiling. ‘I found the empty bottles in your room. I found the truancy notes. Do we have to talk about social workers? Do we have to talk about taking you into care?’ He put the remote control down on the arm of his chair and gazed at his son for a moment. ‘My God, son, if I’d given my mother half this grief she’d have belted me long ago.’

‘Then belt me,’ Ben said; ‘knock yourself out. Just don’t moider me to death about it.’

Stone got to his feet. He crossed to the sofa and stood over his son, his hands on his hips, lightly clenched. ‘Sit up,’ he said. His voice was barely steady. ‘I’m not talking to you while you’re slouched like a drunk. Sit up.’ There was a moment’s pause. ‘Ow!’ said Ben. He got up as Stone drew his

collar, ducked and turned in an attempt to escape, and finally let himself drop to the floor, a dead weight, a broken puppet. 'You're hurting me, dad,' he said. Stone ignored him. By the time they had reached Ben's bedroom, both were out of breath. He stood in the doorway, blocking his exit, and Ben threw himself down on the bed, his face to the wall.

'If I want to restrain you,' Stone told him, 'I will. If I want to hurt you, I will. If I want to phone social services and tell them I can't look after you any more, it'll take me five minutes to make the call.' He stared for a moment at Ben's back. 'You stop drinking. You go to school. You start cooperating. Now.'

He was fourteen years old. The following day he ran away from home.

His hands meeting over the cup as though chained, Ben opened a sachet of sugar, emptied it into his cup, picked up and emptied a second, a third. Stirring his tea, he looked up, caught his father's eye, and blushed. 'It was a nice lunch, dad. Thanks.'

To Stone it felt wrong. The town was a collection of bakeries and small galleries, antique shops and bookshops that Faye might have enjoyed but Stone himself found oppressive. The café was a landmark of the town, overlooking the square where Oswald Mosley had addressed the fascist crowd. And it seemed more appropriate for the pensioners chatting at a nearby table than for Ben in his shabby tee shirt and jeans, while the menu had been inappropriately light and sweet, a choice of pastries, ciabattas and toasties when he would have preferred to see his son tucking into a chop. The prison was nearly six miles

away, the day free for Ben to enjoy, but even so he seemed to bring his captivity with him, to infect the whole town with his misery. At the next table an old woman took a bite from a cream éclair, her face a picture of senile delight, and her daughter wiped her lips on a napkin with a murmur of reproof; the waitress with the oval face and black hair carried some creamy and sparkling dessert to the table nearest the door. There was something of Nia about her looks, and Ben turned in his chair to watch as she passed, looked back at his father and tried to smile. 'I suppose it's a change from the canteen,' said Stone.

'Prison food isn't so bad,' said Ben. 'It's better than anything I could cook on my own.' A look of annoyance came over his face, and he asked, 'What is it with you, dad? Can't I even say the word *prison* without you jumping out of your skin?'

'Yes you can,' said Stone, 'but you're not in prison.' He watched his son exhale and raise his eyes to the ceiling, and added, more gently, 'It's a Young Offenders' Institute, and you should never forget it. You're in there for very different reasons from your hardened criminal.'

'Well, anyway,' said Ben, 'it's not for much longer.' He raised the tea to his lips, not wanting to seem ungrateful, thought Stone, and tired of the argument.

But it was an impasse, not a resolution. The waitress walked past them up the narrow stairs, and Ben's head turned. He cleared his throat. 'There's something I haven't told you, Ben. I've taken early retirement.'

'Congratulations,' said Ben. 'That must feel pretty good after all those years locked up in a classroom.' Stone felt

himself stiffen. 'I'm glad you've finally got some time for yourself.'

'It wasn't entirely voluntary. But it's nice to have more time for people, like you say.' He waited a moment for the words to sink in. 'I'm having dinner with Lindsay Carter tonight.'

'Lindsay Carter — wasn't she one of your pupils? The one who had the baby, right?'

'Troy,' said Stone. 'He's a right little battle-tank, that young man.'

'Well, say hi from me,' said Ben. 'And it's great you're still keeping active, still helping people.'

A hint of bitterness — a rebuke parried by a rebuke. He asked, 'Do you have any plans for when you get back?'

'Play chess with a friend: he's teaching me. Go upstairs, do my breathing exercises, take an early night. Maybe watch some TV before lights out.'

'That sounds nice,' said Stone. He tried to smile. 'Who's the friend?'

'He's from Bristol. He maxed out his dad's credit cards and went on a spree.' He gave Stone a tender look, almost father-like. 'You know my friends are all criminals, don't you?'

'I try not to think about it. Do you want a walk before we go back? Do you want to go to the cinema, anything like that?'

'If I leave now I can get the bus back to prison. It's okay, dad — I'll be fine.'

'I'd rather drop you off at the gate.'

'Christ, dad, what do you think I'm going to do — hijack the bus and head for France?' He sighed, and added, 'It's not

like I'm in a desperate rush to get out. I've already talked to Yvonne about that.'

'It's just for my peace of mind.' Their eyes met, and Stone said softly, 'You didn't make it easy for us.'

He paid the modest bill, adding a tip. They were driving out of the town centre when he asked, 'Is there anything you need from the shops while we're here? Anything from the chemist? Clothes?'

'It's okay. I can get all that stuff at home anyway.'

'Next time will be better. We can go for a walk along the canal.'

'That'll be good,' said Ben.

They followed the Shrewsbury Road towards the prison. Ben sat with his arms folded, saying nothing as tea shops and private galleries gave way to riding schools and farm shops, to fields of rapeseed and poly tunnels and the open palm of the Shropshire plain. Stone turned the car into the prison approach, and Ben kissed his father's cheek in the car park.

'Well. I'm back where you found me. Thanks, dad.'

He reclaimed the key to his cell in Reception, crossed the campus to his cell block, and went upstairs to take off his jacket. He remembered how, at the age of fourteen, he had stood in the doorway of Nia's empty house on Norman Road, the family on holiday, the spare key from under the window box dangling from his hand, amazed at the suddenness of his freedom. He had gone to the kitchen, put milk and bread from the shop in the fridge, and helped himself to biscuits and coca-cola from the cupboard before he stood in the upstairs window, and saw the rooftops declining towards Coed y Glyn and his father's house, and he laughed. All this is mine, he had thought; I can stay here a week, and no one will

find me. His neighbour in the next cell shouted 'Tosser!' at the TV. He went back downstairs. Terry Leonards, his chess partner, was playing patience. 'Oh, it's young Stone,' he said. 'I thought you'd be out living the high life with your dad for a few hours longer.'

'It didn't work out,' said Ben. 'Good day here?'

'The A Block Lions beat the B Block Dragons 12-4. I'd have watched, but my Personal Officer warned me team sports build character. There's a rumour the cooks are attempting a satay. It will hide the taste of yesterday's meat, and we have a job lot of peanut butter to get through. Can you stoop to the consolations of convicts after tasting the joys of the outside world? Care for a game of cards first?'

'I thought I'd lie down for a bit,' said Ben. 'I was just checking you're up for chess later.' Tanner Moss and Catch Blayney passed down the corridor and headed towards the stairs, guffawing at some imaginary triumph. Ben sat on the edge of his bed, grasped his ankles, and rocked himself back and forth. Oh, father, he thought, I love you. I hate you. I will never understand you. I ran all the way to prison just to get away from you. You made me feel like a murderer every day of my life. Someone turned a radio full blast, and turned it off. I am going to cry, he thought. He filled his lungs and counted to ten, and cleared them.

In Stone's darkest moments, two memories merged from fourteen years apart, and Ben was a witness at his own birth. Her third convulsion came to an end, and abruptly Faye relaxed, her head lolling back against the side of the birthing pool as her hand, clenched tight, relaxed, and let the sea-glass pendant slip down into the water. Her eyes met Stone's.

‘Tom,’ she said. There was a flicker of a smile. Then the baby, having refilled its lungs, resumed its screaming, and Stone looked down from cutting the cord to meet the still, unfocused gaze of a corpse. There was the wail of a siren. A draft reached the living room from the open front door, and he wrapped his newborn son and clutched him to his chest.

The runaway returned as the ambulance crew arrived. He ignored the baby in Stone’s arms, ignored even the commotion by the birthing pool where his mother’s body lay, putting down his rucksack on the table and unpacking it as though he had been gone for ten minutes to the shop. ‘There’s leftover milk,’ he said, ‘and a pizza. There was bacon too, but I left it behind as a thank you present. There’s garlic bread, and there’s some tomatoes I took because they’d have gone off if I’d left them. I’ll cook tea tonight if you like.’

‘You killed your mother,’ Stone told him. ‘You killed your mother, and now you’re killing me.’ And he would never know whether the pain of the things he had suffered or the pain of the things he had done, Ben’s hurts or his own, cut more deeply.

WORKS AND DAYS

Tri pheth a gynnydd yn y glaw:
Gwlydd, ac ysgall, ac ysgaw.
Iolo Morganwg

He must have felt some affection for Tanwen, that self-conscious, studious child, because for several years after he retired as her headmaster, and before she left Gwynedd and outgrew her old friends, she would spend a part of her school holidays in Gwaed Erw twice a year. He was scholarly and gentle, while his wife loved to give hospitality, and whenever she travelled home on the bus, through forty miles of mountains and fens to the cottage in Dyffryn Ysig, it was in a subtle dread of seeing her family again: her half-sister Bethan, practical and outspoken, besotted with her father, a rebuke by her unquestioned belonging to Tanwen's shyness and quietness; her mother, seemingly always on shift, at a loss to divide what leisure she had between the conflicting needs of her daughters; and her step-father Malcolm, who came to the house to take Bethan on camping trips or for work experience in the forest, and whose absence from the family home always seemed to Tanwen a rebuke.

Yet the house in Gwaed Erw was no paradise for the girl, but only a taste of cleanliness and good order. In fine

weather she sat in the hillside garden with a book, or went for solitary walks among the deserted quarries on the *foel*; she played her violin and helped Myfanwy prepare the casseroles and roasts; but much of her time was spent in the study with John, where they read from the folk tales and fables of Iolo Morganwg or the modernist fiction of John Gwilym Jones, stopping whenever she needed help with the difficult parts of the Welsh. And in the years during which she cooled towards John and Myfanwy, the years in which she completed her A-levels and moved to Cardiff to do her degree, Tanwen came to resent the time she had spent with them for accentuating that self-consciousness in her, that studiousness, for discouraging those loves and adventures with which other girls her age had enriched their lives. The last trip she made to Gwaed Erw was in winter. Torrential rains closed the bus route home, and Tanwen was stranded with John and Myfanwy over Christmas. And when they put it to her that John write to her mother, that he and Myfanwy give her a home for the last few months of her childhood and the years of her higher education, that she apply to study Welsh literature in Cardiff and spend her holidays being coached by John, she thought of the loneliness of those walks, the formality of those dinner-time conversations, and John and Myfanwy were confused and distressed by her distress and confusion.

It was mid morning the day after Boxing Day. Fairy lights were twinkling on the Christmas tree, and a coal fire was smouldering in the grate, but the light from the window was grey and dim, and a hard, heavy rain beat in spitefulness at the glass. Tanwen was sitting in an armchair in her coat, her right hand fingering the barrette in a coil of her dark hair,

her left hand holding a paperback in the crimson folds of her skirt, and on the floor nearby lay her suitcase and her violin case. When Myfanwy came into the room to collect her coffee cup, she looked up and closed the book, and gave a small, pained smile.

'John will be down to say goodbye,' said Myfanwy. 'He's stiff in his joints today, but he knows you're leaving.' She stood over Tanwen with the cup in one hand, and Tanwen reached out and took hold of the other, turning it gently to examine the fingers and palm. 'You will think about his offer, won't you, Tanwen?' she said. 'You know the room upstairs is yours, and we both feel it's time you had a warm house and hot meals while you're studying.'

'I know you do,' said Tanwen, 'but it feels very late to change my degree, when I have an offer from Cardiff already. And it's a long way to come, just to study with John, when the teachers who've worked with me all my life are back in Dyffryn Ysig.'

'You would catch up, you know. John thinks you have it in you to be a writer or a translator, and he wants to help.' The sound of a truck parking came from outside, but Myfanwy kept talking. 'Don't feel you have to come, Tanwen *fach.* We know you must have plenty of young friends at home, and we must seem very old and stuck in our ways to you.'

'You know it's not about that,' said Tanwen, 'and I'll always remember your hospitality and kindness to me.' She embraced the woman, all bones and joints, and John came downstairs to say goodbye and kiss her cheek. Then, with the warmth of his hand lingering between her shoulder blades like a bruise, harried by the urgency of their love, she picked

up her cases and left the house in Gwaed Erw for the last time.

Low hydrangea shrubs bordered the path. The stream running past the *cegin* had burst its banks, and in its violence had pulled John's ornamental water wheel from its axle and dumped it, broken and black, against the garden wall. A few cobs in the neighbouring field picked their way to higher ground, twitching their sodden hides at the rain, and Tanwen put down her head, and ran and skidded on the slates and through the mud to where Malcolm was waiting behind the wheel of his truck.

Her mother had not chosen Malcolm for his looks. There was sandy hair turning grey, and a long, narrow face; there were sunken cheeks and a furrowed brow, and deep seams running downward beneath the lower lip. The mouth thinned and broadened as Tanwen opened the door of the truck; the ringed left hand snatched a road atlas from the passenger seat, and there was a long, jagged scab on the back of it. A light came on in the living room window; someone opened and slammed the front door. Then some blockage in the flood cleared itself, and a mass of mud and brush and timber bled thick and dark across the road. Tanwen sat staring ahead of her, one hand resting in the crimson of her skirt, the other pulling at the barrette in her hair, and there was a touch of annoyance in his voice as he asked her, 'So you had a good Christmas? John and Myfanwy looked after you?'

'It was okay,' said Tanwen. 'It was nice.'

'You don't sound too sure.' The truck was moving towards the valley floor, past black stone walls and scrawny hawthorn, through rain which hurled itself at the

windscreen and floodwater which eddied and swirled at their tires. ‘You didn’t miss much in Dyffryn Ysig. Your mum’s been working, your sister was bored, and no one’s left the village because of the floods.’ Again the mouth broadened and thinned. ‘We spent most of Christmas by the fire playing cards. I suppose if you’d been there, you’d have curled up in a corner with a book.’

‘Could you really not come and collect me for Christmas? Not even in the truck?’

‘Look, Tani,’ said Malcolm. A farmer’s lorry was picking its way up a parallel lane, and the muzzles of the sheep inside poked at the vents. ‘They’re clearing the winter pastures, moving the livestock to higher ground. Both roads out of the valley were closed. We’ve had motorists stranded in Dyffryn Ysig, sleeping on the church floor.’

‘It sounds quite nice, though, the three of you together. I suppose you and mum had time to yourselves as well.’ For a moment her gaze rested on the view ahead — on the swirl and eddy of the floods at their tires, on the windscreen as it blurred and cleared — and then she shifted her weight, pulled her muddy shoes onto the seat and leaned forward over her book.

A crow was feeding where a sheep had drowned in a mountain stream. As the truck came in view, it raised its head, swallowing the eye it had plucked from the carcass, and took flight with slow beats of its wings. The rain had eased off. The truck crossed the ford that the stream had made of its culvert. Tanwen awoke from a doze as the front tires struck the water, and then they began climbing towards the next pass, through mountains with a twisted, stunted

look, and where the road had been widened a sign showed the flags of Europe and Wales, defaced by a swastika. This was Meirionnydd. Here the kings of Wales had fought, Dyfed against Gwynedd, Gwynedd against Powys, groping towards a Kingdom of Wales that had been crushed as it was born. Tanwen put her book aside, and cleared her throat.

A hitchhiker peered at them from under his hood, and raised a mittened thumb as they passed him. Malcolm's scabbed left hand hovered over the gear stick, and withdrew.

'I didn't think it had rained that hard,' said Tanwen.

'We're over-farmed. Plenty of room for sheep, but none for trees or water meadows.' Malcolm shrugged. 'A bit of deforestation, a bit of climate change, and here's the result.'

'I didn't know,' said Tanwen.

'People think what happened at Aberfan is history. Before the mines closed. Before devolution. It's not a good world you're growing up in, Tani. Try and make it a better one. Please.'

There was a silence. The windscreen blurred and cleared and blurred again. 'The roads don't look too bad,' said Tanwen.

'We're making good time. We'll be home in time for lunch.' He glanced at her book, stowed page-down under the windscreen. 'Maybe you'll have finished your book by then.'

'John gave me this one. I've got a few chapters left.'

'You've been reading all Christmas?'

'Studying. I've been with John, studying.' The defensive note crept into her voice, and she added, 'He's offered me extra coaching so I can apply to do Welsh in Cardiff.'

'Extra coaching,' said Malcolm; 'it's always the extras with you, Tani — always the privileges, never the rights.

Your teachers back home would give you any help you asked, but you'd rather have John and Myfanwy fussing over you.' Tanwen straightened her back. Her left hand strayed to the barrette in her hair. 'Bethan is going to learn how to work with her hands. Bad times are coming, and she wants to help. Is studying Welsh really the most important thing right now?'

Tanwen said nothing. 'You know you can get onto that English course. How many trips is it going to take to make your Welsh as good?'

'It wouldn't be trips,' said Tanwen. 'I'd live with John and Myfanwy till I went down to Cardiff, and spend the holidays there.' Her voice grew shrill. 'Why shouldn't I live with John and Myfanwy if I want to? They want to help — and I'm old enough to leave home, if I want to.'

'Think carefully, Tani,' said Malcolm.

'I will do.'

'No, Tani, I mean it. You need to think very carefully indeed.' For a moment the sound of the engine filled the gap between them, and he added, 'There's something you should know: I'm moving back in. Bethan needs her father, your mother needs a partner, and even you need me a lot more than you think.' She opened her mouth to protest. 'Leave if think it's the right thing to do. Go and live with John and Myfanwy; change your study plans. But don't walk out on your mother and sister without a great deal of thought.'

'I won't,' said Tanwen. Her voice sounded flat and resentful. The steady hiss of the rain and the regular, monotonous droning of the windscreen wipers filled the silence, and once again she put her head down, and took refuge in her book.

In the closing years of the old millennium, a young English student from Stockport had caught the eye of a doctoral student in Bangor, and a few months later had conceived a child. In the aftermath of its birth, she had given up her degree and taken a job in the hospital kitchens, and the young man had transferred his research to Cardiff, leaving the woman with a cottage in Dyffryn Ysig which he had inherited from his parents. The house on Stryd Igwl was his sole investment in his child, and the last that the woman would have accepted; but not long afterwards, she had met the father of her second child, who stayed close to Dyffryn Ysig for the sake of his daughter, when discord with that first child drove him away. And this contrast between the two fathers had become the contrast between the girls also, Tanwen learning studiousness as a disguise for her self-consciousness, neglecting friends her own age while seeking the approval of people much older; and Bethan both resenting and despising her sister as the reason her father had left.

They were driving into Dyffryn Ysig when Tanwen made a decision. On this side Mynydd Igwl rose, rugged yet green, six hundred feet to where it was capped by cloud, and on the other, Crib Ysig, bruised and jagged with quarries and slag. Then came the village. A small industrial park with half its units empty, a school where Tanwen, who knew neither Branwen nor Heledd, had been bullied, yet whose language, by striving, she had made almost her own; and now a tumble of terraces, chapels and pubs, that community which had endured the Welsh Not and the Penrhyn Lockouts, and which ecocide and linguicide and ethnic encroachment threatened to crush under foot.

The town had suffered in the flood. The houses on the main street were sandbagged, although the water levels had sunk, and a rowan tree torn from its moorings lay with its branches on the road. Tanwen sat straight in the passenger seat and untied her hair as the truck turned uphill towards Stryd Igwl, past a man pushing a bicycle laden with hay, past a woman who emerged from her door under the flag of Owain Glyndŵr, and crossed the lane in her wellington boots and her dressing gown to a caravan. Malcolm stopped the truck at the turning, and again the mouth broadened and thinned.

'Go on in, Tani,' he said. 'I'm going home to pick up a few things, and I'll join you in an hour or two.'

It was strange to be home. The wall facing the street was windowless stone, and a narrow alley led to a yard, where the *tŷ bach* had been connected to the house by a perspex corridor, green with mould. No lights showed. The sound of a bass line came from the attic, Bethan practising her guitar. Tanwen took the key from her bag, and let herself into the kitchen, putting her violin case down among the dirty lunch plates with a sigh. 'Hello?' she called, and louder, 'Hello?' The music stopped. Feet sounded on a wooden ladder, and Bethan put her head round the door. 'Oh, Tani,' she said. 'You're back.'

'I'm back,' agreed Tanwen wearily. 'Have you let the fire go out? It's cold.'

She kissed her half sister on the cheek, and dragged her suitcase down the step into the living room. Here also the Christmas lights twinkled on a tree, but the room was cheerless without a fire, and a patch of damp was appearing on the carpet. She sank down on the sofa, while Bethan

watched her, lounging in the doorway. 'Mum's at work,' she told her; 'but there's chicken and roast potatoes in the fridge, if you want lunch. Did you know my dad is moving back in?'

'He told me,' said Tanwen. She was starting to cry. And Bethan gazed at her for a moment, bewildered, before joining her on the sofa and putting an arm round her shoulder.

'What is it, Tani?' she asked her, 'what's up?'

'I don't know,' said Tanwen. For so many things had died or been born that day that she could not have said which of them grieved her.

CLEANLINESS

If there was anyone whom Tanwen could think of as deserving her confidence and respect, then even though they never grew close, that person was her half-sister, Bethan. And although the realisation of her qualities came late, for Bethan died in her early twenties, Tanwen in her longer, lonelier life could look back on the night she had stayed with her sister as the end of the hostility between them, and the beginnings of something like kinship. Bethan was studying to be a conservationist. With a small inheritance from her grandmother, and with her father's help, she had built herself a kind of caravan of wood and steel, insulated with sheep's wool and heated with a wood stove, parked on the edge of the pastures in Nant Meigion near Tregynllaith; and as the long drought of summer broke and the autumn nights grew chilly, she remembered the other part of her inheritance, her grandmother's home-made quilt. And since Tanwen was travelling to Cardiff to move in with her father while she started her Ph.D. in Welsh literature in translation, and since the bus from Dyffryn Ysig would be passing a few miles from Nant Meigion, she proposed that Tanwen bring her the quilt, and spend the night in her vardo to break up her journey.

It did not seem to Tanwen that the visit would bring about much happiness. Her sister, being her sister, phrased the suggestion as a demand; her step-father, being her step-father, turned the demand into an order; and the demand and the order filled Tanwen with a quiet resentment at the weight and bulk it would add to her baggage, at the disruption of social contact when she had hoped to be alone. The night before she left Dyffryn Ysig was cold. Stirred into partial wakefulness by the light of the moon through her attic window, Tanwen staggered to her feet to take the quilt from her rucksack and spread it over her duvet, and sank back into sleep with the weight of it on her side and the smell of it in her nostrils. And as the bus drove south through barren fells and steep ravines, through mellow afternoon sunlight and sudden assaults of hail, she sat brooding with the rucksack in front of her leaning against her knees, and the smell of mould from the quilt inside it seeping into her clothes. Then came the halt at Tregynllaith; the walk 2½ miles along narrow roads with the weight of the quilt on her shoulders and the damp of her sweat on her back; the farm track through the valley, Nant Meigion, past open woodland and water meadows, past a farm truck displaying the *draig aur* on its tail-gate, past a house where the flags of Wales and Europe flew united in defiance, and past Jacob sheep that lifted their heads to watch as she went by, until she arrived at Bethan's door thirsty and tired and a little aggrieved at the inconvenience and the delay.

'It's good to see you, Tani,' said Bethan. She had inherited Malcolm's heft and complexion, darkened by their mother's genes, and she stood on tiptoe to reach Tanwen's cheek, the dolphin pendant which Tanwen had given her catching the

light as she did so. 'Did you have a good journey? And did you remember the quilt?'

'I remembered the quilt,' Tanwen said; 'the journey was okay.' She shrugged off her rucksack, sinking down on her back on the grass. 'I've not had lunch. And I'm thirsty.'

'I can make you an omelette. And there's tea. Or beer.' She stood above Tanwen, blocking the light, and added, 'We can eat in the sun. Or you can come inside and look around.'

'I'd like a shower,' said Tanwen. She added with sudden impatience, 'That quilt weighs a tonne, Beth. I'd forgotten how heavy it is.'

'Keeps you warm, though,' Bethan said. 'You'll be glad of it tonight.'

'It stinks. It's been mixed up with my clothes all day.'

'We can air them.' She added, with mild asperity, 'Do you still want that shower, Tani? Or food? Or a drink? Or are you going to lie on the grass all afternoon?'

'I'll come in a minute,' said Tanwen. Bethan's shadow passed, and she opened her eyes. The vardo stood parked in the shelter of an oak tree. More oaks lined the stream, and behind the vardo, behind a plantation of firs, Nant Meigion rose to its head: still bare after the summer heat, yet regaining its native colours except where the trees had died in their foliage, or where the drought had revealed pathways and boundaries older than Edward's castles, older than Rome. She heard the kettle boiling and followed her sister indoors. Bethan was cracking eggs into a bowl, but she turned round as Tanwen entered, and said, 'It'll be a few minutes. Take a look around. Tell me what you think.'

'I like it,' said Tanwen. Like Wil Bryan, and for the same reason, Bethan could live comfortably in one room. A kitchen

ran down one side of the vardo, a study area down the other, and a ladder led up to the sleeping platform above a snug, with beanbags and bookshelves on either side of the toilet door. Bethan's hash pipe and tarot pack lay on the table, her guitar was propped against the steps, and the books she had borrowed from her father — Frantz Fanon, Raymond Williams, Gramsci's letters from prison — occupied the shelf space in the snug. And the vardo suited Bethan. Its cleanliness, its sense of simplicity and good order, its mixture of austerities and unexpected comforts, suggested a life lived with good sense and purpose. She said slowly, 'It's what I'd have expected of you, Beth.'

She had been slow to appreciate her sister's qualities. When she had set her sights on a degree in Cardiff, and was being coached by John and Myfanwy, what she had seen of Bethan had been the slovenliness and disorder that now she had outgrown; after rejecting John and Myfanwy and returning home to Dyffryn Ysig, she had read Bethan's closeness to Malcolm as obedience, the obedience that John and Myfanwy had expected of her. Yet Bethan had chosen her own way of life, using her inheritance to buy independence, and moving away from her father's influence even as she pursued the calling they shared. She laughed in embarrassment, and was suddenly practical.

'It's not like I was ever going to be a high flyer like you, Tani. So it was this or some dingy studio flat, and at least this is on my own terms. There's cheese and an onion and pepper on the side — maybe you'll give me a hand?'

The grey skirt and black top in which Tanwen planned to arrive at her father's were hung over the back of a chair, and the quilt that had caused her so much resentment was laid out upstairs with a window open to air it. The quilt was the work of three generations, excepting her mother but including Bethan herself, backed with sprigged cotton, wadded with wool, a medley of colours both vibrant and subdued: pale cream from the wedding dress her great-grandmother had worn during the war; rich brown cut by her grandmother from a skirt shredded by thorns; and Bethan's contributions scattered amongst them: a school uniform she had grown out of, an old shirt of Malcolm's, and even a scarf that Tanwen had loved — the theft too had caused Tanwen resentment, though what she had resented most was Bethan's happiness.

They set out for a walk, up the hill through the conifer plantation and towards an old drover's road. Tanwen, the more sedentary of the two, walked with her gaze on the yellow and grey of her sister's walking boots, pausing from time to time to catch her breath, while from somewhere behind them came a buzzard's eerie cries. Presently they had breached the ridge, and the quietness was broken by the sudden chatter of Tanwen's mobile phone. Bethan turned round, waiting as she sat down on a boulder and read.

'Anything the matter?'

'Just my dad. He wants to know when to meet my bus.' She slipped her phone into a pocket and stood up. 'I'll text him later.'

'Reception's good here, if you want to text him back.'

‘It can wait. I can text him on the bus tomorrow.’ Defensiveness made her impatient, and she said, ‘I don’t just want to sit around on top of a mountain, Bethan. It’s cold.’

‘Then don’t,’ said Bethan. She led the way, not looking back. The tips of the mountains were visible above the lower hills, the clouds were under-lit by the afternoon sun, and she slowed her pace, forcing Tanwen to catch up with her. ‘If you want to be close to your dad and treat the rest of us like strangers, then fine,’ she said. ‘But if you’re planning to just use him while you do your degree and then drop him like you did John and Myfanwy, don’t expect sympathy or respect. ’

Tanwen was silenced. ‘No one gives a damn if your clothes smell of mould. Turn up smelling like shit if you have to, and give your dad proper a hug. But don’t just stand there with that smirk on your face, looking like you’re too pure to touch.’

‘I didn’t—’ said Tanwen.

‘You didn’t have to come. You could have refused, and I’d have got the quilt some other way. But when I ask you to see me and bring it down so I can have a bit of my childhood here, all you can do is whinge about how heavy it is and how it makes your clothes smell.’

‘I didn’t—’ said Tanwen again.

The path was easy to follow. It led gently downward between raised banks, through pasture thick with sheep droppings and criss-crossed by rabbit trails, towards the gable of a ruined house in a defile of the hillside. The spring still ran clear from its little arch of stones, but the hawthorn hedge had broken free from its laying, and the roof had collapsed. The slates and the rotting remains of the rafters lay among the brambles and willowherb that filled the

rooms, but dock and navel-wort grew where the windows had been, and here and there lichen the colour of sulphur had colonised the stone. Bethan sat down on the doorstep. She took a bottle of water from her rucksack, swigged, and passed it to Tanwen.

'This is where we were going?'

'This is Tŷ'n y Graith. This is where we were going.'

'Is it okay to go in?'

'It isn't dangerous, if that's what you're asking.'

She stood aside to let her pass. And Tanwen, moving gingerly through the undergrowth and rubble, took in the fireplace in the corner away from the draught from the door; the sockets for the rafters. Her fingertips stroked the rough stones of the wall, and she turned to find her sister watching her.

'Are you okay?'

'I'm okay.' Tanwen paused. 'It's peaceful here.'

'When me and my dad were setting up the vardo, I used to come here every day to get away.'

'To get away from your dad, you mean?' Their eyes met. There was complicity and humour in Bethan's smile. 'Why was it abandoned?'

'The *tylwyth teg* came one spring. They danced in a circle on the far bank of the stream, and the father heard the trilling of pipes, and stepped into the circle and joined them, and no one ever touched his hand again. A year later, they danced in a circle where the hawthorn blossom lay thickest, and the oldest son heard the beating of drums, and leaped into the circle and joined them, and no one ever saw his face again. And a year later, they danced in a circle in front of the door. The daughter heard the sighing of fiddles, and

although her mother tried to hold her back, she skipped into the circle and joined them, and even the sweetness of her voice was gone, and work at Tŷ'n y Graith stopped.'

'You have hidden talents, Beth,' said Tanwen. Bethan laughed.

'It was what the mother always said — but there's truth in it. The father was killed in a fight at the county fair, they got into debt and the son went south to work in the mines, and then the daughter just vanished one winter, and the mother died in an asylum. Can you imagine what my dad would have made of a story like that?'

Tanwen shifted her weight. If over there the *cwpwrdd tridarn* had stood, if here some Begw had played with her doll while her Sgiatan blinked at the fire, if there the floor had been darkened by mud when the father brought peat from the store, then the berries were still bright among the green leaves of the hawthorn, and no doubt the lizards and slow-worms had their lairs beneath the brambles. The house did not mourn them. A wind was bringing rain clouds from Meirionnydd, and as she watched the mountains softening in the mist, it flashed through her mind that she was cold and bored and still resentful of their argument. Bethan was leaning cross-legged against the fireplace, her hair blowing loose, her blue and pink anorak unzipped to reveal the dolphin charm at her throat, and it was strange to see her so still, so composed. She seldom used the language which neither of her parents spoke, seldom expressed anything more than impatience with the history of thought it conveyed, yet she seemed as moved by this empty small-holding as Tanwen had been by the ruin of Cynddylan's hall. By effort, Tanwen had sought to master the language, to

graft herself onto that green and scarlet tree; but Bethan, it seemed, had woven herself into the national life as naturally and unthinkingly as she had stitched her great-grandmother's quilt. She looked up. Her blue eyes met Tanwen's brown ones as the first raindrops fell, and she laughed.

'Come on,' she said, 'or we'll both get the creeps. Let's get you home before it's pissing it down, and I'll light a fire before tea.'

She gave Bethan her clothes to dry by the fire, and took a shower, and because the rain was thunderous on the roof, she put on her pyjamas and settled down in one of the beanbags to read. Bethan fussed over her household tasks, dusting the surfaces and sweeping the floor, before sitting at her desk with her textbooks. And Tanwen, looking up from her book, remembered the grey light and the sound of the rain at Gwaed Erw before she was stranded, and then, in a moment of irrational fear, she imagined the vardo working loose in the mud, and sliding down as they slept towards the foot of the valley. She shifted in her beanbag with a nervous cough, and Bethan looked up from her books and gave her a kindly glance.

'I'll start the meal in a minute or two,' she said.

The meal was couscous served with courgettes and peppers; the wine was a Chilean Merlot which Tanwen, standing in the off-licence in Tregynllaith with her rucksack, had recognised from her undergraduate days and bought out of thrift and nostalgia. And it was not only the wine that reminded Tanwen of her past. The food, with its rough-edged simplicity, the tumblers used for wine, the incense to cover

the smell of cooking, and even her sister's forthrightness, brought to mind shared dinners in student kitchens where she had watched and listened, had laughed when the others laughed and said what was expected, and had felt herself on the threshold of friendship. She raised her glass with a thoughtful gaze, and clinked the edge of Bethan's.

'What? What is it?' said Bethan.

'Here's...' The wine had softened her. She lacked her sister's long practice with alcohol. 'I don't know, here's to you... You and this beautiful thing you've made.'

'I don't know I've made anything beautiful. Unless you mean the quilt.'

'The quilt is beautiful too.' She had never made such a confession. 'But I mean this life you've built yourself... this caravan...'

'It's not finished yet. Anyway, my dad did most of the work.' She was still talking, perhaps to cover her own embarrassment, or to ensure that Tanwen felt none of her own. As she described her plans for the vardo, her studies, her ambitions for a career in conservation, Tanwen heard Malcolm's tone in her — the world lurched towards fascism, flood and flame, yet in fighting them, Bethan had found a reason for living; and for a moment she saw her own life as others might see it, arid and unfeeling. After dinner, her first night in her father's house, she sat on the end of the bed and buried her face in her hands. Amidst the dark, heavy furniture, the Tunnicliffe prints and the florid, musty fabrics, only the rucksack on the floor was her own — and her lap, and her feet in front of her, and all the moments of her life, already regretted or still unknown, see-sawing on this moment of loneliness and doubt.

Bethan died in a landslide the winter she turned twenty-two, driving home from Dyffryn Ysig to Nant Meigion.

PUGNACIOUS LITTLE TROLLS

She had looked forward to introducing Rhidian to her old professor, looked forward to seeing the house in Traethelern where Huw Emyr had retired, but in the end, Tanwen had spent that day in a state of exhaustion and subtle irritation. It was not exactly Rhidian's fault. For the past week or so he had been depressed, a consequence of their argument and the time she was spending at work, and in addition to that, he was feeling the loss of his independence on his first trip home without a driving licence, and more than usually anxious that his next seizure might be his last. They had been late leaving Aberystwyth; he was nursing a hangover. And although he had rallied in the cool of Huw Emyr's bungalow, holding her hand on the sofa where they had drunk coffee, and at the dining table where they were eating lunch, he had said little except in agreement with the others' comments, and his arms, whenever he moved them, released a faint odour of sweat. Huw Emyr did not seem to notice. He had hugged Tanwen briefly, shaken Rhidian's hand and apologised that he had already eaten, and now he sat opposite, toying with a glass of wine and talking as they ate. The diggers were at work at a building site up the road, and

from time to time Rhidian let go of her hand and cupped his hand round his ear to help him hear him.

'I'll grant,' said Huw Emyr, 'that the commotion amused me.'

'It amused you,' said Tanwen.

'It amused me rather a lot. And I more than suspect they enjoyed the diversion. It gave them cause to fluster, and such people like to fluster, and it confirmed their most thrilling terrors about the people of Traethelern. If I can infiltrate a second-homers' committee, merely by temporarily owning two houses and using the English form of my name, how can they even sleep safely at night?' His left incisor, larger than its twin, gave his smile a lopsided, quirky look. 'By the time I escaped from the meeting, I'd been told by one member to know my place, and by another to remember that it's the English who pay for keeping our made-up language alive. I felt like the man who won the vote but lost his trousers... You seem a little stressed, Tani: are you all right?'

'Work,' said Tanwen; 'just work.' Rhidian gave a short, harsh laugh, and Tanwen looked up from rubbing the bridge of her nose with finger and thumb. 'Carry on; I'm listening.'

'So serious, Tani,' Huw Emyr said; 'always so serious. Since moving to Traethelern I've made a study of frivolity, the way I once made a study of Middle Welsh verbs. Living alone, I instituted a strict policy against talking to myself about politics or work — it makes relaxation easier, and increases my chances of success with the women on the second-homers' committee. I hope you realise, Tani, that my lifelong predicament as a single man is due entirely to the time I lost to politics and Middle Welsh verbs? They are

dangerous things, and I must forbid you to mention them. Your happiness is at stake.'

The bungalow lay on the main road into Traethelern. To the north, the blue of Caernarfon Bay was visible beyond the pastures, and to the south, Gyrn Goch rose above the smoke and dust of the drought, as bald and scarred as Crib Ysig by its quarries. The name of the house, The Waves, had come from its previous owner, and Huw Emyr had kept it, perhaps enjoying the consternation of his Welsh-speaking neighbours as much as he enjoyed provoking his enemies. There was little in the house that Tanwen had seen to mark him as a scholar. If he still had his books, they were out of sight in some back room, and instead, the rooms displayed old photographs of his grandparents, parents and sisters, and photographs of college life when Huw Emyr had been young. Tanwen asked, with weary amusement, 'What can I mention, Huw Emyr?'

'With regard to that,' replied Huw Emyr, 'I commend you to the good example of the second homers' committee, who never, that I can see, discuss Middle Welsh verbs, or anything that would trouble their vacuity at all. The forests of the world are on fire, and they want to hold classes in *topiary*.' A wind ruffled the blinds. In a lull from the building site there came the sound of a car starting, a lawn mower, the slam of a garage door. '*I* can discuss the second homers' committee, because I can assure you, such discussion is in no sense political. And household policy, strict though it is, *does* allow the discussion of work, provided I take no part in it... It may interest you to know that Huw Emyr is translating Gildas into Welsh. Translating Gildas particularly pleases Huw Emyr, in part because it represents the movement of ideas from a

dead language into a dying one—' he saw that Rhidian's glass was empty, and leaned forward to refill it, not breaking his flow '—and in part because it continues that tradition of pessimism and despair that so elevates and dignifies our culture... I'm surprised the second homers aren't more supportive of the project. After all, they represent the final stage of English colonisation which began when Constantine pulled his troops out of Britain and left us isolated from Europe... Tani, you're giving me puzzled looks. Remind me what you did your thesis in — representations of textiles in Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion,* was it? Lady Guest's textiles as text?'

Rhidian guffawed. And in retrospect, her work made Tanwen wince: it had been ambitious, yet lacking in conviction, stunted by an anxiety to please that now seemed comically misplaced, since one of the people she had most wanted to please was Huw Emyr. Bethan's death had deepened her sense of purpose without broadening her research, so that she forced herself to work long hours in a sense of futility and guilt. There was a slight odour of sweat, and Rhidian's hand briefly clasped her bare knee under the table. 'You've got to admit it, though,' he said. 'She's in a good place career-wise.'

'How can I contradict it?' said Huw Emyr. 'I can barely understand it. I live a few short miles from where the *Four Branches* were written, and I read almost nothing but *Jennings* and the Biggles books. *Jennings* and the Biggles books tell me everything I need to make sense of the English mentality. With their help, I am not without hope of putting frivolity aside, and launching a new offensive on the second homers' committee as a sincere and patriotic Englishman... Do the

little things, Tani, little acts of subversion: you don't have to be a Trefor Beasley to help. You like to stand underneath your problems, where they can crush you. I like to see what they look like from the side.'

'There's something in that,' said Rhidian. Tanwen uncrossed her legs, and leaned forward, but before she could respond, the noise of a digger came from the building site next door, and the moment was gone. 'The Welsh language does not suffer pain,' said Huw Emyr. 'The English language does not want it dead. There is no grand battle between red and white: only the fear felt by you, you and my English neighbours. You know so much, Tani, but I sometimes wonder whether you know how to live. Learn from me as a translator and scholar; follow my example if you must. But not in that.' His smile showed warmth, an intensity of concern that made her think of John and Myfanwy's possessiveness, and in the same moment Rhidian's hand came to rest once more on her knee. 'Take my advice, and enjoy yourself a little. At least use today to enjoy Rhidian's company. Or go and write about clothes in Kate Roberts, or whatever you have to do.' He stood up to collect the plates, gesturing impatiently at his guests to stay seated, and then, seeing that Rhidian's glass was once again empty, he picked up the wine bottle and poured out what was left.

She drove down the hill towards the village in the heat of the late afternoon. The car had warmed in the sunlight; the leatherette upholstery was an abuse of the flesh, and Rhidian sat beside her with a flushed and heavy look, only glancing at her once, with a bovine wonderment, when she parked in the village square. Traethelern had a dead look, the second

homers enjoying the breezes further down the coast, the locals at work or indoors, avoiding the heat. Only in the dimness through an open street door, she glimpsed a man, bare but for his underpants, re-plastering his wall, and a cat lay sprawled on its side on the pavement, as shameless of its belly as a dog. 'Do you want anything?' she asked, and when Rhidian opened his mouth little, without intention of speaking, she got out of the car and crossed the square. Three boys and a girl were sitting on the pavement. 'Nice dress, miss,' the girl said, quite nicely. 'Miss,' said one of the boys, 'will you be our new teacher?' She drew herself upright and kept her eyes ahead as she got out her purse and pushed at the door to the shop.

'There's no more ice cream!' a woman yelled. Tanwen paused, startled, her hand still on the latch. 'I said there's no more ice cream! Those kids have taken the lot. They're like the plague!'

'I only want a bottle of wine,' said Tanwen. Frustration and weariness found their voice, and she added, 'I suppose the kids have taken all that as well?' The woman behind the counter subsided. 'I'm just saying,' she told her. 'Because everyone wants to buy ice cream, and I haven't got any.'

But it was cooler than the sweltering heat of the car. She felt the prickling of dried sweat on her skin, and prowled the aisles for the sake of the solitude and the cool, lingering in front of the greetings cards, creepily specific, the cheap toys and colouring books, the padlocks and cable ties that are sold everywhere in country stores, before she moved towards the drinks aisle. Living with her father had improved her taste in wine, but among the Merlots and the Chardonnays and the red and white blends, as matter-of-factly named as the shop

was named Traethelern Shop, she noticed the blush of a White Zinfandel, and surrendered her dignity to the heat and bought it.

Rhidian was sleeping with his head turned to the side, and his cheek was silvered with drool. Yet the self-doubt and anxiety had gone from his face, and seeing him so calm and reposed in his sleep, she felt a little of her own tension dissipate also.

She drove south, and the smell of sweat was in her nostrils, and smoke hung over the lower slopes of Gyrn Goch.

And it was not Rhidian's fault that she found herself always so stressed. His condition made him careful, meticulous in diet and exercise and his medical regime, until a blackout or seizure came upon him unprovoked, and self-care gave way to indifference and anxiety. It was those darker moods that made him so dependent on her, and out of the dependency grew the possessiveness that overwhelmed her and drove her to the outskirts of their relationship. And possessiveness became jealousy of her career and friendships and the time they spent apart, so that they had argued — really argued — when a colleague offered to take her sailing in Cardigan Bay: not only because he was afraid she might drown, but because her colleague was male. She had stood her ground and not given in, although it had tired her, and she had wanted to give in. And in addition to that, there were the anxieties they shared: fear of the next hypo, which if it came in his sleep might kill him; fear of the gradual loss of independence which might make her his carer in middle age. And over time his private anxieties had come to take the same form as hers. The hypos he described, like wading through mud, like drowning in the Foryd flats where he had

been raised, made her think of the mudslides that had killed her sister, that threatened to engulf her in her dreams, and she felt her will to live subsumed by the weight of his fears and hers.

She could see the fire now, as she turned onto the main road. Whether caused by the drought or — and the thought amused her — by those plaguesome kids, it had spread across the width of a field at the bottom of Gyrn Goch, consuming the gorse, and now it licked at the trunk of a rowan at the edge of the barer slopes. Tongues of smoke moved outward, exploring the breath of the road, obscuring the sign to the farm that was called Majestic, and the smell of it, quick and clean, was stronger than the smell of Rhidian's sweat.

She pulled into a lay-by and rummaged in the glove compartment for his injection kit. The convulsions had already begun, and with shaking hands she made up the solution as she had been shown, stabbed his thigh with the syringe and drove it home.

A little of the smoke had parted; the farm, Majestic, had become a homelier Maes Teg; and Rhidian had looked at her with sentience in his eyes when Tanwen climbed over a stile into the field where the gorse had been burning. The ground was black beneath her sandalled feet, and the smoke rose in flurries where she passed, with flames that peeped shyly from the trodden ground as though, like Olwen, she had planted them in her steps. She was gaining height. The white blur of sea was becoming visible behind her, and as she entered the *marian* where the fire was still burning, she hopped onto one of the larger rocks and took a jump to the next.

‘Tanwen!’ called Rhidian behind her.

A lizard was perched on the rock in front of her. It licked the ash on the air, turned its head and examined Tanwen, and darted from view. She hesitated at the length of the jump, and with a sense of daring took off her shoes, and left them side by side upon the rock.

‘Tanwen!’ called Rhidian again.

But the flames were not white. They licked at the base of the tree as though with lascivious intent, and above them (‘Tanwen! Come back!’ came that voice behind her) the branches were vivid with berries and leaves. Like the summer fires that were creeping beyond the south of Europe, like the ignorance and greed that threatened her own fragile nation, they were growing stronger, and she stood with her hands at her sides and her toes scratching the lichen that dusted the rock, as the branches took light, and the tree assumed its final beauty and gave itself to the blaze.

‘I exist,’ she thought. And that moment, that moment of knowing, was joy to her.

INDUSTRY IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND

> 'Three hundred miles and more from Chimborazo, one hundred from the snows of Cotopaxi...'
>
> H. G. Wells

1. Something to read on the way

There is a sculpture outside the train station which serves the Country of the Blind. Cast in bronze, it shows the valley's discoverer, standing almost at the crest of a crag with a young woman by his side. He gazes southward, past the station towards the mountains into which he made his escape, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the sun, the other holding the woman's arm in guidance or support. The woman, bare-footed, is nursing a child. Her face is turned towards the ground, while surrounding them both is a sea of uplifted hands, grasping their ankles in supplication or treachery. A plaque in Roman script and Braille commemorates their names, Ricardo Núñez and Medina-Saroté, his lover, after whom the town is named.

The statue is regularly vandalised, and as regularly repaired. The nationalists, the Serenos, paint their slogans over the plinth or hammer them into the bronze in a kind of

inverse Braille; they lock fetters round the wrists of those upturned hands, or they cover Núñez's eyes with goats' blood as though they have been gouged. The staff in the tourist cafés whose glass fronts line the square will disavow the Serenos. They are not from Medina-Saroté, they will claim, but from Las Piñas or Cien Fuegos to the north; they are blind, and come to Medina-Saroté to drink their disability pensions; they are fanatics, who have hijacked the cultural heritage of the Valley as a pretext for their hate. In some of the cafés a few blocks to the north, or on the pavement outside the Casa Rosada where there are poetry readings on Thursday nights, the condemnations will seem more measured. Enucleation is a thing of the past, people will say, just as forced labour is a thing of the past. Because of gold, Núñez enslaved the people and broke their ways, and because of gold, they are building the old ways again. Perhaps some waiter will take a liking to you. He will mention *Senderisma*, the philosophy of the Ways, he will direct you to one of the bookshops, or the museum. He will suggest you take one of the walking tours of the perimeter wall or the parts of the Ways that have been restored; he will smile in dismissal or touch your arm as he peers at you in the sunlight.

When Ricardo Núñez discovered the valley, the ways ran the full forty-seven miles from the meadows where Medina-Saroté stands to the rocky landscape of the far north, intersecting to form a grid which every child began to memorise as soon as it could walk. Alongside the goat-bells and the plough, the bagpipes and alpenhorns, the milk churns and butter presses and simple children's toys, the museum displays a man's letter-staff and a woman's girdle

with the Ways encoded in knot-work. A piece of old film, digitised and displayed in cycle on a screen, shows the Valley's last cantor, Enrique González, sitting in a windowless room as he chants the ways and their waymarks, their landmarks and their natural histories, a complete cosmography of the Blind. The gift shop sells fragments of the old chants set to ambient music, walkers' and bird-watchers' guides, and books on *Senderisma*. Buy one from the woman behind the counter who has watched you browsing with goat-like eyes. It will be something to read on the way.

The visiting lecturer at Cardiff University is an exile from the Valley, nicknamed The Cord. He sits on the podium, a tanned, spare man with a powerful brow and eye-sockets in shadow, and declines when invited to come forward to the podium, giving his lecture still seated, his head turned a little sideways as he reads from the letter-staff in his hand. The lecture is a curious network of accidents and associations: the discovery of coal in the Rhondda, and Ricardo Núñez's discovery of gold; Maredudd Ddall, the captive prince sent home to Wales blinded by Henry II, and Núñez's Breaking of the Ways; the Welsh Not; Wounded Knee, and the text that Núñez carved on the hand-rails that guided his slaves through the mines: In the country of the blind, every man is a king.

The landslide that enwombed his people in their valley came about by accident, without warning, just as Núñez's arrival was so unexpected that they concluded that he had been born of the rocks. But the thin air and fierce light that caused the settlers to go blind, and the genetic quirk by means of which they were eventually born without eyes,

made themselves felt over generations, so that his ancestors had time to prepare. When Núñez came among them, they had adapted to life without sight; they had built the wall that protected their meadows from rockfalls, and the system of roads that forms the Wayland, the *Matriz*, so that when Núñez and the prospectors and mercenaries who came with him opened the mines at Cien Fuegos, their slaves were able to learn and navigate its tunnels as easily as they had moved around the valley above their heads.

The history of the Wayland can be told as the elevation of a disability into the basis of a culture, and the degradation of that culture into a disability. The achievements of the Blind as a people are the Ways as a means of giving shape to the land, the knot-work girdle and the letter-staff as systems of writing, and the chants of the cantors as philosophy and literature; while their humiliation is expressed in the disability cheques that they draw from the government every week, the televisions that they buy, yet cannot watch, their widespread addiction to alcohol; yet the humiliation begins in Núñez's time, and in his mines. The slave-workers who died there died for gold, a metal that has no value except to the sight, whose very name is meaningless to the blind; so that the foremen tormented their slaves with the taunt that they could never even know why they must die. During the uprising at Cien Fuegos, seven captured foremen were blinded in the town square, and left to grope their way home to their blind wives as best they could. And when Medina-Saroté gave birth to Núñez's son, she gouged out his eyes so that he would never succumb to that cruel and grasping madness called sight.

2. Souvenirs for the tourists

Senderisma, an attitude of staying on the Ways, of understanding oneself as a part of the cosmos. A reliance on the knowledge of the Ways that one has been taught, bringing with it a sense of respect for one's forebears and kinship with one's neighbours, and an obligation to help maintain the Ways without which one is lost. As you read your book, the bus takes the modern road north-east, following the former route of Núñez's railroad, past modern houses with bay windows facing south; past retail parks and hayfields; past a village of blank stone walls where a wide-eyed child guides her grandfather onto the bus, his eye-sockets shadowed by the rim of his hat; past a water-bottling plant and a private spa, until jettied houses of black pinewood and grey stone show that you are entering Las Piñas, and the driver turns the engine off outside the Longhouse in the main square.

The valley narrows here. A mountain ridge covered with pine forests runs down to meet the river, and where the air is filled with the roar of waterfalls and the rumbling of the glaciers, Ricardo Núñez made his home, and later adventurers founded a sanatorium or two. There are guided tours. The oldest of the blind guides, known as The Goat, will take you up through pine forests to listen to the songs of the birds which once, he explained, were revered as the Spirits of the Air, towards that mingling of forest and scree where Núñez dismantled the boundary wall to use the stone for the Longhouse. In Núñez's time the Longhouse contained a courtroom, a garrison and prison, the apartments where Medina-Saroté was installed with her child; but now it offers a benefits office, a public library, legal advice. Signs brightly

painted on wood in the square point the way to river rafting, hostels and bunkhouses, restaurants, forest walks. There is a tourists' office on the other side of the square. A relief map shows the mountains surrounding the Valley, the three main towns, and sections of wall. Other displays, and much of the merchandise, represent the wildlife of the Valley and the folklore of the Blind, especially concerning their national hero, Hernando.

a. Hernando and the Spirits of the Air

Hernando, guided by the Spirits of the Air, taught the people to clear their pastures of the stones and use the stones to build their houses. Hernando, inspired by the Spirits of the Air, taught the people to bell their goats, so that wherever they wandered, they could find them. Hernando, taught by the Spirits of the Air, showed the people how to dry meat in the sun and how to turn hide into leather; yet when he saw that the people needed metal for agriculture and cooking, he turned his back on the spirits. He made his way north from his home in Las Piñas along the riverbank, even as the wind grew bitter with cold, and the clear and joyful songs of the spirits turned harsh and dark and menacing. He dug the ground at the place which is now called Cien Fuegos, and built furnaces to refine the ore, but the spirits were offended by his presumption, and so they never taught their language to a human being again.

b. Hernando and the making of the ways

Hernando followed the riverbank south from Cien Fuegos, gathering pebbles as he went, until the sound of the river was the sound of his home, and he knew that he was at Las Piñas. Hernando called his name and the name of his

farmstead, as the custom was, and let shouted voices guide him, but once home, he did not rest. He called out his name and the name of his neighbours until they called him in, leaving pebbles from the river behind him on the way, and so the first of the Ways was laid from farmstead to farmstead, from man to man.

Whoever Hernando met, he asked them who were their neighbours, what rocks or streams lay in the way, and what was the feel of the land. He carried a staff, on which he recorded the places he had been, and he began to chant as he went to remind him of where he was going. Behind him he always left heaped stones as waymarks, and the people made them larger, cut symbols and numbers into their sides, dug paths and levelled them and made their boundaries firm, so the space that had been unknown and nameless between the farms came to be the home of Hernando's people: the Wayland, the *Matriz*.

c. Hernando fights the Men of the Rocks

When they heard the valley being filled with the ways, the Men of the Rocks became afraid of the people, and the land resounded with their roaring and groaning, and the rocks they hurled from the high, cold places panicked the flocks and terrified the people. The making of ways would have stopped, and the Wayland would have been lost, but Hernando chose men and led them up into the high, cold places to fight them, and the Men of the Rocks were pacified for a time.

As Hernando grew older, he came to understand that he would not always be with the people to defend or guide them, and so he appointed cantors to travel the ways and

teach the people the chants, and he took the strongest men once again and set them the task of building the wall. When it was finished, it stood so tall that a man could barely reach the top of it with his arms up-stretched, and its foundations were as deep as a man's feet are from his chest, and it circled the valley from its southern tip to the furthest north and back again, so that there was nowhere for the Men of the Rocks to break through. When the work was done, Hernando departed from his people and was reconciled with the Spirits of the Air, but if they care for the wall and keep to the paths, the people can be sure that he hears them and keeps the Wayland safe.

Who hears the Blind today, asks the Cord; who keeps the Wayland safe? The way from Cien Fuegos to its seat of government is the way of the sighted young when they leave: by bus through Las Piñas to Medina-Saroté, by train through the tunnel gouged through the mountains to bring Núñez's workers to the mines and export Núñez's gold, to San Martin or Puente Angosto where they will be told that if they are looking for work, there is no work there, and they must go on to the capital city, where one could sit for a year in the legislature without hearing the Wayland mentioned.

Could the people of the Wayland rebuild the Ways? The blind and ill-sighted who stay in the valley have their disability payments, their drugs and alcohol, their sense of themselves and their history as an accident and a curse. They can pick up work in the craft shops making souvenirs, or as tour guides in the gold mines; they can join the Serenos to firebomb some new hotel or deface a statue or two. Others know that if it is pointless to fight, it is pointless also to

reason. For if we speak of the dignity of the Blind, we are heard to be calling for enucleations; if we speak of the heritage of the *Matriz*, we are accused of rejecting all progress. It was after the blinding of the foremen in Cien Fuegos that Núñez broke the Ways. He tore up the waymarks, he flattened the verges, he heaped the ways with slag from his mines and laid landmines made by his slaves, not merely to take ownership of the valley or isolate the people, but to break their spirit. Yet *Senderisma* and the stories of Hernando commodify and infantilise the Wayland's culture to serve the tourist trade, while Medina-Saroté, blinding her child, becomes a rebuke to all those who reject the state's view of progress. That the sighted must protect and care for the blind, who in Núñez's case protected and cared for the sighted, becomes proof that our heritage is a weakness and a burden, just as here in this national capital the language is cited as proof that you are unworthy to be a nation, that to desire to be so is divisive and backward, proof of a sickness of mind.

3. Close enough for a day out

As the bus heads north from Las Piñas it begins to rain. The driver plays light classics, and the family in front of you eat chorizo and hard-boiled eggs as the harsh light of the mountains dims under heavy cloud, and the road passes straight through sombre alps and past windowless farm-houses crouched in the shelter of spruce trees. You stop at Agua Sucia, and the road begins to climb. Pastures give way to moorlands heaped with slag tips and checked with polluted streams; the valley begins to die in a muddle of gorge and ridge, and glaciers grey with soot rise above

chimney-stacks venting flame. There is a smell. Something thick in the air snags at the throat. Disembark at the bus station, and walk through snow and rain past the law court and the police station, up windowless streets, past the blind feeling their way with their sticks as the sighted young slouch past them, past loan companies, past vendors of repossessed goods, past a Pentecostal church where the Blind are promised sight, towards the memorial in the main square where the foremen were blinded.

The figures are cast in bronze on a shallow plinth. Two lines of seven are depicted walking barefoot over broken ground, those behind with their hands on the leaders' shoulders, the blind with their eye-sockets covered over with flesh, the blinded wrapped in rags where their eyes have been gouged out.

Steps behind them lead onto the plinth. To the side, modern shoes are cast in bronze, and you take the hint, bending down to undo your laces so that like the statues themselves you will walk barefoot. The rough bronze will bruise your feet. You will likely trip. You will put out a hand for support.

THE CONSERVATION OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN HARPY

The interview took place on the veranda of Director K.'s home, a bungalow in the tropical style. Behind the bungalow was a sizeable copse, to its side, a *ficus* from a lower branch of which hung a swing used by the director's twelve-year-old daughter, Pía, and stretching beneath was the valley, wooded on both sides, containing the conservation project known as the Mission. The interview was conducted by Enquirer J. in German, which Director K. spoke with a Frisian accent, and was recorded by means of a dictaphone, supplemented by Enquirer J.'s shorthand notes. Occasionally it was interrupted by the director's greetings in English or German to passing volunteers, by his wife singing folk songs in the local indigenous language as she made lunch, and by the profanities and blasphemies of the harpies as they flew between the aviary, a few hundred metres downhill from the bungalow, and the woodlands where they hunted the howler monkeys and sloths that were their prey.

Director K. sat in a battered armchair on the veranda that comprised his outdoor study, bare-chested and dressed in brief shorts and sandals, showing a spare and tanned physique. Beside him a bureau contained his paperwork, and

above it, nailed to the outer wall of the bungalow, were a drawing of *Harpiya hepativora,* the common harpy, as it appears in Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*; a picture of Albert Schweitzer, to whom Director K. bore a physical resemblance; and a cork board with photographs of the Mission at earlier stages of its history. Director K. had been photographed earlier that morning by Enquirer J.'s colleague, Observer P., at work in his study, strolling along one of the woodland paths, doing a little carpentry on one of the roosting stands, and handling a harpy which had been asked outside for the purpose. The air was pleasantly warm, and volunteers could be seen working in the kitchen garden and cleaning the chicken coops, preparing rice and beans for lunch in the covered cooking area, and entering or leaving the woodlands on patrol. There was a flicker of colour as a lizard darted across the driveway in front of the house, and a harpy flew overhead, shouting a sexual accusation at Enquirer J. as it did so.

Enquirer J. Goodness.

Director K. (amused) Are you all right? Was that close to the mark?

Enquirer J. I'm not sure I'd want to comment on that. Are they really like that all the time?

Director K. That was mild, not least by Rafaela's standards. We've had volunteers turning round and leaving the project within ten minutes of meeting Rafaela; a few years ago, we had an engaged couple no longer on speaking terms.

Enquirer J. (a little nervous) You call her Rafaela?

Director K. All our harpies are named after angels. For bird-bodied women spouting a torrent of filth, it's rather appropriate, don't you think?

There was a pause, while Enquirer J. made a short-hand note of the fact. Director K. lounged at ease in his chair, his ankle at rest on his opposite knee.

Enquirer J. That implies that all your harpies are female, Director K. Yet you've had male harpies at the Mission in the past — at least at one point, I recall.

Director K. Yes, at one point... The idea of establishing a breeding population here was attractive, as you can imagine. But male harpies seek solitude in the wild, and it wasn't possible to break them of the instinct. They don't appear to be in any way sentient, like the females; their intelligence is at the animal level, and they're difficult to train. There was no way to keep them here, except in captivity.

Enquirer J. Were there other failures? I recall the Mission being closed for a time; there were rumours you'd suffered quite a major loss of stock.

Director K. (a pause) We had problems with some of our neighbours at first; you might be alluding to that. We had ranchers laying snares in their feeding grounds, we even had them coming into the aviary with poisoned meat. That was before we kept it guarded, of course — and over time the ranchers have become more accepting of what we do.

A harpy nearby called 'He's lying, you know!' in a voice so human that it could have been one of the volunteers.

Enquirer J. (hurriedly) That's interesting, Director K. *(He made a shorthand note, and resumed with nervous pomposity.)* Those insights into the early days of the Mission are useful. They give our readers a sense of the problems you've overcome, and they key in with a theme from your writings: your desire to work in partnership with Latino and indigenous cultures, your desire to respect the sentience of the harpies themselves. Perhaps you could say a little more on that issue, since there does seem to be an almost spiritual aspect to what you do.

Director K. 'An almost spiritual aspect...' *(teasing)* Half an hour in the aviary would dissuade you of that idea.

Enquirer J. It's in your background, though. Your theology studies under Jürgen Moltmann, your early training as a Lutheran priest. I recall a poem you published in *Sinn und Form* after you founded the Mission, comparing your work with the harpies with the Christian missionary endeavours which have so shaped Central American culture.

Director K. Well, all right. But the poetry is a sideline. I don't know that it casts much factual light on our work here.

Enquirer J. It might be more noteworthy than you think, Director K. And the metaphor reflected your success, changing the behaviour of the harpies, persuading them to hunt for game in the woodlands and leave the ranches alone.

Director K. (thoughtfully) In retrospect, it seems unfortunate, though... if we work to alter the behaviour of the harpies,

it's human behaviour that most needs to change. Harpies weren't traditionally threatened, not until the increase of cattle ranching that cut into their range. Even then, if they exploited the ranches for carrion, or hunted the weakest members of the herds, it wasn't a threat to the industry in any real, economic sense. And from a religious point of view, a missionary point of view, if you like, their challenge is to Protestants. So far as the Central American Catholic is concerned, the harpy is the friendly critical voice that drives him to the Confession — he doesn't expect moral perfection of himself, and he isn't upset by the harpy's exposure of his failings. The Protestant takes terrified flight from the harpy as the manifestation of what Aristotle celebrates as comedy and Bonhoeffer condemns as 'cheap grace.' He'd rather the whole world were condemned to the flames than that he himself were not taken seriously, and as Fromm says, it was the Protestants whose notions of divine sovereignty paved the way for fascism.

A harpy squawked, 'Stuck a ginger up his arse and let his girlfriend cane him.' It was not clear whether it was Enquirer J. or Director K. who was being referred to.

Director K. We were quite strict at first. Strict in dealing with the volunteers, I mean. Male-only or female-only teams of volunteers, segregation in the bunkhouse, an alcohol ban, all to give the harpies less substance for their accusations... But it didn't work. The volunteers who were most willing to accept such strictures were precisely the ones least able to cope with what the harpies represent,

and we had to move to a liberal way of dealing with them. The volunteers have just one taboo here, that nothing any of the harpies says is actionable. We tell them to think of the harpies as offering a choice between chastity and complete licentiousness, and that's hardly a Lutheran perspective... The common harpy was never sought out for guidance, like the fortune-teller harpy, *Harpiya sibylla*, but their accusations were used to relieve sexual jealousies and social suspicions. There was a tradition among indigenous people that no crime short of murder could be punished if the harpies revealed it: there were gifts of food to encourage harpies to visit their villages; there were festivals where whole communities trekked into the forest and camped near the cacophonies, simply for the entertainment and as a form of carnival.

Enquirer J. There was another poem from a few years before. An account, or that was how it was presented, of hiking into the cloud forest in search of *Harpiya sibylla.*

Director K. (awkwardly) Ah.

Enquirer J. When you finally find one, feeding on the entrails of a puma it has killed, it leads to quite a long reflection on alterity, the self, the search for completion... Your previous metaphor is reversed, and the harpy becomes the conduit of divine presence for the poet... Or do you insist that I'm reading too much into it?

Director K. It felt unsettling. This creature, utterly fey, utterly alien, looking up from her meat with the blood on her jaws and addressing me by name...

Enquirer J. (quietly) And?

Director K. They were more or less a cryptid, *Harpiya sibylla.* It wasn't accepted that they existed at all, let alone as a

separate species; the belief they could not only discern the past by seemingly supernatural means, but even reveal the future… There's a saying that the common harpy addresses you daily, the Sibylline harpy just once. And whether your human pomposity rejects the unmeasured and the unknown, or demands the revelation of some sacred mystery, what you're left with is the miracle of the common harpy, and the mystery of its rejection of any idea of the holy. Like Ezekiel, cooking his meals over human dung, you find transcendence in abjection, it seems… *(A note of self-satisfaction entered his voice.)* Eschatology in scatology, if you will.

Enquirer J. There is one last poem I'd like to mention to you, Director K… Based on a rather obscure Biblical incident, Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter.

Director K. (cautiously) I don't think I remember that one.

Enquirer J. It's a little different from the original story. Jephthah returns from his victory over the Ammonites, finds his daughter jubilant when she should be grieving at the ugliness of war, and kills her in his rage. I'm surprised you don't remember it, Director K. — your daughter can't have been born long before.

Director K. Pía's made sacrifices for the Mission. She's still too young to know it, of course.

Enquirer J. In an interview a few years ago with *Christentum und Kultur,* you said the poem was a response to violence between two cacophonies… Forgive me, Director, but did this violence take place here, at the Mission? Was that another mistake?

Director K. We were too ambitious... We introduced a new cacophony into the aviary; we thought the tamed harpies would influence the wild. It ended badly.

Enquirer J. It ended with violence?

Director K. It woke us up the first night... the howling and screaming. This was before we kept guards at the aviary. We assumed it was just a verbal stand-off; it took us a while to work out what was happening in there.

Enquirer J. The poem, though: it was an unusual story to choose. If you wanted to cast the violence in Biblical terms, Cain and Abel might have struck most of us as appropriate.

Director K. (reflectively) They don't kill their own kind, you see. Not in the wild. They insult and threaten, but they don't resort —

Volunteer A. I'm sorry to interrupt, Director K. I think you'd better come to the aviary.

Director K. What is it, Anja?

She was young, blonde-haired and tanned, dressed in brief denim shorts and a sports bra, and was smeared, both clothing and flesh, in the faeces of the harpies. There was a smell. A clod of the stuff had caught in her hair, and she pulled it out with a grimace, rubbing her hand on her shorts.

Volunteer A. Lena got a shovel-full, and she's had enough. They're asking for you in the aviary. They're getting rather frisky. *(She glanced at Enquirer J., and tried to smile.)* Sorry.

From this point on, Enquirer J.'s sound recording became garbled. Director K. and Volunteer A. moved partly out of range as he followed them, assuming consent, and in the aviary he quickly put the dictaphone in his pocket for protection. His shorthand notes, taken later that morning, were commendably thorough. They described a converted barn, airy and light, the ground covered with straw and strewn with their faeces, and the air filled with its stench. The trunks of four palms running from end to end of the building, and suspended from the roof by thick chains; a fountain at the far end for the harpies to drink; and on their perches, the harpies themselves. Black hair, filthy and unkempt, hanging loose over human faces, with open mouths showing rotting teeth, and eyes white in their fury. Human breasts smeared with filth, wings growing from the shoulders, covered with feathers, slate black in colour. White feathers, also soiled, grew over the bellies, concealing the faecogenital openings. Short, powerful avian legs, ending in talons that relaxed as they rose from their perches and took wing, and the air became thick with their screaming.

Harpy a. Come and talk to us, Director K.

Harpy b. Come and sit beside us.

Harpy c. Come and stroke my cack-fanny, Director K. It's been at least a week.

Harpy b. She'd do it herself, Director K., but you know she's got no hands.

Harpy d. That new girl got a shitload, Director K. She ran away crying, but she'll soon toughen up.

Harpy c. Who's your friend, Director K.? Is he here for the interview?

Harpy b. Does he flatter you, Director K.? Does he ask you about your theology?

Harpy c. Does he quote your chapbooks, and ask you what they mean?

Harpy b. (imitating Enquirer J.) Ooh, tell me all about your wonderful poetry, Director K.

Harpy a. He reads van Buren in bed, Director K. If there's any joy or innocence left in the world, he wants to kill it.

Harpy c. You want to know why he wrote that poem, Enquirer J.?

Harpy b. When he came in here after that big fight, and they were all dead except for three of the tame ones, so he strangled them one by one?

Harpy c. They enjoyed it, Director K. Do it to us.

Harpy b. (imitating Harpy c.) Come and choke me, Director K. I want to feel those strong, manly hands around my neck.

Harpy c. You want to come and sit beside me, Enquirer J.? You want to stroke my cack-fanny? Director K. won't do it any more; it's been at least a week.

FATHER CHRISTMAS TALKS TO THE CAT

It was rather an elegant grey and white cat, and it was sitting on the roof of the house where the children were sleeping. The moon and stars gave a clean light to the reindeer that were drawing the sleigh and the bearded man who was driving them. The reindeer stopped when they drew level with the house, so that the man could rub the ears of the cat and talk to it.

'I used to bring gifts to the children,' the man said. 'When times were hard I brought food and warm clothes, and in good times I brought toys. Now the children are no longer children, and the toys are different, but they are still toys. Tell me,' he asked the cat, 'what will do you tomorrow for anyone but yourself?'

The cat licked the base of its tail with a delicate pink tongue.

'You think me selfish,' it said, 'but I have gifts. Tomorrow morning my humans will find a mouse on the doorstep. I left it not dead, so it will be fresh, and because it suffered torment between my claws the flesh will be sweet. That is my gift for the adults who feed me.

‘For the children who play with me I have a gift also,’ said the cat. ‘When evening comes and they are bored of their toys I will roll on my back and show them my belly, but when those soft pink hands come in reach I will bite and tear. Then the children will know that beautiful things are not kind. If they remember the lesson they will thank me.’

A look of wonder came over the man. ‘You deal in cruel and terrible truths,’ he said, ‘and I deal in comfort and happiness.’ Then he stepped out of the sleigh and dropped himself down the chimney into the house where the children were sleeping.

THREE TALES FOR EUROPE

Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams, 1747-1826) was a stonemason by trade, a poet and mediaevalist, a Unitarian and a political radical, and the founder of the Gorsedd Beirdd. These three tales from the Iolo Manuscripts, chosen for their significance to the politics of our time, are retold with changes to quicken their narratives, and to bring out their contemporary relevance.

The Road to the Lime Kilns

Talhaiarn the poet had a son named Tanwyn, and this son had been raised by his father in the love of mankind and the service of God, in every honourable attainment and every beneficial skill. This lad, arriving at man's estate, felt a yearning to leave his father's house, and to seek out his destiny in the world, so his father kissed him and gave him his blessing, with a few parting words of advice. 'My son Tanwyn,' he said, 'my only beloved son, I have given you all knowledge and training and instruction, and I have neither land to house you nor gold to speed you on your way. Therefore, travel where you will under the guidance of God, and remember only these words of mine: never wish on another what you would not wish on yourself; never take the

new road where the old road is still passable; and never pass by a place where a man of God is preaching, without stopping to listen to him.'

So Tanwyn left, and after travelling for some days, he came to a long and even strand, and remembering his father's advice, he wrote these words in the sand with his staff: *He who wishes ill on another, on him may the same ill fall.* As he was doing so, the lord of that country came by with his retinue, saw the clarity and beauty of his writing, and reined in his horse to speak to him.

'Is it you who wrote in the sand,' he asked, 'and where are you travelling to?'

'It was I,' replied Tanwyn, 'and I am going into the world to earn my livelihood, wherever fate leads me, and however I can.'

'Then you are the man for me,' said the lord. 'Will you come and be the steward of my household and estate, and receive whatever wage you ask?'

'I will,' said Tanwyn, 'but as for my wage, I will accept whatever my peers judge is my worth when my labour is done.' So Tanwyn became the lord's steward, yet so prudently did he manage his household, and so wisely did he govern his lands, that over time the master came to feel less honoured than the man, and the seeds of bitterness and envy took root within him.

At that time the lord was laying a new road through his estate, and since lime kilns had been built where the earth was being dug, he set out one day to visit the lime burners. 'There is a traitor living among us,' he told them. 'He is plotting with foreign powers to invade our country, to depose its rulers and plunder its wealth, and if he has his

way, then so many foreigners will swarm over our land that you will not even have room to grow food.' The lime burners swore their enmity to this traitor, vowing that if ever they should learn who he was, they would not hesitate to kill him. Then the lord warned them that this traitor was coming to see them, travelling along the new road and bringing gold and mead as the price of their treachery, and once he had extracted their oath to grasp him and hurl him into the burning kiln, he left them.

The lord returned to his court, and summoned Tanwyn before him. 'I have hired lime burners to help laying down the new road,' he said, 'and it is time to give them their pay. Start at once along the new road, without stopping to speak or listen to anyone, and pay them in gold for the work they have done, with ale and mead as gratuity.' Tanwyn took mead and ale from his master's cellars, and gold and silver from his treasury, but as he set out, he remembered his father's parting words, and set out towards the lime kilns along the old road, not the new. On his way, he passed a house where an old man was preaching, and remembering again his father's injunctions, he stopped to listen to him.

He stayed so long that the lord concluded he must be dead, and resolved to hear the lime burners' report and pay them for their silence. He took a bag of gold, and set out along the new road, but because the shift had changed, and the lime burners on duty had never seen him before, they set upon him as the traitor their companions had warned them of, and threw him into the burning kiln, where he burned to death in the flames. Not long afterwards, Tanwyn came into view, bearing gold and silver and gifts of mead.

A Cage of Trees and a Prison of Bones

The survivor of a routed army came before their emperor in Rome, to complain of Caradoc, the son of Brân, and his warriors in the forests of Siluria between the Severn and the Towy. 'Their settlements lie deep in the woods,' he said, 'like the lairs of beasts: they hide, and come upon us unawares, and the trees surround us like the bars of a cage to trap us when we retreat.' And when he heard how many of his legions had been slaughtered in this way, the emperor ordered an army to Wales to burn the forests of Siluria, so that there would no place for Caradoc and his warriors to hide.

Caradoc and his men heard of the order he had given, and with one voice they said this: 'It would be ignoble for us to defend our country except with fire and blood, so let us burn the forests ourselves, from the Severn as far as the river Towy, until there is not even a sprig where we could hang a flea. Then we shall challenge the Romans to come, and we shall meet them on open ground, and still we shall defeat them.' Thus they set fire to the woods, and through the length and breadth of Caradoc's realm the smoke and dust rose from the scorched earth, and even the smallest gnat could not find shade.

Then once again the Emperor of Rome received messengers from Wales. 'We are sent by King Caradoc, the son of Brân, the son of Llŷr,' they said. 'We would sooner have peace and tranquillity than war, sooner feed our cattle and sheep than our war-horses, sooner meet our brothers for feasting than your legionaries for their slaughter: the war between your race and ours was not begun by us. We have

met your armies in the forest, and you know how we have destroyed them, but we now have burnt our forests to the ground, and all our land is stripped bare. Come, and we will meet your armies in the open field, two Romans for every Welshman, and then we will see if you can win back the honour you have lost. Mark our words well, for it is Caradoc himself who summons you.'

The ambassadors returned to their king, although the emperor itched to kill them, and the Roman armies marched upon Wales, a great foreign rabble blown by the winds from every corner of Europe. Caradoc and his men fought them fiercely, as easily in the open as they had in the woods, and left the carcasses of their dead in great piles for the ravens and wolves to feed on.

Because they had burnt the forests, there was no wood to build houses, so instead the people built roundhouses of stone roofed with thatch. They learned how to make lime, and to surround their villages with palisades and earthworks now that the forests could no longer protect them, and they posted guards on the Severn and the Towy, to question such travellers as entered or left. The bones of the Romans still covered the land, so Manawyddan the brother of the king gathered them together, and built them into a prison of bone, where soldiers captured in war could be held, along with rebels and recidivists, malcontents and moaners, foreigners, traitors and spies. Over time the prison decayed, and the very bones turned to dust. The dust and lime were ploughed into the soil, and when they saw the grass growing tall and thick, the people planted barley and wheat in the place where it had once stood.

The Cloak of Kings' Beards

There were once two kings on the Island of Britain whose names were Nynniaw and Peibiaw. One bright, star-lit night these kings went walking in the fields, and Nynniaw said, 'See what a fair and ample field is mine.'

'What field is that?' asked Peibiaw, and Nynniaw replied: 'The night sky.'

'Then see,' said Peibiaw, 'the flocks and herds grazing the night sky, for all of them are mine.'

'What flocks and herds are these?' asked Nynniaw, and Peibiaw replied:

'All the stars you see: a blazing fire, each one; and the moon standing guard over them is their shepherd.'

Nynniaw said, 'They shall have no pasture in any field of mine.'

'They shall graze their fill,' said Peibiaw.

'They shall not graze at all,' said Nynniaw. Thus each king contradicted the other, until there was a blazing row between them, and the row grew into a deadly war, and the hosts and realms of each were all but laid waste in the fighting.

Rhitta the Giant, King of Wales, heard about the carnage wrought by those foolish kings, and resolved to mount an expedition against them. So with the support of his army and the consent of his people, he arose and marched against those kings in their pride and rage and pillage, vanquished them, and broke their swords. But when the remaining kings of Britain heard what he had done, they mustered their armies to avenge the disgrace that Nynniaw and Peibiaw had suffered. They advanced, attacking Rhitta the Giant and his

men, but although they fought bravely, Rhitta and his army took the field. ‘This is *my* fair and ample field,’ said Rhitta, and he and his men cut off the beards of Nynniaw and Peibiaw and all those other kings.

The kings of France and Spain and Ireland heard what he had done, and they also took arms to avenge the humiliation of the British kings. Again there was fierce combat, but Rhitta and his men won the field unscathed, and cut off the beards of these kings also. ‘These are the livestock that grazed *my* field,’ said Rhitta, ‘and I have driven them all away: they shall have no pasture here.’

Then, with the beards of the kings he had shaved, Rhitta made himself a cloak which covered him from head to toe, and he was twice the size of the largest man ever seen. And by his victory, law and order, wisdom and righteousness were established between princes and their rivals, peoples and their neighbours, throughout the British Isles and even the whole of Europe. So may this peace endure over rulers like those foolish kings, lest they wage war again without need or cause; and may it always be so.

NOTES

'The Conquest of Angles A and B' and 'Reflections on the Destiny of the British Race' were first published by *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* under the joint title, 'Reflections of the Destiny of the British Race,'[1] and with an epigraph (p. 7) taken from *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes*.[2] The idea that thinking beings might experience aeons of subjective time in the last moments before a universal collapse came from Paul Davies.[3]

'Traveller M. in the land of the Cynocephali' was first published *Otherwise Engaged: A Literature and Arts Journal 6* (Winter 2020), with an epigraph (p. 23) drawn from Albert Memmi.[4] To Ruth Graham I owe, among many other amendments and improvements, the insight that the Cynocephali would neither taste sweet flavours nor see colours (pp. 24, 25 ff.), the pebbles of Aberdaron (p. 40), and the appearance and history of Bethan's quilt (p. 71).

1 On 23rd April 2019, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2018.1520895.

2 Ed. by W. T. Stead. London: Review of Reviews Office, 1902. p. 190.

3 *The Last Three Minutes: Conjectures about the Ultimate Fate of the Universe*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994.

4 *The Colonizer and the Colonized.* Trans. by Howard Greenfeld. Boston, Mass: Beacon, 1993. p. 67.

The *eryr wen* or *white eagle* (p. 45), a personification of the mountain winters which defeated English incursions into Wales in the Middle Ages, was the symbol of the Free Wales Army in the 1960s, but has no associations with Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru, whose explosions during the investiture of Prince Charles were intended as a bloodless display of resistance to English rule.[5] Dinas Brân was built in the mid 13th century by Gruffydd Maelor, who ruled Powys Fadog, but not, as Faye believes (p. 46), Powys as a whole.

The epigraph of 'Works and Days' (p. 57) is taken from *The Iolo Manuscripts* of Edward Williams.[6] The fictional name, 'Dyffryn Ysig,' phrases of geographic description (p. 64), and the reference to Branwen and Heledd (p. 64) which signifies a basic education in Welsh literature, are taken from John Gwilym Jones's short story, 'The Communion.'[7] Branwen, the sister of Brân in *The Mabinogion,* marries but is mistreated by the king of Ireland, provoking a war which devastates both islands, and Heledd is the last survivor of the royal house of Powys, who witnesses the destruction of her brother Cynddylan's court (p. 74).[8]

Wil Bryan (p. 69), a character in Daniel Owen's classic novel, *Rhys Lewis*, can live happily in one room because he can only be physically present in one room at a time.[9] Begw and her cat Sgiatan (p. 74) are characters in Kate Roberts's

[5] Wyn Thomas, *John Jenkins: The Reluctant Revolutionary?* Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2019. pp. 201-203.

[6] Ed. by Taliesin Williams. Liverpool: I. Foulkes, 1888. p. 226.

[7] In *The Plum Tree and Other Short Prose.* 1946. Trans. by Meic Stephens. Bridgend: Seren, 2004.

[8] The poem appears in English as 'Cynddylan's Hall' in *Welsh Verse.* trans. by Tony Conran. Bridgend: Seren, 1986.

[9] Trans. by James Harries. 1888. Cockatrice, 2017.

short-story sequence, *Tea in the Heather*;[10] references to the green and scarlet tree (pp. 75, 86) are taken from the story of Peredur, also in *The Mabinogion.*

The title, 'Pugnacious Little Trolls,' comes from A. A. Gill's depiction of the Welsh people as 'immoral, stunted, bigoted, dark, ugly, pugnacious...'[11] Williams (p. 79), the village tailor in a well-known short story by W. J. Griffiths,[12] wins a committee vote with the help of a customer who owes him money for a pair of trousers. A respondent on Adam Price's Facebook wall referred to the English subsidies supposedly necessary to preserve Wales's 'made-up language' and advised a Plaid Cymru supporter to 'learn [his] place' (p. 79).[13] The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (p. 81) are traditionally attributed to monks at Clynnog, on the north coast of Llŷn. Gildas (p. 80), sixth-century author of 'The Ruin of Britain,' blamed the Britons' impious rejection of Roman rule for their defeat at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons, while a battle between red and white serpents (p. 82) is interpreted in a prophecy by Emrys as symbolising the conflict between the Britons and their Anglo-Saxon oppressors in Nennius, 'The History of Britain.'[14] Trefor Beasley (p. 82) and his family, who refused to honour tax bills sent to them in English, are

[10] In *The World of Kate Roberts: Selected Stories 1925-1981.* Trans. by Joseph Clancy. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

[11] 'Smile — you're on cameo camera: Ireland be damned, creative bigotry is the lifeblood of Britain and its TV service, says A A Gill.' *The Sunday Times,* 28th September 1997. By way of response, see Catrin Fflur Huws, 'Why racism against Welsh people is still racism.' *The Conversation,* 14th May 2018.

[12] 'Eos y Pentan' in *Storïau'r Henllys Fawr*. Llandysul: J. D. Lewis, 1964.

[13] Andrew Elphick. Response to Facebook post from 27th March 2020.

[14] Both in *Early Welsh Histories.* Trans. by J. A. Giles. Cockatrice, 2020.

credited by Clive Betts with pioneering civic resistance to the Anglicisation of Wales.[15] Olwen (p. 85), also from *The Mabinogion,* walks with white flowers in her steps.

'Industry in the Country of the Blind' is forthcoming in *Land of Change*, an anthology of radical fiction from Wales,[16] and appears here by the editor's kind permission. Parts of the setting and backstory were taken from H. G. Wells,[17] while the imaginary lecture given by The Cord (p. 89 ff.) was inspired in part by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's lecture at Bangor University in 2008, and his comments concerning the British Empire's persecution of the Welsh and Kikuyu languages.[18] Director K.'s remark, attributing the evolution of Nazi authoritarianism to Calvinist and Lutheran views of divine sovereignty (p. 101), comes from Erich Fromm's seminal study of the psychology of fascism, *Escape from Freedom.*[19] 'Three Tales for Europe,' retold from *The Iolo Manuscripts*, was published under the title 'The Cloak of Kings' Beards: Three Welsh Folktales' in *New Writing.*[20] The closing invocation of European unity is phrased in the Welsh as a prayer.

15 *Culture in Crisis.* Upton, Wirral: Ffynon, 1976. p. 35.

16 Ed. by Gemma Howell. Culture Matters, 2021.

17 In *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories.* London: Thomas Nelson, 1911.

18 See also Wanjiku Maina, 'Kenya: We Have Normalised Negativity Towards African Languages — Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.' *Daily Nation,* 8th February 2019, which draws the same comparison.

19 1941. New York: Henry Holt, 1994. See especially pp. 89-90 and 110-111. For the antisemitism of both the Nazi-supporting German Christian Movement, and the leaders of the dissident Confessing Church, see Henry Munson, 'Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust.' DOI: 10.3390/rel9010026 and Michael Lackey, 'Conceptualizing Christianity and Christian Nazis after the Nuremberg Trials.' DOI: 10.5749/culturalcritique.84.2013.0101.

20 On 24th September 2018. DOI: 10.1080/14790726. 2018.1520895.

At the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016, and at the start of a period of rising racism,[21] Brexit supporters on Twitter called for Leanne Wood, leader of Plaid Cymru, to be gang-raped and shot[22] for her pro-European stance; described the people of Wales as 'sub-normal, sub-human Marxist vermin,' and called for their immediate genocide;[23] and boasted that English residents in Wales were 'keeping the Welsh language at bay';[24] while a Tryweryn memorial near Llangollen was defaced with swastikas in an apparently fascist assault on the Welsh people's right to recall their own history.[25] Michael Kenny, Professor of Public Policy at Cambridge University, found statistical correlation between support for Brexit in England and other indicators of a specifically English nationalism;[26] while Richard Wyn Jones, Professor at the Wales Governance Centre in Cardiff, found that the highest levels of support for Brexit in Wales came not from voters who identified as British or Welsh, but from voters who identified as English, and as English alone.[27]

[21] Robert Booth, 'Racism rising since Brexit vote, nationwide study reveals.' *The Guardian,* 20th May 2019.

[22] Nino Williams, 'Man jailed after sending Leanne Wood disgusting threat saying he hoped she was "gang raped by immigrants."' *Wales Online,* 15th July 2016. Nino Williams, 'Insurance worker appears in court after tweeting offensive message about Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood.' *Wales Online,* 8th November 2016.

[23] @WomenObeyUKIP. Twitter, 13th June 2016.

[24] 'Carmarthen business denies "anti-Welsh language" comments after bad reviews.' *Nation Cymru*, 15th March 2018.

[25] Robert Harries, 'Cofiwch Dryweryn spin-off painted over with swastikas.' *Wales Online,* 7th August 2019.

[26] 'The Genesis of English Nationalism.' *Political Insight,* 1st September 2016. DOI: 10.1177/2041905816666124. Also published by *Centre on Constitutional Change* on 30th August 2016.

[27] See 'Divided Wales.' *Cardiff University Politics & Governance Blog,* 23rd

Meanwhile, leading Brexiteers in Wales began to campaign for the abolition of the Welsh Parliament;[28] Conservatives in England and Wales warned that the party had forsaken unionism for English nationalism;[29] and the UK government ignored parliamentary votes in the Celtic nations to press ahead with legislation that will hollow out their democracies.[30] The Coronavirus likewise inspired social media posts from the Conservative MP for Shrewsbury and former member of the European Research Group, Daniel Kawczynski, for the abolition of the Welsh Parliament on the

September 2019. See also claims by Prof. Danny Dorling of Oxford University that Wales's substantial native English population undermined its pro-European majority, quoted in Jonathan Leake and Imogen Horton, 'Wealthy English blow-ins "'swung Welsh Brexit vote."' *The Sunday Times,* 22nd September 2019.

[28] 'Senedd musical chairs continues as Brexit Party members switch allegiance again.' *Nation Cymru,* 16th October 2020.

[29] Tom Peck, 'A Welsh Tory MP standing down over his party's embrace of "English nationalism" should set off alarm bells. It won't.' *The Independent*, 15th July, 2019. 'Conservative Party has become "the English nationalist party" says former Welsh MP.' *Nation Cymru*, 9th December 2020. Harry Yorke, 'Boris Johnson branded "English nationalist" by former Tory chairman.' *The Telegraph*, 12th December 2020. Rob Merrick, 'Tory party urges activists to campaign like Trump by "weaponising fake news" and "fighting wokeism."' *The Independent*, 15th December 2020.

[30] Freya McClements, 'NI Assembly passes motion rejecting Internal Market Bill.' *The Irish Times*, 22nd September 2020. Alistair Grant, 'Holyrood votes to reject controversial UK Internal Market Bill.' *The Herald*, 7th October 2020. Craig Cairns, 'Welsh Parliament rejects UK Internal Market Bill for undermining devolution.' *The National*, 10th September 2020. Owen Donovan, 'Senedd roundup: Welsh Government prepares legal action over "power grab" bill.' *Nation Cymru*, 16th December 2020. 'UK Government pressing ahead with "power grab" bill despite rejection by the Senedd.' *Nation Cymru,* 17th December 2020.

grounds that it was stopping English people from going to the beach;[31] and a graffito on the streets of Mold calling for the deaths of all Welsh people as 'scum';[32] while the journalist Toby Young declared himself an 'English nationalist' in response to the supposed 'ingratitude' of the Celtic nations to England during their national lockdowns.[33] My own mail from the period following the EU referendum contained threats of violence, arson and murder; sexual insults and accusations of sexual crimes; accusations of treason and the appeasement of Britain's enemies; claims that I eat faeces, love Muslims, and vandalise Christian churches; and copies of attempts to denounce me to my employers as a Welsh nationalist. In response to the ugliness and barbarity of our times, I offer Gwynfor Evans's vision of an independent Wales within a free and voluntary union of sovereign states as an antidote to the fascism which dogs the industrial age,[34] alongside Rob Riemen's call for Europeans to renew their struggle against fascism in the name of the humanism on which their union is founded.[35]

Rob Mimpriss
Bangor, 2020

[31] 'Senedd roundup: English MP calls for Welsh Parliament to be abolished — so he can go to the beach.' *Nation Cymru*, 11th May 2020.

[32] Steve Craddock, 'Anger after offensive graffiti scrawled on pavement in Mold.' *The Leader,* 21st May 2020.

[33] Toby Young, 'I'm turning into an English Nationalist.' *The Spectator,* 22nd October 2020.

[34] See *Land of My Fathers.* Swansea: John Penry, 1974. pp. 443-444, 450, 452 and *Fighting for Wales.* Talybont: Lolfa, 1991. pp. 212-221.

[35] *To Fight Against This Age: On Fascism and Humanism*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018.

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Annexe Magazine

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With a luminous prose that reflects the richness of the Conwy Valley, A. L. Reynold's novel explores both the violent, destructive force of passion and the fragility of the human heart.

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O. M. Edwards was a writer and scholar, a leading educationalist, and, alongside J. E. Lloyd, a member of the Cymru Fydd movement, dedicated to achieving home rule for Wales. This brief book, outlining Welsh history from the Stone Age to the start of the 20th century, reflects O. M. Edwards' hope for the rebirth of Wales as a modern, democratic nation, and is reissued by Cockatrice Books with additional material outlining the history of Wales from its first publication to the present day.

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by J. E. Lloyd

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'Bathed in white fire in every sense... Borges would happily own them.'

Gee Williams

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