

**'A new kind of
modern pastoral:
peopled, raw,
messy, and shining'**
HELEN MACDONALD
AUTHOR OF
H IS FOR HAWK

**melissa
harrison**
**at hawthorn
time**



BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS

AT HAWTHORN TIME

Melissa Harrison

BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

'I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien.'

– Sergei Rachmaninov

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PROLOGUE

Here's where it all ends: a long, straight road between fields. Four thirty on a May morning, the black fading to blue, dawn gathering somewhere below the treeline in the east.

Imagine a Roman road. No, go back further: imagine a broad track, in use for centuries by the tribes who lived and fought and died on these islands, and whose blood lives on in us. When the Romans came they paved it, and for a short while it was busy with their armies and trade. After they left it decayed, though it wasn't forgotten; it came to mark the line beyond which the Vikings lived by the intractable Danish creed. Later it became a drovers' road, trodden by sheep and cattle; then a turnpike, taking travellers, and mail, to Wales and beyond. Now, though, it is simply an A-road, known around these parts as the Boundway but marked on maps with letters and numbers alone.

Imagine driving that ancient road. The light is rising behind you, the dim fields, on either side, are asleep. Soon you will pass a sign for the village of Lodeshill, a turn-off you note each time you come this way, but never take. But before you can reach it you see something blocking the carriageway half a mile or so ahead, something you can't yet make out – though part of you already knows, because what else would it be? The straight road points to it like an arrow, and as you draw closer, as you slow and stop, it moves from the realm of the dreamlike to the disbelieved to the real.

You switch off the engine, and as it dies you realise what every day of your life so far has led you to: two cars, spent and ravished, violence gathered about them in the silent air. One wheel, upturned, still spins.

Hands shaking, you make a call. You fight down panic and open your car door, stepping out onto a million tiny fragments of glass. Reluctantly your legs carry you into the scene. Who else will do it, not you?

I see it all from where I am: the tyre marks, the crumpled metal, the coins and compact discs spilled across the road. The smaller car, with its huge spoiler and brash paint job, rests on its roof, displaying its brutal undercarriage to the sky; the other, a big Audi, has one door half open, and I can see the mundane, private cargo of the door pocket: tissues, a Thermos, a Simon & Garfunkel CD.

I can smell the sharp grass of the churned-up verge, and I can see what it is that awaits you: a young lad in the custom car, upside down and veiled in blood; a slumped figure in the Audi, perfectly still and beside its open door, a third body, face down, on the road.

Seven slow minutes have passed since the crash. The sky lightens; the spinning wheel slows and halts. The birds, one by one, are returning to the hawthorn hedges and shaking down the heavy blossom although they do not sing. Life struggles and hangs; different futures intrude and unfold. The fact of the accident insists on itself.

I watch as you move from one person to the next, from the injured to the dead. You hold a hand, gently, and it almost pulls me back. I linger as the sirens come, as we are all tended to, even you. At last you become part of the siren's wail, part of the shimmer of air over the ambulance's hood: neither

earthbound nor quite free.

Later, you will recall the things you saw only in fragments. And I will recall nothing at all.

Cherry blossom over, daffs turning. Hawthorn bud-burst.



It was a mild, damp night in April when he escaped the city, though the forecast predicted fair weather to come. It had rained a little, earlier in the day, and the moist night air had called out snails in their thousands to dot the grimy London pavements in ill-fated hordes.

He put on his ancient army coat, took his pack from behind the door of his room and filled a plastic bottle of water from the tap in the communal kitchen. The pack contained seventeen tatty notebooks, some cooking things, a pup tent and an old brown sleeping bag. His bedroll was strapped to the outside, and the pack itself was studded with badges and pins; a few bits of cloth hung from the straps like prayer flags.

He left the hostel and pushed the keys back in through the letter box; then he began to walk north. At least there was no ankle tag this time, and he knew himself to be invisible to the mobile phone masts he passed and unwatched by satellites overhead. The feeling of walking, after three months locked up, was like when a plane's wheels break contact with the tarmac and it lifts up and away from the ground.

You could dig out cuttings on Jack, if you wished. He was there in the very early days of Greenham Common, before the women drove him away; he gave a brief quote to a local radio reporter in Newbury and his grainy image – if you know what you're looking for – can just be discerned in footage of the poll tax riots. The travellers talked of him at Dale Farm, too, though that could have been someone else.

Mostly self-educated, once a haunter of libraries, Jack walked the lost ways from town to town, keeping clear old paths that no one used, avoiding company for the most part and living off the land when he could. Picked up again and again for breaching bail conditions, or vagrancy, or selling pot, he had done short stretches inside everywhere from Brixton to Northumberland, acquiring prison tattoos and learning the advantages of a Bic-shaved skull and a cocksure posture. When at liberty he mostly worked on farms, picking fruit and helping with the harvest; he avoided towns, slept rough, and slowly, over time, forgot that he had once been a protester – or, perhaps, came to embody his protest more absolutely. Born, so he said, in Canterbury, his life before he took to the road was obscure.

Growing ever more unloosed from what seems to sustain the rest of us, more stubborn with every arrest and stranger and more elliptical in his thinking, Jack became, with the passing of decades, le

like a modern man and more like the fugitive spirit of English rural rebellion. Or – to some, at least – mad.

Not long after the turn of the millennium a sympathetic journalist tracked him down to a wood near Otmoor; but Jack, by then, had little he wanted to say – certainly not the grand narrative of protest and exclusion that the writer had in mind. He spent two days with Jack, broken by a night at a Premier Inn where he was much disturbed by drunken wedding guests, but his piece, when it came out, barely mentioned Jack at all.

Away from the main arteries the night-time streets were quiet: the odd dog walker, a few revellers, foxes, cabs. Here and there flowers nodded dimly to Jack from front gardens as he passed, blanched by the sodium lights to a uniform paleness: irises, tulips, early peonies dropping their petals over the walls.

He crossed Vauxhall Bridge on foot, stopping for a moment to look down at the black water below full of ship's nails and clay pipes and broken bottles and bones. Briefly, he wished for the keys back so he could cast them in, a kind of offering or parting gift – though they would have been swallowed up by darkness long before he could have seen the river take them, and he was far too high up to hear them fall. Where these arcane impulses came from it was impossible to say.

Finding his way through the centre of town was easy enough. Pimlico was quiet; he skirted bus lanes in Victoria before pushing on, Green Park invisible behind a high wall to his right. How was it that the names seemed so much more than mere streets, or confluences of streets? Belgravia, Park Lane, Marble Arch, Marylebone: you would not think that such places could be so easily abandoned, yet on by one they fell behind him.

He stopped at a petrol station in Hendon in the small hours, walking across the floodlit forecourt to the little window and handing up coins to a Bangladeshi man who seemed all the more vulnerable for the bulletproof glass between them. Two boys and a girl were hunched on the kerb at the edge of the forecourt, pupils dilated, talking quickly and disjointedly among themselves. The girl had glitter on her temples; one of the boys kept clenching his jaw.

Jack ate the crisps and chocolate he had bought and walked on. For a long while there was hardly anyone around: shift workers, cabbies, bin men. He kept to the same road northbound, crossing side street after side street, all untaken.

By the time it began to be light he knew he was leaving the city behind. Later, inured, almost, to the rush-hour traffic, he passed superstores, car plants, playing fields, a golf course, wasteland; then, with the roar of the M1 somewhere ahead, the straight road broke north-west between fields.

It was enough. He pushed his way off the tarmac through a belt of trees and tangled undergrowth where years of sun-faded litter had blown and caught: beer cans, dog shit in bags, crisp packets, hubcaps. Twenty-odd paces through the wood he emerged into a tussocky field from which two rabbits fled, their white scuts bobbing away into some trees on the far side. He let his pack fall from his shoulder and sat down with his back to an oak.

Listening to the traffic behind him he felt the breeze play on the hairs on his arms and watched the sun rise slowly from a distant reef of cloud. Looking at it made a bluish bruise on his field of vision that jumped and twitched, and he shook his head like a horse trying to shake off a fly, finally squeezing his eyes shut and waiting for the insult to his retina to subside. When he opened his eyes again the horizon swam briefly and the light seemed very bright.

Just to be able to go where I like, he thought. Just to live how I see fit. I don't do any harm, God knows; and there are plenty out there that do. So let me go now, please; just leave me be.

After a while a blackcap sang from the scrubby field margin and the morning sun began to dry the dew from the grass. Jack picked up his pack and began to look around him for somewhere to sleep.

The field itself was almost entirely without distinction, a nondescript trapezium bordered by overgrown hedges. It had not been grazed or mowed for a long time, and pioneer saplings – scrub oak, sycamore, ash – were stealing a slow march on the grass. There were no paths through it, unless you counted those made by rabbits and foxes, and it harboured no species of special distinction, no orchids or rare butterflies. Yet in summer its edges foamed with meadowsweet, and in autumn it bore clutches of mushrooms like pale golden eggs.

Jack chose a spot in the shade of the far hedge and rolled out his mat. He took a sandwich and a can of Coke from his rucksack, the last of his shop-bought food, and with his back to the city he sat down to eat.

It was still possible to find work on the land almost all year round: picking daffs began in February and farms often wanted help with lambing; in summer there was hay to mow and soft fruit to pick, although he hated the polytunnels with their close, stale air. You could usually get work picking apples in September and, later, felling Christmas trees; he had once spent much of December making holly wreaths. But fieldwork was what he loved best, and it was spring: nearly asparagus season. He thought back over the farms he knew, and that knew him: he wanted to keep his head down, didn't want to sign any papers this time, and that narrowed the options a little.

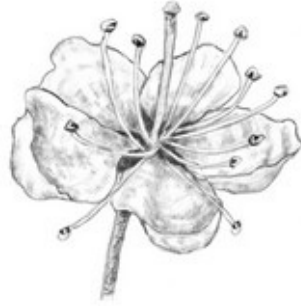
He'd set out from Devon in January to walk vaguely north-east. He'd never meant to come to London, but the arrest and the sentence – for breaching an order not to trespass, although all he wanted to do was walk an old cart track between villages – had blown him off course.

Now he decided to keep to the old Roman road north out of the city. Eventually it would take him to a little village called Lodeshill which had four farms with asparagus beds clustered around it. There was one he'd promised himself never to set foot on again, but he felt sure that one of the others would take him on for a few weeks with no questions asked. There was some lovely countryside up that way, quiet and slow and unvisited, and not too busy with day trippers – not like Cumbria or Cornwall. It was an in-between, unpretentious place.

Apart from the road, the quiet concatenation of the drink inside its can, when he opened it, was the loudest thing Jack could hear. When he had finished he lay back, thankful for having eaten, thankful for the weather, wondering when sleep would come. And then he slept.

As the sun rose slowly over Jack's head a hawthorn in the hedge behind him felt the light on its new green leaves and thought with its green mind about blossom.

Horse chestnuts, swallows, blackthorn (sloe).



As soon as his wife had left the house Howard went about shutting all the windows. It was a warm day but not so warm they all needed to be open, and anyway, he couldn't bear the sound of the road. Flies were getting in, too; he'd swatted one in the kitchen earlier. Kitty would only complain at bedtime when there were insects in her room.

It wasn't the road through Lodeshill he minded; there wasn't much traffic on that. Why would there be – there was no shop any more, and the Green Man was hardly the type of pub people sought out. Even the church only got a few of the faithful, and those on foot. Kitty one of them now, of course.

It was the Boundway that bothered him. Straight as a ruler it ran, passing the village less than half a mile away, and the local louts all gunned their muscle cars along it – especially at weekends. You could hear them changing up from miles off, the whine of it; you'd think they'd find a better way to spend their time, but no. Still, he reflected, putting an old Kinks CD on the hi-fi in the living room, it could have been worse: he'd heard that there'd once been quad-bike racing somewhere nearby, though the track had closed down long before they arrived in the village. *Et in arcadia arseholes*, he thought, and went to the pantry for a drink.

He knew there was a six-pack of lager left over from the last time their son Chris had visited, but it was a brown ale he was after. He'd need to get plenty of booze in for next month, when their daughter Jenny was flying back from Hong Kong and both kids would be with them for the first time in ages. Vodka for Jenny, he thought. Probably.

There was no brown ale. Sighing, he turned and climbed the stairs to the radio room; there was a Marconi 264 that wanted a new valve. Downstairs, a bumblebee knocked twice against the kitchen window before lurching away into the warm spring air.

Most of the time Kitty had the master bedroom to herself; Howard usually slept downstairs, in what had previously been the study. Before they moved to Lodeshill from north London, a year ago, it had only been an occasional thing; now, apart from when the kids visited, he was down on the sofa bed every night. It was something they did not discuss.

There were three bedrooms upstairs; one was Kitty's, one had briefly been Jenny's until she left university, and still was when she visited. The light was good in the third, so when they moved

Howard had taken the old pink carpet up and built a counter around two sides, set his tool chest underneath. Then he bought a craft light and a stool, carried the radios up from the garage – he had just four, then, and one in bits – and got to work. He had thirteen vintage wireless sets now, all pre-war; good working examples, not boot sale stuff. Five more he'd sold or traded. Where do you stop? There were people who had two hundred.

You could find them easily enough on the Internet, of course, but he felt – obscurely, though with some certainty – that it wasn't the right way. He went to swap meets and the odd show, but preferred local auctions and private sales to buying from other enthusiasts, despite the extra legwork it entailed. Admittedly, most of what came up that way was rubbish – either cheap to begin with, bodged about or beyond repair, good only for parts – but not always.

Word of mouth had got him more than one tidy example: 'I know a bloke who'll take that off your hands.' He had a Ferguson 366 Superhet that was found by a local family in the attic of a house they had just bought; it came to him covered in dust for five quid. The Marconi he was working on now turned up in a barn near Deal, and had barely been touched the cabinet full of mouse shit, the dial clogged with cobwebs and chaff.

As well as finding them, doing the work himself was what he loved: replacing the knobs, restoring cracked Bakelite, a new valve here and there. He wasn't an expert, not yet, but he did OK, and his experience with guitars and amps helped. There was something almost magical about taking an old wireless and bringing it back to life: the way they could be woken, no matter what state they were in, to pull living sounds from the air. The lovely old cabinets hiding such comprehensible innards; the simple heft of them in his hands.

It was gone four when the letter box banged; he was trying to get at the capacitors, deep under a block of resistors, and was working carefully and with minute concentration. He considered ignoring it but it rattled again, followed by the slap of something landing on the mat. After a moment he carefully set down his tools and went downstairs. For God's sake, a telephone directory. As if anyone used those any more.

Back upstairs he peered again through the magnifier at the circuit, but found he couldn't narrow his focus properly, failed to feel again the thread of the stubbornly absent current and its likely pathways and hindrances. He replaced a capacitor, but even as he did so he was remembering knocking on doors after school when he was a child and running away; and he thought, too, of the time he picked Madeline blossom from the churchyard, with its ripe and heady scent, and brought it home to his mother, who had chased him, cursing, from the door. Half a century ago, but still like yesterday. That such moments could remain latent somewhere in the intricate cortices of the brain; that he, not far off sixty years of age now, should still detect their resonance. It was a mystery.

He swung the craft light away and stretched his back. A beer before Kitty came home; why not? Not the Green Man, though, with its unfriendly farmers and local doleys; the Bricklayer's Arms, or the Crown. It was only ten minutes away, and it was a nice day for a walk. He fetched the paper from the sitting room, switched off the Kinks and set out.

Lodeshill was barely a village; more a hamlet, really. As well as Manor Lodge there was a grand Elizabethan house with mullioned windows and a box maze at the end of a long private drive; a pretty church, largely overlooked by the ecclesiastical gazetteers; a Georgian vicarage (the vicar himself served several churches, and lived elsewhere); the Green Man; a dozen modern houses of varying quality, and a cul-de-sac of ugly bungalows inhabited mostly by the elderly. What had once been the shop and post office was now a private house, though it still had a red letter box set into one of its

stone walls.

~~Past the church the houses gave way to fields and the road began to climb gently as it passed the outbuildings of one of the four farms that surrounded Lodeshill. In places the centre of the road was faintly mossy, and here and there was dung, for the most part dry and pressed into the road's surface by tyres. Bluebells and celandines starred the verges, and the leaves on the blackthorn hedges were very green.~~

After a couple of hundred yards Howard turned left onto a footpath that ran through Ocket Wood. The path followed the line of a ditch and bank which had once marked the wood's boundary, but which the wood itself had at some point in its long history overspilled. It was mostly oak, with some ash, alder and holly, and had been coppiced and felled on a regular cycle since the Dark Ages – though not for a long time now. In medieval times it had supplied the manor house with timber and the village with kindling for their fires; their pigs had been turned out in it each year to eat the acorns and mast. Later still it became a gamekeepers' preserve, the public kept firmly out. Now it was mainly visited by dog walkers, and the understorey had not been cut for years.

Jenny was always telling them to get a dog; she said the exercise would be good for them. But what his daughter hadn't yet learned was that there was an age beyond which you stopped really caring about what was good for you – especially if, as in Howard's case, you'd fucked yourself up pretty comprehensively when you were younger and were just waiting for the damage to become apparent. Now, every year that passed without cancer – or something worse – was a bonus, he told himself. Anyway, here he was, out for a walk. And he did it a couple of times a week. You couldn't argue with that.

The Bricklayer's Arms had been extensively refitted and the inside was all blond wood and chairboards. Howard leaned on the bar and nodded at the barman, who brought over a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale and a half-pint glass.

'Wife not with you?' he asked in his cheerful Australian accent. Kitty hated the Bricklayer's, had only set foot in it once or twice, but it pleased both the barman and Howard to pretend that he was there more often with his wife than without her.

'She's at the shops,' Howard replied, the merest hint of an eyebrow standing in for the hackneyed observations about women and shopping which had long since been exhausted between them. In fact Kitty was not a woman who shopped for pleasure, and Howard had no idea where she had gone. She may well have taken her easel with her; he hadn't checked.

With a brief feeling of bleakness, quickly pushed away, he surveyed the available tables before making his way to a seat near the window and opening the newspaper.

He left just before eight, as the sky outside started to grow dim. If Kitty had been painting she'd not outstay the light, and there was no harm in getting back before her.

Ocket Wood was a shadowy mass on either side of the footpath, and although he'd only had three bottles of Brown the fact that he couldn't see much around him made Howard feel drunker than he was. It was association, too, he thought, groping towards the insight; you were *supposed* to wear a hat when you came home from a pub in the dark, it was ingrained. Not that it was quite dark yet, but still.

He found, to his surprise, that he still had his empty bottle with him, and with a growing awareness of a need to pee he struck off the path and made for a huge ash stool nearly six feet across, a ring-shaped remnant of a single tree that had been coppiced repeatedly many years before. The new trunk it had sprouted, now ancient themselves, leaned outwards as the crowns competed for light.

When he got back to the path the image of his piss puddling hotly on the dead leaves between the

trunks remained in his mind all the way home, as if spotlighted somehow in the otherwise black and secret spinney.

Kitty's car was reversed in next to the Audi when he got back, and inside he found her in the sitting room, ironing. 'Good day?' he asked, edging past the board and switching the TV on. 'Gin and tonic?'

'No thanks,' she replied. 'Have you been to the pub?'

'I popped in,' Howard said. 'Did you paint?'

'No, I went to see Claire. I did tell you.'

Claire was an artist Kitty had met not long after they'd moved to the area. She exhibited at local galleries and craft shows across the county, pictures of dogs, mostly, and the odd group of cows. She wore copper bracelets on both arms and thick-soled flip-flops that she claimed were the same as going to the gym. Howard disliked her.

'So you did,' he said neutrally. 'Are you sure you won't have a drink?'

'Perfectly sure. There's a pork pie in the fridge if you want it, and some potato salad. I went to the good butcher's.'

'Thanks.' Howard had poured himself a whisky and subsided into a chair, from where he sat flicking irritably through the channels. 'Christ, there's never anything on.'

'Switch it off, then,' Kitty said.

'It's all bloody repeats,' he said, before slyly assuming his wife's long-standing position: 'I don't know why we even have one.'

Kitty didn't reply.

Howard was at the fridge door eating the pork pie when Kitty called out to tell him that Jenny had phoned. 'She asked to speak to you. I told her I thought you were at the pub,' she said.

Jenny had a year's internship at an investment bank in Hong Kong, and although she would be back for a visit in less than three weeks' time Howard missed her terribly. That Kitty had delayed telling him was, he knew, a kind of subtle revenge for him having gone for a drink. Why it should bother him what he did with his days was beyond him; it wasn't as though he ever drank to excess. Not any more.

'So how is she?' he called back carefully from the kitchen.

'She sounded fine.'

'Anything else?' Despite himself, Howard had drifted through.

Kitty appeared to relent, and looked round at him where he hovered in the doorway of the sitting room. 'She said to give you her love.'

'Right.' Howard looked down. 'And . . . she's still coming?'

'As far as I know.' She turned back to the ironing. 'I'm doing your shirts, by the way.'

The pork pie finished, he wiped his hands surreptitiously on his trousers and passed Kitty to reclaim the armchair. 'Thanks. What are your plans for tomorrow?'

'Oh, I thought I might do a walk. I don't suppose you'll want to come.'

'Are you taking your painting things?'

'Just the camera for now. I've finished the one of the bluebells, so I'm looking for something new. I want something with a bit more history to it this time. A bit more meaning.'

Howard grunted, changed the channel on the TV. Since they'd arrived Kitty had thrown herself into local history, and now she was full of facts about local churches and pollard oaks and ruined castles. It was she who had wanted them to retire here; she had spent the last two decades dreaming of a life in the country, and Howard had always known that their life in Finchley wouldn't be for ever.

The kids and the business were what had kept them in London. Howard had run a small haulage firm, and for a long time he'd needed to be at the depot every day: managing the drivers and mechanics, purchasing fuel, doing the books and dealing with the day-to-day running of a fleet of lorries, a warehouse and a yard. Once he took on a general manager he could have reduced his hours; true; but he enjoyed it, and by that time the kids were doing their exams, so there was no danger of them moving anyway. Nevertheless, Howard had always known that he was keeping Kitty from what she really wanted, which was something obscure, a connection with a place that he found hard to understand. 'But you were born in Hemel Hempstead,' he'd said, more than once, as she leafed through the property pages of *The Times*. 'You're not even *from* the countryside. You're just picking somewhere pretty out of a hat; you won't belong there, not properly. You're a townie, you know, like it or not.' But she'd just shake her head and look away.

Chris had taken over the business a year or so before they moved to Lodeshill. He'd worked there for five years at that point, he knew the ropes; it wasn't complicated, though Howard didn't tell Kitty that. She'd got serious about house-hunting once Jenny had finally gone to university after her gap year, the family home strange and silent with just the two of them knocking about in it; and when she found Manor Lodge Howard had known, deep down, that he owed her: that despite his affection for their scruffy, gobby corner of north London, their time there was coming to a close. And would it be so bad, a fresh start somewhere new? Without the business to run he could really get into the radio and give it some proper time. And it wasn't as though he went out much in London any more. He was practically a pensioner, for God's sake. Not that he felt it.

The Lodge was very handsome; even he could see that. The previous owner, a Mr Grainger, had sold it to pay for his care fees but prior to that it had formed part of the Manor House's estate, although these days a conifer belt stood between its back garden and the Manor House's remaining two acres. It wasn't as old as the big house, and dated from the time when it was being remodelled; it had probably been intended for guests or, perhaps, the gamekeeper. It was built of warm red brick, with three pointed gables and two sets of ornate chimneys; Virginia creeper covered a third of the facade up to the gable, green in spring but deepening to crimson every autumn before falling away to leave a ghostly tracery on the bricks. Their surveyor had advised them to get it stripped, but Kitty wouldn't hear of it.

She had gone to a series of local auctions when they'd first arrived, buying old furniture she wouldn't have looked twice at in London but which, Howard had to admit, seemed to work here: a Welsh dresser, two battered oak chests, a semicircular hall table with spindly legs. She'd also picked up half a dozen pictures in old-fashioned frames to fill the extra wall space they now had: botanical prints, a county map and an oil painting of someone else's ancestor who looked down disapprovingly at Howard while they ate. 'It fits with the house,' Kitty had said, shrugging. 'It's got history.'

She was right. There was a proper scullery with a chipped butler's sink, a coal hole with a lead chimney cover by the back door and, until they'd had it repainted, a series of marks on the kitchen door showing the heights of what looked like generations of little Graingers – probably including the one man they'd bought the house from. But now it was theirs, and it was clear that Kitty loved it fiercely and the countryside around it. She was happy now; anyone could see it. It was what she had always wanted.

Now Howard stood on the drive in the dark, an empty tumbler in one hand, a cigarette in the other, as the parallelogram of yellow light cast on the gravel by her bedroom window disappeared and made the darkness press closer around him. He didn't smoke any more, not really, but every so often he had one outside, after Kitty had gone to bed; and even without one he liked to come out for a moment

the fresh air before sleep. Now and again as he smoked he could hear the distant whine of a car changing gear far away.

Did he love it here? He wasn't sure. Manor Lodge was an achievement, certainly; something to show for all those years building the business up. It was proof that he'd made something of himself: he was Howard Talling, who'd left school with four O levels and had started his career as a jobbing roadie for bands nobody now had even heard of. He thought about the invisible village around him: the other people in their beds; the half-dozen families; the rich people who lived at the Manor House, whom nobody ever saw; the unguessable farms. Did they all have a proper reason to be here, more reasons than him?

A breeze drew a sigh from the massed leaves of Ocket Wood, and two hunting bats rode a breath of wind over the house into Lodeshill. Howard saw them flit across the flung stars of the Milky Way above him, their tiny calls, like a wet finger on glass, inaudible to him as he slipped the cigarette butt back into the box and went inside.

Wild garlic, dog violets, sycamore bud-burst. A cuckoo calling.



Jack could cover twenty miles in a day when he wanted to, but once he'd left London behind his pace had slowed. He walked the old Roman road north as thousands had before him: Diddakoi, tinkers, prophets, fools; the footsore army of men who once tramped England's byways looking for work.

Usually he navigated by a kind of telluric instinct, an obscure knowledge he had learned to call on even when the land he walked through was unfamiliar: the wind on his face; the pull of the water table deep beneath the ground; the change from chalk to greensand to lias under his feet. Yet in the land just north of the capital it was hard to feel those things, though he couldn't have said why. There were towns in which he could still sense the soil beneath the streets and feel the land's scars and sly take-backs and reburgeonings; here, though, it was as though the green acres were half mute, and it made him uneasy.

The road ran like a ruler through paddocks, arable fields and golf courses; from a car it probably looked bucolic, accessible, but in fact every acre was fenced off, divided up, used; it did not welcome walkers, and almost everywhere, apart from the busy road's wind-thrashed and perilous verges, was private.

It was trespass that had landed him inside the last time. He'd set out in late January from the farm on the edge of Dartmoor where he'd spent the winter dry stone walling, heading roughly north-east at a slow couple of miles an hour and hoping to bring spring weather with him. The first arrest happened in Somerset as he was crossing what turned out to be some rock star's estate; the second was in Wiltshire, for damaging a crop – or so they said – and after that it was over and over. He was pretty sure the police in one area had warned the next to look out for him, or maybe word had just spread among the locals – who could say? They cooked up some kind of order in the end, telling him to stop off private property, but it had just made him more determined. Eventually he'd ended up in magistrates' court in Berkshire and had been given a four-month sentence, which had been a shock though he'd only served two.

He could have made it easy on himself, cooperated with the police, pleaded guilty; he could have agreed to get some of those maps that showed rights of way in green and stuck to them. But there was a principle involved. All he wanted to do was walk the land in which he'd been born, peacefully and subject to no one else, and if you compromised that idea, he thought, you might as well give up.

Years back he'd lived for a few months in a van belonging to a Marxist called Tommo. The van had been parked up, with a few others, on the derelict forecourt of an old Elf petrol station. Tommo did evening shifts as a pot-washer in the titty bar across the road where the lorries stopped, and Jack had always wondered how he managed to square the cash he took from the bar with the ideals of freedom and equality he'd espoused. He'd talked a lot about land ownership and private property and the Inclosures, and about The Man who kept the English proletariat – by which he mostly meant Jack – down. Passive resistance was what it was all about, he'd said. Eventually Jack had moved on because he couldn't stand to see the girls come and go; but he still thought of Tommo now and then, and about some of the things he'd said.

Jack felt the spring sunshine warm on the back of his neck, felt the beginning of a poem flicker tantalisingly somewhere, just beyond the place where he could think about it. But that was OK, he could wait. Perhaps he would get his notebook out later, if it had shown itself by then.

Although the Roman road ran, in one form or another, nearly all the way to Lodeshill and its farm, after a couple of miles walking he struck off it, preferring to take his chances on private land again than suffer the lorries' constant roar at his back. He wasn't in a rush, and there was more to see that way, anyway: a fugitive stand of wild hops; a thrush's nest in a hedge with four blue eggs; spoil from a rabbit scrape rich with little shells from deep in the soil. He'd found an arrowhead like that a long time ago, vicious and beautiful; where it was today, though, was anyone's guess. Perhaps it had found its way into the hands of some policeman's child after one of his many arrests.

Jack found it hard to keep track of all the things he owned, although in fact they were very few: his notebooks, two biros, his cooking things, some stones and feathers and a few coins. In prison he'd had nothing, not even the sad, private little collections of matches and sweets and oddments that the other men guarded so jealously, or the curling photographs they stuck to the cell walls with smears of toothpaste. And when he left he hadn't wanted to keep anything from there, nothing that might bring with it that shut-in, musty smell.

In one field the young oilseed rape had been decimated by pigeons and slugs, a victim of the winter and late spring. In the next, the rows of beans were small for the season, despite the pellets of fertiliser like hailstones in the furrows. A row of pylons strode away from him, their cables slack in the sunshine, and the shadows of hobby aircraft raced across the soil, their whine drowning out the wrens and great tits singing in the thickets and raising Jack's hackles as he walked.

As he passed under, and then away from, the big jets' flight paths far overhead he filed his knowledge of them somewhere beyond explaining, along with the invisible lines of lost causeways and underground streams. Once, there had been none at all for more than three days, and it had troubled him so much that he had taken refuge in a derelict lock-keeper's hut by a canal as still as glass until the aeroplanes had appeared again.

Now he tried to prospect his way ahead for a path he knew had once been there. To walk its long route would be to slog across a vast ploughed field in which a distant tractor dragged a disc harrow back and forth, its clanking roar borne to him intermittently as the breeze shifted. He would be exposed; but not to honour it felt to him a betrayal, even here.

Deep down the earth was still heavy with moisture, but a few days' sun had dried the surface to a friable crust so that it gave softly underfoot like half-baked sponge. Jack set out, crossing the shallow ridges at an angle that made stepping from one to another something he had to concentrate on, the gaps between them not quite long enough for his loping stride. In the warm soil around him flints gleamed dully or glowed like bone. He knew of field edges, elsewhere, that were piled high with them, the

necessary harvest of generations of children and women. And yet still the earth sent them up.

~~Above Jack red kites wheeled and tumbled into sudden dogfights, and somewhere to his right the sun flashed off the windscreens of the traffic on the Roman road. A cuckoo called, and Jack froze, his scalp prickling, until the soft note came again, settling lazily over the field like a pair of falling feathers. *Summer's coming in*, he thought, turning a coin over in his pocket and grinning to himself. It felt like a good omen. He would write it in his notebook later on.~~

In a small copse stinking of ramsons he stopped to eat. He'd netted a rabbit the night before and there was a late cabbage in his pack he'd filched from a back garden in one of the dormitory towers he'd passed through; it was a shame he had no onion, but with the wild garlic it was enough for a simple stew.

Rabbits were easy to catch, mostly because of their curiosity: if he sat very still at dusk, downwind of a warren, and made the sound of a crying kit he could often make the does take notice. If he kept up they'd creep closer, eyes wide, ears twitching. His net was made from knotted string; years back he'd been taught how to make them by an old poacher with pockets full of wriggling ferrets. Now he was never without one. Flung fast enough, with a flick of the wrist, he could entangle a coney into a knot of kicking feet and cord. He felt no compunction about taking what he needed to survive, though when he came across an animal in a snare he'd always free it, if he thought it might live; and he'd bend the snare into uselessness and leave it where he'd found it, a lesson to whoever might come.

Coneys were easy, and he could take squirrels, too. But he wouldn't touch hares. They were wise and unearthly, and he felt sure that they knew something about him, something that he didn't even know about himself.

Early one morning in a meadow somewhere – Stinsford, was it, or Selborne? It was hard to remember now – he'd been sitting quietly with his legs stretched out as the world slowly grew light, watching an orange sliver of sun needle, then dazzle, through a silhouette of far trees. Next, the sound of thundering feet – and before he'd had a chance even to look round a brown hare had cleared him with one leap and disappeared. A half-second later another hare appeared in pursuit, but this one braked hard and came to a stop just short of him. Jack flinched, froze; and for a long moment they regarded one another, the hare's tall ears swivelling, its beautiful, gold-flecked eye taking his measure. And then, quite calmly, it seemed, it had left, and Jack had let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding.

After he had eaten the stew he took his clothes off and dunked them in a metal cattle trough fed by a hose and ball tap. He dunked his head, too, opening his eyes underwater to see the mosquito larvae twisting in the bubbles and shafts of sun. The water was icy cold and smelled faintly of iron, and it reminded him, for some reason, of the milking shed at Culverkeys Farm in Lodeshill: the patient cows in the clanging stalls, the plastic teat cups tight on the udders, the warm, white milk filling up the steel tank.

Perhaps, if he got to Lodeshill and the asparagus wasn't ready, one of the farms would need a reliable milker. Fieldwork was what he wanted, but dairy work was OK – just as long as he could keep moving around, as long as he didn't have to stay in one place for too long.

He wrapped himself in his sleeping bag and spread his clothes out to dry in the afternoon sun. Then he took a plastic razor from his pack and began to drag it roughly over his scalp, feeling it catch hair and there on old nicks and scars. Just before he began on his beard, he stopped and rinsed the razor off in the trough. Perhaps he'd let it grow a while this time.

Ribwort plantain, common bugle, bird's foot trefoil.



This was Jamie's earliest memory: a magnet drawn dripping from black water on a rope. His grandfather's strong hand prising a bright blade from it; the red drops hanging from his fingertips. And then, as he shook it off, the old man's blood landing warm on Jamie's lips and streaking the back of his hand when he tried to wipe it away.

They had called it dipping, and looking back it seemed as though they had done it every weekend although of course he knew it couldn't have been so. The magnet was huge, like a drum; God only knew where his grandfather had got it from. They'd lower it into the water together, see what brought up: coins, keys, rusty sections of iron wheels, and once a broken knife, what was left of the blade notched and vicious still. Sometimes the magnet would catch on something really big – too big to be recovered. Then, his grandfather would let him hold the rope, let him feel the weight at its end as it shifted, sending bubbles up to the surface: the only sign of something long lost that they would ever see.

The old man, of course, had thrown everything back. 'She'd go spare,' he'd say, shaking his head ruefully; but even as a very small boy Jamie had known that his nanna Edith had died giving birth to his mum.

They did all the rivers around Lodeshill and Ardleton, and a couple of canals; they did the lake that had at one time been part of the grounds of the Manor House, and the old tin workings on the slopes of Babb Hill. He fell in there, once; he could still remember the shock of the icy water and how his flung arm made desperate contact with the rough, wet rope that held the magnet, how his grandfather hauled him from the pond like a fish onto the muddy bank. It hadn't put him off; in fact, there was something about how little it had mattered, how unconcerned his grandfather had been about his skinned knee and wet clothes, that had comforted him. It felt as though, when the old man was there, nothing could go wrong; not really.

Jamie never asked his granddad why he did it, why he dredged the water for finds and then threw them back. He just liked going out with him, and it was enough. The little boy holding tight to the crossbar; his grandfather behind him, pedalling. His strong arms around him on either side.

Jamie was a Lodeshill boy; he'd been born nineteen years before in the overheated bedroom of

1950s bungalow whose scrappy garden bordered Culverkeys Farm. He had begun to arrive at the Queen Elizabeth one still and bone-cold November day, then had seemed to change his mind; his parents were sent home, told to come back once the contractions were more regular. He waited, so the family story went, to be born in Lodeshill, like his grandfather before him, and back at the bungalow had slipped out quickly and silently onto the duvet cover as his mother wept and next door's neighbour sympathised in the byre.

His father worked at a landfill site a few miles out of the village; his mother was a dinner lady at the local primary and also cleaned at the Green Man, and at the village hall and sometimes the Bricklayer's Arms in Crowmere. But a lot of the time she didn't work at all, because she didn't want to see anyone; then she just sat on the settee ordering things off QVC that she would return a few days later, or going on eBay for her doll collection.

Five of the dolls sat on the windowsill in the lounge, while two – his mum's favourites – sat on the pouffe in the corner of his parents' bedroom; there were more in a box in the loft. Jamie had more or less stopped seeing them, though when he was younger it had been part of why he didn't ask any kids from school over to play. 'It's just a hobby, son,' his dad said.

Even when she was OK, which she mostly was at the minute, she wasn't like other people's mothers. It wasn't just her weight; you had to be careful not to upset her, you had to think about what to say so you didn't set her off. It had got easier as he got older, it was more or less second nature now; he could tell how she was feeling by a million different things: what she put on in the morning, the way she spoke, how long it took before she replied. But it was hard to explain to people outside the family, and even he and his dad didn't really mention it. When things were OK he preferred not to think about it, and when they weren't he didn't want to bring it up.

For a long while, though, he'd felt part of another family as well as his own. Until they were born, thirteen Alex Harland had lived next door, on Culverkeys, and they had been inseparable. The farmhouse was so different to home: always bright, busy, and full of voices. Alex had a little sister, Laura, whom he would alternately tease and ignore; Mr and Mrs Harland talked about things loudly while they were having their tea, like what was on the news and the price of cattle feed, and during the day a string of farmhands came and went. To Jamie their family life seemed loud and exciting and uncaring; he never stopped feeling wary of its unpredictable ebb and flow, but at the same time, it was as though something in him loosened when he was there. For instance, once he'd dropped a mug in their kitchen and the handle had broken off, and he'd turned and held up the pieces to Alex and his mum and said, 'I can't get a handle on it,' just like that, and everyone had laughed. He could never have done that at home.

Culverkeys Farm itself – the fields and woods, the stream, the barns and tracks and dew pond – had been a shared territory, something he and Alex had possessed completely and with all the thoughtless complacency of childhood. And then, when Jamie was thirteen, Alex and Laura had been taken away, and everything – *everything* – had changed.

He had always struggled a bit at school, but without Alex to keep up with things went downhill. Bored him, it was stupid; there was no point to half the stuff they made you do. The teachers just said he just wasn't very academic, whatever that meant, and when he left, at sixteen, it wasn't with many qualifications to his name.

By that time he had a Saturday job in a bakery but no real idea of what came next. He'd spent the first summer kicking about the bungalow, playing computer games in his room while flies buzzed against the window, and watching TV with his mum. The meadows around the village were mown and the hay baled or wrapped for silage; other families went away on holiday and came back tanned; a new

school term began. The gap in the hawthorn hedge he'd once used as a short cut to the farmhouse filled in and grew over; meanwhile Jamie felt stranded, becalmed, as though his limbs were weakening or the air around him growing clotted and slow. When he locked himself in the bungalow's tiny bathroom and made himself come into the handbasin there was no excitement in it, or even desire. He put work into not catching sight of himself in the mirror.

His dad just wanted him to get work, any work, but although he made a CV and looked at the job websites every morning there wasn't much to be had. Eventually someone had tipped him off about Mytton Park, a huge distribution centre just off the motorway. The next day Jamie had put on his school trousers and a shirt and rode his 125cc trail bike there, pattering in amid the fumes from articulated lorries and following what felt like several miles of signs to the site office where a southerly-faced personnel woman had him fill out several forms before telling him, to his absolute and lasting surprise, that his first shift would be in two days.

The scale of Mytton Park had been a shock. All his life he'd lived less than a dozen miles away, yet in the seven years since it had been built he had never known it was there. Its blank, windowless sheet was covered, so the site map said, nearly four hundred acres, yet its low, grey mass was hidden from the motorway by trees, and while lorries may have served it like worker ants, at ground level – at deer and boy and village level – the countryside in which it squatted seemed almost to have absorbed the affront, to have agreed not to speak of it. Almost.

But two years on Mytton Park was so much a part of Jamie's daily life that it was hard to remember a time when his world hadn't included it. His official job title was Warehouse Operative, though for work he was called a picker and packer; he moved goods around from two in the afternoon to ten at night, five days a week, shifting boxes on and off wire-guided forklifts and conveyors, directed by the recondite stock-control systems that made of him a minor component in a vast logistical superorganism that supplied goods to stores almost as they were being bought and fulfilled online orders overnight. Sometimes he tried to imagine the places the lorries took the stock away to, the shops and flats all over the country: people with different accents, different houses, different lives.

He'd bought his first car when he was still at school; what else was there to do? His dad put in a couple of hundred quid and made Jamie earn the rest; he'd used the money he got from the bakery staying on there after he started at Mytton Park so as to save up for insurance and petrol. His mum had been against it, had said the bike was bad enough and that he'd get himself killed; but for once his dad had overruled her. He'd passed his test first time.

He'd kept the Clio on the drive next to his father's old Ford Focus and tinkered with it with a boyish obsession everyone said he'd grow out of. But then, when he was just a few weeks' past his seventeenth birthday, he'd surprised everyone by selling it at a profit to a boy who'd been in the year above and trading up to a Corsa he'd seen in the local paper. It didn't look like much – in fact, his dad thought it was a bit of a wreck – but Jamie had been adamant that he wanted it. It was why he took every shift he could at Mytton Park – the tyres he wanted cost £500, and after that there were the alloys, the exhaust, the turbo, the audio system; the money he could spend on it, really, was limitless.

'Are you putting something by?' his dad had asked him once. 'Course,' he'd replied; but he wasn't. What he didn't give to his mum for housekeeping or spend on going out went on the Corsa. There was no use in saving up; it wasn't as though he'd ever be able to afford his own place or anything – not that there was any affordable housing around there anyway, as his mum often pointed out. So it just seemed futile.

Underneath the tarp the car had been undergoing a slow transformation. He could see now that he'd come at it all wrong, of course, sending away for a cheap body kit that turned out to be all but useless.

bar the sills and bumpers, and spending too much time on a flashy instrument panel. He'd known leave the custom stencils until last, but it was obvious now that he should have tackled the engine before anything else: one of the new sills was already cracked where he'd knocked the block and tackle onto it a few weeks back. But he was learning.

There were places you could go to show off a car like his. Not just shows and rallies, but service stations and car parks on certain nights. The cars would have the bonnets up, showing off the engine work; some might have their sound systems turned up loud, the whole car bouncing, engine revving, all the lights on and a police car parked up nearby in case of trouble. He'd never been to anything like that – not yet – but he'd heard about such things locally. He wanted to be part of it, though of course it seemed a bit intimidating from the outside. But once he was there the car would speak for him: people would come over and ask if it was his, if he'd done all the work himself, and he'd be able to say yes. He pictured it sometimes: an appreciative nod, a casual question about the exhausts, or the spoiled leather. 'I'm James,' he might say, offering his hand. 'And what do you drive?'

On Saturdays he still rode the trail bike into nearby Connorville, leaving the village by deep lanes more familiar to him than his own body, and sold doughnuts and leek slices from nine to two. One day, though, he would live somewhere different – 'somewhere real' was how he described it to himself. Though how that would come about he couldn't have said.

'Dicko! Oi, Dicko!' – that was Jamie's line manager Dave, in the glass office in the corner of the van hangar, swinging around fatly on his chair with a look on his face that usually meant he'd found some choice piece of Internet grot to shock him with – 'Dicko! Get your arse over 'ere!'

He had been named after his grandfather, James Albert Hiron, yet Jamie Dixon had been Dicko all the way through school and was Dicko again now – although when he left school he had hoped to leave it behind.

'Here, Dicko,' said Dave again as Jamie stuck his head round the office door. 'Look at this –' and he gestured towards the desk where the local freesheet was spread out over the keyboard. Dave had been a forklift driver until a slipped disc had made of him, in his late forties, a transport clerk. Now he was growing fat, though to Jamie, still as scrawny as a calf, he seemed like a powerhouse of a man.

Jamie stood behind his swivel chair and looked down at the paper, glad at least to see that it wasn't porn this time. At home, by himself, was one thing, but at work – around other people – it just made him uncomfortable.

'Lodeshill, it says – ain't that where you live?'

'Yeah.' Jamie reached down to the thin paper, smoothed it so the light from the computer screen hit it more directly:

Harford, Rogers & Sturt
FARM DISPERSAL SALE
Culverkeys Farm, Lodeshill, 7 May.
On behalf of P Harland (deceased)
Sale of 2 Case Tractors, Farm Machinery,
Livestock Equipment, Milking Parlour and Effects,
General Horticultural Equipment and Miscellanea
and Household Contents. Sale to commence
at 11 a.m. prompt.

'Is that the farm where . . .?'

 Dave turned to look up at him, one eyebrow raised.

‘Yeah.’

‘P Harland, it says here. Did you know him?’

‘I – I was friends with their son. Our house is right next to the farm.’

‘Poor kid. He OK?’

‘I don’t know. Him and his sister moved away with his mum six years ago. Nearly seven.’

‘So they’re selling off the farm. What about the land? That going to auction?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘Two months since he died and we’ve still not heard.’

‘Probably go to a developer: new houses and that. Or they might look for coal, or shale gas – you thought of that? Going on all over.’

‘Maybe Mrs Harland will come back and live there, maybe it’s hers now.’

‘Well, you don’t know, these days,’ said Dave, sitting back in the creaking chair. ‘Could be a lot of money in it. You’ll have to wait until the lawyers have finished with it all, I suppose.’

Riding home after his shift that night through the dark lanes, Babb Hill black and invisible to the east, Jamie thought about Culverkeys, about what might happen to it and what it would mean. The cows – seventy or so Holstein-Friesians, mostly milkers plus some calves and in-calf heifers and a Hereford stock bull – had been taken to market a few days after Philip Harland had died, and now the dispersal sale suggested that the farm would not be sold as a going concern; what wasn’t clear yet was what would happen to the land.

When he thought about Culverkeys he pictured the aerial photograph that hung in the hallway at home; a man had knocked on the door one day and told his mother there’d been a plane over, and a letter had come in the post a few weeks later. In it the village looked like a jumble of grey squares surrounded by green; you could see the main road through it, and the turn-off to Crowmere, and a bit of the Boundway in one corner. And you could see his house at the end of the little cul-de-sac, with its tiny rectangle of garden behind; and beyond that, Culverkeys stretching north and west as far as the big field called the Batch with the oak in it: the green squares with their ghostly crop marks, the clumps of dark trees and the dew pond reflecting the sun like a drop of mercury. It looked, from that height, as though the back gardens on the west side of the cul-de-sac had been carved out of Culverkeys land; and perhaps they had. Perhaps the earth in Jamie’s back garden had once belonged to it.

And he thought about Alex’s father, and the terrible way that he’d died. Jamie had come home after his shift one Friday night back in February to find all the lights on in the bungalow and both his parents in the lounge. The telly wasn’t on and they both stood up when he let himself in; he’d believed, for one heart-stopping second, that his grandfather had passed away.

What he first felt, when his dad told him, was that it was in some way his fault – as if the long, slow process of the Harland family’s unravelling, now concluded with Philip’s death, had been set in motion by Jamie many years ago, tracked to the happy farmhouse from the bungalow somehow like a virus in the treads of his shoes.

It was stupid, he knew. But the feeling had persisted. This wasn’t how things were supposed to have turned out; he and Alex were supposed to have been friends for ever, and the landscape into which they had both been born was something that should never have had to change.

And yet Jamie had never quite had Alex’s optimism, never quite trusted the future in the way that Alex, back then, had seemed to. ‘What will you do when you grow up?’ he’d asked Alex once, back in primary school. Alex had answered for them both: ‘That’s easy. We’ll live here, on Culverkeys. I’ll be the farmer, and you can be the herdsman.’

He'd wanted to believe it, but even then Jamie had known that life was more complicated than that

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