Flash Fiction Competition 2016

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Like it or not

I’m in the watershed.

I thought it would be okay, but look at me. I look petrified. I’ve been caught in the act. They say a picture says more than a thousand words and this one does. It reveals my inner story.

I thought I could pretend this summer. Thought it would be okay to be in the watershed for a while. Do some menial tasks, simple things that need done over the summer, and pretend it doesn’t matter. But it does.

My words would convince you otherwise. You can hear me tell people when they ask.

‘What are you doing right now?’

‘I’m in the watershed at the moment.’

‘The watershed?’

‘It’s okay. It’s giving me time to think. To enjoy simple pleasures and reconnect with myself.’

‘You’re okay with that?’

‘Of course. I don’t know where I’m going next, so it’s giving me time to come up with a plan.’

‘A plan?’

‘Yes, what I’m going to do next. Time to find out who I really am, and what it is I do. What it is I want.’

My letters too. In my writing I pretend with the best of them. I can spin a negative into a positive, make the words sound convincing to everyone but me.

When I talk I sound light, a false smile on my face, working hard to look relaxed. Inside I’m heaving, my stomach churning, my muscles tight and sore. I feel small. Nobody wants me and it hurts. I’m cast aside, forgotten, feeling like baby’s first cuddly toy, rubbed bare in parts and missing the stuffing in other parts. I feel aimless at the moment, with no clear road ahead. Look at me. My inner child is too obvious. She’s screaming. My eyes tell you everything you need to know about her. I’m scared because she’s scared. Even our body is scared. We’re crouched, small; folded together, don’t deserve to be big. We need to work at it. To expand, unfold, unravel become full, fully present. Then you’ll know where I am, and I’ll know where we’re going.

Maybe it’s time to stop pretending? Time for us to admit to each other. If it’s so obvious when you look at my eyes, maybe it’s time to look myself in the eye and admit it. I’m scared. I just want someone to need me, keep me warm, take me with them, feed me. Everything she needs.

Like it or not, this watershed is the place I’m spending time with my inner child.
The Courtyard

Crisp, cold air blew through the ruined court yard. It had been many years since I had seen this place, nothing has changed. That sense of dread I had walking up here never goes even long after I am home with my family.

Winter was setting in, there was light patches of frost on the stones that made up the well. A grim centre piece, its gaping maw echoing a lonely silence. I am trembling as I shuffle closer. My heart jumps as the silence is broken with the cackling of a passing crow. I steady myself and look over the edge and into the hole.

“Help us!” a panicked voice calls “Please, Please! Help us” each cry more and more desperate. What was there to do? The well water thrashed as a child tried to gain a hand hold on the side, slipping on the wet stone. The girls face twisted in fear for her little brother’s life. The girl shook and cuddled the boy but he remained motionless. Skin pale, head slumped, the cold had taken him. The thrashing slowed to a flail eventually stopping. She buried her head tight into the boys shoulder sobbing. The court yard fell silent again. The two bodies bobbed slowly in the water.

The boy’s eyes were closed, at peace. The girl eyes open, the trauma painted across her face, puffy eyes, bitten lip. That look of confusion and hopelessness, she was powerless to save her brother. When he was gone she gave up on herself. Is that love? Or acceptance?

The silence was interrupted by sirens, the faint blue lights flashed through the court yard, cracks of twigs and rustling of leaves could be heard as the rescue scrambled through the wood. Crackling of radios, beating of helicopters, the peacefulness of death disturbed by frenzy by chaos. Men in white suits place the bodies carefully on the ground, a man in a long black coat hunches over looking at the girl gravely. He turns his head closing his eyes as he stands up. The man walks to the back of the court yard to a man and woman who eventual break down in tears on the ground.

A crow cackles again and I open my eyes, just a memory. All those years and I can recall it as new. What more could I of done? If only I had listened and we stayed away from the old court yard. I reach into my coat and pull out the two white lilies I was protecting from the wind.

Staring into the still water I drop them in. Maybe next year it will get easier. Maybe next year I can finally forgive myself.

I say that every year.
Like all collectors, we photographers kill. In that perfectly framed, perfectly timed moment, we capture an image that is forever deprived of its forward momentum and forever in ignorance of its history, a still point, frozen at absolute zero, incapable of interaction. Yet we can say with unprovable certainty, that it could never have been so beautiful as in that perfect moment, nor ever could be again. And because we capture that image in that moment, it becomes our possession on which we may gaze from time to time, for no other reason than it is beautiful.

Look on my photograph and I dare you to disagree. The crouching figure draws the eye and stares right back at you, clear-eyed, inquisitive, unafraid. There is just enough of a breeze to take the hair away from her flawless brow, off which, it seems, the sun is reflected. Her skin is smooth, even around her eyes and mouth. She cannot yet be twenty years old. Even as I pressed the shutter, I knew that it would be my finest picture, knew that she would never again be as lovely.

You might say, you took the picture, what need to take the life? But consider this; such perfection needs to be safe-guarded. An alternative view admits comparison and surely you would agree that the vital, ageing reality could never compete with this, my vision of the immaculate. If she’d lived, I hold that her several ages of decline would detract from her original, ideal self. Of course, it would be nonsense to claim that I deliberated on all of this before acting. Some things we process faster than thought, like the hunter pulling the trigger before completely knowing the target.

Even as I killed her, I made sure not to look on her more than was absolutely necessary. Instead I kept that still image at the front of my mind, which later of course, was reinforced by the development of the photograph.

It was only after the deed that I knew that there had been a witness; some alteration in air turbulence, created by a body’s movement perhaps. When I looked round, it was to see her, back to the wall, hands pressing as if to find some stone that might magically give way and allow her a supernatural deliverance.

The disappearance of two maids from the one estate excited short-term activity but to no effect. The missing were not to be found and in the absence of any evidence of a criminal nature, the authorities pursued other priorities, leaving only the immediate family members to preserve the memory of their existence, as one of them did.

Collection without exhibition is a sterile activity. It seemed only natural that I show my work, my best work, the work that any other man would have destroyed years before. Though
recognition was my vindication, it came at a cost. The victims, the knife, the disused well; they were all there, awaiting discovery.
Carl Trestle took out a folder from his rucksack and slid an 8x10, black and white photograph across the desk. Paul Chambers, pensively stroking his thick, grey beard, threw a concerned glance back as he took it up. Through the University office windows the late afternoon sunlight streamed in behind him, highlighting just how haggard and pale his friend’s features were.

“It’s very Gothic in style, good use of the wood and stone textures and the overhanging tree bough allows a reasonable depth perspective.”

“For God’s sake Paul, I explained, I’m not interested in the bloody merits of it. What about the crouching girl?”

“Well, she seems rather out of place, furtive, unsettling, spoiling the foreground entirely.”

Carl struck the desk with his fist.

“NO! Is she real – or not?”

“Look Carl, we’ve known each other for many years and that’s the only reason I agreed to see you, but to say that this girl wasn’t there when you took it is just preposterous. I’m a lecturer in photography not a bloody ghostbuster!”

Carl shook his head and took several photos from a folder, spreading them out across the desk.

“I took these pictures in the same area, within an hour, what do you see?”

Paul took out a magnifying glass and scanned the first picture tapping on a figure in the distance and then prodding at the others.

“That looks like her standing by a gravestone, she’s in them all and appears to get gradually closer with every shot.”

“Exactly, well she wasn’t there, nobody was - I was completely alone!”

“It must be a fault with the camera, do you have it with you?”

He nodded, taking an SLR camera from his rucksack.

“It’s a fresh roll of film too.”

Carl paused before handing it over.

“You gave a lecture once about certain cultures that believed taking a photograph of someone was to take away their soul. Also legends that claimed the camera opened up a gateway to the dead, believing that some things could escape death through it? Am I mad, is she really trying to escape?”

Paul stood and quickly snapped a picture of Carl, then walked across to a cupboard door labelled ‘Dark Room.’
“I’ll get this developed in a jiffy and soon put your disturbed mind at rest.”

He closed the door and a red light above the door by a ‘No Entry’ sign lit up.

After a few minutes the light went out and closing the door behind him Paul sat back at the desk.

“The picture’s hanging to dry, but rest assured, there is only you in the image, so get a grip Carl, tribal superstitions are just that and don’t belong in the modern world.”

Carl was about to object when the red light above the dark room door suddenly lit up!

Both men rose sharply in their seats, a stark look of alarm on their faces.

Then the dark room door began to open!

The end
My Perfect Fingers

Why did I come back?
The pitted, angry walls make neuron scars jump.
See my skin. So much purer... softer than it was then. I feel my cheek and then I run porcelain
fingers over grainy, coarse brick and cement. Every indent thrusts noxious images onto an old
dusty screen in my head. It’s not revulsion exactly but compression...suffocation. It is violent,
but...it’s almost like pleasure! How? How can that be? Tears leach, unbidden.
I blink.
The scars have transferred from fingers to neurons. Apparently invisible. Apparently not
there...not real. Tricks, always tricks. How do you escape? How do you make it go?
When I examine my fingers...they are joyous. Perfect.
You would never know! You would NEVER know.
But...the contact with the wall, like an electric link fires up those old neurons. Why aren’t they
dead? Why haven’t they been used for something else? Something better.
I can’t stand it!
I can stand it. I have stood it...for so long.
I am only twenty...and yet...I have lived so long. So long. Goodbye...but not goodbye. It won’t go! I
won’t let go. Is there then pleasure in its awfulness? Do I refuse to let it go because it is MY
memory. Mine alone. Is there pleasure in its uniqueness to me?
I had to come back. But...did I?
Why did I come? To dredge it all up again?
Is it cathartic? It doesn’t feel cathartic.
My life is good isn’t it? I have a job...of sorts. I met Jamie.
Does Jamie remind me of HIM?
Jesus! That hurts. An association I did not want. I feel sick.
So why come? I was a fool.

There is no pleasure in contaminating the possibilities of the present with the ghostly fingers of
the past.
Fingers conduct memories. My perfect fingers...entwined with the ghostly, leechy memories...a
present past!
I gag and shake my fingers to free them of this self imposed vision. I strike the wall hard, with the
palm of my right hand. The “PWACK” sound echoes and my palm reverberates. My left palm now.
“PWACK”. It is, not so much painful, as shocking and I laugh. I strike again, both hands in unison and glee fills my throat. The pain...is not quite pain. The glee uses it. The glee chuckles and reverberates around the walls.

This is it! This is what I came back for. I strike the wall again and again.

I choose glee! I CHOOSE GLEE.

The old dusty screen may be triggered into life at ANY time. A touch. A smell. A plucked memory.

But I choose! I choose MY response.

My response must be “PWACK”. I hit the wall. Double palm “PWACK”.

I choose my job, for now. I choose Jamie, for now. I choose the present.

Informed by the past, yes.

But, I CHOOSE.
From the window, she could see the museum through torrential rain. But being Asian, she was not in tune with these storm clouds over Wales. “That’s the Talyllin Railway Museum,” he had announced on the day he had brought her as his bride to his terrace house. She had lit up her eyes. “Train lamps, those eyes of yours,” he had said, and, ever after, she had obliged. What a high price for her flight from poverty in Bombay. And, in Wales, she had found out he had been lying about being rich. “You’re from Darjeeling housing the famous Darjeeling Toy Train! It’s Fate! Dad was a railway man!” he had roared, when they met. She peered into the dark hall. Their bicycles loomed. “I eschew the car,” he had said. She hated his pretentious speech and the damn bikes. Not the life she had imagined. “Our home will be in Wales. None of this staying in India hogwash,” he had said. “Prove your sincerity, Brian.” “How?” “Put the house into joint names. My mother was left homeless, when my father deserted.” Clever to tell him how she feared abandonment. His father had often been away from home. “Driving the great iron horses all over Wales,” he had said. But she had discovered his father had been a ticket collector on a local line, and the house was still in Brian’s sole name. Arguments had followed. “Feel more secure if I put the house in your sole name, my sweet steam engine? Can’t get you rusted through crying.” “Let’s buy a larger house? If we make babies, we’ll need more space,” she had said. “If you take on the responsibility of selling this one.” The cash from the sale would be in her bank account, today. Their meeting had been Fate. A visit to a cousin had coincided with his to the World Heritage site of the Toy Train. Sipping tea in the Windmere Hotel, she had lain in wait for a suitable European. And suddenly there he was in the steam from her raised cup. He had thought she was a countrywoman. How could he have mistaken her for some rough-skinned hill station person? And her body always compared to trains was insult. She loathed him.
She would put the kettle on. A nice cup of Darjeeling before her flight to London, and thence to India.

He appeared in the doorway.

“I faked the papers putting the house in your name. And a pal pretended to buy it. Escaping? Don’t you know you’re in my museum, my sweet steam engine?”

His smile was sickly.

“Kettle’s boiling, dear. Let’s have a cuppa, and then a ride on the bikes, eh? There’s no place like home,” he said.

She heard a piercing scream of a train entering an eternal tunnel. Could it be coming from her funnel?

End
A Crimson Hope

I held the knife over my wrist. I was prepared to cut myself, but I paused. How had I gotten here? You don’t get to choose what type of life you’re brought into; your gender, your name, your rank in society- It’s all left up to fate and her divine wisdom.

My earliest memories are of my mother cradling me in her arms, hushing my cries as we hid in the bedroom closet. Screams echoed in the night, shattering the silence. My mother tried to calm me, whispering comforting words in my ears as she rocked me back and forth: “It’s okay, Katherine Karish. Everything is going to be okay, my darling girl.” Just when I thought it was over the doors were ripped open, exposing us to the world of anger and pain that we had tried to keep at bay. We had tried to cheat fate, tried to write our own stories, but some things are set in stone. My mother was killed in front of me. I don’t know why I survived, people tell me that I shouldn’t even remember what happened- I was barely a year old.

It’s been thirteen years since that fateful night. For years I relentlessly studied fairy tales, graphing the stars and searching through centuries of nearly forgotten lore all in the hopes of trying to fix the mistakes of my ancestors. Last month I had stumbled upon an old, dusty book hidden beneath the floor boards. The pages were old and yellowed and the spine cracked and worn from years of neglect. The book told the story of an ancient line of royalty, so ancient they were all but forgotten. A Prince had claimed the throne due to his father’s untimely death. As a prince one of his first duties was to find a suitable wife, but he was in love with one of his servants. The princess of the neighbouring kingdom was beautiful, kind and intelligent- everything a princess should be. She proposed that they should marry and unite their kingdoms. This idea was tempting. He would be all powerful and be married to the fairest woman the world has ever seen; he didn’t hesitate to accept this offer. The poor serving girl was left heart broken and in her grief she threw herself off of a cliff. Her father was distraught and driven mad with rage. He cast a spell over the Prince’s family; all the women that married into his family would suffer horrible deaths, leaving their husbands to suffer the grief that he felt. The only way to undo this curse was to have one of his children sacrifice their own life, let their blood drip into the old, ancient well. They would trade their life for their mothers. A life for a life.

It had all come down to this. I could rewrite history, right a wrong. Bring my mother back... I took a breath and brought the knife down, watching the well water turn crimson.
Lady in the Lake

Annie was one of those human interest stories, tiny in person and smaller on paper. Her picture was like looking into a dollhouse, one of those square sections that divides the rooms when you remove the front. There she was, the little old thing by the canal, probably complaining about how she’d been treated by schoolchildren during their lunch hour. She would have a lot to say on this, but instead of listing a trail of complaints the local paper decided it was much easier to just write on Annie. People make nice short stories compared to issues, you can’t get them right or wrong, you just write.

*Mention the name ‘Annie’ to any child in the Muirmount area and you’re likely to get a number of nicknames back. Nicknames that would never make it into print.*

I knew one well, Alkie Annie. You could smell it on her breath, see it in her step. It was sort of theatrical, the way she would sway and stumble towards you. You didn’t know what to think. You’d laugh and not know why. What exactly was funny?

*To describe Annie as abrasive might be an understatement. As many complaints as she may have about the children of today, she too has been targeted by the parents of the students of high schools adjoining the Union Canal, often described as a ‘danger’ to their safety.*

Once, she came crashing towards me, one of those bags on wheels shaking behind her, crunching on the uneven path. She would mumble and look directly at you, and, again, you wouldn’t know what to do. But on this occasion she didn’t stop, she kept going and going as if I didn’t exist, as if her stern look would pierce right through me and let her pass. I don’t know why but I didn’t budge. As manic as her eyes were she was still this little old lady. I’d move if I wanted to move. She came right at me and we collided, her arm swinging her bag into the canal. She winced, hitting the ground with a bone crack. The bag went straight under, and she just puffed and mumbled, eyes wide open.

*Ms Vivian Tennyson, 52.*

Was that her real name? Was she that young? I mean, I can’t think of her as anything younger. It would be like knowing another person. Well, knowing a different character. It’s not like I sat down and chatted to her about the grandchildren as she lay dazed on the ground. I didn’t ask her how the husband was or if the dog still had fleas. She just looked right at me.
I wonder if the bag is still under there, at the bottom of the canal, how long it will last there.

I look down and see I've unwittingly scrunched up the paper in my hand.
There's no such thing as monsters.

It was pure misfortune that brought me stumbling across the ruins that day. The sky was plagued. It coughed and heaved up spats of water and it was whilst seeking shelter I found myself there. I felt displeasure at first sight. The space chilled me and I wore my unease like a fine robe. The walls whispered deformity. Moss festered in cracks. Vines shrivelled and decayed against the rock, and although nests resided in the trees, no bird song could be heard. I rolled my tongue around my mouth, the impression of something utterly abhorrent leaving a bitter taste. Yet for all its oddity, I remained huddled, shoes lowered into the floor. I assured myself, there's no such thing as monsters and I occupied my rationale filching refuge from the downpour.

Nevertheless, that wretched sense of unease rose within me again. It grew. With gross impertinence it slinked down my spine and coiled in my stomach in bouts of vile. I fixed my gaze upon the pooling water at my feet, but the nip of cold water couldn't alter the feeling. The feeling of being watched. I swallowed thickly and jerked out my chin, eyes wide and stiff fingers ghosting shakily down my front. I caught the scream creeping up my throat as I faltered at the sight. A crow perched; watching me; indifferent yet still cackling. I mused—there's no such thing as monsters.

Heavy downpour gave way to veils of wraith-like fog, wind nipped and howled like hell hounds, and I felt trembles overcoming my body in terror-ridden spasms. I hunched over, hands fisting hair, lungs churning sharp puffs, and trapped words gargling in my throat like blood. Tears leaked rivets, salt sullied cheeks quivering as the water pooled on the earth. The puddle rippled as I peered into it. And in return, vacant eyes pitted in a sunken face ogled back. The creature was distorted; augmented skin pulled taut into a snout, and lips into a sneer as it crept in the murkiness. Yet for all its contortion, that hellish vision, I knew was very much myself. It was despicable. A disfigurement spawned from my reflection. But the mirror had me inebriated. I didn't dare lean forward to touch the creature nor did I feel I had the strength to move away, I was stuck. Like a heathen it clutched me around the neck and nestled me to its bosom, and I was enthralled by the odious thing that was in every sense a part of me. Rapt, I asked aloud, "there's no such thing as monsters?".

Although the rain no longer impinged upon my body, a sallow pall still dressed the heavens, the day's sun lowering into the Earth. The gale had gone, I had no reason to stay, yet I did. Herald by the crows caws, the night encroached. And my reflection cackled. Then gasped as I choked it, hands tight on its neck. There's no such thing as monsters.
Village de Chêne Sage

Village de Chêne Sage is haunted, so they told her. She never believed them. Had they ever seen a ghost? –No. Had they ever heard a ghost? –No. Then how did they know it was haunted? –It just is! This wasn’t good enough for her: she wanted answers.

For as long as she could remember, the old dry well had been the centre of all the fear; she questioned everyone about it. But again, the answer was always the same: Stay away from it, it’s dangerous. It was like they were under the influence of some invisible force, ensuring that no-one considered venturing near the well. But Marie wasn’t scared. She’d recently had her birthday; she was eight now – invincible! Still without answers, she went to explore.

She should have listened to the adults.

The well is situated in the very centre of the village, surrounded by a neat ring of decidedly ancient oak trees, gnarled and somehow wise. They stand tall and proud, as though they know things you don’t, and hold secrets so secret that no matter how closely you listen when they whisper, you can never begin to hope to learn them.

Marie, young and ignorant as she was, was brave. She walked straight up to the neglected, crumbling well and called out, voice echoing downwards.

“Is anybody there?” Her voice was higher than expected, and I realized she was young. I seized my chance.

“Down here,” I answered, watching her silhouette startle backwards. But then she replied, and I smiled to myself; I had her.

Marie chatted for hours and seemed reluctant to leave. She promised not to tell anyone about me, and returned each week – she thought I was her friend. My plan was going perfectly.

My plan didn’t come to fruition, however, until some two years later, when Marie announced she was coming to visit me. She’d built a rope ladder and proceeded to tie it to a point jutting out of the side of the well. I watched her dark form descend and grinned hungrily as she dropped down. Once her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she scanned the space, a look of confusion overtaking her.
She searched every inch a hundred times, unable to find any traces of a living thing. The sun started to set, and before she knew it, it was twilight. Her time was up.

As Marie stood, I grabbed her around the neck, gripping the garrotte in both hands and pulling it tight across her throat. Her eyes bulged as she struggled for breath, and I spun her around to face me, watching her pupils dilate with fear as she took in the scarred face as white as bone, the dark pools of madness and the insane grin, before the life left her and the only druid left in this once infested village grew even stronger. I felt the power surge through me, and grinned again. Village de Chêne Sage – Wise Oak Village – remains under my command.
Waiting

Even as a little girl people found me odd, withdrawn even. Other children preferred not play with me and adults too kept their distance.

Being alone amongst other people is a lot more lonely than being alone on your own, so I preferred solitude. My favoured place for it was the old well.

When I first started going there I did not wonder why we never drew water from that well, or why no one liked go near, especially after dark, it just suited me that they didn't.

As I grew older, I started to come by at night too, sometimes to avoid my father who could get aggressive when drunk, sometimes just as somewhere comforting to go when I could not sleep.

Occasionally I thought I could hear noises from within the well, but my fears were tempered by my curiosity so I kept coming.

The first time I saw them, they emerged chattering and bickering, unaware of my presence. I could see the glint of eyes and dark shapes coming closer until they almost fell over me as I sat there, transfixed. They yelped, alarmed and scarpered back down the well, still arguing.

A few days later they returned but only to peep over the rim of the well before disappearing again.

Over the course of that summer, they appeared hesitantly a few more times. Distrust subsiding a little with each visit, till one of the bolder members edged towards me holding the palm of his left hand out, bony fingers splayed, which I took to be a greeting. I held out my right hand in a similar fashion as he approached gingerly looking alternately at me and back to the well, edging closer, closer, till our fingers gently touched. With a flash of sharp little teeth he smiled, his large, deep eyes flickering in and out of existence as he blinked rapidly. I realised that he was no older than me and despite his strange appearance I recognised a fellow misfit. He then held out his right hand and I mirrored with my left. He pressed till our palms touched. He started chattering softly but I understood nothing, the sounds harsh and short on vowels. I shook my head, but he carried on and I wished he would stop. I disliked that it made me feel that I understood nothing when I understood everything. Our hands were still touching and I did not want to let go and he would not stop talking. So I kissed him. He stopped talking.

*****

Now, each summer, we meet for a few nights each side of the new moon, it is the only time they can venture above ground. It is such a small time together but at least that time is ours.
Sometimes I wait even when the moon is bright and I know he will not come. On those nights the act of waiting is, in itself a comfort. It makes me feel connected, despite the separation.
Spatula. Secretly stealing away, strolling through the silver birch, spotting shaggy ink caps.
Picking Psilocybin, Penny bun, Coprinus picaceus, playing peek-a-boo with Polly Amory.
Extemporising, engineer an extended excursion alone with an enchanting Wren.
Crouching, conceal camera, cooking crepes on a clandestine camping stove.
In the inglenook, S* T* I* N *G
Always alert, aware of the impending arrival - a chaperone companion of honour from the Hellhole.
Laughing, “Let us go forward together”, left Lorenz in the lurch, loitering in the lee of the lychgate.
Captain Ridley’s Shooting Party, Churchill’s co-conspirators crept towards concealment
On a rustic patio.
Lolling, languid, linguist,
Listening, long hours, listlessly longing for London, long hours, listening,
Eventually, ecstatically, exiting early at eleven, escape from the Duddery Corpse shelter (a crude code), cyphers, chess, cryptography
Tremulously typing elaborate acrostics
Intercepts not a Spatula again.
Over on an old oak bench plank for a picnic,
Next to the spreading chestnut tree, K* S* I* N* G
Spoonling, chocolate spread from Station X to Station Y
Folded flat, freshly foraged fungi filled creamy crumpets.
Looks like Lava. Volcanic, like pumice, or tufa, anyway
A . - A fine rampart for a well.
Sugar tongs or this Spatula need rinsing
Hazelnut spread, hmmm
Fading grandeur at the Government Code and Cypher School
It’s not all hard sums here at Bletchley – Blists and Banburys
Colossus, Crosswords, Quadratic equations
Taking tweezers to twist the terminal wires
Is it sugar tongs, Spatula, small pieces, (astray trial usually little actual sense)
O - - - Official Secrets Act, obviously
Now we consume our crepes with ceps, Chanterelle, champignons, cooked in cream,
Contraband camera, Cherie? Carelessness costs lives.
O - - - , Over and over-easy
Making sensitive, tentative movements
Photograph Polly’s penetrating pupils in the sunshine – shhh, Steps
Eyes right.
There –
Is someone coming?
Trouble and strife
I think so – It’s another intercept
O - - - , Oh oh, Operation Fortitude
Nowhere’s safe, we’re spied upon from above
Always from above
Watching well beloved Bombes and wayward women wandering from Woburn
Imagining, and industrious,
Not everyone works with
Numbers, Names, or numbing noise
Intelligence, inferences, interpretation
Networking, neglecting, not nurturing Flowers,
Gardenias, and all those gardens gone awry,
Enigmatically enters, preceded by just her shadow.
Now everyone knows our secret spot
Trust me, that’s tufa; Tommy, Tummy a trifle tentative, tricky,
Rinsing Spatula in the sluice, staring, smiling strangely, startled, strange sensations, astonishing

“You two’ve not also eaten those poison mushrooms, have you?”
The Wish

The first time I saw her she looked straight into my soul, and in that instant my life was changed forever. Crouched down, her slender frame carefully balanced, she dipped a glass into the freezing water. Her lips moved silently... what was she wishing for? I stood, frozen, holding my breath in the early morning light. She had the most beautiful face I'd ever seen; features as delicate as a doll. Sensing my presence she looked up sharply, green eyes glinting, our gaze meeting across the frosty flagstones. Her eyebrow rose in question. For a moment I was paralysed. Then I breathed out, warm air dissolving in a cloud of tiny droplets before me. She slowly stood, sipped from the glass, turned gracefully and threw the water over her shoulder. It splashed noisily into the well, breaking the silence and making me jump. ‘I've seen you here many times’, she said quietly; placing the glass down with a chink on the cold grey stone, ready to be filled with someone else’s wishes. ‘Me?’ I’d come to the wishing well every morning for months, rising early to make it here before my duties. Light the bedroom fires, heave the bucket of warm water up the back stairs for my mistress to wash. I had always to be careful not to smudge soot or slosh water on the cobalt blue carpets, which would madden the housekeeper - earning me sharp words and an even sharper slap. ‘I haven’t seen you?’ I said, gingerly standing and stepping towards her. ‘Not many do.’ She stared into my eyes, seeming to search for something. Stretching out a hand she laid it gently upon my cheek, surprising me with its warmth. Up close she smelt of the forest; moss and earth, nature, wilderness and the unknown that lay beyond the village walls. A tingle ran up my spine and I broke her gaze. The girl’s skin was white, almost translucent, like porcelain against the dark curl of her hair. Abruptly a vision of Mr Braxton appeared in my mind; his greasy black mane and bulbous nose, gnarled hands crimson with blood as he wrenched the guts from another innocent sheep, wiping his knife clumsily on his butcher’s apron. I shook my head, blinking to rid myself of the image. ‘You don’t have to belong to him or to anyone’. 
How did she know? My mind raced back over the misery of the last few months - the unwanted proposal, my parent’s pressure to accept, Mr Braxton’s clammy, slug-like grip on my forearm.

I had wished at this well many times for an escape, a way out from my dreaded fate. She had no shoes; her feet muddied and bare, dress torn and ripped by brambles. Her hand dropped and clasped my own as she smiled and gently led me into the trees.

Far away the housekeeper called me, but birdsong and the crunch of frozen leaves underfoot was all I heard... the sounds of freedom.
“What are you doing?”
Isabella looked up.
“Fishing for coins.”
“Why?”
“Silly! This is a magical pool: touch something that’s been in the water and your wish will be granted.”
“What about the weed?”
“That shows how old the pool is. Think how many people have been here over the years,” she responded, retreating up the steps to where she had left her boots.
“The other girls are going back to the convent. Sister Joseph said we mustn’t stay out in the midday heat.”
“You go on,” she said lazily, dipping her toes in the water.
“But she’ll know you’re missing,” I insisted.
Isabella sighed. “Aren’t you tired of being good?”
As orphans, I felt we had no choice. If we brought disgrace on the convent, we would find ourselves on the street. Linger in the public gardens beyond the time allotted for our precious weekly walk was a small act of rebellion that could lead to greater sins. We both knew what had happened to Lucia.
“Please come,” I said.
Isabella stood irritably, untwisting her hitched-up apron and skirt. Whatever she did, whatever scrape she got herself into, however torn or marked her clothes might be, she was always the nuns’ pet, always forgiven. But this did not extend to her companions, and Isabella had a nasty habit of letting the blame for her misdemeanours fall elsewhere.
Despite the distant bell urging our return, she paused, running her hand over the stonework. Just when I thought she was following, she jumped up and swung on a thick branch.
“Isabella, please!”
“Have you ever looked at this branch, Julia?”
I shook my head. She took my hand and held it to the bark.
“Lovers who’ve had wishes granted have carved their initials in gratitude.”
Wonderingly, we traced letters with our fingers, imagining the fulfilment of our own wishes. The bell rang again. Clasping hands, we ran, laughing, back to the convent.
I woke to find the bed next to mine empty. Isabella’s clothes were missing, with her cherished kid boots and her mother’s Bible – abandoned with her seventeen years ago.

Once outside, shafts of moonlight made an enchanted trail along the dusty street. I drew my shawl closer as I approached the mirror-pool. With its catalogue of lives, the branch crossed my vision like a gash.

Isabella’s boots stood at the top of the steps. I called and the water stirred. Creeping closer, and leaning over, where I should have seen my own reflection, I saw her. Horrified, I clapped my hand to my mouth, but she smiled.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “I’m quite safe.”

“But the pool is so shallow, how can you be underwater?”

“Give me your hand.”

She laid her hand against the surface, and I touched my palm to hers.

“Where are you?” I whispered.

She smiled again, blurred and disappeared.

I breathed on my hand to warm it. Picking up Isabella’s boots, I slowly walked back to the convent.
The Forest Dweller

My, just look at those big eyes, alert as fire, a gaze to burn the human veil to ashes. So young, the sweet petal, yet already a tigress, a face that would inhabit their nightmares. The girl has come to keep her company, here at the point where all inhumans stop.

The old lady, buttoned, scarfed and bun-shaped, wants to teach her about the richness of life in this secret place, and scuttles off like a puppy through leaf litter, naming every life form, spinning, pointing with her stick. There are a trillion roots and spores and leaves and critters, fetching, carrying, eating, shitting, breathing, growing and turning light to sugar. And in the hush of a morning mist, yes, murmuring softly, listen, each to each. There are mushrooms that walk, legumes that confer, spiders that turn themselves inside out one day a year, revealing jewels to the lucky finder. There are fruits that, when you swallow them, communicate a single coherent thought of the shrub that bore them. Don’t eat nothing that ain’t dead already or dropped its own self to the forest floor. Respect these things, for they are holy.

The girl follows, solemn, stern, absorbing all. Yes, she says, nodding: it is like picking through a sort of mind.

I know why you came, my petal, the old lady tells her, yeasty beer in one hand, stubby pipe in the other, feet crooked up on the chair arm to ease her swollen ankles. They banished you like they banished me, the humans. A teacher presses his hand to your chest and giggles to feel your fear. He says, Your little heart is beating. And the classroom laughs to see your fear. And afterwards, the adults retreat and the human children close around your fear, to feed. All inhumans have stories such as this.

I do have stories such as that, the girl agrees.

They live together deep in the forest for an unspecified number of years, until the day the girl announces her departure.

The old lady’s eyes are round and big and wet and twitching. She had almost stopped fearing this. I have not cared for you?

You have, the girl says, and I thank you for the trillion names of roots and spores and leaves and critters, the jewels the spiders showed us and all the things that are holy, but I have unfinished business now, with the men who make fear, the women who summon fear and the children who eat fear. Come with me if you wish.

Terrified, the old lady cannot find words, and the girl is in no mood to listen, framed in the doorway, ready. That lovely, fearsome face: she clings to it now with eyes and memory, as three feeble plosives plod across her lips: But petal...
The girl is done. She turns away. My name is not petal, she says. It’s Gretel.
The Letter

He’s here.

I can feel it. The air it feels like its closing in on me.

I need to breathe, but he’ll hear me—he always does.

I’m sure I heard a rustle over there by the wall, but it might just be leaves. It’s hard to tell from down here.

As soon as I saw the letter I knew. It was from them. It’s the writing that I’ll never forget. The cursive handwriting, the dots on the ‘i’s and the flick of the ‘f’s.

I suddenly clutch on to the letter as hard as I can. My eyes wonder down and lie on the letter.

Before I knew it the letter was in my hand and I was running out of the library even though he wasn’t around. I tried to go back but my legs kept going until I found myself outside. The crunch of gravel snapped me out of my thoughts, he was moving, my breathing started to change, my heart rate was increasing so fast I felt as if I was about to pass out. I needed to calm down as he’d hear me.

I was down in the servants hall when I heard him yell my name, but what I didn’t understand was how he could tell a letter was missing—knowing me I probably knocked something over when I ran out— but there are many servants working on the estate.

The gravel was moving closer to me, the footsteps getting louder. Fear surrounded me I could feel myself shrinking.

A shadow started to form above me, my eyes grew in fear as the shadow, and it was like it was building on my fear. His body was as solid as a rock. His fists were clenched, the shadow was almost the size of him but it seemed bigger. The only thing separating us was the well I was hiding behind. It began to get colder. The shadow was starting to move around the well, getting bigger by the second, he was near me I could tell it was getting draughty.
I slowly turned my head. I was right he was behind me with a sickening smile plastered on his face. I begged him not to hurt me but I couldn’t move. I just stayed there begging, pleading almost. The next thing I know he is leaning over me, grabs the letter, his fist rises above my face.

It slowly came towards my face and the darkness surrounded me.
The Maid’s Cycle

I open my eyes to see grey clouds hovering over me and the jagged stones pushing into my skin making everywhere painful. I finally pick myself up to find I am right next to the well in the stone garden. I pat the dust off my dress and apron, but it won’t come off, only leaving handprints of blood from the stones piercing my hands. I look up to see a maid, walking pace fully. Everything seemed to be normal about her, until I saw behind her back.

A steel carving knife. I was shocked and confused; we were only allowed to carry them in the kitchen. She vanished down the narrow path, so I cautiously began to follow her. I couldn’t see her face, but her hair was tied up like all the other maids. She entered the back door into the kitchen, the door creaking eerily. As she walked through she ran her hands through the hanging pots, making a loud crashing noise. She crept up the stairs to the main corridor where there was a large tapestry that the mistress made. The maid slashed her blade into it and dragged it to the end of the corridor. She was now standing outside the mistress’s office.

She put the blade behind her back and opened the door. The mistress looks at her in disgust, asking the maid why she dare show her face. The maid slowly edges towards her and pounces on her, stabbing her in every place imaginable, the mistress’s screams became more distant with every incision of the blade. When she had finished with her, the mistress was an unrecognizable heap of slashed meat.

The maid stood up and turned around and looked me dead in the eyes. It was awful, it was impossible. She was me. She turned to the window and slowly opened it. She stood up in front of it, right above the well I awoke next to, screaming as she fell to the darkness of the well. She slowly climbed out of it and passed out; in the exact spot I had found myself. I watched over her for a good five minutes and saw her slowly get up, patting the dust off her, only leaving bloody handprints on her dress. She had blood on her hands, it could not be cleansed. I saw her notice another maid walk by, with a steel carving knife. She cautiously followed her, vanishing down the path, less than a minute later I heard the pots clashing together loudly. I wanted to jump out the window, but I knew that the cycle would just continue.
Wishes

Da had always said to ye about Tree, how it was no good. If it was angry, it would hurt ye. Ye’d seen it try. If it got ye wae one of its branches, that was it, ye were a goner. In the winter it was worse. Maybe it was the cold? If it was you, it’d be yer teeth chattering, and yer nose, all wet and sticky, so ye’d have to rub it on the blanket. If it’s loads of cold days in row, then ye see it. Ye can count the days. But if ye dinnae have a blanket to protect ye, what would ye do? Tree dinnae have one... so if it was raining hard for days, ye were just watching it. How it got wet and would shake. But even if the sun was out and it was just standing still, how would you know that it wasnae going to trick ye? Ye couldnae.

It wasnae that ye were feart of it or nothing, ye werenae, no a lot anyway, just a wee bit, just enough. And even if ye were, then so what? Only grown men pretend they’re no feart of stuff. That’s what Da says. So if ye were scared back then, then ye’d see it. Maybe it was a funny face, or if it was bad, then it would be greeting. But it’s no like that no more. I’ve grown-up.

Anyhow, it wouldnae matter soon, Da’s gony rip down Tree wae his bare hands. He telt me so. Other men couldnae do that, but Da could. No that he’s started on it, or anything. It’s still here. For good reasons but. There are good reasons for everything.

Before ye had been wishing that Tree would just disappear. But what’s the point in wishing? If you want something, ye’ve just to go get it. My brother Ezra said it too, only losers make wishes. But Da doesnae like him saying that. How come? Ye thought if he was making lots of wishes in his bedroom. Maybe he didnae want to admit that they might no come true. But how would they, if ye were just wishing?

Da say’s I’m a fighter, he says all the time, O’ you are a fighter, a fighter so ye are. Maybe I was, maybe I wasnae. If I was though, would it be wishes I was waiting on? Ye did not think so. Or Da neither. How could ye be waiting on him, if he was just wishing too? So ye were to help him. Ye’d pull Tree down by yerself. If he dinnae see ye do it, ye wouldnae tell him it was you neither. Cause that way he’ll be thinking his wish just came true by itself. Then he’d be happy. He would be right happy. And if Da was happy, then so would everybody else. Ye thought that. How it was up to you to make all of them happy.
Forget me not

People say lightning never strikes twice but how can they be sure?

I feel like I have been here before, like déjà vu. I walk over these same rocks that pierce my path like arrows every day, every hour but this time it is too familiar. My eyes fix on the well I built with my father where we really started living life rather than hiding from it. This was my new beginning like a phoenix rising from the ashes of my past. It was just me and my dad... he has taught me all I know. Without him I am nothing, I am no one. He is in every memory I have, this moment is the first I have been completely alone.

My pale, fragile skin brushes against the ancient barriers that encapsulate my memories made and forgotten. The light streams through the branches of life above me and now dances on the dusty paths before my bloodied feet. The wind whistles through my mouse brown hair swirling up the gravel in my path. Do my eyes deceive me? Is it him? I scream out his name but only silence surrounds me. I try to run into his arms but I am stuck, frozen in time. All I want to do is go back to our life before we had to run from our deepest fears but I can’t. Bird call breaks the silence releasing me from my trance but now I really am all alone, the man that stood just out of my reach has gone. I call out in hope that maybe it was him and that he has come back to save me from this chamber of madness but I know it is in vain. I have lost him the same way I lost my mother, I watched their minds be torn apart piece by piece. That is why I am here alone surrounded by rubble and dust living a life that I can barely remember.

My skin scorched as the sun begins its decent and I finish my daily chores which sometimes feel more like a ritual. I do them not because I must but because that is what I do, that is what he always did. Collect the water, forage for food, light the fire, the list is endless but it always ends everything comes to an end like my mother and father, they met their end. People say that lightning never strikes twice but it did for me I lost them both. I watched both of them forget but I never will, this disease can tear my memories to shreds just as it did to them but I will never forget them because I know they would never forget me.
The Girl by the Well

The courtyard’s solitude pooled calmness in my thoughts as I stepped beneath the bough and into that place. Not a soul. Until I saw her.

Crouched within a stone channel, half-hidden and quite still. Looking straight up at me. I jumped, mumbled an apology. Something about her posture suggested a private, furtive act, and I was embarrassed for her. Yet, she smiled at me. Or had she already been smiling? I reappraised her. She was dressed simply, a maid’s uniform, hair pinned back, stark eyes possessed by a remarkable self-assuredness. I felt challenged. Or was it still that smile, lost somewhere between brazen curiosity and hard-won cynicism, yet far from either? A smile for the wilful trespasser, from one rebel to another. It did not reassure me.

She held a finger to her lips, her eyes never leaving mine. “Do you hear it?” she asked, the words dragging themselves across the flagstones like rigor-mortis leaves.

It was a peculiar request, but, awkward in her company, I acquiesced: the trickling of water that flowed through the conduit, the faint hum of talk from the search party, on the tourist path below. I let my eyes rove—the wooded hill just beyond, filtering the light; the jumbled stonework bulging from the earth. The well in the centre.

I thought I heard what she meant, then—what I thought to have been some ratchety boiler, a generator corroded with neglect, heaving through rusted lungs—it came from the well. A stygian, arrhythmic urge.

It sat in the centre of the courtyard, its stone barely visible beneath a build-up of what looked like congealed sap, of some petrified igneous seepage.

“What is it?” I asked her, my voice clumsy in the quiet.

Her knowing smile did not change. She seemed busy with something, though I could not see her hands.

As I approached the well, my impression of it changed. No longer did I see it as an artificial excavation of something contained, but rather, an irruption of something chthonic, metamorphic, invasive. Not an excavation, then—a wound. A puncture from elsewhere. Something had been collecting, amassing, and now it was breaking in.

It was not calmness that had soothed my thoughts upon entering this place, it was merely their rendering silent by an almost undetectable yet total ecology of change. It suffused the courtyard, nurturing it in its own image.

I stopped before I could see inside the well, knowing I would not, could not tolerate whatever it held. I turned to the girl, realising now, that I could see her in her entirety. She was crouched over
something. Small and naked, it lay beneath the damp folds of her skirt, squirming, yet unnervingly quiet. At first I thought the newborn was drowning, until I realised it was in silent ecstasy of the water that breached our world.

And her smile, still knowing, still lost, drifted amidst everything else that had become uprooted.
Go away. I was here first. It took me ages to find the perfect spot. All right, you can stay for a minute, but don’t get comfortable. I’m not planning to offer you a cup of tea or anything.

I get a great view over that wall, all the way to the sea. That’s the main road down there. That green bit up at the back, that’s the edge of the zoo.

I saw three bears the other day. It’s funny how things come in threes. Yesterday I saw three ships come sailing in. And then just this morning, I saw three guys wearing kilts and Prince Charlie jackets, off to a wedding or something. The next thing, this sailor popped up out of nowhere, must have come off one of the ships. Grabbed one of the guys by the arm.

Sit down on that stone and listen. He wouldn’t let the guy go, and the guy’s mates walked off without him. You know what I thought? I thought he’d been away at sea for ages and ages, and he’d come back and found his girlfriend had gone off with this guy. I was quite excited at the thought of a fight. No such luck. He was just talking, and the guy had on an expression like he was pretending to be interested. I was too far away to hear what he was saying, so I crawled over to the wall and hid at the foot of it.

He had one of these really boring, monotonous voices, and I could only make out the occasional word. I say word, but it was mostly nonsense. "Uprist," he said. "Gossameres." "Clomb."

I don’t know, I must have snorted or something, because the next thing the guy he’d grabbed was looking over the wall at me.

"Listen," he said to the sailor, "I’m really sorry, but I’ve got to go. What about this lady here, why don’t you tell her what happened?"

And the sailor jumped over the wall and grabbed me and started on about his uprist and his gossameres and his clomb while the other guy legged it. I told him this was my spot and he had to leave, but he wouldn’t let go of my arm. He kept going on about how he had to talk to me.

It took a while for me to fix things. No, just stay where you are. I’m going to tell you what happened.
I was back at the well again. But before I could even look at it I had stopped and I had frozen. I was one more step away from shattering into thousands of tiny little pieces. But I just couldn’t just run away from this nightmare that I had created. I picked up the canvas bag that was hanging inside of the well on a stone that was sticking out in the side of the well. I left it on the ground before opening the bag up, I had fell into a trance going back to when all of this had started. Bradley and I weren’t even together! What was I even thinking? Having a baby out of wedlock, could you imagine what they would all say about me if they all knew. I ran to the kitchens for some milk, then came back opened the bag. I cuddled it and all of a sudden the cold winter of my heart had suddenly turned to the heat of summer.

I have to see Bradley Every. Single. Day. because he’s my father’s butler. We were only fools just mucking around with too much drink.

I’m a lady; he’s a butler. There’s nothing I can do, he doesn’t even know about it. What about when it gets too big to fit into the bag in the well. What shall I do then?

It’s now later in the day and I had to do something about it I am going leave it at Bradley’s family farm at least I know it can be loved, warm and safe.

At breakfast this morning my father and mother heard that a baby had been left at the farm they wouldn’t stop going on about how disgraceful it all was leaving a baby to defend for them self.

I was ashamed of the person that I had become, and disgusted. I couldn’t live with myself, not with all this guilt. It was all too much to take.

I ran to the nearest door but there was still nowhere to go or leave except the well I walked closer but the door had locked behind me and I was boxed in like a caged animal. I walked over to the well that I had left it in looking down into the never ending black hole I stepped up onto the edge.

I shut my eyes and dropped into the well.
£1,500 I owed to Cedarwood School. That’s why I applied for a job at Wellington Place.

There was an advertisement on the shop’s window so I took a piece of paper with the number on it. I called them up. They told me to come for an interview. At the interview they said, “well you have some experience but you don’t seem to have the interest to work with us. On the other hand we’re desperate so you can have a week trial. Here’s your schedule. What’s your size? 18, ok we will get your uniform ready for when you start which will be on Wednesday.”

“Oh really?! Thank you I said with my heart beating like drums in my chest. Ok, I must get on I’ve got things to do and people to see.”

I went home and just in time cause the kids came through the door.

“Hi mum!”

“Hi darling.”

“Hi sweetie.”

“So how was your day today?”

“Really good. How was yours?”

“Good, I just did the washing and ironing.”

Before I knew it I was on the 3rd day of the trial week and I was getting the hang of things, I liked it there, I felt like I fitted in. I loved the job so since I liked it so much I spoke to the boss, and...I got the job! A month passed and my kids still didn’t figure out what I was doing during their school hours. Just as the kids headed out the door the phone rang. “Hello, Is this Ms.Rossignol?”

“Yes it is, I replied with caution. “Who’s this may I ask?”

“It’s Parker’s school, Cedarwood School.

“Oh yes how silly of me!”

“Yes, well can you come into the school next Monday for a meeting, we have a topic we would like to discuss with you ma’am.”

“Yes that’s fine I think I’ll need to discuss with someone first.”

The next day at work my boss came up to me. “Are you okay? Is something up? You can talk to me you know. Let it out.”

“Oh, it’s just I’m in debt with my child’s school and they want a meeting on Wednesday. Also the Taylor swift concert sold out.”

“Oh, that’s a lot. Well the subject I picked up on is you have debt.”
“Yes”, I replied with hesitation.
“How about I come to your meeting?”
“Oh uh sure, that would be very nice. Thanks.”

Then the ending is like a fairy tale except she doesn’t get a prince she gets out of debt, her boss is a thief she was keeping money in a well in her courtyard. And me? My life is great.
The Girl in the Garden

I know I wasn’t allowed in but it was just so pretty. The smell of all the different kinds of flowers
growing up the walls and round the benches. I like coming to the court yard, it’s so peaceful and
quiet compared to working in the main house. I fetch water from the well every day at noon. I
don’t get much time to myself but when I do I sit here and read.

It was my lunch so I grabbed my favourite red coat and raced down the stone path. When I got to
the bottom, I checked around me to see if anyone followed. If anyone found me here I would I
would be dead. They would lock me away in the attic for weeks.

I opened the gate and I could hear the sounds of the birds singing in the trees, the sound of the
leaves rustling as the wind swept under them. I shut the gate behind me and walked through the
leafy arch way. It was magical, just sitting on the crooked bench listening to the water from the
well. I opened my book and read on till I hit the next chapter.

I put my book down and watched the wind catch the trees until I heard the stones hitting off each
other, getting louder and louder. They stopped and then the gate creeped open. I jumped to my
feet and hid behind the well and didn’t make a move. Whoever it was slowly made there way
closer to me…it all of a sudden went quiet. My book! I left it on the bench.

I sat for a few minutes and then peaked my head over the well. It was one of the main house
guards and if they caught they would take me straight to the mistress.

The guard shouted at the top of his lungs. “Someone’s in the courtyard!” I quickly shot up, he
stared into my eyes with my book in his left hand. He slowly opened his hand and dropped my
book and began making his way towards me. I didn’t know what to do and I know they would hide
me away after this…the guard grabbed my shoulder. “Do you know how much trouble you’re in?” He paused for a moment. “You’re lucky it was me and no one else who found you”.
“I’m sorry”. I told the guard.
He picked up my book and handed it to me and then left through the leaves. I never saw that
guard again.
The mistress’s cat

Everything seemed to slow down and go in slow-motion as the knife dropped towards the floor towards the cat. As the knifing entered the cat’s body it unleashed a river of blood. My heart was in my mouth. For a few minutes I froze on the spot staring at it, I didn’t know what to do. I knew I had dispose of it but where I couldn’t take it home, I couldn’t hide it in the forest in the forest in the garden the one place I could hide it though was in the well that was the perfect place. As I was picking up the lifeless bundle of fur Hilda the head maid walked in to drop off the washing. So I quickly tossed it in a cupboard that was open I don’t know what was in there but its in there now. “There’s a funny order in this room” Hilda said, “what are you hiding” she asked. I kept silent as Hilda eased closer to me. “What are you hiding” Hilda was now shouting as me. “Nothing” I quickly answered back,” I know you’re hiding something I’ll be watching you”. At that point I knew that I had to go straight out to dump it in the well. I opened the cupboard, grabbed the cat by its tail and walked outside, down the steps over to the well. I stared into the dark oblivion which was before me. I raised the cat above the well when Hilda the maid from earlier came outside and was walking down the steps straight to the well to get some fresh water. So I ducked down behind the well. She lowered the bucket that sounded like she had the most squeaky handle in the world. Just as well because I sounded like a horse how heavy I was breathing. Hilda collected the water and headed back into the house. I stood up from behind the well and carried on as before and got interrupted by Hilda. I raised the cat by his tail above the well and let go. There was no sound of the cat hitting the water for about 5 seconds or so, so it must have been a big deep well. When I got back inside the house I gave a sigh of relief. The mistress called me. I knew what this was going to be about or at least I thought I knew. When I got through, there sat an identical cat to the cat i killed. Had the cat come back from the dead or had I just killed a different cat?
Young Mischief

Caroline was going to be in deep trouble if she gets caught this time. “Miss Caroline where are you?” “Come here right now young lady” Nanny Davies shouted after her. Caroline was the daughter or the town Mayor, she never really seen her father. He was always tucked away drinking whiskey at the top of the grand house they lived in. She continued to race through the gardens trying her best to outrun Nanny Davies, who was always like a mother to her. The mother she never had. Holly leaves scratched holes in her frock as she tramples through the bushes to hide. Her knuckles white from grasping hard on the note from William. It read ‘To Carrie, meet me at the gates in the back garden, from William’. That’s where she was headed now, to see her friend, boyfriend maybe. She leaned against the well to catcher her breath for a minute, before returning to her mission. “Miss Caroline is that you?” Nanny Davies questioned. She fell to her knees instantly, crouching behind the well, taking a hard look around to see is anyone was watching. Caroline waited a moment, to be sure that it was clear to go. She jumped up from her crouch and darted off down to the gates, not far to go. Just as she turned the final corner of her journey, there was stood Nanny Davies was stood taking to William. “Miss Caroline I have been looking all over for you, where on earth have you been?” As she was about to answer with a lie from the top of her head, she asked another question. “What’s that in your hand Miss Caroline?” With a curious look taking over her face. Caroline looked over to William and he raised his hands, giving her no clue of what to reply. Nanny Davies’ eyes widened in question at Caroline, waiting for an answer. Caroline gave in on thinking of an excuse, so she passed the note to Nanny Davies looking at her feet awaiting the argument which she knew was about to take place. “I can explain, this isn’t Caroline’s fault” William buts in. “I’m sure Caroline will appreciate your help but this is very much her own problem”. Caroline looks up to Nanny Davies, she sees the frustration in her eyes, but also disappointment, not sure which one was overpowering the other. “Miss Caroline you are too young for a boyfriend, especially the farmer’s son. A young lady like you needs someone of her own class that can accompany her to a ball. Not a boy covered in mud with no money”. William’s face drops, realising Nanny Davies could be right. Caroline knows now not to argue with her, as she could never win. She apologises to William, walking away with Nanny Davies grasping at her wrist. Caroline turns her head and throws a wink to William, letting him know this won’t be the last time he gets to see her.
The Escape

There I was, a young fourteen year old girl, a servant, a teenager who’s never been free, a girl with no one, no family/no friends. I haven’t even seen outside of the walls before.

I was adopted right after birth by a very rich family and as soon as I turned five I became their servant, right up until now! I need to escape.

For months now I have been planning my scape. The rich family have a well which is the in west garden, the only garden with a door that leads to the outside world.

On Saturdays I have to clean and work down by the well so my plan will begin then. It’s quite simple, all I need to do is get to the door and unlock it, then run! My only problem is the other staff, that ones that actually get paid to work here! They are very strict and don’t like me, so I have to be careful.

The west garden has stone walls, higher than I can see and the well is a lovely place to come and just sit and relax by but I am not allowed near here without supervision, I always have someone around to supervise me. This may be more difficult than I thought, I think to myself.

I waited for everyone to finish their work and go to lunch. I hid behind the well so everyone thought I had already gone for lunch. Earlier this morning I took the keys to open the door and hid them in my bonnet.

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Everyone has gone, the coast is clear and it’s now my chance! My heart is racing; my breathing increases and my palms become hot and sweaty. I am so nervous yet so excited at the same time. I get up and get the key and start to walk towards the door when suddenly I hear someone coming! I panic and run back to hide behind the well but then something comes over me and I sprint to the door and quickly unlock it, I might actually do it!

I feel a hand on my shoulder just as soon as I step out of the door, I try to run but they’re too strong! They pull me back and shout at me, they hit me multiple times and drag me back to the
house. Instead of going to my room, they take me down to somewhere I have never been, the cellar!

The cellar is completely out of bounds, for everyone! I am terrified. They throw me down to the cold, hard floor and they closed a huge door and the room was completely black. I hear them lock it and chain it too. I am never getting out of here...
Her heart was pounding every bone in her body was shaking with anxiety.

If she failed the consequences would be brutal.
If she stayed she would never see the world.
A stable boy had once tried to escape. He had grown mad thanks to the sleepless nights and work full days. The boy had been reckless he had just ran straight at the great barred gates and had started to climb. The guards had simply lined up 50 meters from the gates. Raised their rifles and fired. You could hear the report from the rifle fire at the other side of the grounds.
But she was more careful then he was he had bragged to her. Two days before the escape that he would be remembered forever as the boy that escaped. His constant chattering had annoyed her so she had told the guards. About what he was going to do they had rewarded her with extra rations for a week.
Now she was going to make her own escape she hadn’t told anyone.
First of all she would have to secure her escape route.
She walked at a brisk pace towards the old well.
She turned the corner and there it was her way out.
It was obviously a sign from god that her escape was meant to be. She walked towards the edge of the well she heard humming. She stopped frozen like a statue. Not able to believe her ears. It was very low humming but it was coming from the direction of the well. She walked towards the sound wary not to stand on anything that would give her away. She knelt down slowly edging closer to the sound. As she crawled round the circumference of the well searching for the source of the humming noise. The noise got louder and louder until then she saw her. The noise was coming from a girl who from the look of her cloths she worked in the quarters section of the manor working class. She edged closer trying to get within arms reach of the girl. Then SNAP! She had stepped on a twig the girl spun right round. As if she had been electrocuted. The girl stopped humming she looked right into the eyes of pursuer and screamed.
Two arms wrapped around her neck and squeezed she keeled over and fell but her arms were still attached they broke through the well wall and plunged into the darkness.
The Beady Eyes

It was a dark night and the wind was whistling going through the cracks of the brick walls. Beth had just woken up from a deep slumber and looked around just to see dark shapes all around her. Once her vision cleared she made the dark shapes to be brick walls but she couldn’t figure out where she was. She looked up at the night sky to see nothing but a black sheet above her. She was alone no one around and she couldn’t hear anyone around. That’s what she thought until she turned her head around to see two small beady eyes looking right at her from a corner about a couple metres away from her. She went frozen still with shock, her eyes went big and she clamped a hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming. Shaking with fear and her eyes squeezed shut hoping she imagined it or it was all a dream. She opened her eyes slowly, one at a time, only to see another pair of beady eyes looking at her. She blinked once to see another pair of eyes looking at her, she blinked again but the more she blinked the more eyes appeared. Beth squeezed her eyes shut once more counting up to ten hoping it’s a dream and is going to wake up in her dark empty room with no small beady eyes looking at her watching her every move. Once getting to ten she took a deep breath and peeked a look through one eye then slowly opened the other eye. She slowly turned her head to look around her to be surrounded by small beady eyes. Beth didn’t what to do it was like she was glued to the ground. The only thing that could move was her head going from side to side watching the eyes watching her every move. She couldn’t move her head was spinning while looking for somewhere to run. She saw a gap were she planned to run but the eyes were getting closer freaking her out more making her struggle to think about what to. She made the eyes out to be little creatures like rats. Then she ran as fast as she could faster than she ever had in her life. Beth looked over shoulder to see the rats following her gaining on her. Then she tripped she panicked trying to scrambling to her feet and the rats getting closer. All of a sudden she was awake in her bed breathing heavy covered in sweat. She looked over at the clock to see what time it was only to see a set of small beady eyes looking. She caught her breath in her throat and scrambled to her lamp and turned on the light. She looked to where she saw the eyes only to see her pet hamster looking at her. She let out a breath and flopped on to her bed going back to sleep.
The Well

The train docked into the platform a little before 8am. It was a cool autumn morning. The sun hung in the sky, a perfect white disc behind a misty cloudbank. I hoisted my backpack onto my shoulder and made my way to the station road to hitch a ride.

A man riding a tractor westward picked me up and took an awkward route weaving between dry stonewalls and hills, eventually dropping me off on feral grounds at the back of my aunt’s house. I ascended the path to the woods, taking large steps over the bracken and made my way through trees.

I came to a circular clearing obscured by a large sycamore tree. In the centre of the clearing stood a dry stone well enclosed by ancient building foundations and a dammed stream. To the right a stone stairwell twisted around leading to the house. Crouched at the side of the stream a young woman of around nineteen, gamine and fair. In her hand was a drinking glass and she scooped the glass full with water, taking a sip. What was curious about her was she wore clothes from another place and time. I moved towards her and she looked up.

“Hello,” I said “do you work for my aunt?”

Staring back at me she stood up and giggled. I edged forward as the sound of footsteps came from the stone stairway, startling the woman. Quickly her gaze darted to and from the steps and me frenzied. She lifted a single finger to her lips, blowing a “Shush!” before vaulting over the well side. I lunged forward to stop her and was met by an empty void. The woman had completely disappeared. Footsteps behind grew louder and as I turned to face the possessor, two heavy hands gripped my shoulders flinging me into the stream. Landing face first in the water I began to crawl up over the side as I was again seized and thrown to the foot of the tree. Hands covering my face “Stop!” I screamed. A strong breeze rose through the air besieging me in a cascade of autumn leaves. I peered through my fingers finding that there was nobody there. Awash with relief, I slowly drifted off into unconsciousness.

I awoke in a dimly lit box room. My aunt sat anxiously by the bedside and proceeded to tell me that she had found me lifeless and soaked to the skin by the sycamore tree. For days I’d been in and out of a fever. I asked her if the young woman was okay. My aunt looked at me a blank. I described the woman in detail as my aunt slowly turned a pale shade of green. She took my hand and told me the folklore of the circular clearing and the well. It was rumoured to be an evil place, where in the past illegal witch trials had been performed and many young woman had been hung or drowned.
Julie was always a weird little girl. At just age 6 she would sit in the corner of the playground all curled up in a ball every single day, other girls would try to make friends with her but whenever they would try go up to her she would just scream in a very high pitched tone. Then when she was 9 she started walk round in circles whispering quietly “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I shall die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Now age 11 when anyone tries to speak to her she will just say “Devil, is waiting for you to make mistakes, you never wanted to. Devil, is searching for you to tame, the monster inside you.” Nobody knows what happens at home for her or if she speaks or not. Rumours are her dad is the devil himself and her mum is a cocaine addict, but I don’t think that’s true, I think they are just a very private family.

Something very scary has been happening a lot lately. Every day after Julie finishes school she goes to the well in The Devils Square and crouches over and prays to O’ Mighty Lucifer. A couple of weeks ago two little girls walked past her and asked her what she was doing. She ran up to them got right in their face and hissed at them, and then she stuck her tongue out as if she was going to lick them. The girls said that her tongue was long and thin with a split up the middle, like a lizard and bright amber red eyes with a black pupil shaped like a diamond.

A couple of days a group of young boys followed her home; she lives in an old disgusting abandoned building according to them. They say that she would go to one corner of the room and echo “I am evil, I am evil, the devils voice is sweet to hear.” Apparently she would say it 10 times before moving to the next corner. The boys watched her through the window for almost 5 hours until she noticed them. She walked up to them but they couldn’t run, they couldn’t even move like she had control over them. She walked up to each of them and whispered in there ear “I’m going to kill you.” Then the boys felt some kind of release on their bodies and they ran as far as they could but she didn’t chase them she just watched.

That night there was the noise of a very loud screeching almost as if someone was being murdered, in the morning Julie never turned up to school or the next day so a police officer went to look in the old abandoned building where Julie lived and there was no sign of anyone like it had been empty for years. No-one has ever seen Julie since.
**Watching the detectives**

What’s that she’s looking for down there in the Ice house? A body is it? Sure looks like it to me. Sherlock Holmes would be on to her straight away. I mention him because it looks like his era, black and white and all that. I’m a Jeremy Brett man myself – what an actor – except for the addict bit – that wasn’t acting. You might be thinking, what’s the point in mentioning Sherlock, he went out with the Indians but I kid you not, I heard of an Italian detective working on a case in Perugia – which in my opinion, he’d made a dog’s dinner of – talking about how much he was inspired by Sherlock Holmes. Obsessed with clues you see. It’s a man thing – elementary as they say. Ha ha!

Scary detective though. So convinced he’d got it right when he so evidently hadn’t. They pictured him looking up at some ceiling chapel in Perugia, blessing himself and talking about a higher justice. God protect us from religious detectives – they’re completely partial.

You might ask what I’m worrying about courts of law for but if you want to be a detective you’ve got to know your way around the justice system. Likewise, you’ve got to read a lot of crime fiction, watch detective shows, *NYPD Blues* and the likes, forensics shows, you get the idea. I especially like the documentaries about the serial killers. Boy, it’s like watching the key stone cops working against the clock and the clock wins. My very best favourite is our guy from Peterhead. Holy crap – what a man from a small town can get up to let loose in the big smoke. Before I watched the American series, I probably would’ve said municipal. Anyway, apparently the house was rank. Amateurs. I thought detectives were supposed to have a nose for crime. I ask you.

Not to be immodest but I think if I was a detective I’d be an Inspector Frost kind of detective. Now I know you couldn’t accuse him of having finesse, not like your man Morse but the way he handled Superintendent Mullet was a joy to behold and he always got his man even though he wasn’t always glad to have got him. And he loved a good curry and he did a good line in cheap wit but he was always chivalrous to the ladies. Really when you think of it he wasn’t a million miles from Inspector Morse and after all, its horses for courses. You couldn’t have Frost blundering around in Oxford or Morse pussy-footing around Denton playing opera and drinking malt whisky. But note – they both did a good line in irascibility - it’s a common trait in detectives.
An Unusual Wedding

“Do you, Eloise Thorndale, take Lord Rupert Winchester, to be your lawful husband, to have and to hold, to love and cherish, till death parts you?”

Eloise paused.

She couldn’t say those two little words. She looked at the wealthy landowner standing in front of her. He had enviable features but still Eloise couldn’t look at him with affection. Lord Winchester’s eyebrows furrowed, hope striking his soft face. This face wasn’t the one she wanted to say “I do” to. This face wasn’t Jonathan’s.

She remembered the day she met Jonathan Reeves. They were just children, but were forbidden from being friends. Her mother made it clear that “some people simply do not mix with others. Especially if those others are mere servants.” Nevertheless, this never stopped the two youngsters from sneaking away together to skip stones at the riverside, climb trees or play with the geese at the old well where the servant children liked to play.

As the years passed, Jonathan took his father’s place as head coachman of the family, and Eloise was educated in everything her parents deemed necessary. One thing however, stood the test of time: Eloise and Jonathan would still sneak away and meet at the old well, although skipping stones and climbing trees turned into shy conversations and sweet nothings.

“Miss Thorndale?”

Eloise was brought back to the present. This arranged marriage offered so much: financial stability, her future children would lack of nothing, and her family would be secured if ever their own funds ran out. Yet she would lose the chance to share her life with somebody who made her truly and irrevocably happy.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Lord Winchester’s face fell, not with anger, but with saddened understanding. “My Lord, I can’t -”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “There was sadness in this church ever since you stepped into it. This should be a joyous day for us both, and it clearly is not. Please...there is no need to explain and I beg you not try.”

Eloise reached over, and hugged the startled Lord. She released him, grasped the front of her dress, and bolted down the aisle. Eloise burst through the church entrance and onto the grassy field, searching for Jonathan. She found him tending to the carriage horses, forlorn and close to tears. He looked up when she came running towards him.

“Eloise? Are you alright?” he asked, face creased with concern.
“Everything is as it should be,” she replied, smiling at him. “I have just one question for you, my darling.”

She cupped his face in her hands as she said: “Do you, Jonathan Reeves, take me Eloise Thorndale, to be your lawful wife, to have and to hold, to love and cherish, till death parts us?”

Jonathan looked at her, a radiant smile spreading across his own face.

“I thought you’d never ask.”
The Refugee

I refuse to consider myself a murderer. But then, in a country ravaged by hate and war, you find that death courses through your hands as readily as your own blood. It has been nine months since civil war broke out, seven months since the first bombs were dropped, two months since the law had ceased to be enforced, three days since I had last seen my husband alive, and one day since I had found him dead. Beaten like a dog for the small change he carried to buy something for our children to eat. When I found him they tried to kill me too. I only escaped the murderers myself by assuming the actions of one. The bloodied rock in my hand, one of them ran away while I watched the life bleed out of the man who now lay motionless next to my husband.

The city is no longer safe. My children cry with hunger whilst we hide in this abandoned house. We cannot stay here. I had heard the rumours of the boats. They say they will take you on the gently rocking road to safety. They say the salt-air that burns your lungs breathes new hope. The rumours don’t whisper of the chance that the boat will capsize and that the next time you see the person sitting next to you is when their bloated body washes up on shore.

We are lucky. Cold and alarmed, I make it to the sand and begin to cry with gratitude that my children are alive. Many people share my tears. There are swarms of us now, and I join the crowd who are making their way towards a tall fence. Waiting our turn, a man in an official-looking uniform approaches and barks, “Waar kom jij vandaan?”

“Sorry?” I ask.

“Where you from?” he repeats, this time in broken English.

“England” I reply. Giving me a look of severe distaste, he jerks his head and commands, “To the right”.

We are shoved together in a small camp, just outside a beautiful city which I’ve never visited before. I have made friends with people who have had similar experiences and my children play football in a small square of grass. There is little food and they allow us to drink from an abandoned well, which soldiers take turns to guard. Today it is a woman, and she is kind. She lets my children drink a generous amount of water and even gives them a small cake each. When it is my turn to approach the well, I use it to wash my hands. The water will carry my secrets with it and leave me ready to start my new life. I refuse to consider myself a murderer.
Rumours of the Stagboy

My uncle has the farm up by the slope of the mountain and he was the one who first saw it – the deerlike creature, the stagboy. It would wander about at the edges of his land, at first cautiously, stopping between the trees to stare, and then with less hesitation, sometimes lying out in the open. I went up there twice to see it, though my mother told me not to.

It’s a child, obviously, but its face juts out like a snout, and its ears are long and pinched, and small antlers push out from its forehead. They branch off only twice, each one, but they are thick and covered in downy hair and look like they will soon grow large. It moves about awkwardly, its arms down like forelegs, and its head swings heavy on its neck as though its antlers are unfamiliar, its neck still weak.

It knew I was there, both times, and watched me sideways. Its eyes are big and round and look almost human, even with their amber colour, except for the strange, horizontal pupils. You can’t read its face like another boy’s – its long lashes blink and its gaze seems impossibly far away and present all at once.

My uncle didn’t chase the stagboy from his land but he grew quiet and unfriendly. My aunt wept and gave up all company, hiding away in her room. Astrith, my eldest cousin, threw malformed carrots and potatoes for it, sometimes roots and stolen oats.

It turned out that at night it was coming into the village. People had been joking about hearing hoof-falls in the dark, an animal’s body brushing their doors, frightening children with stories of a creature drinking from the well – the reason, they said, it had run dry. One night the stagboy brayed – a loud, deep, guttural sadness – and the people burst into the streets. They called out in fear and netted the stagboy and lowered him into the well.

Most people are wary and avoid the well altogether. Astrith sits beside it. She tells everyone she’s keeping guard, accepts their thanks and hurried offerings of food and water, listens to them tell that the waters will return now, drown the beast. But the people know Astrith is feeding it, dropping morsels into the darkness, and they grow wary of her too. Children curl tight in their beds, imagine the creature climbing the well’s inner wall. Some say Astrith talks to it, takes hold of its downy antlers and helps it from the well, wanders with it in the quiet, through empty streets, watching sleepers through shutters, that they nuzzle and touch one another, steal into sheltered places to lie together.

When I can spare some food I take it to Astrith, peer with her into the moss-lined shadows. We listen for breathing, for the scrape of antler against stone, and wonder if it lies down there, the stagboy, if it looks up at us with its amber eyes, if it sees.
An Invisible Force

I sit, I walk and then I sit again at the same spot I've sat for over 200 years. An invisible force, like the shackles on a chain, binds me to this place.

I am the present and yet I am past. I journey only in this courtyard; its buildings and landscapes change with each start of spring to the dark ghostly shadows of the year's end.

Recollection is painful; yet slowly I seem to remember....

That tree: a rope, with a strong knot secured like a chain around a neck. I hear laughter and joy of the spirits of children gone, playing again Arm in arm their devoted mother, lovelier than Venus herself, and her husband, watching over their cubs. Look at them: I am envious of their happiness so full of the hopes and the pleasures of life yet to live.

Suddenly, all laughter and noise stops. They have seen me.

Eyes which a moment ago were the soft blue of the sky, now are dark and hollow, like that of a death mask.

I cannot look at these wretched bodies. I shield my face with my hands and a sticky wetness touches my cheeks. What is this thick, fresh crimson which stains my palm?

Then I am seized with the realisation of my true sin which shakes me to the very depths of my being and I grab my chest as a sharp piercing pain, as if a slow extraction of a jagged dagger, grips my heart. I am consumed with violent convulsions as if toxins travel through my blood and I am breathless and delirious with the agony of the torment of the affliction of the vilest of all sins.

Dear God, I scream, if you have forsaken me, then dearest father Satan save me.

My beloved is here amongst the shadows too ashamed to comfort me, but I feel the intimacy of him. His union is my imprisonment.

All our stolen moments in shadows, all temptation and talk of love, woos of the wedding band of thorns upon your finger, you have seduced me and I am lost.

I wander aimlessly, fearful that our sin becomes more visible each month.

Where is the magical potion of deliverance, the hemlock to numb the pain and dull my senses?

A change comes over my vision,

I am returned to this happy scene with a dagger held tight against my bosom. My beloved sees me approach. He runs towards me, but in his haste trips and his heart meets the blade.

I howled as I do now.
I drew forth the knife from his heart and tore down his wife and cubs.

They lay where they fell.

Numb from the deed, I drop upon my knees and watch over them until the sun died and the moon covered their bodies with a blanket of black mist...

I sit, I walk and then I sit again at the same spot I've sat for over 200 years.

An invisible force....