

Laura Beatty Darkling

‘Beautifully
written’
The Times



VINTAGE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Mia Morgan is a woman under siege: by memories of her late lover, the relationship with her blind father, and by a family secret she can't forget. She is also accused of living in the past. Adrift in London, Mia's days are spent amid the life and letters of lady Brilliana Harley, who lived nearly four hundred years ago during the English Civil War.

Brilliana Harley is a Puritan, a lone Roundhead in a county of Royalists, and it is not long before her enemies sit down in siege around her. As cannon-shot rains down upon her castle, she alone must captain a garrison of men and defend her home.

As Mia pieces together this woman of extraordinary courage and conviction, she finds that it is through Brilliana's life – so different and yet so similar – that she can come to understand her own.

Darkling is a revolutionary undertaking: echoing of two lives across the centuries, deftly weaving original seventeenth-century documents into the fabric of modern fiction. The result is a book of voices, past and present, exquisitely observed and skilfully summoned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Beatty's debut novel *Pollard* won the Authors' Club First Novel Award in 2009, was shortlisted for the RSL Ondaatje Prize. She lives in Wiltshire.

ALSO BY LAURA BEATTY

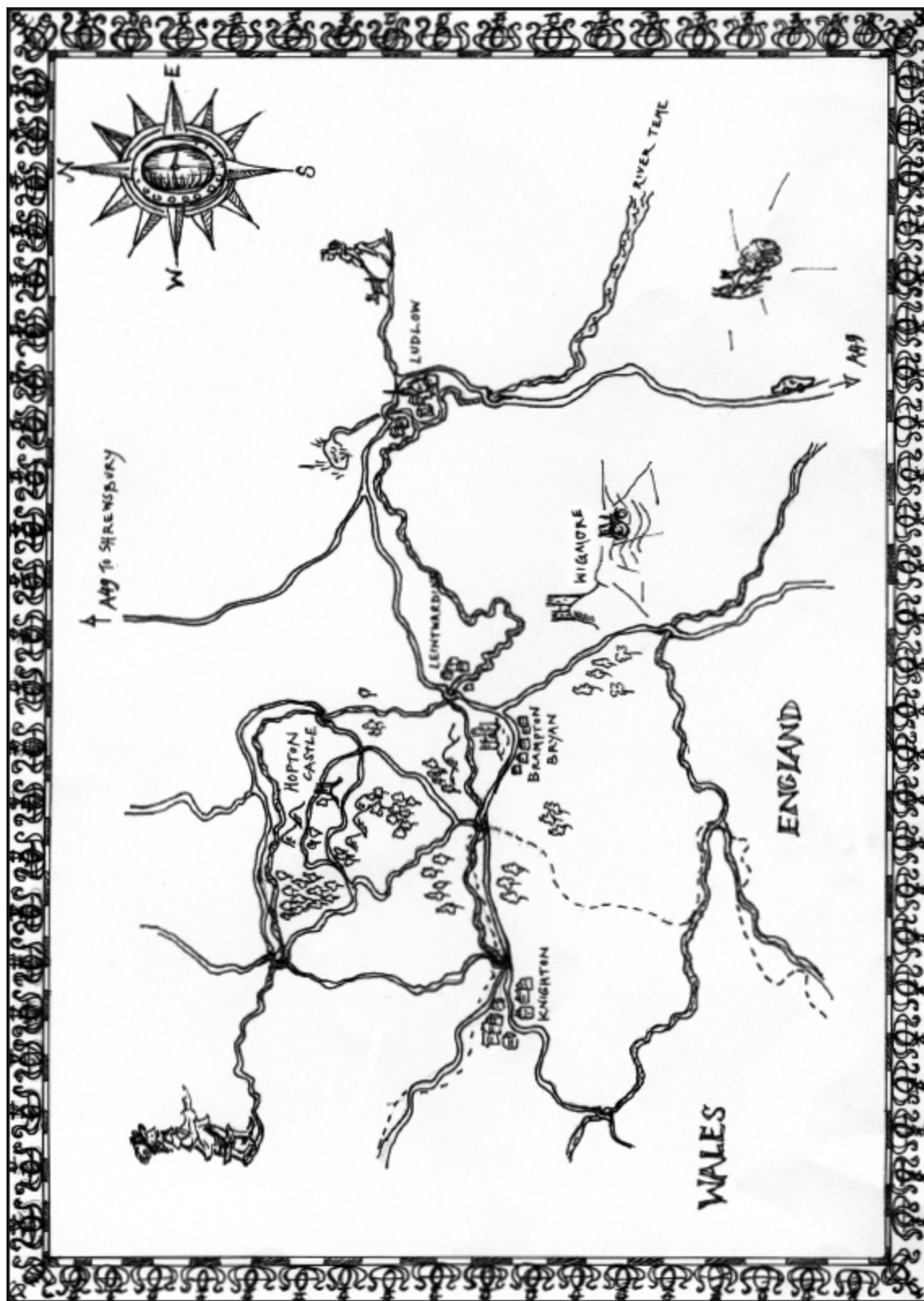
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Map by Laura Beatty.



*A double dedication for a double book:
To Ivo and to my Brilliana*

Darkling

Laura Beatty

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

‘. . . as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal note.’

Paradise Lost, Book II: 38–40

‘A note in my edition says that ‘darkling’ is ‘not yet poetic’. In fact it is the reverse of poetic in the context from which Milton took it:

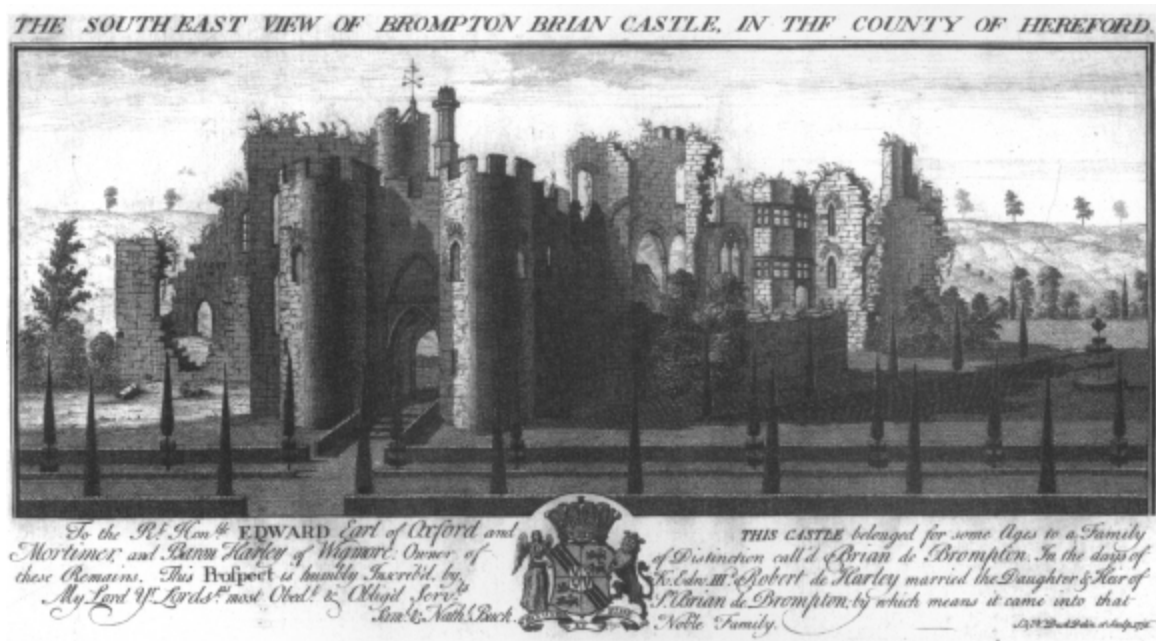
The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
That it had it head bit off by it young
So out went the candle and we were left darkling.

The word ‘darkling’ is instinct with tragedy, though it also suggests ‘darling’ – ‘little dear’. Its darkness is also the darkness of belonging to a powerless opposition.’

Tom Paulin, *The Secret Life of Poems*

PART I

THE WELSH MARCHES



TO THE HAWK, whose ground this is, the world is not an anchored place. It is more like a tray, tilting its grass surface this way and that, as he swings it about on his eye-beam. And he is lonely up there above the Welsh hills, which he sees opened out flat beneath him.

It is only my eye, he thinks, tipping the tray of the world, that fixes things. Because he can do that. He can pin the movement which is mouse, despite the horizon see-sawing when he stoops, despite the speed of his fall down the sudden cliff face of these trees, or the world rushing up at him again in three dimensions. Only when he lands does the

horizon blink shut and the earth heap itself up around him, in all its strange solidity.

He is so nonchalant, in his fling of feathers, as if gravity didn't exist, as if the ground had no power of its own to hurt him. Because, however fast it slams towards him when he dives, he has never once mis-judged or crashed. He has never felt its hardness against him. He doesn't know its steepness, or its sharpness, or the cold of its earth, or how you labour your weight up it, pulling for the top; like the woman climbing the side of the valley now, who is out of breath and who carries her head slightly forwards as if peering, and who lives, unlike him, in terror of her own sight fading.

There are few people among these hills, so he won't have failed to notice her. He does notice people coming and going, though they live in such a different dimension. She's not food so she's not much more interesting than the sheep, say, or what cars there might be crawling down the steep roads, except that she's wearing a red coat and that is distracting.

Eventually the woman stops to catch her breath. She stands on the steep sward, where it rises up and away from Hopton Castle, and she notices the hawk and admires him turning into the wind and falling. She doesn't realise that his world is a place she wouldn't recognise, his experience of life strange and particular. Because when he lands, switching air for earth so fast, when he stands on the ground, with his cloak around his shoulders and those great arms folded, he must see such a different place.

The woman's world is made of people. She sees swathes of nationality, or time, or social grouping. She sees history and politics and event. She doesn't see that in fact we are all of us living in different worlds - all more or less inaccessible to each other - and that seeing another life, hawk or sheep or human, means nothing, because seeing is nothing like being. She has no understanding of that.

Instead, she stands in the autumn sun and she watches the hawk lift again, listens to him slide his thin cry down the sides of these hills, and she thinks about time, which is a dimension that doesn't exist for him. How different would this valley have looked, in the seventeenth century, for instance?

The black dot of the rising bird. There must always have been hawks here, so that hasn't changed. And indeed the pattern of his life has remained constant, ever since hawks began, so perhaps he doesn't need time. His parents' harsh cries, these sparse fields and the bloody gobbets he ingests have told him only that life is fierce and life is present. Life is right now. That is his point of view and point of view, after all, is everything.

The hawk, on some invisible diagonal, planes away and the woman walks through an open gate and into a field of sheep. And next, she thinks, with some nostalgia, though her father no longer farms, of how you hulk a sheep around at shearing, its fleece greasy, and of the strength of its buck in your grip, the butt of its head. And although she knows a bit about sheep, she thinks about them too from her own experience, or from what she remembers of the nexus of care and predation that animates these high-up, grassy places around England's edges, in which the lives of people and sheep and birds of prey meet, and briefly intersect, and diverge again.

Everything about a sheep is awkward, she says to herself on the side of the hill, starting with its brain and ending with its bolting, stiff-legged run. Maybe that explains her impossible father. Maybe awkwardness is catching. Is that crow on the back of that ewe picking for maggots? Even after a decade and a half of living in a town, as she watches the flock in her town coat, she can't help looking automatically for signs of foot rot or fly strike.

The sheep themselves have eyes only for the grass. They glance up and crop and crop and crop. They splay their feet

and plant their weight, hammocking it above the ground, which they know, not so much by sight, as with their knees and with their mouths. The valley is made of food, they think, rolling their marble eyes, half-witted. The grass is everywhere. Why look above the horizon? Only the dog now, running low and open-mouthed at their ankles, galvanises them into some kind of alertness, as they coalesce, skittering in a body at its will. Behind it the farmer comes up slantwise, with long strides.

Come on Tess, the farmer bawls at the dog, all bristles and shite and red hands. Stop faffing around. And the woman, who is labouring across the field once more, sidesteps and apologises and can't tell which way they are headed. I'm sorry. I'm in the way, and the farmer coming level, and appraising her like a bull appraises a cow, says, No, don't worry. It's the dog that's being a prat, not you. And she is reminded that she has a full and feminine figure, which is something he can say without opening his mouth.

I don't know your face, do I – you're not from these parts? He's pretty easy with himself. He has that propensity to talk, which often belongs to people of remote places and which is something else she had forgotten.

No, she tells him, she's not from here. Although, she hesitates – she doesn't want to encourage him – her father used to farm sheep and she nods towards the flock. But it's nice to be spoken to on the side of a hill. It's nice to be appreciated.

Whereabouts is that then, he farmed?

Oh, it was Scotland. A little place. You wouldn't know it. She smiles.

Like this then, he says, smiling also. But you won't have a castle, I don't suppose, where you are? I take it you're up having a look at the castle? He nods over at the ruin, where men in hard hats are at work behind wire caging.

She is, and they fall silent, though his eyes say all kinds of things and it is clear that he would dawdle and say more,

with his bristles and his shite and his red hands itching no doubt, only the sheep are running and it's a working Wednesday. So he heads away and the woman, whose name is Mia, turns uphill, her weight suddenly an asset.

*

She is no scholar, Mia Morgan, no academic. She has no specialist knowledge, apart from her childhood acquaintance with sheep and her interest in time, to bring to this quiet valley, between England and wild Wales; its stub of a castle, its hanging hawk, its sheep careering now through the narrow gate with the dog behind them. She just has a habit of attentiveness. She knows how to listen and how to look, as if the world were disappearing, as if everything in it mattered. So that is what she does. She sees into the past the way you see through a keyhole, partially and in thin fingers of light.

Reaching a corner, where the wooded top of the hill meets with the field, Mia stops again, leans against the stile and watches the farmer, small in the valley bottom, crawl about his business, with the dog still being a prat. Quiet. The burr of a tractor somewhere and the clank of machinery in the wood behind her, and the hawk repeating its cry, like a blade being sharpened on a whetstone.

From here, the valley appears pleated into feminine tucks and folds, a little stream running clear through its floor. There is everything you could need, she thinks, pasture, clean water. Such softness. And nursed in the middle, the castle, sitting like a navel, in its tender green.

So, what happened here? Backwards and forwards a yellow digger crawls, scooping fallen earth from the castle's middle. I'd show you round, the foreman had said to her earlier on, when she'd tried to gain access, but you don't have an appointment. She'd laughed at him. It seemed ludicrous that you'd need an appointment for a pile of mud

and an ash tree leaning crazily out of what had once been indoors. And you'd need a hard hat. Much as I'd like to, he'd added not ungallantly. It's health and safety.

Anyway, she'd thought, looking at the hawk overhead, you need a proper perspective, which is why she had climbed the hill in the first place, to see the castle in its surroundings, to understand why it was there. Not immediately a strategic position. In fact, why would you ever come here at all? On the way to nowhere and so small – 'but one room below and one above' is the recollection of its one-time commander. She has read all the accounts. And a garrison of only sixteen men, until the castle of Brampton Bryan, four and a half miles away, 'lovingly' sent reinforcements.

Round it the hills rear up, Hopton Titterhill, the Black Hill, whose great impassive forms shut the valley so that anything that did happen here, Mia realises now she's looking at it, would happen in secret, out of the eye of the world as it were.

So this is how it is, Mia thinks. This is how a valley is, the hawk, the sheep, the grassy silence of the hills complicit. After a massacre.

LISTEN. THE DEVIL is abroad in these English lanes, stalking on nightmare legs, with his hocus-pocus and his Hail Marys. Listen for him come back once more, moving about the country by night, looking for a foothold to harry the One True Church, to light fires again and burn the Godly and bring purges and Spanish invasion and lay trails of gunpowder under the Houses of Parliament.

Say it is late February, early March 1644, just barely spring, small daffodils, catkins, buds breaking, though the trees are still bare. A country, like a dog tearing at itself in a fever. Civil War.

Almighty God, our Father, we pray to you for the suppression of popery and Arminianisme. May we ridd popery out of the lande.

And here are the Godly cooped up in their castles, straining their eyes and their ears into the dark. Because it is not life or death, that is at stake, it is eternal damnation.

Armies on the march, back and forth through an England convulsed. Confused alarms in the night and poor communications, and rumour, and waiting.

Now here is the Devil, wagging the legs of five hundred men, down the twisting roads, to Hopton. Five hundred men moving in darkness, into the mud of this little village. The half-timbered houses, the hovels, all sleeping. The godly garrison in the castle, tense against rumour. We humbly beseech that God will enable us in mercy to keepe covenant with him. We give thanks to God in his grate mercy, for our deleverance from the Powder Plott and from the Armada of Spain.

Owls sweep through the valley.

Two hours before dawn, the noise and the smell of an army and the persistence of pioneers with picks working a breach in the castle. May the Good Lord delever us from our enemies. Muddle and makeshift fighting. Dark work.

Dawn, and the enemy looks surprisingly ordinary. Muddy, ignorant men from another county. They have billeted themselves in the village.

Cannon arriving in carts a week later. That was on a Sunday, and in the night, three pieces of ordnance. The valley bulging. Men and horses and cold and little food and the hills rising impassive and the hawk splashing his excrement on a fence post and lifting to the sky as if nothing were happening.

Monday morning waken to drumming.

Inside the little castle, thirty-one men resisting with pikes and muskets and clubs. The cannon shot shaking the hills repeatedly. Nine o'clock till five they shot ninety-six shots at the out-wall and made a breach and inside, the men, working in sweat and smoke, to repair it with branches of trees and with heaped earth. Upwards of a hundred and fifty dead strewn over the spring grass. Blood. Smoke. More smoke. The moans of the wounded mixed with birdsong, rising on the air. Then a truce while the dead are gathered. Bodies heaped onto carts and Colonel Woodhouse picking his way on horseback in a fury. It was such a nothing place.

Quiet all Tuesday till night and then the enemy come to the brick tower and set it on fire.

So another night of turmoil. Of effort in exhaustion, of the flare of shot and firelight and shouting themselves hoarse and running with water. Of wood splintering, of clangour and explosions in darkness. The battle begins to go against the castle. The door breached and the garrison fight to fill the gap with anything to hand, boxes, furniture, but the enemy bring broom faggots to fire the porch.

O Lord, save us in this our hour of peril.

They draw water in buckets to quench it, passing them hand to hand, but for all they can do the porch burns and the door begins to fire. And now, the dull thump of mining underfoot. The castle shakes with the shock of picks and shovels. Cannon shot continuing.

Weary with working all night, and not out of their clothes for a fortnight's time, and the enemy gotten underneath the castle through a house of office on the south side; it is moved they should desire a parley. Above the ramparts the white flag trembling as if exposed.

Surrender granted under no conditions other than Colonel Woodhouse's mercy.

Silence suddenly, and a handful of men and two women emerging shock-witted, haggard, into an ordinary day. With the smoke of the cannon hanging they unblock their port, put their arms on a heap. Stumble into their own valley in the morning. The forgotten sounds of life here, audible again for the first time. Sheep bleating because the lambing has started. Someone's dog. A cockerel. The cots and hovels among the mess the occupying army has made, but the hills familiar, the skyline at least, unchanged.

Samuel Moore, the commander, tied and marched off, for interrogation, over the water by Richard Steward's house, and then he looks back and sees none have followed.

The two women stripped to their smocks and cut about. Watch this. They strip the soldiers naked, tie them back to back.

Afterwards it is hard to know what you've seen. There is muddle and horror. Some say they slit their throats. Some say they killed them with clubs or such things, by beating. Buckling to their knees on their own grass. Many, that they were left in the March cold, tied naked to each other, staring and bleeding, for several hours, until word was given that they be left to the mercy of the common soldiers. Ordinary men, from the outside. Englishmen. Not much difference to look at, between the men of the castle and the enemy; who presently fall upon the prisoners, wounding them grievously, and drive them into a cellar unfinished, wherein lies stinking water, the house being on fire over them.

It is unthinkable what men will do to each other in their own country. This is not a foreign enemy. These are our own

countrymen.

Every man of them presently massacred.

*

The hills close round, holding the castle to themselves, as if shushing it to forget. From her vantage point, Mia looks down at the village. Cupped by the hills, its sounds float up to her, people calling companionably back and forth in the plots and gardens below. A car starts up and inches out into the lane. Every noise distinct. The valley is so constructed that anyone standing here by accident, at the joint of the field with the wood, a vagrant maybe, sheltering in this corner, where the blackberries are enormous and grow in globs in the hedgerow, anyone minding their own business, or a boy minding sheep or kine, would hear distinctly all that was going on in the village below. The cannon shot. The appalling screams. You couldn't miss anything.

And then the next morning, or the morning after the massacre say, the castle sunk in silence, its defences gaping. Just the smoke from the ruin still rising on the air, with the hawk winging through and the hills keeping on with their own fecundity, while the bodies were dug into the hard March ground. What happened then? Did the people just go out, stunned, into the fields and carry on with the work of providing?

Now the village has forgotten. The houses have bright plantings. They have cars and tarmac drives and everything neat. The hawk rises and falls and the digger goes on scraping. I think I'll walk up into the wood, Mia says, see if anything suggests itself.

She gets over the stile and enters the wood and climbs. It is warm and it is steep going. Instead of the wide and surfaced path that must circle the shoulder of the hill, she chooses one that goes more or less straight up. She hauls herself, holding whatever offers itself, following what look

like channels made by flash floods, but which turn out to be downhill racetracks. Keep clear at all times, a sign reads, mountain bike exit.

So, it would have been sixteen – what? Sixteen forty what? Think of a date, she says to herself. But she can't. It's embarrassing, when it comes down to it, this inability of hers to hold information, as if she were some leaking bucket. A bad workman, her father would have said. A bad workman blames his tools. It doesn't matter, she says by accident, out loud, to drown out the sound of him in her head because he is an exacting man. It doesn't matter. Dates are just a filing system. They're just a way of saying, this happened not now, in a different place from here. I'm writing it all down. I don't need to remember it.

Just round this corner, just up to those trees, where there must be a break and I'll see out. I'll see something.

As if in answer there is the sound of rending from the wood above her, of paths being forced. At great speed, a body of men, urgent and sweat-slicked, in Lycra and coloured helmets come crashing and jolting through the trees. Backs! They shout as they pass. Coming through! And one, towards the rear manages, Thank you! breathlessly, as he hurtles past. Down the track she has just come up, their back wheels slipping sideways. They stand up in the saddle as if at the gallop and at the fence they skid and one falls, pushes his bike limping for a bit and then hops on again behind. She reaches the fence herself, in time to see them shoot out at the bottom, bumping down the fields and over the sward to the castle. Mia watches them dismount, bandy-legged, and drink, heroic, from plastic bottles. They shake their legs out and stretch and stand in coloured knots on the road. She can't tell whether this was a race, or just training. The competition seemed so earnest.

Mia leans on the stile in the sun, eating blackberries. She can hear the men still talking all the way below her, on the road. Then she climbs over, recrosses the sloping fields,

dawdling this time, down the brook that runs through the valley floor, to marvel at its stones. It is so clear. They say the waters ran red with blood, as far as the Teme, after the massacre. That's about four miles.

The grass, so short and sweet underfoot and the sun still strong.

Nothing to tell you what once happened here. Only, towards the gate, there is one very ancient hazel, bent and crabbed and with a hole through its middle, which stands, holding its handfuls of wind-stunted sticks like something shocked. It is the first thing Mia has seen in the valley that looks anything like a witness.

All is still as she walks to her car. The hills have settled back to silence. The shouts and the urgency of the mountain bikers and the splash of synthetic colours have seeped into their grassy sides. Just one man remains, by the roadside, as Mia passes, strapping his bicycle onto his car. Afternoon, he says, as he pulls the nylon straps tight. The sheep are quiet and the farmer is nowhere to be seen. Only, as she fishes in her pocket for her keys, an owl calls, hooting in daylight, as though in this valley it doesn't matter. As though there will be no one here to tell you, if you make a mistake, if you confuse, momentarily, dark with light.

PLACES MAKE PEOPLE, Mia. That's what her father used to say to her, when she was a child. They were walking back from the sheep sheds in the dawn, the first time, wiping the blood and slime off their hands, with the stars paling and the lines of the hill, in the grey light, like a world cut out of paper before them, and the breath and milk and dung snugger of the new lambs behind. Places make people. Always remember that. He had a Lowland Scots accent.

Then later, when she wanted to leave Scotland and go elsewhere, places make people again, and this time not in companionship but as a foregone conclusion. As much as to say, you can try, but you'll have to come back. As though the great hill and all the needle rains and the chapped hands and the muck and drudgery and the afterbirths and the life and the death, and all the things she wanted out of, would get up and follow her into London. Dog her up and down Bond Street and Oxford Circus. Lift her skirts to show that she'd wellington boots and long johns on underneath, and drag her back as unfit for anything but farming.

She has never forgotten it.

But making is making. It isn't possessing, as she'd worried through her teens that it might be. The hill that humped itself through her dreams never came to get her. And now here she is, a visitor to the country these days and doing the brain-work, as her father would call it, that he could so easily have done himself, with his piles of *History Today* by the wing chair and his mind like the flick of a fish's tail, had he not had a farm to inherit.

Sometimes, Mia thinks, places make you so you are only fit for somewhere else, leaning over the gate to the churchyard at Wigmore now. There is a jackdaw, strutting about among the graves, with its hands behind its back, sizing things up. You should have been a crow, Dad. That's the difference between us.

Crows can live anywhere. Anywhere you go in the world you find crows of one kind or another, snatching their living off the surface, as it were, disengaged, adaptable. Because usually birds interlock with a place, or that's how it seems, like a flowering out of particular conditions, like something the landscape produces. Clouds of puffins out of a cliff face, woodcock that bloom out of the forest floor, herons grown on stalk legs out of pools. They bed down, as if the part of themselves that flings constantly skyward were mirrored by a twin somewhere just below the earth's surface.

Only a few people do that. The rest skate about like water boatmen, vacillating, picking and choosing. For the smallest of reasons, they take off and move to somewhere completely different, just as Mia's father did, in the end, when his eyesight went completely and he found himself blind. He just picked up and sold the farm and went to a place called Myddle, in Shropshire, that had nothing whatever to do with him. Because, he joked sourly, it sounded like a safe place to be, if you couldn't see - the middle.

You should have been a crow, Dad, Mia says again, a little out of breath as she leaves the jackdaw and starts the steep climb up from the church to another castle ruin. Walking. Thinking of her father, the first time she'd been to visit after the move, sitting in the little plot at the back of the house, all dandelions and tussocks and rank grass, a place he'd have scorned if he could have seen it; just sitting, just staring with his sightless eyes, a look of puzzlement on his face. A still day, and he sat with the thistledown falling through the air around him. Neither adaptable nor disengaged. Disoriented. Dispossessed.

You look tired Da, Mia had said, to break the silence mostly, to bring him back. Will I make you a cup of tea, slipping back into Scots as if that could comfort him.

There's not a breath of wind here, girl, he said, without turning his head, as though addressing the fence, the poor

field behind it. And she'd noticed at the time that his voice was brisk and out of context, the little chips of his consonants and the breeze of his vowels, as if even that was fitted to the climate that had born it, because he'd lived his life so far, under the skin of where he belonged.

A man could suffocate just trying to breathe here.

It's just a warm day Da, she'd said. There's wind everywhere. Then it flashed through her mind and caught in her neck that perhaps he'd lost his place in the world, like you lose your footing and slip; that she was somehow responsible. So now he'll die, she'd thought, because he looked like something blown about, a bundle of dry matter, his cheeks sunk, as though deprived of some lively function. All afternoon he kept raising a hand to his face, to check whether as well as his sight he hadn't lost his sense, some new trick of his body's, to bewilder, to scramble his knowledge of things. Because it wasn't only a breeze he'd lost. It was *the* breeze; the breeze that struck your left cheek as you faced the hill, so you knew it would rain, or the one that scooted you from behind and made everything skip, or the one that flayed at your right, or smacked at your forehead and watered your eyes. It was how your body knew without your head having to bother, how it talked all the time to the place.

And however hard she denies it, even Mia is aware of the parts of herself that her Border childhood has made. Her ability to do without company, her occasional brisk impatience. Something clear, something of coldness and clean stone and water about her.

Now stepping out with purpose she goes, half-conscious of this map that she carries about inside her, through a kissing gate, up the hill, and along the tangled footpath to the castle ruin.

These are the Marches, borders again, and it is intriguing to Mia that her father has, without looking, chosen

somewhere to live that is a border, a boundary place. It's on the edge, Da, even if it calls itself Myddle.

It is an outpost, thickly fortified. There are castles everywhere you look. Ludlow, Painscastle, Croft. She can fit the names to her steps. And Wigmore, Montgomery, Chirk. Stokesay and Powis and Hopton and Grossmount. Longtown and Whittington. Brampton Bryan. Skenfrith.

How thick they are, how full of consonants. Wild names for wild places.

Upwards a moment later, under a sunken archway, small curtilage walls either side, surrounding a mossy lawn. Then half a turret and a rowan tree and on again, another rise, another set of walls and towers and shattered ramparts, more and further, she ascends and ascends until the topmost platform, where Mia rests and looks down on the landscape, at last.

Fields hazy with distance. Curve of the horizon. And all the birds wheeling below her this time. Small ferns, moss and wind. Cars like beads on all the roads, silent at this height. You are halfway to the sky here. She runs one hand over the blasted stone.

*

This is how a family of Puritans is born.

Elizabeth I on the throne with her paper face and her hard-as-nails eyes, and her untouched body encased in embroidery. England, with the bitter smoke of Mary Tudor's bonfires still rank in its nostrils, is become a feverishly Protestant country. Small, mud-bogged ways. Carts rocking past. Horses from time to time. The slowness of things, to set against the switchback changes of religion. Take Old John Harley of nearby Brampton Bryan for instance, a Catholic, whose son, Thomas, changing with the times, turns Protestant and marries a Nonconformist.

Wear your hat in church. Don't genuflect. Throw out the altar rails, the incense, images, decoration and all those things that suggest pomp, or mystery, or luxuriance, for they belong to the Devil.

Thomas's wife, Margaret, severe and ardent, lives by these rules. She is from a family of reformed Protestants, not afraid to proclaim the new religion. Clarity is important, to hold to it, to know yourself; ask yourself daily, hourly even, are you one of the elect? Are you saved? Look into your heart, order it, subjugate it. Take care you be not idle, or luxurious, or dark.

For I am a light to lighten the Gentiles.

And lights are made of rush, of tapers, waxed, or floating in oil. There is no such thing as a light that doesn't burn. Thomas Harley's wife, carrying herself into the musky comfort of her recusant father-in-law's Catholicism like a flare. Another woman to burn the country clean. Beating on the doors of the chapel at Brampton Bryan, where the Mass was held illegally. I would speak with my lord. No answer. Just the smell of incense drifting under the closed door and hum of the Latin mumbo-jumbo. I would have my lord Thomas Harley come out to me. Beating with her fist on the locked doors. What if the Queen were to hear of this? Open the doors. Inside, the people listen.

Open! Open, I say. Do you wish to keep your heads?

And the doors open and out comes Thomas, head down, walking quick, because the Act of Supremacy means that Catholic priests are now traitors, and the punishment for treason is beheading.

If Sir John will not change, then the young Harleys will not stay. So Thomas and Margaret, with their possessions on carts, scurry away to Wigmore, where they wind up the hill to the airy castle and set up house and start a family. And old Sir John, who is afraid of nothing, is left behind at Brampton Bryan, shouting in Latin from the popish primer

through the long Protestant services, and holding Mass in the castle until he dies.

To this couple, Thomas and Margaret, Robert Harley, the Puritan, was born, here in this eyrie, in 1579. His first sight of the world, this view that Mia is still taking in; the pattern of these fields and lanes, this clean, uninterrupted sky, these wheeling, searching hawks. And from here, as Robert listened to his mother's unadorned truths, fitting them to what he saw laid out below, the world might have looked capable of being ordered.

It is seductive up here. You half-wonder why anyone would leave. If you wanted to just sit and watch people living, Wigmore would be perfect. The burden of involvement lifted, just the sky and the silence. But the moment Sir John Harley died Thomas and Margaret moved back to Brampton.

Mia has stopped thinking and is watching a tiny tractor with a Swiss roll of straw on a spike in front of it trundle across a field. For livestock, no doubt, though she can't see any. Imagine, like leaf drift, the shadows overlapping of how many people, in what kind of clothes, looking out of this ruined window, at the fields and woods and roads to London, watching the world laid out before them and plotting what their place in it might be. Because that is what people do, stand at windows and dream and make decisions. And then, they either stay where they are and do nothing after all, or, like the Harleys, they come down.

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Down from the castle the landscape is a different place. Narrow roads that were made by feet tracking back and forth through mud between small villages, connecting places that were days away from each other to begin with, half a day if there was a horse, if it didn't go lame, if the ways were good.

And at walking pace these roads would have been places themselves, cupping the noise of their own banks and hedgerows. The chirping, the fluttering, the sound of steps approaching or receding, the cartwheels in and out of the ruts. Long moments of emptiness. I wonder who's coming now. A man's whistle, or a hoof on a stone. Nothing travelling faster than a horse can gallop. Reported news that changes or becomes outdated, often long before it has the chance to arrive, swaying along between the hedges. Just the slow creak of the basket into which letters have been put, paper prayers, carrying messages, hopes, anxieties, the father's repetitive wishes for his daughter's health, married to an older man say, in a shire he has never seen. Please God she is well. While he listens, in the bird-filled silence of elsewhere, to her absence. She hasn't written for a week.

Now the roads are fast with tarmac. So fast they no longer exist except as distance measured and consumed, flexed like cables, between these villages. Onibury, Craven Arms, Church Stretton. And the places they connect are also changed, also uncertain. Houses set down anyhow, in a rush, at odd angles flimsily built, as though infected with impermanence. You can leave a village without even knowing you've been in it.

Mia is at the wheel of her car, heading to her father's for the night. As she turns off the main road and steep down into Myddle, whose jumble of buildings surprises her with the feeling of not belonging, she thinks guiltily that she doesn't visit enough. It doesn't look anything like home. I hope he's not in one of his moods.

Down the main street, brick houses in smart closes. That's new since I came last. Bungalows with red tarmac drives among the old sandstone. Her father's house is in a small modern crescent, off the main street and open to fields at the back; Glebelands, which is what it must once have been, and Mia likes the reminder that its name unfailingly provides.

The house is semi-detached, so her father and her aunt Ines, who lives with him, have neighbours. This is an awkwardness for them, in particular for her father who is a private man, should anyone choose to have a row. Not that having rows is something that either of them do intentionally, or very often. They go miles round to avoid spoken confrontation. They are expert bottlers and lip tighteners and simmerers and suppressors, Mia and her father. Mostly he manages a quiet life. Mostly Mia's visits, though always brief and far between, are gentle. They communicate by not communicating, by teasing each other and by turning a blind eye, which Mia finds ironic. How much blinder do you need to be Da, she will ask him in her head sometimes, when either the seething or his mildly abrasive manner gets the better of her.

They must have been watching for her because the door opens before Mia has time to knock or to ring the bell. Hello pet. Ines on the doorstep, very neat, very buttons and bosoms, holding out her arms. Come on in Mia, come in, how are you, you look great.

Hello Aunty, and Mia hugs her aunt, who is her mother's sister, though nothing whatever like her, being too small, too soft. And the house, even though it isn't home, smells familiar, of outdoor boots and a certain type of fabric softener and cooking. The radio talking to itself in the kitchen. Looking down the narrow hall Mia can see out through the kitchen window, the cows in the little fields beyond, the sky reddening, the coming dusk. I'm absolutely exhausted, she says without thinking.

Is that you girl?

That's me Da.

Mia's father, tall and still spare, standing in the living room, making his feeling way to the door because he can't wait, shows his pleasure at his daughter's arrival with an embrace that is for a moment almost too tight, a bang on