



.FINAL FOOTSTEPS DOWN THE LANE.

by

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For ten years I have been a regular contributor to newspapers, mainly the regional Western Morning News with articles revolving around my 1950's rural childhood. Some of the articles first saw the light of day as poems, which became pieces of prose to fit in with the editors' requirements.

This collection is made up of new poems, poems which became articles, and which have been rewritten in the way I originally envisaged them, plus prose-poems. Pieces on my childhood, which I have been writing about since the 1970s.

At times, the past becomes so vivid as I write about it that it becomes the present, and I am once again the nine year old boy in many of the poems. Poems and prose poems written by an adult with events as seen through the eyes of a child. When this occurs, past and present tenses also occasionally merge in my writing.

Dedicated to the memory of Miss Marie Robins, my junior class and head teacher who always had a new Shell nature poster on the classroom wall at the beginning of each month, kept a fine class nature table and who, together with my father, gave me my love of nature.

For reviews and comments of this collection and previous works see final page of the pdf.

Finally, a big thank you to Don Oldham who made this presentation possible.

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## .RIVER BATHING.

One August afternoon when mirages melted, and treacle black tar  
oozed up and bubbled through cow pat scabbed gravel,  
the Higher Orchard spring, our source of tap and pump water,  
threatened to run dry. My mother and I trekking across three meads

drenched in the scent of meadowsweet and honeysuckle,  
to the river bank of the Crooked Oak, a boundary on our farm,  
it's surface pollen flecked and silent.  
At the edge of a small plantation, beneath the shade of conifers,

the contents of a wicker basket placed upon the grass -  
bath towels, flannels, Lifebuoy soap,  
a thermos flask, pop bottle, beaker, crisps and currant buns.  
A final check to ensure we weren't being observed.

Getting undressed in a flail of limbs. My loud giggles. Apprehensive glances  
through the screen of trees. My first glimpse of her unclothed body.  
My face colouring.  
In the silence of the overhanging branches

our toes touching the surface.  
Small ripples. My flesh tingling with the surprise,  
trying to avoid looking at her soft nakedness. Blushing once again  
as I saw her reflection looking back at me. Crisps and pop forgotten.

Splashing together in the ice coldness. Back on the bank  
her hands towelling my body, before ruffling my hair, her fingers lingering.  
Dressed, and the picnic pop bubbles exploding up my nose.  
Stealing sideways glances at her, blushing once again.

Picking a rush she slowly peeled back the stalk  
to reveal a slender white strand. "Rush pith. A poor man's night light."  
Her fingers delicately caressing the flesh. "A candle wick to be dipped in oil."  
Her fingers once again ruffling my curls, and touching my neck.

Thirty years later, sitting by her nursing home bed  
I recalled that hot summer afternoon. A smile,  
her hand grasping mine. "Your father had a lovely neck.  
Always beautifully scrubbed. His white collar, starched, the gold studs gleaming.  
I'd sit behind him in the church pew. I was seventeen, he was twenty five.  
I fell in love with him, four years later we were married. He was a good man."

In my memory, a glimpse of her soft nakedness.

.COMMUNION.

Each summer on a late hot August afternoon we made our pilgrimage,  
my mother striding through the grass, beating a track with a gnarled walking stick.  
“They’l come to come,” she always said when blackberries lay like nubs of coal  
upon a hearth, and flame thorns burned her naked arms.

Pulled down with her stick, her fingers fumbled through the foliage  
finding out the choicest fruits for turning into jellies, jams, pies, tarts  
and a cordial for the monthly Sunday sacrament.  
Suspended from an iron hook set into the back kitchen revolving beam

a muslin bag, gorged and bloated with its boiled feast, dripped juice  
into a white enamel bowl. In the dressing room, attached to my parents’ bedroom,  
jars containing jams and jellies from blackberries, greengages, plums and damsons  
blazed on the shelf in the reflected light; a stained glass window.

Each August I recreate the ritual alone.  
Licking fingers blotched by the bruised fruit,  
I taste the blood. Floating on the breeze  
echoes of our laughter from those childhood days.

.THIS IS THE DISPOSABLE AGE.

I have discarded you, cast you aside, old, worn out,  
surplus to my requirements, functions all irregular.  
Now I can continue with my life, leaving you sitting  
on the periphery of yours, staring inwards at yourself  
and into the centre of the lounge.  
Your days growing longer.

Twice weekly I rake up your memories. Your eyes light up with a sparkle,  
but the fire soon splutters the embers turning dull.  
It's back to monosyllabic responses as you reply to your dutiful son.  
Is your leg still swollen? And are your fingers numb?  
It's cold outside. Think it'll snow? And did you enjoy your tea?  
Squeezing her hand I kiss her face, before quietly leaving the home.  
A backward glance at the blank expression once again in place.  
Your days growing longer and longer.

Outside I return to my real world, jewelled notes of the blackbird  
drop from the sun's gold crown. Cascade of swallows tumble down  
from out of an azure sky. On the wind leaves pirouette,  
dancing the days away. Frenzied flurry of falling flakes,  
cold kiss on an upturned cheek. How quickly my year goes by.  
In your world of the thermostat the seasons blur and merge. Spring  
Is summer, autumn, winter. Your days growing longer and longer and longer.  
This is the disposable age.

## .YELLOW RASPBERRIES.

“Hour after hour, and mile upon mile along the country roads and lanes we went, when you were very small. The time I spent taking you out.” She’d recount with a smile the story from my childhood. An oral photograph. My game of spotting haystacks from my pushchair. The details as sharp as if she was still there.

“You’d point them out, shouting loudly ‘Pooky hay.’ Once we found some yellow raspberries. How you loved your rides around the the countryside.” Her eyes a photo album. When time permitted, I collected her from the nursing home. Inwardly cursing her second childhood I pushed her around the neatly ordered grounds.

The views of suburbia with open plan estates, the skyline of tile and Cornish slate. One day, while gazing at a farm with fields of newly mown grass turning into hay, she looked up at me and said, “The raspberries were very sweet in those days.”



## .HARVEST HOME.

### I

Each night she read twenty verses, the pale glow from the Aladdin lamp  
illuminating the text of the family Bible with a mantle of lemon light.  
Accepting each word with a childlike trust, she tended the crop  
sown in the spring. Her faith allowing no seeds of doubt to take root  
and grow into tares in her harvest field.

The wicker basket heavy by her side was carried with a quiet pride,  
her contribution to the harvest scene. Home bakes, pastries, pies and cakes.  
Spread out on the drying grass, a cloth smothered the scent of chamomile.  
"Sanctify O Lord this food to our use, and us to Thy service  
for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

Sanctify was a strange and haunting word. "What does it mean?" I once asked her  
as we folded the white linen cloth.  
A pause. A smile. A ruffling of my curly head.  
"It just....it just means holy. God's word. Now off you go  
and make the hay. And don't go getting into trouble."

### II

The harvest festival was her favourite act of worship, its glut  
of produce swollen with ripeness. Bunches of beetroot, carrots and parsnips  
spilling over the chapel window sills. The altar rail a cascade of chrysanthemums,  
dahlias and Michaelmas daisies. Petals trickling over a wheat sheaf  
shaped out of dough by the local baker.

Cubes of freshly baked bread laid out on a white linen serviette.  
Home made black-currant cordial in tiny thimble-shaped tumblers.  
Celebrating the sacrament was the climax of her special day.  
Her eyes reflecting an acceptance  
with a faith total in every sense.

### III

On her eightieth birthday I brought photographs.  
Scattering them like ears of corn on her crisp white turned over cotton sheet,  
I recounted past summer days. Bringing to life once again  
the ageless faces in family portraits, wedding groups and scenes of bygone rural days,  
I harvested our memories

For two days glazed eyes gazed past the figures,  
as if staring over the horizon into a land beyond.  
Then, with a rasping breath she set out on her final journey.  
Across the field beneath a skim of summer swallows,  
the farmer's wife steps through the shimmer of a heat haze

and is quickly lost from from view. At the granary door, the farmer  
extends an arm beckoning her to enter and celebrate raising the harvest home.  
Spread out on the trestle table the harvest supper laid out in readiness.  
Figures rise and turn to greet her. As one their voices swell the air.  
"Welcome wife. Welcome daughter. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome home.

### .THE PARTING GIFT.

Your hands are delicately lifting a day-old chick  
from beneath the Rhode Island Red. Warm fingers  
in a feather-gentle touch, placing it  
with reverence on my tiny outstretched palm.

Your hands spreading out the cloth in the hayfield,  
on chamomile crushed by cart wheel, hoof and boot.  
Scents mingling with the aroma of freshly baked buns  
in a melt of home-churned butter.

Your hands towelling my wet hair,  
Fingers ruffling my curls, brushing my burning cheeks.  
First glimpse of your body on that heat-filled day,  
while bathing naked together in the river.

Your hands picking wild strawberries, raspberries - yellow and red,  
black-currants for the chapel communion cordial.  
In the orchard, greengages, damsons, apples and plums.  
Juice in a trickle running over my chin, dabbed away by your fingers.

Hands held in mine, fingers growing colder; the memories fading.  
A sudden surge of summer heat passing through me. With your final breath  
your parting gift- your spirit passing through me. Leaving behind  
"The little boy I'd waited sixteen years to arrive,"

## . A POOR FARMER.

Shunning innovation and machines he chose the horse power of a Shire,  
preferring the stench of sweat to that of tractor oil.  
Twice daily he milked his seven horned cows by hand. Head bowed as if in prayer,  
forehead pressed against the flank. Each named animal treated with respect.

Having no stomach for sticking pigs, he seldom saw the gush of blood  
spew steaming hot from an open throat. Neither could he bring himself  
to thrust a knife into the beak of a hanging fowl, allowing  
my mother to perform the task for our Christmas dinner.

Each spring he found the first white violets, presenting a small bouquet  
to my mother, a shy smile playing on his lips. He knew the names of  
each of his seventeen fields, knew the beech hedges intimately.  
Knew where to find the nesting sites of robin, thrush and wren.

How he enjoyed picking wild strawberries on the secret banks  
and watching lizards basking beneath the summer sun at hay making time.  
How he enjoyed at dawn, the spiders' webs sparkling in the dew,  
the glint of kingcups in the rushes by the pond. The returning cuckoo's call.

The box hedges with the neatly clipped sides enclosed a parcel of land, untied  
each spring with a child like glee. The wrapping paper of winter weeds quickly  
torn away by his excited hands. In the summer months the rewards of his labours -  
sweet peas and stocks saturating the air. The autumn parcel of vegetables displayed with pride.

He seldom reminisced about ploughing with his team of Shires, of how he had  
tramped ten miles a day to plough a single acre, enjoying bird songs as he toiled.  
He told me how the newly cut sward and soil sang, of how the jangle of harness  
and the heavy beat of hobnail boot and iron-shod hoof were musical rhythms to his ears.

Scraping a living from the twenty three acres he was, according to those in the know,  
a poor farmer, a simple man. He found his riches in hedgerow, field and pond.  
Many years after he had died I heard his music of the earth,  
and glimpsed his store of grain. Daisies were his silver, Buttercups his gold.

"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old  
man around. But when I got to twenty one, I was astonished at how much the old man had  
learned in seven years." - Mark Twain.

## .MY AGED MAIDEN AUNT.

All her life she lived for her God kneeling morning and evening  
crouched over her patch worked quilt. Bowed head resting  
on boney hands, fingers interlocked, her lips slowly intoning  
prayers at the side of her bed. Her face was the finest vellum,

my lips touching the softness. Her eyes a twinkle-time of stories  
which I read as I bounced on her knee. In old age, the onset of illness.  
Unable to kneel by the side of her hospital bed, she lay between  
crisp white sheets afraid that her God would desert her.

Fingers trembling, dry lips quivering as she silently begged His forgiveness.  
The parchment was yellow and cracked, my lips hesitating  
drawing back. Her stories now haunting and strange  
which I found myself unable to read.

In the kitchen a bowl of fruit cake mix, her right hand resting on the rim,  
my index finger swallow-skimming the surface, her left hand  
touch-tapping my knuckles. The ice in her eyes quickly thawing,  
to be replaced by a dance of sunlight. "Go on then, but only one finger full."

In her rocking chair in the chimney corner, flickering flame light  
on the spiralling skin from an apple deftly peeled in a single strip  
dangling down in a ribbon to land on the red leaded hearth.  
Her hand squeezing mine, "The first initial of your girl friend's name."

In the farm court the benefactor with her purse, a florin pressed into  
my outstretched palm for ice creams on the seaside outing. A rejoinder  
of how I wasn't to spend it all at once. A sprig of leaves placed in my button hole  
on Oak Apple Day. "Remember to remove it at midday."

In my bedroom, kneeling on the cold linoleum covered floor. Her hands  
placing mine in front of my face, pressing my palms tightly together.  
Peering through my half closed lids as I parrot fashioned the prayer,  
"We're building our tower to God."

Lost moments of childhood glimpsed as I grasped her wrinkled hand,  
our bond renewed through that simple act of touch.  
Never before had we been so close as in that fleeting moment.  
Her voice interrupting my thoughts, "I know you're a man now,  
but you're still my little boy." Her eyes filled with a happy ending  
safe in the knowledge that her tower was built on a foundation of rock.

## .THE. FAMILY. TREE.

The shortest day of the year was silver cleaning day.  
“Can I help you, Auntie. Please, can I. Please.”  
Her seemingly contradictory reply, “No you can’t, but yes you may.”  
The black protective oil cloth spread across the kitchen table,  
crafted from beech, eight feet long and seating ten,  
had originally been brought in through the window.  
The plank top almost two inches thick,  
was polished monthly with lavender polish or bees wax.

Following her into the front room, used only at Christmas  
and on special occasions. Walls with surface cracks  
covered over with faded patterned paper, where strange continents  
expanded their boundaries during the rainy season.  
Build in cupboards on each side of the fireplace,  
containing apple logs from an ancient tree  
in Lower Orchard, toppled in an autumn gale,  
the base of the trunk rotten, just above the ground.

Cut with bow and crosscut, burnt for its scent, a tree,  
planted by my late grandfather. One of several varieties  
including Tom Putt, Quarrenden and Duck’s Bill. The man  
I never knew, dead twenty six years before I was born,  
and yet I did know him. Standing on the stool he’d crafted,  
placing my finger tips on the glass in the picture frame,  
measuring twenty-six inches by twenty-one. The glass  
as thin as the first brittle ice on a November puddle.

Feeling the bearded face in the head and shoulders,  
larger than in real life, releasing and meeting him in my imagination.  
The top cupboard doors, the woodwork varnished,  
the brass knobs tarnished. The glass, rice-paper thin,  
one door opened and my aunt’s fingers groping their way through  
porcelain figurines and tea services. Seeking out the special box,  
tucked out of sight from prying eyes at the back. Reading the blue lettering -

‘Perishable. Deliver immediately. Oakdale Products. Plymouth.  
Telegrams to Oakdale. Telephone Plymouth 104.’

Placed on the oil cloth, the treasure chest was opened, the contents  
carefully tipped out from the tissue wrapping paper.  
A silver cascade of sugar tongs, butter knives, table,  
desert, tea and salt spoons. Napkin rings. Forks with prongs  
fang-sharp, almost two and a quarter inches long  
Wedding and christening gifts from over two centuries.  
A spoon dated 1757, lion stamped. “That shows tis real silver.  
A rat tail spoon, because of the line like a tail down through the handle.”

Another dated 1832. "Your great grandfather's christening spoon.  
"Taken in a horse accident when he was only forty-four. Left a young widow and  
Six small children under nine. They all came here to live with an aunt,."  
No more details forthcoming. Numerous forks and spoons initialled  
TH and GB. One with DJH beneath them. "Your christening spoon,  
your grand parents' wedding spoon. My mother and father.  
Thomas Hill and Grace Buckingham." Her voice faltering. A pause.  
"I should have had another little brother Thomas, as well as your father

and your uncles Herbert and Maurice." Her voice fading.  
A hand reaching out and squeezing mine. Wondering whether to,  
but deciding against disclosing more. "Let's bring the shine back."  
A tin of liquid and two striped cloths produced, cut  
from the tail of an old flannel shirt. The collar frayed  
beyond repair, had chafed my father's neck. The garment  
put in the rag bag, the collar having been turned once for extra wear.  
"I'll rub the Silvo in, you buff 'em up,"

Aged nine, scrabbling through the silver branches  
of my paternal family tree. Too young to be really interested  
in the names of long gone relatives, never seen  
except in sepia photographs, but listening to her every word.  
Thirty four years later discovering, that in 1920, my grandfather had been thrown  
from his pony and trap, when it had collided with a horse-drawn fully laden timber  
wagon, and had died the following year. Uncle Maurice, an accomplished accordion  
player, had contracted meningitis and had spent twenty years in a mental home

after attacking my mother, before she married his brother, with an iron bar.  
After the buffing up, into back court for tree climbing in the  
beech tree. Crunching beech nuts under foot,  
mast removed and nibbled mouse-like. The beech tree  
in spring was my robed queen of the farm trees, with the oak, two  
fields away, the king. Regal and tall she ruled over back court,  
her branches, in my young eyes, penetrating the clouds. A crowning  
glory to the man who had planted it over two hundred

years before I was born. Descendants, later grafted a new scion  
to my farmhouse tree, after much of the original stock  
had been destroyed in a fire, which raged through the branches in 1854.  
Two branches of the beech tree grasped, a real family tree to be climbed,  
the trunk an autograph page on which, with my birthday present pen knife, I had  
Carved my initials DJH with pride in heavy strokes, below TH and JH. A tree  
with branches older than the dates on the family tree cutlery;  
climbing up and feeling my grandfather guiding my hands.

### .VISITING GRAN.

When I was young there were visits to gran  
to stay in her three up, three down terraced house.  
The front step regularly scrubbed, the brass strip polished  
until it shone corn-yellow in the morning sunlight.  
She was always bustling around, cooking,  
cleaning, washing, ironing and baking.  
The retired farmer's wife.  
Once, and only once, I asked her age,

frowning she told me it was rude  
to ask a lady such a question. In  
the next breath she informed me  
that ladies glow, men perspire and only horses sweat.  
Smiling she pressed a coin into my palm.  
In a cabinet a fourteen inch black and white tv,  
the picture flickering caused by traffic passing  
by the front door. Sitting side by side on the two seater settee,

we watched exotic birds, enjoyed their songs  
in what she called her cage of sweet delights.  
She'd tell the tale of my mother and my grandfather,  
while he shaved at the kitchen sink, watching a cuckoo chick  
through the window in a hedge sparrow's nest.  
One day her exotic birds, pecked through the bars,  
wings flapping furiously, and flew around her neatly ordered room,  
their plumage taking on horrific, garish, hues,

their liquid notes discordant, filling her brain with a cacophony of noise.  
Alone in her room in the home she was 'visited' by her parents  
in horse-drawn traps and jingles, she'd point them out  
trundling up the drive. Listening to the voices in her head  
she shrivelled up into herself.  
One afternoon with a robin singing on a granite cross,  
I did find out her age, but there was no little old lady  
to admonish me and press a coin into my perspiring palm.

## .THE SWIVEL BEAM.

### .PART ONE.

Back kitchen floor, said to be over two hundred and fifty years old, was a patchwork quilt of ill fitting large and small flat stones embedded in soil. Stitched together with crumbling cement, they were criss-crossed by the silver trails of slug and snail. Crevices, dust and creepy-crawly creature filled. The stones, damp when rain was prevalent, heaving up in the frost of winter days, acted as a form of primitive barometer.

In the ill fitting wood ceiling, the planked floor of the attic, a six-feet-long revolving old oak beam, with slots and notches bored into it. One afternoon, when very small, my father scooped me up above his head. My face touching fur. Panic. The sensation quickly replaced by a familiar reassuring feeling. I felt I was touching my teddy bear. Even the eyes appeared to be glass ones, but this fur was grey and tinged with brown.

My hand touching the mouth, a sticky substance. Fingers licked. A strange taste, never before experienced. Lowered to the floor and left to continue my crawling exploration of the stones. A dry red stain. From iron hooks in the beam a hanging of pigeon, pheasant, snipe, rabbit and hen. Shot, gin trapped or throat cut. The occasional drip, drip, drip, throughout my childhood.



.THE SWIVEL BEAM.

.PART TWO.

The circular-shaped revolving beam designed for  
the carcass of a pig to be winched up by hempen ropes. To be suspended  
for halving, jointing and salting down in the annual pig sticking ritual.

“Swing low sweet chariot  
Comin’ for to carry me home.  
Swing low sweet chariot  
Comin’ for to carry me home.

He’s got the finest voice I’ve heard on the wireless.  
As deep as our back court pond. Now up you get,  
I’ll hold you steady. Don’t worry. Careful does it.”

From the beam, two ropes and a simple wood plank seat.  
His lined and rough palms pressing below my shoulder blades  
with a firm, but gentle touch.

“I looked over Jordan and what did I see  
Comin’ for to carry me home  
A band of angels comin’ after me  
Comin’ for to carry me home.

The pigs I’ve winched up on that beam. For every pound the head weighs  
there’s a score of meat on the carcass.  
Hold tight and up you go again.”

Flying above the familiar landmarks - The corner washday copper,  
long case pump and the red and green painted iron mangle.  
Contemplating the logistical feat of how my head, still attached to my body

could be weighed on the brass dial swing balance.  
Memories of watching my first pig-sticking ritual.  
The squeals, the slit grin in the neck, the blood steaming in a torrent,

the boiling water and the shaving of the bristles. Stretching my legs,  
tucking them in. My father's hands pushing me ever higher.  
His voice echoing in my ears.

.WASH DAY.

“Twas on a Monday morning  
That I beheld my darling,  
She looked so neat and charming  
In every high degree.  
She looked so neat and nimble-o,  
A-washing of her linen -o.”

Words sung with gusto around the piano. Sheet music  
illuminated by candles in brass holders on the upright front.  
Each Monday morning the song acted out in back kitchen,  
at first around the pump trough, copper, and the wood and iron mangle.

In the early fifties, two grey Calor gas cylinders installed.  
A boiler and an iron, purchased, both powered by a bright blue flame.  
The drudgery of the washday made more bearable  
with the old items consigned to the corner of a outhouse.

At the end of the afternoon the large double cotton sheets picked in,  
the gipsy lady crafted clothes pegs placed in the hessian bag tied around my waist.  
Next, mother and my aged maiden aunt, who lived with us, performed  
their washday dance. Stepping up to each other and smiling broadly,

each grasped two corners of a sheet. Taking two quick steps back  
they pulled it taut. Shaken up and down and all about in a white billow-flap.  
Moving forward, the partners faced each other once again. The sheet folded over  
with my aunt passing her part to my mother, who completed the jig.

My aunt retreated a couple of steps and unpegged the second sheet.  
Facing each other for the second dance. Step, step, close up the second sheet.  
At the end of the performance the wicker basket carried proudly  
back into the farmhouse for the final act in the wash day ritual

“Dashing away with the smoothing iron,  
Dashing away with the smoothing iron,  
Dashing away with the smoothing iron,  
They stole my heart away.”

## .THE MEAD GATE.

The five bar gate leading into Higher Mead, laid up for hay each spring, was a sound and solid structure to keep stock in and strangers out. Crafted opposite in the carpenter and wheelwright's shop - F.Newton and Son. Butt carts, long carts with lades, ladders, gates, hand rakes, handles for farm and garden tools. Mr Newton's cryptic riddle. "Best oak for the job they'll all need doing. The job that the owner will never see completed, and for which he or she will never pay me personally for doing."

Filling my nostrils, the scent from recently sawn wood was as strong as that of the fox passing under the lower bar of the gate, at dawn through dew drenched grass, to his earth in Beer Close Copse. My tiny fingers stroking the wood, tracing the rings, working out the age of the ancient tree, as I had been taught by my father when he felled the ash struck in two by lightning. "Burn ash green fit for a queen, But burn it dry for you and I."

The gate, decades old, granite grey, and lichen-coated with pinhead yellow specks in sunburst clusters, was hung at the back of a post wedged in a hole. Firmly tamped in with earth and stones, so as to clear the ground with a couple of inches to spare. My height measured out each spring with a nail scratched mark, his chuckle and the annual words, "Growing up again, not down. That's good. Two inches since last time. Remember no swinging on it, and if you ever have to climb over it, use the hinge end not the hapse end."

By clambering on to the lower bar I could emulate his leaning on the top bar, cogitating stance, as we chewed on our stems of grass. Arms resting on the gate looking out over meads and moors. In my mind today, echoes of the clicking mower blade through the hay mead swamped with summer wild flowers. Recalling the scent of chamomile crushed by hoof and boot, harvest picnics in the shade of the corrugated iron hay shed and the unfathomable words of the carpenter as he planed the final plank.

## .INITIATION CEREMONY.

When I was young we went one winter's morning,  
when the sky, glowing and grey, hung heavy and swollen  
above the fields, to a sale of personal and farm effects. On tabletops  
chintz cloths, china figurines, silver spoons, forks, brass - and copper ware.

On shelves a bundle of books, bound with cord, a clasp brooch with the  
lock of a loved one's hair. Jewellery of jet and jade, homemade rugs  
of rag, cord and wool. A sampler - "Mine help cometh from the Lord."  
Lots set out on public display. Arranged in haste, amassed with love and care.

An earlobe tugged, chins rubbed and noses scratched. A nod, a wink,  
an index finger raised. Each coded signal deciphered by the auctioneer.  
Afraid to blink I stood with hands clenched tight, head bowed, my blushing face  
kept hidden from view. "What am I bid. Are we all done. Going....."

Outside, a book dropped on the ground. Between the tattered pages  
a black edged card used as a mark, mud spattered. A name, two dates, an age.  
A text - "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away."  
Placing it on a window ledge my father took my hand. His grip

strong but tender. The echo of the gavel coming down on the final lot.  
Going, gone.  
The snowflakes stinging our faces.  
The fields white.

## HANDS.

### I

Charlie the Shire horse was an iron horse of a beast -  
a steam locomotive, snicker and snort, snicker and snort.  
Occasionally a hind leg struck the stones of the stable floor  
in a firework of sparks. He was a cider barrel of a beast,

bubbles of sweat oozing in a fermentation of foam  
from his leather staved belly. The scent strong and intoxicating.  
Gentle hands lifting me onto the bare back.  
“Hold tight and don’t let go of the hames.”

Astride the globe surveying my hayfield realm,  
I was a king for fifteen minutes. Led through newly mown grass  
in a lumber-lurch of plodding hooves. Hands bringing me  
back down to earth, my legs unsteady.

Sugar lumps placed in my outstretched palm  
with the words, “Watch out for his teeth.”  
Gazing into deep, seemingly bottomless pools,  
touching the moss-soft nostrils and lips.

### II

The stable straw was a safe place to go and hide when I’d misbehaved,  
where I could see out, but not be seen. A heap glistening gold  
in the corner beneath the hanging tack. Sunlight filtering through  
the cobwebbed wooden window slats.

The oak manger was a safe place where the farm cat went to become thin,  
a kindle of wet wrinkled bodies in a squirming heap of squeaks and squeals.  
A hessian corn-sack dropped on the cobblestone floor.  
Hands reaching in over the side of the wooden manger.

Kittens removed one by one. Rough hands dropping the tiny bodies  
into the sack. The neck, binder cord knotted tight.  
No squirms and squeals from the darkness, and the farm cat going off  
to get fat again. The straw tarnished, no longer my safe hiding place.

### III

On winter nights, games of cards, board games, wool rug making,  
listening to the wireless and occasionally our hand tower game.  
My mother, father, aged maiden aunt and me. Hand on hand, palm on  
back of hand, eight storeys high, six bricks smooth, two roughcast.

Bricks suddenly pulled away, our edifice collapsing in a gale of laughter.  
The clenched fist, two fingers extended or hand held out. Paper wraps stone,  
scissors cut paper, stone blunts scissors. As if reading my mind  
my father cutting, blunting or wrapping and winning.

To make me laugh he places his hands together, palm against  
palm fashioning them into a structure. Each movement accompanied by -  
"Here's the church, here's the steeple. Open the door and here's the people.  
Here's the parson climbing the stairs, here he is saying his prayers."

Co-ordination and manual dexterity, words unknown by the finger sculptor,  
taught to his building apprentice. My excited laughter, an in vain attempt  
to emulate the master craftsman. My tower crumbling on the congregation.  
My father taking my fingers, shaping, twisting forming the praying man.

On a summer's afternoon a hand on mine working the iron handle  
of the long case pump. Drawing up spring water from beneath  
the flagstone floor. Primed, slow drips. A sudden gush. The rush  
of diamond bubbles crashing into the granite trough. A flood of laughter.

Today, an ornament in our garden, the green painted pump gleams  
in the sunlight. Placing my fingers on the handle, a shiver through me.  
The presence of unseen hands, corner stones in their constructed tower.  
An invisible force flowing.

## .RITE OF PASSAGE.

In the cob-walled stable, listening to my father's chant as he listed  
the items of tack hanging on the wall from iron nails and wooden pegs -  
draught collar, hames, belly band, breeching, crupper strap and trace chains.  
Strange-sounding words filled with mystery and magic.

His deft movements with fingers and thumbs as he harnessed the Shire horse.  
Outside in front court, mouth clicking sounds to accompany his commands.  
"Whoa there. Steady boy. Back up. Move on."  
Standing, watching, with my back pressed up against the stable wall.

The butt cart crafted in the workshop across the road, blue and salmon pink,  
hauled steaming dung, bags of slag, wire tied faggots, apples, sticks logs,  
iron tyres with wheels of oak, ash and elm, crushed stones in a thunder rumble,  
as I stood watching with my back pressed up against the hedge

The chosen morning was fine and sunny. Hands lifting me into the cart,  
as he took his seat on the shaft. Gripping the forehead board, clicking my tongue,  
giving my first command, "Move on." The lurch forward, regaining my balance.  
Swaying gently with the motion, I was first mate on my maiden voyage.

Sailing up the road on my voyage of discovery. Hailed silently by the master  
of an approaching craft. My captain raising his index finger in acknowledgement,  
Instinctively my hand emulates the gesture. The final act in my rite of passage  
to be toasted later with a tiny tot of cider from apples carted three years previously.

## .THE FARM CREED.

The firkin, iron-staved, by the door of the root house, became my seat  
in late August, when King Edward and Majestic were laid down in a clamp  
for later meals. Enthroned, I watch him build the heap checking skins for scab,  
disease or rot. As he worked, he intoned the ancient chant passed down by his father.

Through the next two days of harvesting I learned old measures and old ways -  
gills, firkins, kilderkins, barrels, hogsheads, puncheons, pipes and butts  
flowed through my brain in a litany of intoned words.  
My every response greeted with an approving nod.

For the second lesson he chose the field names and sizes-  
Lower Down, Higher Down, Moory Ground, Bull's Mead, West Furze Close,  
Higher Mead, Lower Mead, Hither Six and Outer Six Acres, Lane Field and Little Close.  
Fifty nine acres, three rods and twelve poles. Arable, apple, grass and soft timber.

Through learning his creed, the passed down farm lived and breathed.  
Closing the door on the darkness, I entered the light.  
Old lore conferred, in the kitchen the initiate is rewarded with  
a glass of milk and a slice of fruit cake from a handed down family recipe.



## .POTATO HARVEST.

In late August my father digging up the potato crop. As he dug,  
he'd ask me with a laugh to guess the number of potatoes he'd unearth.  
His hands gripping the shaft - ash, shining and smooth, his father's.  
The grain polished with a patina of grease, grime, sweat and spit.

The forged iron prongs prising the tubers free. Lifting, shaking, counting the crop  
as it dropped to the soil. My guess always one under or a couple above.  
Freshly dug, the tubers irregular in size, dried in the sun, lying  
like pebbles on a beach. The haulms shrivelled and brown.

Beetle-like, I scurried up the newly dug drill filling my willow basket  
with the smallest spoil to be stored for seed. Once I found a fist-sized one,  
shaped like the Methodist minister's head. A pause. His laughter echoing  
over the garden as he pushed the barrow to the root house.

At Sunday dinner, during grace, peeping through half open lids,  
surprised at catching my father's open eye.  
Even more surprised by his secret wink. Our shared smile.  
The roast eaten in the customary silence.

## .BOUNDARY.

The lane was a boundary line over which I was not allowed to cross,  
an ancient path between two tracts of land, our fields and a neighbour's  
field and copse. Under the hawthorn-banked hedge in a tangle  
of bracken stalks, a sunlit-slither of slow worms woken from their winter slumber

by the heat and the vibration of hoof on stone and the lumbering echo-  
creak of ash, oak, elm and iron. Naves, spokes and rims.  
White violets growing in a secret single clump. The butt cart  
brought to a sudden halt. "Stay boy. Hold hard."

My father jumping down, kneeling. Head bent, drinking in the perfume  
in deep gulps. His rough fingers fumbling with the short stems.  
Back in the farmhouse kitchen the aroma of home bakes -  
Potato cakes and currant buns. A tiny bouquet placed on the table.

My father and mother in a wraparound embrace of brown dungarees  
and floral apron. My small shape thrusting between them. Flour-fleck petals  
floating down on my tousled head. Beneath the breeze-blown  
hawthorn blossom a gentle stirring in the grass.

## .CATTLE.

### I

Head bowed as if in prayer, forehead pressed into her flank,  
the warmth of the shippen stifling and moist. The scent wild and sweet,  
hay and sweat permeating the cob walls. Hands cupping the roundness,  
the veined bag brimming over, stretched and swollen;  
a full moon.  
Fingers stroking, coaxing and squeezing. The rhythm ancient and unhurried.  
Through his hands two slender pillars, white and flowing;  
liquid moonbeams.  
Cupped between his knees the aluminium pail froth-full;  
a pool of moonlight.  
Occasionally I'd write my initials DJH, with the tip of my index finger  
in the foam of a full bucket outside the shippen entrance.  
My father, aiming a teat at my mouth as I crouched  
by the aluminium pail, chuckling when milk splashed against my cheek.

### II

My father reared Red Ruby bullocks for beef. Each April  
driving them to the nearby annual spring show. My mother walking at the head,  
my father at the rear, me by his side with my hazel stick thwacking the air.  
He kept his rosettes in a box together with a stick of sealing wax, bills,  
receipts, a lump of chalk, odd lengths of string, pen nibs and old note books,  
at the back of the kitchen table drawer. In the china cupboard -  
tucked behind the lustreware, the tea and dinner services, cut glass vases  
and the cider jugs - the tarnished silver cup,

embossed with leaf motifs, inscribed: 'Best steer bred and fed by the exhibitor  
East Anstey Fat Stock Show.' Once in a while when in reflective mood,  
he'd tell the tale of how he took his Rubies to the ring.  
The sky was blue, a golden sun, birds sang in beech hedgerows  
which lined the four-mile drive. No mention of grey winter months,  
or how his hands were chapped, calloused, red and raw.  
Or how each day he sliced hay from the stack, carrying it roped and bundled  
through snow-filled fields to his herd of waiting stock.

Each spring he won for three successive years the champion's rosette  
and silverware. His to keep, "The small man beat the big boys."  
His smile of pride, the quiet satisfaction of a job well done,  
of how the stock had won it and not him. Finally he'd list the wild flowers seen:  
red campion, stitchwort, bluebell, a natural rosette. That third year,  
when he'd found a robin's nest with a clutch of six warm mottled eggs.  
His eyes shining with delight as once again he relived his special day,  
saw once again the special cup, his jewelled, priceless cup.

## .HIS LEGACY.

The fingers which fumbled with a fountain pen,  
forming letters large and cumbersome in copper plate  
to sprawl and stumble in drunken loops across his will  
would grip a bill'ook and with the iron blade cut out his mark  
in beech and hazel bark the hedge-length of each field.  
In a wrist-twist of fingers his hands bent branches

shaping tender saplings, paring back the hedge with pride.  
From early in the morning the fields would ring with the singing  
of metal striking wood. Across his land with an iron will  
my father signed his name for all to read in strokes  
both light and heavy. A document laid down, a legacy  
of real estate to be passed down through future generations.

## .THE PAIR OF HOBNAIL BOOTS.

### .PART ONE.

Just inside the farmhouse backdoor, crafted in the carpenter and wheelwright's shop, seldom locked or bolted, the iron hapse\* forged in the village smithy, a pair of boots. Leather hobnails soled with studs, carefully tapped in, to form a pattern, plus iron toe-pieces and horseshoe iron heels.

Leather protected by coats of dubbin regularly applied, wax oil and tallow to waterproof and soften. To make me chuckle with delight, his party piece. Striking his heel on the back kitchen stone-flag floor, careful not to slip and slide; sparks in a shower-spit of tiny petal flames.

Leather laces looped through eyelets. An old one saved. His fingers knotting and threading it through a conker, oven baked, the hole bradawl bored for the playground championships. Marching along the village road the two of us playing at soldiers. "Chest out. Shoulders back.

Swing those arms. Left, Left. Left. Right. Left." His boots clicking out the rhythm. The sergeant major leading from the front. "Left. Left. Left. Right. Left. Pick those feet up. Squaaaaad halt. Stand at ease. Stand easy." Through the gate into Lower Orchard

where cider apples grew on lichen coated branches bowed down by weight and age. Filling hessian sacks, and stacking them against tree trunks for carting back to the pound house in the afternoon. Striding through lank tussocks, his legs a pair of geometrical dividers,

his hobnails leaving indentations into which I placed my sandalled feet. Step out, pull up the other foot. In sunlight, razor-sharp the robin's autumn song serenading the footsteps of the follower as the two tired campaigners returned to their base camp.

\* A Devon word for the latch on the door. "Hapse the door." Shut the door.

## .PART TWO.

One January night, the first snowfall of winter. The unheralded blizzard-blitz bombarding the farmhouse, coating courts\* and fields in its cold white mantle. In the morning we went to the corrugated iron-roofed hay shed, tar coated in July by summer visiting gipsies encamped on moorland

where villagers held ancient grazing rights. Watching him kneel, and with his hay knife, the blade fifteen inches long, honed to a silver sharpness, slice out a wedge of summer sweetness with which to feed his five Red Ruby bullocks. Watching his shoulders heave and shudder

with the strain. Hands plunging the iron blade deep into the stack, releasing the scent of sun-filled days. In a blast the intoxicating aroma awakening memories of tossing grass stalks high into the air. Turning cartwheels and rolling in windrows ready for sweeping. The summer bundle roped and carried on his back. Trudging through snow to the middle of the mead.

His stock haughty, pawing the snow in head-tosses of impatience. Half stumbling, eager to keep up with him. Small impressions of my wellington boots almost level with his prints. Cattle fed, we turn and head for home. Carrying me piggy back

he almost loses his balance with the exertion and my weight. Dropping me onto the stack, breathless. With a laugh his finger pointing at two sets of prints outward bound, but only the one set returning. "One of us has been left behind." Words said with a chuckle.

For several weeks after his death, the hobnails remained in a corner on the flagstone floor by the door, where he had cast them off. When last we had stepped out together I covered and filled his prints in the mud, but I could never fill his boots. Always the follower, never to be the farmer.

\*Back along, court was the term used for the farm yard on many farms.

### .BONDING.

They grew in a clump above the stream beneath the box hedge  
and the flowering currant, on the bank next to the outside lavatory.  
Their lemon petals gauze-flimsy in the summer breeze.  
It was a double platform, pine, two holes - one large, one small.

Two metal buckets with their wooden lids set into the platform seat.  
The paper, six inch squares, 'News of the World,' collected each  
Monday morning from the blacksmith's wife. Read, cut up and quartered  
before being hung on a loop from a nail behind the planed plank door.

Sitting on the outside step my father leaning across the stream,  
picking a flower. A blade of grass pulled from a tussock. Gripped,  
and held to his lips it gave off an eerie squeal. While I laughed  
and tried to emulate the noise, he pulled the petals over the calyx

made a loop with the blade to secure them, snapped off half the stem  
pushing it through to make the arms. Told me it was my one-legged  
flower doll called Poppy. Giving a laugh he added she was Welch.  
In the afternoon beneath the flaming sun, cutting, folding, creasing,

his hands, a farmer's hands, nimbly shaping an admiral's tricorn hat  
and a fleet of brown paper sailing ships to float in the granite pump trough.  
Together with a cotton-reel tank, a trolley and a cricket bat, hand carved,  
these were our only shared hands-on experiences.

## .CONVERSATIONS.

A hessian sack from the stack of summer corn tumbling from the cart  
falling with a slow dull thud. A few grains trickling onto the stoney ground  
from the mouth tied with a twist of binder cord. Compared to the annual  
yield per acre, the words in our conversations made a meagre harvest.

In the orchard, bent over the crosscut saw, hands singing in harmony,  
thoughts dancing to the music of the blade, the sowing of the seed.  
From a mud lined nest, a turquoise egg speckled black resting  
on his outstretched palm. Eyes meeting, the germination of the seed.

Today in the first apple blossom,  
in the evening song of the thrush,  
Echoes of his silent voice from across a distant horizon;  
the cornfield golden with a harvest rich beyond compare



.BOY WITH A NET.

In the afternoon heat above the cabbage patch, a flurry of butterflies  
dancing in a mirage in a silent shimmer of summer snowflakes.  
Running between the neatly spaced rows I chased my prey for bounty.  
At the end of each sweep, the gauze curtain net throbbed with flailing wings.

Gently held between finger and thumb each captive dropped  
into a screw-top jar, where finely chopped laurel leaves from the churchyard  
quickly extinguished life. Taken out and laid on the cinder path  
the wings formed a black and white mosaic.

As he paid me a wren farthing for each Cabbage White butterfly,  
my father gave me his simple philosophy - caterpillar, butterfly, life, death.  
Once, in error, I killed a Brimstone. In his eyes a look of sadness.  
On a good Saturday afternoon my catch earned me a shilling.

.OLD JAKE.

Old Jake, my village hero, was according to my aged maiden aunt,  
a charmer who possessed the old ways and the power.  
Through touch and incantation strange, he charmed the ringworm, wort  
and festering sore and conjured blackthorns from the flesh.  
The wizened walnut, white stubbled, ninety-year old face  
was in my young eyes, a wizard's. A shaman's face.  
"Needs a good wash," said my aunt,  
"and only a lazy man never lets a razor see his cheeks."

On fine autumn sunny afternoons, muttering and mumbling to himself  
he lurched along the road to glean his autumn crop  
of fallen branches from the outskirts of Beer Close copse. As twilight  
crept across a poppy crimson sky, he dragged his final harvest  
homewards. On the ground his faggot sheaf left runic squiggles in the dust.  
Each fortnight, dustmen emptied out an old tin bath.  
mostly filled with Ambrosia creamed rice and baked bean tins.  
Together with bread and cheese, home made broth, leek soup, stews and tea

this was his diet, while seated in the smoke filled corner of his inglenook.  
Each night he rode his white mare Sally a mile to the Masons Arms,  
at closing time they'd place him on her back, swipe her flank  
and she would amble back to his two up, two down mid terraced house.  
I thought he'd live forever, my school mates said he would,  
because they said his bubbling cauldron contained frogs, slugs, snails  
lizards, worms and beetles. One morning a knock went unanswered,  
and on that day, a way of life vanished from my village.

(He told his future wife, when he proposed to her, that if she married him and was true to him, he  
would cobble her shoes for the rest of her life. He also boasted that the double number of their  
children represented the number of times he had used a cut throat razor. He once ran an Aunt  
Sally stall at the fair, cobbled boots, swept chimneys and had a very small, small holding.)

## .DRASHING DAY.

A highlight of the bronzed leaf floating days was the arrival of the drashing\* convoy - Murch Bros, Umberleigh. Entering under the cover of darkness, it took up its position in the rick yard of our neighbour's farm. Bellows of rage from my mythical creature. An angry, rhythmical, throbbing and the stench of its fiery sulphurous breath. On its back, warriors thrust pitch-fork swords into it. "A beast of a machine," boasted the foreman when he caught me skulking behind the bole of the largest beech tree. "Creeper, blower, belt and drum. Smutters, shakers, sieve and spout. Collecting board and riddle."

Anatomically dissected, my salmon pink and bright blue monster from its cave-lair seven leagues away, lost its magical sinews, wings and scales. Stripped down to iron, wood and mechanical parts it was once again the drasher from the nearby village. At the end of the day, their bounty regained, they pulled a tarpaulin sheet over my creature and hauled it away. Stacked against the granary wall my dragon hoard of golden treasure. Two-hundred weight, rough-spun hessian sacks to be carried on bent backs up the well worn granite steps. In the twilight, enjoying the tactile sensation of the newly minted gold coins trickling through my fingers.

\*Drashing - A Devon word for thrashing or threshing -separating the wheat from the chaff. Today this is done by the combine harvester which has replaced the binder and the thrashing machine.

## .THE SMITHY.

The music from the smithy was hypnotic.  
Metal on metal, an echoing chime,  
the ancient beat ringing through the village at dawn.  
The deeply throaty voice of the bellows,  
wordless chants composed of spark and flame,  
the hiss of metal hitting water.  
Nailed to the door, a rabbit's skeletal paw  
to bring the smith good luck.

The blue smoke hanging from the slates and rafters  
was filled with the scent of singed hoof; ancient incense.  
Lining the cob walls his working tools -  
Cross-peen, ball-peen, sledge hammer,  
hoof parers, pincers, tongs and rasps  
Horses shoed, wheels rimmed, machinery repaired.  
Robed in a split apron of leather and grime  
Charlie forged his links on a primitive altar

of iron resting on a block of elm.  
Wrought from the shadows of blackness  
he brought forth a yellow light.  
His strength silent,  
his touch gentle.  
Iron, fire,  
air and water.  
The ancient elements.

## .RITUALS.

Sunday and Thursday were special days. Days of ritual, in pew and market ring.  
Cubes of bread and small glass tumblers of crimson juice. Strange words in chapel  
and secret gestures at the auction ring. Water poured from the black iron kettle  
steamed in the white enamel blue-rimmed mug misting the window panes.

From my stool in the corner of the bathroom I watched the blade flish-flash  
over the leather strop, the badger bristle brush lathering the soap.  
His face uplifted, jutting towards the mirror. The pause, the downward movement.  
My small hands clenched into tight fists, nails biting into palms.

A seagull flying  
Silver wings arcing, swooping,  
In a foam flecked flight;  
Across the rocky landscape  
Gracefully executed strokes.

My fingers relaxing mimicking his actions. Rinsing off, drying off, folding up,  
putting away. His cupped hand balling his jaw. Running my fingers  
over the proffered chin, sharing the sensations of the special days.  
Each morning the winding up ritual, Hands grasping the chain,

fingers stroking the fine metal links, before leaving the farmhouse  
to enter the shippen. The weight at the end of the pulley and crook,  
pendulous between polished oak planks was a bull's scrotum  
of heavy grey iron. Cupped in my palm, sensations of fascination and fear.

The enamel face spoke in sonorous tones, its resonant sound echoing down  
through the finely carved wooden long-case. He told me its beat  
was as old as the throb of the earth's ancient pulse. Today, the grandfather clock  
stands impotent in our hall. An antique by the wall its energies spent,

on the ground its chain broken, the weight. Stroking the cold metal links,  
memories are awoken. In their stalls, steam haloed, the cud-chewing cows.  
In the neighbour's field his bull stamps the earth in a bellow-snort of rage,  
eyes rolling, the brass ring glinting in the morning sunlight,.

## .THE FARMHOUSE TREE : IN MEMORY.

### .PART ONE

Eastacott farmhouse was my childhood farmhouse tree,  
planted in the seventeenth century with foundation roots  
deep in the soil of the North Devon parish of Knowstone.

(In 1086, known as Chenutdestana. In 1240 as Cnuston,  
taking up its present name in 1489 from Canutestone.)

In my young head it was as large and as old as the oak tree,  
growing in the hedge of Lane Field, each room a branch.  
Six lower branches and six upper ones, each a different size.

Mud, chopped straw, small stones and water for the cob,  
trampled under hoof by oxen. Trunk building done by hand,  
lintels crafted by the carpenter opposite. Seven double windows,  
each single one containing thirty-six small panes cased in iron  
in the front of the Trunk. At the back, two large double windows,  
one with a bull's eye pane a full six inches across, plus three stout doors.

Through the next two centuries, a series of owners and their descendants -  
Follett, Webber, Moore and Hill. A will written in 1810 by Richard Webber,  
the Elder and Yeoman of West Anstey parish. One of his effects, his best bed  
bequeathed to his wife Elizabeth. Eastacott was left to his second eldest son  
with the condition that should he die intestate, the following proviso should apply.  
This written clause was to cause legal problems for a further sixty years.

"If James should depart this world without issue lawfully begotten of his body, then and in such  
case I hereby give the same estate to my grandson Robert Webber, his heirs and assigns forever."

James, a confirmed bachelor, was looked after by his niece. To repay her,  
he made the necessary arrangements in 1832 that Eastacott should be hers,  
Thus contradicting the wishes in his father's will. Mary Moore was like a daughter  
to him, tending his every need, and helping to run the sixty acre farm.  
In 1583, when James was almost eighty, and in poor health, a fire destroyed  
A large part of the farmhouse plus deeds, wills and documents relating to Mary's ownership

### .NORTH DEVON JOURNAL.....JANUARY 12th 1853.

On Thursday night, shortly after the family had retired to rest, a fire broke out at Eastacott which  
was in the ownership of the occupier Mr James Webber. The front part of the house was  
completely destroyed and more than £300\* in notes and cash, together with the furniture, a  
quantity of wool, a dozen hogsheads\*\* of cider and other property to the amount of several  
hundred pound. Only about £10 of the money according to the latest accounts, had been  
recovered from the ruins.

It appears that the inmates had been enjoying themselves over an ashen faggot, it being old  
Christmas Eve: after the family had gone to bed, the servant maid hung a quantity of wet clothes  
round the fireplace to dry, when some of them caught fire and thus originated the fire.

One of the men servants awoke in the night and said, "The fire is still burning." When to his  
astonishment, the flame almost immediately burst into his room, and they were all obliged to fly  
with nothing on but their night clothes.

\* Spending power of approximately £36,200 in today's money.

\*\* 600 gallons approximately 2,275 litres.

New papers were drawn up by solicitors, with the documentation completed just days before the death of James. Sadly, Mary only lived for six more years and in her will left the farm in joint tenancy to her sister Mary and two bailiffs John Roberts and Robert Bucknell, until her nephew James Webber Moore came of age. All three lived at Eastacott, and the term 'joint tenants' caused more legal woes. For reasons unknown, James never inherited the farm and when John Roberts

died intestate, his sister Elizabeth Fullford successfully contested Mary's will, and was awarded her late brother's share valued at £335 - 11 shillings. Legal disputes were also ongoing between Sarah and the Webbers from 1875-1877. A summons was issued by a Bristol court demanding that she leave the farm. A writ was issued in August, but never signed or served, the plaintiff being one Robert Webber of Delphi in the state of Indiana USA. In August 1877, Sarah's

sister Joan Crudge died, leaving her £1000\* to settle with Joan Fullford and Robert Webber and to give a home on the farm to her widowed daughter Mary Ann a young widow with six children under nine, my great grand mother. One of her sons Thomas, my grand father. Mary Ann died suddenly in 1891, and as a consequence Sarah had to rewrite her will as Mary had been the chief beneficiary to inherit farms and money.

As a consequence Thomas inherited Eastacott on the death of Sarah aged 86 in 1897, and was married in the same year to Grace Buckingham who lived on a farm a mile away across the Crooked Oak river. Over the next three years other members of the Hill family married three members of the same family. In 1991. Grace's youngest son was born - John, my father. He had two brothers Herbert and Maurice, and a sister Nellie, the eldest child who never married and lived on the farm until 1966.

## .PART TWO.

Thomas died in 1921, and his wife in 1930. The following year John married Annie Manning and sixteen years later I was born. Within months I was crawling grub-like across the stone floors over linoleum, rag rugs, coconut matting and wool rugs. My every movement supervised by my 46 year old father, 37 year old mother and my aged 55 year old maiden aunt. Poking pink podgy fingers into cracks and crevices, dislodging dirt, dust

ants, sowpigs\*\* and slimy slugs, tracing their silver track trails with a finger tip. In the wooden floorboard ceiling, a round swivel beam - the country gallows, a tight noosing of bird and animal. Beneath the beam the bull's eye window, the goiterous bulge distorting the outside world into a nightmare scene. This was the washday room with the copper, blue block in a Muslim pouch, dolly, scrubbing board the green and red iron mangle, the granite trough and long case pump

Leaving back kitchen and crawling into the kitchen proper, the largest lower branch with its mighty cave of a fireplace, the open mouth swallowing beech faggots, tree moots, logs and at Christmas, coal in a roaring blaze. Every few years a furze bush pulled down on the end of a hemp rope to clean the sooty throat. The fireplace was a showcase for the village blacksmith's craft, an assortment of ironware jacketed in black soot, velvet soft.

\* Spending power of approximately £115,000 in today's money.

\*\* a West Country word for the woodlice.

The adjustable crane with various hooks, crocks cauldrons, handy maid and kettle A riddy pole with hake and chains, firedogs and griddle. On the right hand side the built in cloam oven, once furze-faggot filled to heat the old brick lining. Ashes raked, the bread was baked. Huge crusty loaves with flaking crusts, the scent filling the lower and upper branches. In the centre of the branch a giant table dwarfed all other furniture. This Atlas never groaning

beneath the weight on its shoulders of a dozen best china plated settings at harvest and Christmas time when cold beef, home made chutneys and pickled onions crushed the fleeing lovers on the Willow patterned bridge. As I grew older I climbed up through the trunk discovering new branches, the wide front stair case where, each autumn, over two hundred hibernating tortoise shell butterflies hung in a shimmer-silkscreen on the walls,

their gossamer wings tightly closed against the approaching winter. Four doors leading off to the bedrooms, two with dressing rooms attached. Brass and iron beds, each with a patterned or white china po. No electricity until 1963, never mains water never a flushing toilet. Instead, an Elsan metal lidded tub the size of a dust bin with Jeyes fluid added on a regular basis. When full it was carried out in the spring and summer months to be dug into

the garden. In autumn and winter the contents tipped into the fast flowing stream which flowed over Bull's Mead to enrich the grass before entering the Crooked Oak. At the bottom of front stairs, the dairy with its snow white walls and ceiling. A flagstone floor and slate shelves stocked with tins of fruit from commonwealth countries, tins of ham and tongue. Apples stored for eating and cooking. Ice cold in summer, in winter it froze the marrow, where breath in muslin bags hung from ceiling hooks and crooks.

In a corner, next to the wire mesh fronted meat safe, the separator for separating the cream from the milk. In another corner the butter churn together with the Scotch hands, butter bars, prints and presser. "Come butter come, David stands at the farm court gate, waiting for a buttered cake, Come butter, come."

The final branch explored with my father when I was nine, with a candle flame, a young Pip in a Miss Havisham museum containing decades-old exhibits. Dusty relics from past child and adulthood's. A treasure chest in my young eyes, a grotto of delights. Boxes and trunks which my fingers couldn't prise open. A tennis racquet, minus the catgut strings, a side saddle, stirrups, bridles and harness, a trap lamp with a candle stub. A bag of lead soldiers, some headless.

A broken gun, a iron hoop and an old accordion. Above these treasures, rafters wrapped in spider-spun webs, the occupants the size of old cart wheel pennies. A hanging of bats, common and greater horseshoe waiting for their twilight freedom flight, when they hawked for moths above the hay meads. Rat droppings littering the floorboards which formed the ceiling over the back kitchen. Was that a furtive movement among the potatoes stored for seed?

Finally my favourite branch, the front room branch, where thick curtains hung from ceiling to floor, blocking out the sunlight throughout the seasons. In a drawer in the mirrored sideboard, a collection of leaves from my farmhouse tree, a heap of glass shadows, sepias and black and whites of past custodians with assembled kith and kin, each one caught in a ramrod position decked out in Sunday, wedding and funeral best. On special occasions.



their lives were relived. Whiskered and bonneted faces, passed from hand to hand before being carefully replaced. Sheep shearing, dairy school and chapel outing scenes, weddings, family groups, portraits and staged poses. Faces I had never seen in the flesh including the mad eyed staring man. "Your uncle." The conversation closed. His life discussed in hushed tones, when it was thought I was reading a book. In another drawer a bundle of black edged cards, which were matched to the photographs.

Here, three days before Christmas, hand made tongue licked paper chains stretched from corner to corner across the ceiling. From hooks, huge crepe paper bells and balls saved from a coronation celebration. The curtains pulled back for the twelve special days, revealing in the window alcove the holly Christmas tree, standing in splendid prickly isolation, decorated with miniature yellow, pink, white and blue candles which cast wax spattered shadows

to flicker over silver baubles, bells, and tinsel spangled birds. Here we gathered around the piano and sang our Christmas hymns and songs, the good king's footsteps in the snow illuminated by the light from two red candles in brass holders on the front of the piano. In a small whicker basket on the sideboard, tangerines wrapped in silver and tissue paper, nuts and a pink and white sugar mouse.

The rewards for a tuneful soprano, singing about wisemen, a baby in a manger and angels from on high. This was where the the Tom Smith crackers were pulled and the wishbone from the Christmas dinner chicken. This was my childhood room of magic and happiness until that bleak, bleak, day when.....

### .PART THREE.

The day you died, the sap drained out of my farmhouse tree. That day it became just another farmhouse. No more, no less, an economic unit revolving around the balance sheet.

Next a two act drama began to slowly unfold.  
Act One: The selling of the farm.  
Setting: The public guildhall.  
Act Two: Sale of the dead stock\* and household effects.  
Setting: Farmhouse, court and mowing mead.  
Theatre in the round. Unscripted, unrehearsed.  
An improvised drama of rural family life with relatives, villagers, would be buyers and hangers on making up the cast and audience.  
Plot line: The end of an era.  
Subplot: Memories.  
Lead role and villain of the piece: The auctioneer.

"On instructions received from Mrs Hill we are proud to be able to offer up for auction the excellent stock rearing farm known as Eastacott in the tiny hamlet of East Knowstone equidistant from Tiverton and South Molton.

This is the first time, to the vendor's knowledge, that it has come on the open market, in its three hundred year old history, and it has been in the hands of the present family since the 1870s. It is now up for sale owing to the sad and sudden death of that well respected farmer Mr John Hill. This is a freehold property ladies and gentlemen, and all features usually designated landlord's fixtures are included in the sale. All other details can be found on your instructions of sale sheet."

\* A term referring to agricultural implements and tools.

The opening soliloquy before the main action of the drama.

“Right then ladies and gentlemen, this is a most substantial property, a shade over sixty acres together with a right of common on Haresdown Moor. There is hunting with five packs of hounds - stag and fox, in the vicinity. There is a tithe of five pounds, nineteen shillings and eleven pence per annum, and a rateable value of forty two pounds. Vacant possession will be given on completion on the 25th of March 1966. Who'll open the bidding at twelve thousand? Properties like this don't come on the market every day of the week.”

Amidst a haze of sweat and tobacco smoke,  
the drama slowly unfolded.  
I sat there numbed, a drowning man  
with my life flooding in front of me  
The waves of emotion drawing me under  
the tide of sad nostalgia, while the memory bubbles  
exploded in my face. I saw your hands reach out  
towards me. Saw in your eyes reflections of the  
cob walled farmhouse, once my farmhouse tree.

Back kitchen with the Monday washday copper,  
And the revolving beam. Yours hands constructing  
a wooden board swing and pushing me ever higher.  
Front room with its Christmas multi coloured paper link chains.  
In the window alcove the holly tree for the twelve special days.  
On the sideboard, John Smith crackers and a bottle of Stones ginger wine.  
Your hand a clenched fist grenade exploding open  
revealing cracked walnuts. Front room my favourite room until.....

The swallow-raftered cob-walled barn, adjoining it the red brick  
engine house, added in the early nineteen hundreds. Home  
of the stationary engine which drove the barn machinery -  
chaff cutter, cake cracker and thresher.  
This was a barracks, the home of a stationary Titan,  
with a body beautiful of solid iron, brass and steel.  
The oil dripped from the black bronzed sweating form,  
muscled cogs, huge revolving wheels and pistons  
flexed into fighting action. Once his battle cry  
echoed through the barn, summoning his army  
to obey his command. But now, defeated by the marching gods  
of progress, he sits in a sultry stance surrounded by his fallen soldiers,  
each one brooding on glories of the past.  
Next to the barn the galvanised iron implement shed  
with its props from bygone days - mower, turner, rake and sweep.  
The lingering summer scent in my memory of chamomile,  
crushed by hoof and hob nail boot.

“Do I hear eleven thousand anywhere.”

The pound house with empty firkins, press and scatter  
shrouded in webs. Echoes of autumn cider making,  
the cob walls drenched in the scent of juice and barley straw.  
Shippens with white washed walks, cobble stone floors, straw-coated.  
Sand paper tongue rasping the curly coat of a  
newly born Red Ruby spring calf. Your hands on mine  
as I gripped the teats in my milking initiation ceremony.

In the stable the scent of sweat and ammonia, where the hooves of Charlie the Shire horse set sparks flying from the stones. Harness covered walls, and the scent of summer hay in the rack. The eight feet high 'oodrick in back court, the rambling rose covered walls of the wood shed, full of moots, logs and faggots of kindling and pea sticks for the garden. Here with crosscut and bow saw the boy acting like the man. Under the flowing yellow laburnum and the flowering currant. Past the outside lavatory and into the vegetable garden. The scent of the box hedges, the smother of boy's love and sweet pea. A flutter of cabbage whites.

Finally the fields, a patchwork quilt of seasonal colours, squares stitched together with beech hedges, laid every ten years. Sites for nesting birds and shelter for the cattle. And as the bidding reached a climax, the names filled my brain. Here through the seasons my childhood journey of discovery. The hedgerows full of wild riches - strawberries, raspberries, red and yellow, gooseberries, blackberries and nuts.

"Ten thousand, five, I have. Do I hear six?"

The orchards erupting with ripeness, the trees showering their bounty into the lank tussocks. Your hands heaving hessian sacks into the blue butt card. In the hay shed your hands gripping the knife to slice out wedges of summer. Harsh trek through deep snow with a roped bundle on your bent over back.

"For the third and last time, ladies and gentlemen."

The gavel came down.  
Sold!  
Sold!  
Sold!  
Ten thousand nine hundred pounds.

Your hands drew back,  
and in your eyes  
Reflections dimmed  
and slowly disappeared,  
as the waves surged over me.

The farmhouse, the outbuildings  
and the patch work quilt  
of textures shades and hues  
was wrenched and torn  
From your clawing fingers.

END OF ACT ONE.

Intermission.

Act Two: The sale of dead stock and household effects.  
The sound of the hand bell ringing.

"Right then ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention, it's eleven-o' clock and I've got one hundred and ninety-six lots to auction, so I suggest we make a prompt start. Implements and tools first, and then we'll move indoors. All lots must be paid for before they are removed. You'll

find my clerk in the back kitchen.....Lot one, a fine wooden five bar gate. Who'll start me off? Two pounds?"

Each year my height was measured out against the gate.  
When small your strong hands lifting me up and placing  
me on your shoulders to look out over the patch work quilt.  
For the second time I sank beneath the waves,  
as grey figures peered and fingers prodded  
at the sale lots floating on the tide.  
Lot thirty-one.....crosscut saw.....five bob.  
Lot fifty-two.....thresher and canvas belting.....seventeen shillings.  
Lot sixty-six.....cider press.....half a crown. Sold for scrap and firewood.  
Lot sixty-eight.....cream separator.....five bob  
Turning the handle to gain the momentum  
to make the bell stop ringing.  
The cream separating from the milk.  
Your hands on mine. Once again the child acting like the man.

Once again your hands reached out.  
These were the works of Nature's art,  
created by the seasons' brush strokes;  
pigments of earth and sweat,  
the mixing of summer dyes.  
Brown paste from the sun's pallet  
flowing across the canvas.  
Gouged line, the mad flourish of winter winds.  
Primitive elements,  
the texture etched deep  
by the brush strokes of time.  
Hands calloused and rough,  
but still possessing qualities portrayed by Durer.

And as the lots continued to be knocked down,  
for the second time reflections in your eyes  
this time mirroring the passage of the seasons.  
A random sequence of events, unintentionally  
created at the whim of the auctioneer.

"Lot seventy....three pails.....Do I hear half a crown?"

Milk buckets sticking to iced hands  
pulling pith and fibre from numb fingers;  
the cruelty of winter.

Lot ninety-one.....A horse drawn plough and a set of drags....Five bob anywhere?  
.....two shillings then.....Good scrap metal....I'll take a bob.

Hands guiding the share.  
Eye on marker object.  
Straight furrow in a harsh landscape.  
The autumn pattern of your life.

Lot one hundred and thirty-two.....two glass vases.....start me off at a bob.

Hand picked white violets in a small bouquet,  
Accompanied by a self conscious kiss.  
The ceremony in your annual spring ritual.

Hands gently smoothing the shell of an egg,  
carefully lifted from the nest of a thrush or blackbird;

The tenderness of summer.

Lot one hundred and ninety-five.....garden tools and a butterfly net....must be worth five bob.

While you toiled with the fork  
I chased white butterflies for bounty.  
At the end of one hunting-safari day  
You took my hand and gave me your philosophy -  
"Life, death. Caterpillar, butterfly."

"Right then ladies and gentlemen we come to the final lot. A ....a fine Windsor chair. Never wear out. No worm.....start me off at five bob."

This was your chair where at the end of a working day  
you fell asleep, the cat dozing on your lap.  
A contented smile playing on your lips.

"All done at ten bob then.  
Going.  
Going.....

One hundred and ninety-six lots up for sale and sold  
accompanied by the barbed remarks -

"Fancy putting that up for sale,  
I wouldn't give it 'ouse room."  
"Would 'e ever. Fancy they still usin' that you."  
"Would 'e believe it. Still workin' wi' a 'orse,"

The coarse laugh, the spit on the ground.  
The final violation of grief.

His gavel came down for the final time, and appeared to hang in the air  
as the final memory bubble exploded.  
One afternoon a sharp barb of frost  
penetrated the heart of my farmhouse tree.  
Instantly the red sap  
ceased to flow through the limbs.  
With no time to cry out against the attack  
you sat, with your legs still crossed, feet on the hearth,  
a glass of ginger wine in your hand,  
the toast barely completed.  
A frozen model in a pose, and on your face  
a look of cold surprise at the suddenness of winter's fury.

Leaving the silent room, I raced into back court,  
scattering the hens. Kneeling on the ground -  
"Please God don't let him be....." The final word, unspoken.  
Running back into the house, hoping but knowing....

I never understood why you had to die,  
wrapping paper not yet thrown away.  
Boxed crackers left from Christmas Day.  
The bottle half empty, or was it perhaps half full?  
Decorations hurriedly taken down,  
the holly tree stripped bare of baubles  
and removed from the window alcove.  
Yours was an untimely exit,  
with the wish bone still to pull.

For a split second  
the impression of a smile;  
a spring breeze dancing.

How I wished.

Across the road, right through the night  
the sound of the carpenter's tools  
shattering the silence. Hearing every chime  
of the grandfather clock, and my mother's,  
muffled, in her pillow, sobs.

The undertaker's secret art transformed the face I knew,  
into a still life canvas. Too peaceful, too serene.  
A grotesque death mask,  
with the primitive elements destroyed.

And did those eyes still twinkle,  
and were those eyes still blue?

In cleaning and restoring the old master  
back to its original state  
he found the hands beyond renovation.  
Palms gouged by the elements, lined,  
scarred, scratched and pitted,  
could never be waxed smooth by fluids.

Under the candle-lit silence, in the window alcove,  
I placed my final kiss on your cold lips.

How I wished.

Outside of the gallery in the hall  
the cat sat on the mat.

For three whole days, until the crated exhibit  
was carried out by six suited attendants,  
the cat sat waiting for a final viewing,  
not eating, not sleeping,  
just waiting and waiting,  
but the guides would not let him in.

How I wished.

January the first.

My mother, aunt and I standing by the family grave,  
tears mingling with silver raindrops. No seasonal greetings  
exchanged with cousins, aunts and uncles.  
Many never seen before, down from 'up abouts.'  
Blurred grey faces, against a grey background  
of grey stones and a grey sky.  
Firm handshakes and well worn vocal intrusions  
into a private grief -  
"We know how you feel."  
"He was much respected."  
"Well loved."  
"No enemies."  
"An honest man, he'll certainly be missed."  
"No one ever spoke an ill word of him, or he of them."

Everywhere a profusion of blooms, but all too grand  
For a man who loved the simple wild flowers.  
Dust to dust.  
Ashes to ashes.  
I scattered my hot tears  
and the cold earth swallowed them up.  
The caterpillar pupates, the butterfly awakes.

As the sale ended, your hands reached out for the third and final time,  
but the tide could not be turned back.  
The final curtain came down on the rural two-act play.

The gavel came down for the final time.  
Gone.

John Hill born September the sixth, nineteen hundred and one.  
Died December the twenty-eighth, nineteen hundred and sixty-three.  
Farmer and custodian of my farmhouse tree.  
RIP.

The goodbye wave to childhood  
and the boy became a man.



### .THE FINAL LOAD.

The hayfield, each June ,was a shimmer of green waves,  
white with crashing surf, clover, ox eyes and yarrow.  
Cresting the sea, ripening. That year at twilight  
a grey mist, rolled across the still hayfield sea,  
just as the final load lurched through the gateway.  
The old grey timbers of the Shire-horse drawn galleon  
creaked and groaned as iron rimmed wheels rumbled  
through deep ruts in the lane.

Spray hung in the air  
wave upon wave. Chamomile, briar;  
each incense sweet.

Stacked on the quayside,  
cargo from the voyages;  
the hay shed brimful.

The implement shed  
was a dark shadow land; day  
merging with the night,

My father closing  
the door. The machinery  
oiled and locked away.

By the wall a scythe,  
its blade honed in readiness;  
the final harvest.



.SUMMER SONG.

Each year from mid to late April  
he greeted its call with delight.  
“Bringing back the sun and warmth,  
our turn to have the summer now.”  
Seldom seen, a glimpse fore told a bumper crop  
sweet hay, golden grain and juicy cider apples.

We never attended his cremation.  
The church service and back to the farm house  
followed by the long wait. Over a cold buffet  
around the beech log fire, I heard a farmer say,  
“Just like sweet pork so they tell me.  
You can smell it in the smoke.”

Late in the afternoon under a grey January sky  
his ashes were laid in the ground.  
In the evening I conjured up his face,  
watching it rise though the flames.  
Each spring the sun-song rises and sets;  
my Phoenix is unseen, invisible.

## .THE MOWHAY.

At the top of Long Halls field, tucked away in a corner, the mowhay\*  
where my father and his father built and thatched their ricks,  
before the winter threshing of sheaves, harvested and carted  
from fields across the road - Lower Down, Higher Down,  
Hither Six, Outer Six and Four Acres. At the end of each harvest  
the ritual of Crying the Neck, when the final ribboned sheaf

was nailed to the granary door. A thank you for the oats, wheat and barley  
gathered, and a prayer that next year's crop would be as good.  
After sixteen years of sowing, my father's seed, sown one December night  
producing an heir to roam his fields. In the mowhay  
old implements, including drags,\*\* discarded when my father, in his forties  
through ill health and war dictates, was forced to rent out five of his inherited fields.

Beneath a parliament of cawing rooks, which nested annually  
in beech trees where our seven milking cows  
gathered in the lew\*\*\* of the hedge,  
an express train and a rocket to transport me  
across the countryside, or far out into deepest space,  
thoughts of farming far from my imaginative mind.

He never sold the implements, living in the hope I would one day,  
take over the family farm and house dating back to the seventeenth century,  
little altered from the day it was constructed out of cob.  
On his death, his Michaelmas son, a farming quarter day baby,  
watched as the rusting implements were knocked down for a bob,\*\*\*\*  
a job lot, scrap, to the one and only bidder. My father's mowhay, empty.

\*mowhay - a Devonshire word also written and pronounced mawee, for an area of a field usually a corner where ricks were made.

\*\* drags - Devonshire word for implement with spikes on, used for breaking up the soil.

\*\*\* lew- Devonshire word meaning shelter or shade from wind, rain and sun. "The cows was in the hedge traw (trough or ditch) in the lew of the hedge."

\*\*\*\* bob - a shilling in pre decimal coinage, worth twelve old pence. The lowest bid an auctioneer would accept. If a lot didn't make a bob it went unsold. Five pence in today's coinage.

## .JOURNEY.

He got on just before we crossed from one county to the next.  
and for several seconds he was my father. Same age, same height.  
Wavy hair, with just a hint of grey, neatly parted  
and the pair of NHS glasses. In the blue eyes

reflections of hay pitching days combining with  
corn sheaves standing in shocks of six, days.  
One major difference, the hands were those of a desk man,  
no harsh lines, no callouses. And the skin pale.

Through the window, a seagull over the Tamar,  
and I was half across the bridge in the land of limbo.  
The bus conductor passing between us. A ting, ting,  
a ticket given and the spell broken. My journey continuing

## .THE FLOOD.

Resting on her knees, the treasure chest  
contained a trove of gems.  
Each night opening the lid,  
reaching in and removing a precious stone.

Bedtime stories read by my aged maiden aunt Nell,  
with additions of her own. "The length  
of the ark shall be three hundred cubits,  
the breadth of it fifty cubits and the height of it thirty cubits.  
Higher and longer than your father's barn.  
And of every living thing of all  
flesh, two of every living sort shalt thou  
bring into the ark. Pigs, cows, sheep,  
horses ducks and hens. In they went.  
All your favourite birds and animals too.  
Robins, thrushes, blackbirds wrens. Even the ole fox,  
and then the rain came. Poured and poured.  
And the flood was forty days  
upon the earth. Just think of that.  
Well over a month. Non stop rain.  
Fifteen cubits upwards did the  
waters prevail; and the mountains  
were covered."

Half listening to her story,  
my head awash with questions.  
How long was a cubit?  
How could Noah be six hundred years old?  
What did he do with all the dung?  
What was Mrs Noah called?  
And the terrifying thought of water  
deep enough to cover our farmhouse.  
Deep enough to to cover my world of  
front and back courts and the fields.  
Higher Orchard where, beneath the stormcock's  
dive-bomb flight, natural springs  
bubbled to the surface.

'Lowman iron works, Tiverton August 11th 1904.  
Two hundred and thirty yards of lead pipe  
at sixteen pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence.  
Best quality high pressure taps, brass,  
at five shillings and sixpence each plus  
our charge per hour for fixing same.  
Terms to be discussed and determined.  
We hope to be favoured with your order  
which shall receive our every attention.  
Yours very obediently, Stenner and Gunn.'

Priming the pump with a jug of water,  
working the handle to suck up the spring.  
In a gush-rush the piped water erupts  
into the granite trough. Cupped hands  
dipped. Raised to my lips,  
an explosion of ice cold sweetness.  
In winter the farmhouse froze,  
ice ferns flourishing on window panes,  
muslin breath ballooning to the ceiling,  
the cold oozing out of the cob walls.  
Dagger-blade icicles hanging from the pig sty gutters,  
snapped off and used as a sword and sucked like a lollipop.  
And the water solid in the pipes,  
refusing to flow through pump or tap.

Throughout the year excess water from the springs  
ran through front court where barn nesting swallows  
skimmed for mud in the summer months.  
One hot August afternoon, two hessian sacks  
crammed with golden barley straw,  
a dam created beneath the small flagstone bridge.  
For an afternoon front court is an ocean,  
my father fashioning brown paper boats  
and a tricorn from the weekly Western Times,  
promoting me to the Admiral of the fleet.  
At five-o' clock the plug is pulled,  
in a surge my mythical sea  
is sucked under the outside lavatory  
through ditches in Bull's Mead, Furze Close,  
Moory Ground and into the Crooked Oak.

During autumn and winter, the water  
washed over the grass in Bull's Mead.  
Lavatory buckets tipped into the stream  
enriching the ground for springtime grazing.  
On winter days, peewit and snipe  
billing the earth for worms and grubs.  
In summer the river was thin,  
a meandering stillness, where my mother and I  
Came to bathe when the springs threatened to run dry.  
Once a dead sheep haloed in flies  
floated slowly by as we picnicked on the bank.  
In autumn and winter it was swollen and gorged with fish  
which my father gaffed with a iron hook on a pole.

One August day the black sky split  
by lightning flashes poured down rain.  
The stream through front court became a torrent,  
flooding under the pine front door.  
"I do set my bow in the cloud,  
and it shall be a token of a cove-  
nant between me and the earth.  
Richard of York gave battle in vain.  
All your colours in a simple sentence,  
and the waters shall no more.

become a flood to destroy all flesh.  
Your birds and animals safe forever  
and your mother, father and Aunt Nell.  
Beast and man, no more drownings.  
And all the days of Noah were  
nine hundred and fifty years  
and he died. Even older than your auntie.”  
A chuckle.  
The family Bible closed.  
A bag taken from a cupboard,  
passed to me with a smile, “For you.”  
The package unwrapped. In my hands a kaleidoscope.  
Today with each twist of the tinsplate container  
childhood rainbows, form, split and shatter.  
A flood of memories.

## .THE BIKE RIDE.,

It was a sunny morning in mid June,  
the maiden journey with my mother across the moor.  
My first bike, second hand, turquoise with a tarnished bell.  
A girl's, no crossbar, no drop handlebars.

Mum, her back always ram rod straight was on  
her smart black Raleigh model. A wicker basket attached  
to the handlebars with leather straps, containing runner beans  
a pot of separated cream and

a screw top jar of a neighbour's summer nectar.  
Orchard apple petal, garden sweet pea and moorland gorse  
golden through the glass.  
Gifts for two aged relatives, visited each summer.

Their kitchen with its large glass cabinet  
containing a stuffed and mounted brace of pheasants  
shot by my great uncle. Great aunt's annual dry joke,  
"But the best ones be the ones I stuff." A chuckle.

A stop off at the moorland verge for me to ramble  
and score points in my I-Spy Wild Flowers book.  
Sundew, cotton grass and the pale marsh violet.  
My mother standing patiently, watching my every step.

Suddenly I heard its distant song,  
the notes rising and falling  
through the sky. A glimpse,  
but no mention in my I-Spy Birds.

Returning to my mother, I remounted my bike,  
and became a crouched over champion.  
The model deluxe, derailleur gears,  
the bell silver and shining in the sunlight.

Today, when heard, the notes, are once again exuberant,  
an exultation of innocence, exhilarating.  
A spangled skein in a woven tapestry,  
conjuring up the bubbling moorland brook.  
The magician of the timeless moment;  
my sky poet.

### .BRAMBLE JELLY.

The bramble patch was a wild beast of a shrub,  
its barbed tentacles ensnaring my unwary bare arms.  
This was my multi-eyed mythical monstrous hydra,  
the compound orbs rage-black in the sunlight. Watching.  
Plucked from their sockets they were placed  
in the enamel bowl wedged in my wicker basket.  
Occasionally the creature lashed out, attempting  
to trap my hand in a writhing of coils.

Tipped into a brown enamel saucepan on the Calor gas stove  
the eyes bubbled into a purple pulp. Swollen and taut  
as a cow's udder the home made muslin bag  
bulged pendulous from the back kitchen revolving beam. Dripping.  
Next morning the blue rimmed enamel white bowl  
on the flagstone floor was full to the brim.  
Blood-thick, the strained juice was a mirror  
locking in the sun-filled carefree childhood days.

Placed next to the pots of chutney and jam  
the jelly jars were part of a shimmering kaleidoscope.  
At the tea table, a greaseproof paper lid removed,  
summer released in a pouring out of memories  
Annually around Derby Day, the first cut of hay.  
Mower, turner, rake, sweep and cart.  
Cascading stalks dry and intoxicating,  
filling the mead with the sweet scent of the harvest.

Running, rolling, skipping through the swathes,  
salt, mustard, vinegar and pepper.  
As twilight came down in a flutter of bats' wings  
I turned my last cart wheel over the mead  
and iron rimmed wagon wheels rolled up the lane.  
Harvest home and the hay shed full.  
Always in summer the drone of light aircraft,  
prospectors of moorland, hedgerow and mead,  
combing for gold in gorse bush and broom  
returning to hangars weighed down with bounty.  
In May a load of hay,  
In June a silver spoon,  
In July not even a fly.  
On a china plate wax cells of treasure.  
Always in summer the sun flowing honey-thick  
across a red sky at night or in the early morning,  
delighting or warning the unknown village shepherd.  
Golden corn with a scattering of poppies,  
bindweed and cornflowers waving gently  
in the breeze; petal-fabric-flag days.  
Call of the cuckoo, skim of the swallow,  
minnows in a jam jar, bird nesting days.  
Summer treat vanilla running into  
strawberry and chocolate ice cream melting  
into the memory of those never to be forgotten days.  
The pot resealed, replaced on the shelf.  
In the hearth the apple log fire blazes sun-hot,  
at the copse-edge, my mythical creature stirs in his winter sleep.



.THAT SUMMER.

"All things bright and beautiful  
All creatures great and small."  
The bush was a jewelled fan, in spring gold pendants and tiny rubies.  
In autumn the real treasure, to be stored in my tin  
for Christmas cracking around the apple and beech log fire.

That summer mirages melted and shimmered on the roads,  
Where bubbles oozed up like boiling black toffee.  
Sun-scorched cow dung lifted scab-like  
leaving the tarmac pockmarked and scarred.  
That summer, myxomatosis invaded the village,  
all the way to chapel on that hot afternoon  
the road was littered with a twitch of fur.  
Balloon bodies, stretched and taut, bounced and rolled  
across our path. Blind and past redemption.

A cudgel quickly fashioned with his lamb's hoof knife.  
The whoosh through the air, dull thwacks,  
a soft explosion of pus. The balloons deflating  
in a hiss-stench of gas. And it being Sunday.  
The hazel stick wiped on the verge, flung over the hedge.  
On the chapel steps my father looking away, mumbling,  
"Something in my eye. You go in. I'll join you in a minute."  
The first realisation that not only children cry,  
The minister choosing a hymn for the Sunday school scholars.

That autumn a profusion of nuts on branches easily within my reach.  
A rich harvest to be secreted away by squirrel, mouse and jay;  
on a shelf in my bedroom my Bluebird tin, empty.  
"All things wise and wonderful  
The Lord God made them all."

.THE CROOKED OAK.

The water under the plank bridge deep,  
seemingly bottomless and night-dark.  
The surface, grass pollen flecked,  
a slow meandering, summer stillness.  
A net.

This was where the legendary creature lurked,  
Which according to an uncle's country lore  
could defy death until the sun's last rays  
sucked out it's force, stilling it's slippery form.  
A hammer.

On the fifth morning he was mine,  
stunned by a blow, iron hard and heavy.  
I tugged him from the mesh, fastened him  
by the head and waited patiently.  
A nail.

There was neither movement or writhing,  
as my uncle had so explicitly described.  
Instead it dangled, a length of hose pipe,  
the hot sun quickly drying the rubber.  
A tree.

Just before bedtime I crept back. The eel  
scorched and hanging stiff, long since dead.  
Flowing across the twilight sky a stain of blood.  
Returning home, heavy hearted.  
A cold bed.

## .CIDER MAKING.

My father is the Keeper of the Saws.  
The red metal handled bow saw and the wooden two handled cross-cut saw.  
We trudge through lank grass tussocks in Lower Orchard.  
Tussocks as thick and as untidy as the rookery nests in the mawee  
and the church yard beech trees.  
He strides out.  
I try to keep pace with him,  
attempting to fit my sandalled feet into his hobnailed boot imprints.  
We reach the apple moot dug out the previous day.  
He removes a small lump of lard from a brown paper bag.  
He greases up the blades to give the teeth a sharper bite.  
After spitting on our palms and rubbing it in he says,  
“Let the saw do the work. Let it go through the wood like a knife through butter.”  
He makes a nicked mark with the bowsaw.  
He picks up the cross-cut.  
My small hands grip a wooden handle, while he grips the other with one hand.  
The teeth bite into the wood.  
Sawdust spits back, forming a small mound as we build up a steady rhythm.  
I breathe in the scent.  
As we work my mind turns to the apple harvest from the previous year - Tom Putt,  
Quarrenden, Duck's Bill and Listner.

The chopping of the apples in the wood and iron scratter,\*\*  
helping to turn the gigantic wheel.  
The making of the straw and apple cheese  
built up in alternate layers on the oak press.  
I wait for the first drips, barely containing my excitement  
The juice from the crushed apples is a lion's mane flowing golden  
into the wooden tub. My summer sun lion is caged, but strong and potent.  
Kneeling on the tamped earth floor of the pound house,  
I lean over and suck up its beams through a piece of barley straw.  
I taste the first drop on my lips and the apple year explodes in my head.  
On Christmas Day the excitement of pulling the wishbone, as a weak winter sun breaks through  
the wrapping paper clouds illuminating branches stark against the sky.  
The promise of a late summer golden harvest.  
The lion cub pawing at the lichen coated boughs.  
A storm of song breaks over the orchard trees in spring.  
Call of the holm screech.  
A serration of notes heralding the end of winter.  
In a sprinkle of confetti, the pink and white shower, as sudden as April rain  
saturates the tussocks..  
A May Day celebration as the harbinger of summer sends his two note call  
echoing over the orchard, heralding a rich, sweet, juicy crop.

In the fruit forming months, time is suspended and I blow my seed clocks  
over the grass, counting the chiming hours silently as they drift in the wind.  
The lion's voice roars across the sky.  
Newly formed apples, left from the June drop, hang from the boughs.  
A pride of ancient varieties maturing in the lion's golden mane.  
With a crack, the sawn moot splits in two and my thoughts return to the present.  
We place the cross-cut on the grass, sit on the logs and share a Mars bar,  
a packet of Smiths crisps and a bottle of Corona dandelion and burdock pop.  
Dad chuckles, "If the sawing has made you sweat, the logs will keep you hot in the winter.  
Keep you hot twice." By a quarter to one our task is completed. I look forward to the afternoon.

Charlie the Shire horse pulling the blue butt cart full of logs.  
Being allowed to take the reins. Giving the commands. Being a proper farmer,  
as we are serenaded by the robin's wistful autumn song.  
My father picks up the bow saw and passes it for me to carry. I am so proud.  
We return to the farmhouse, walking side by side and I think of the hogshead  
in the pound house, brimful with fifty three gallons of liquid sunshine.  
I think again of the first sip. The fully grown golden maned lion roaring in my mouth.  
And all the while the scent of the beast soaking into the pound house cob walls.

\* Devonshire word for the iron and wood apple crusher where the cider apples are crunched up  
and pounded. Hence the name for shed where cider is made - the pound house.

## .MAKING HAY.

It's an early morning in June, my father's right index finger and middle finger knuckles are tap-tap- tapping the banjo barometer. He announces the glass is high and staying put. This means the weather is set fair for three days and it is time to make hay.

His voice echoes through the farmhouse and his words are the words I've been waiting to hear since the hay-making implements were cleaned, greased, sharpened and put away at the end of the previous summer's hay making.

Annually, from dawn until dusk over the next few days the air is filled with the scent of cut grass changing into hay in our two hay meads. The days are sky-filled with skimming swallows days. The scent of drying grass includes sweet vernal, meadow foxtail, dog's tail, sheep's fescue and Timothy grass. My father has told me that there are over a million and a half seeds to the pound in sheep's fescue grass.

The scent of the drying grasses washes through every room of the farmhouse in wave upon perfumed wave. A scented sea ripples in an ebb and flow of nose tingling fragrances which saturate the two feet thick cob walls. When dusk descends at the end of the second hay making day and the grass is drying and changing into hay, the whole village is submerged beneath a vast hay-making sea. The waves crash over me and I drown in the scent.

Time before breakfast to spend walking around the outskirts of the mowing meads with my polythene covered copy of the 'Collins Pocket Guide to Wild Flowers.' The illustrations of the grasses are line drawn and the flowers are either illustrated in colour or black and white. Names to muddle and befuddle my brain. Musical and magical names. Crested dog's tail, rat's tail fescue, self heal, yellow rattle and pig nut.

Names to be written into my school, orange covered, flower note book in my best copperplate hand writing, with my birthday present Platignum fountain pen and logged in my I-Spy Wild Flowers book. Over one hundred points scored before my breakfast of cornflakes and separated cream.

Wishing that I didn't have to go to school. The day behind my desk seeming like a week. Quickly jumping down from the cream and red school bus at a quarter to five. Changing into my play clothes, drinking down half a pint of milk and quickly devouring a freshly baked rock bun. Rushing out to Higher Mead. Jennings and Derbyshire on the wireless, on Children's Hour, will have to attend lessons without me.

Taking a very deep breath and filing my nostrils with the impossible, to bottle scent. Laid out across the field the approximately three feet wide swathes of grass mown by our neighbour, Mr Down with his Massey Ferguson tractor and the mowing machine.

Coming from the base of the corrugated iron roofed hay shed the scent of chamomile, crushed by boot and wheel. I pick a flower and squeeze out the juice between my finger and thumb. It gives off the most aromatic fragrance in the hay fields.

Over the three hay making days the picnic teas. Teas which have never tasted better. Teas brought out in a large wicker basket, to be eaten in the shade of the hay shed. Teas baked and prepared by my mother and Aunt Nell. Teas laid out on the white linen table cloth. Again the scent of crushed chamomile.

Sandwiches of home cured ham. Sandwiches with Cheddar cheese. Sandwiches with sliced hard boiled eggs. Bacon and egg pies. Jam tarts. A fruit cake. A white enamel jug of tea and a summer treat bottle of Corona fizzy pop for me.

This summer while I'm cart wheeling, somersaulting and rolling in the hay, the harvest begins to take on a new meaning. It begins at the final picnic tea when my mother and Aunt Nell perform their annual end of hay making rituals which they first performed when I was four. The holding of the buttercup under my chin ritual, when, if a golden spot is reflected on the underside of my upturned chin I am told I like butter.

My mother is the first to hold the freshly picked flower. She smiles as her bloom sends a yellow blob dancing over my flesh and tells me with a smile, that once again I like her freshly churned and rolled butter pats. Not to be outdone, Aunt Nell picks two buttercups and when they are, Bob, bob, bobbing in harmony she laughs and says that not only do I enjoy butter but that I also love my father's separated cream. Both my mother and my aunt allow their fingers to linger and stroke my cheek. It was not until I was eight that I realised that there would always be a dancing blob when the sun was shining and that the flower was never held under my chin when it was a cloudy day.

After the buttercup ritual my mother picks and makes what she calls her yearly hay making daisy chain. She pierces a stem with her finger nail and threads a daisy through the slit, and continues the process until the daisy link garland is big enough to fit over my head. Very carefully she lowers it over my tousled hair and it rests on my chest.

That summer's afternoon, because it was so hot I had taken off my green and white check shirt sleeved summer shirt and I was bare chested. The tiny daisies tickled my flesh. As soon as she had placed it over my head she once again caressed my cheeks with the backs of her fingers. For some reason a strange shivering tingle ran through my whole body. She gently ruffled my curls, entwining them between her fingers. I felt my cheeks begin to glow. She let my curls drop back on my neck and then she smoothed it,

Once tea is eaten, my father, begins to sweep the horse raked hay with the horse-drawn wooden sweep. Pulled behind the horse, the hay is swept up from the windrows on the long wooden tines and hauled back to the hay shed.

I race across the field for the final hay field playtime of the summer. This is a harvest high-light. I lie face down in the raked windrow before rolling over and over in the hay, smothering myself with the dried grass strands. Jumping up I throw myself into an adjacent windrow, repeating the game, enjoying the sensations, not only of the scents, but also the tickling and pricking sensations against my naked flesh.

Breathing in the hayfield aroma I lie for a short while staring up at the sky, before rolling over and over once again, coming to a halt with my face deep in the hay, breathless. One last deep inhalation.

That year a tingling sensation. A tingling sensation which was even stronger than the one experienced at the picnic tea. It pulsed through my body. It was beautiful, and at the same time alarming. I felt as if I should be wary of it, but not knowing why. It coursed through me and it was as if a new force was being released in me. As if my body was waking from a deep sleep.

I stand up, my father needing to sweep the last remaining windrow of summer. The final sweep-load pronged into the oven-hot hay shed with the hay almost touching the roof.

The first tendrils of dusk are descending. In the gathering gloom, the honeysuckle perfume fills the air to entice in the early night-flying moths. The hay harvest is over for another year

## .THE HAY CART.

When the banjo barometer shows set fair, when the strand of seaweed brought back from the previous year's Sunday school seaside treat trip which hangs in the pound house over a hogshead of cider is dry, and when the wireless weather forecast tells my father there are three dry days ahead, it is time to make hay.

The grass is cut on the first morning into swathes, dried and turned on the second and third days with the horse drawn turner, and raked and carted to the hay shed or tallet\* on the third or fourth afternoon depending on how good the drying has been. My father has told me that the best hay comes from grass which has flowered, is cut before the seed has set and carried before the stems have turned brown and brittle in the sun. He also told me that the vitamins are preserved, less sap has evaporated and the crop is good and heavy,

The long cart for carrying the hay is my favourite farm implement, and it is stored in the linhay, next to the butt cart at the top of front court opposite the farm house. It was crafted just before the First World War in the village carpenter's shop. It took several weeks to construct, and consists of an oak framework and plank floor, wheel hubs of elm, spokes and shafts of ash and wheel rims of iron. It cost my grandfather eighteen pounds.

That never to be forgotten, first-time ride home on the final load, when I was nine, with my father's instruction to hold on tight.

Exhilarating and at the same time frightening. My small hands gripping the rope which holds the hay firmly in place between the lades. My knuckles white.

Overhead, through the sea-sky, a wing-skim of surfing martins and diving swallows, each nesting on either barn cob wall or stable rafter.

Lying out full length on my hay mattress, flying above my farm's and field's world. My face buried in the stalks, my nostrils soaking in the scents of the dried grasses and flowers pressing into my face.

In the hedge the honeysuckle, with the first evening moths fluttering over the flowers. Petals of the dog rose, pink and white falling into the hedge troughs; brittle shards of summer. The leaves of the overhanging beech branches brushing my back. Bramble barbs tugging off wisps of hay.

To see and feel nothing except the three day dry stems. Hearing only the sound of the hoofs of the heavy horse, the jangle of ash stocks turning and iron-rimmed wheels jolting over ruts and pits in the never to be recaptured experience.

The load lurching and swaying beneath me.

Apprehension in the pit of my stomach.

Approaching the hay shed.

Daring to sit up and look around.

Memories of my first ride on the Shire horse.

But now I'm so high above my hay field world.

Feelings of fear disappearing.

A smile filling my face.

My father's command to Charlie, 'Whoa, boy. Whoa'

Coming to a halt.

The pause.

A deep breath.

My father giving me words of encouragement.

Plucking up courage.

It's now or never.

Sliding down the side of the load.

Into his waiting arms.

My feet once again on firm ground.

Crop and boy safely gathered in.

A final turning of cart wheel and somersault.

Throwing a handful of hay into the shed, pretending to be a farmer.

Flutter of bat wing and it was no longer day. First dew of dusk and the twilight startling me.

\* A Devon word for the hayloft over the shippen. Hay could be dropped through a trap door into the hay rack below. The word comes from the word tally.

## .GOLDEN DAYS.

Between the hay harvest and apple gathering days, there are the Dinky-Corgi-Matchbox-Dandy-Sherbet-fountain-corn-cutting-summer-holiday-days.

The sun glows golden-syrup-thick across a blue sea sky. Every week a treat melt in the mouth, six penny tub of ice cream, Corona orangeade bubbles exploding up my nose with thrupence back on the bottle, overflowing with laughter, week.

Every day is as sweet as the buzzing-bee-sucked- moorland-heather-and-broom-bloom-nectar-in-the-honey-flowing-thickly-from-an-over-brimming-sun-filled-golden-jar, given to me by the bee-keeping carpenter, undertaker, wheelwright across the road, day.

At the twilight, bat-fluttering-past the beech trees bordering the back court, end of the day, a red curtain is brought down on my fun and games. In the public bar of the Masons Arms, the den of iniquity according to my aged maiden Aunt Nell, the stage is set for a run through of the script, over a pint of cider or mild and the click of dominoes, wreathed in pipe and cigarette smoke, about the hours of sunshine and of the corn harvest soon to be acted out in the farmers' fields.

At this time of the year, my life revolves around I-Spy with my little eye, something beginning with 'C'.

On a hot August morning as soon as the sun has burned off the early morning dew from the field, I see a golden corn tent with flimsy red, white and blue banner-flag flowers unfurling and fluttering in the breeze being 'opened up'.

In the depths of the ocean-sky, swifts in a cloud, swim with mouths agape harvesting the aerial plankton of insects, seeds and spores, whale-like

In Outer Six Acres, the arcing-wing sweep of the whetstone honed scythe blade, cutting a swathe through the golden stalks close to the Devon banked rabbit-warren filled hedge. The entry of the tractor-drawn reaper-binder sailing into the field on it's maiden voyage of the year.

The first scythed golden stalks and ears bound in a sheaf in a wrist-twist rope of stalks and tossed into the hedge trough.

Click of the blade teeth and the stalks are lapped up by the canvas tongue and swallowed into the insatiable belly of the binder, only to be quickly spat out seconds later as, tightly bound with binder cord, sheaves.

When three or four swathes have been cut and bound, the heroes of the field begin the Herculean task of shooking the sheaves in shocks numbering six, sometimes eight or ten if wheat to allow the ripening process to be completed, and for a drying breeze to blow through them.

Shirt sleeves buttoned at the wrists, even though the harvesters are working under the sweltering midday sun, to prevent the thistle barbs and the awns of the bearded barley from ripping the flesh.

This is my golden realm where I stand the young pretender in my regal golden robe with golden rays for a golden crown. A young King Midas for a golden day, when the ears in a sheaf become gold coins to my touch as I shred them from the stalk and count them on my palm. All around me the bronzed Greek heroes from my book of fairy tales and myths toil through the day.

When not in the cornfield I am in the farmhouse kitchen standing and watching my mother and aunt as they work in perfect harmony making our ambrosia for the long winter days ahead. Vegetables from the garden to be metamorphosed, by boiling, into succulent chutneys and pickles. In the days of the ancient Greeks, their God's by giving ambrosia to the favoured ones, bestowed immortality upon them, but my aunt's Methodist God would never grant the same gift to me. Instead rich flavours for my developing body are served up with the special silver spoon handed down through the generations from seventeen fifty-seven.

Most golden of the various flavoured ambrosias, both in colour and taste, is the runner bean chutney, the recipe having been written down on the back of a calendar sheet for the month of April 1953, given to my mother by two great aunt's and another copy passed around to villagers.

Golden were the corn reaping days. Golden were the chutney making days. But most golden of those summer and late summer days were the apple picking, cider fermenting days. Those days of golden nectar drinking heroes lifting two hundred weight apple filled hessian sacks into the Shire horse pulled salmon and blue butt cart. Those golden days of swarthy sweating heroes turning the bar to lower the board on the straw and apple cheese block to press out the golden nectar of the gods.



Kneeling by the tub I see my face looking back up at me as I stare down into the filled to the brim, with the golden nectar, iron-staved tub before it is raised up and the liquid funnelled into the bung-hole of the hogshead barrel.

Dipping my piece of golden barley straw into the juice, watching four ripples break over the surface, each ripple is a season in my eyes of the cider apple growing year. Weak rays of a Christmas Day lion cub sun pawing at the lichen coated boughs. Call of the cuckoo echoing over the pink and white bursting boughs. Newly formed apples hanging from boughs In mid summer In September a pride of ancient varieties plucked from the boughs.

First sip of golden sun nectar sucked up and the fully grown, golden maned lion roars in my mouth. And all the while the scent of the beast soaking into the pound house cob wall.

At the end of the golden day I sit in front of the fire on my golden throne, a rustic carved stool crafted by my late grandfather. On my lap a Willow pattern plate. On the plate a hunk of crispy crusty bread, delivered by the baker, covered with golden home-churned patted-butter, a golden dollop of runner bean chutney and a gold-ingot-wedge of Cheddar cheese delivered that day by the grocer. All washed down with a small tumbler of last year's laid down golden cider. - a goblet and feast fit for a Greek king.

I spied with my little eye somethings beginning with 'C' - cornfields, chutney, cider, crispy crusts and Cheddar cheese in those golden days of childhood.

.RETURNING.

.PART ONE - THE VILLAGE SHOP

Today when I return to my roots I visit the spot where the village shop, my palace of edible delights had once stood. Where once the cob walled building had been, burnt down in a fire of the 1963 winter, there now stands a splendid modern village hall.

I stand looking through the iron railings where one of the two village long case pumps had been attached, and stare across the stretch of ground which had once been the school play ground. Momentarily the hall in an air-shimmer is replaced by the shop from my childhood.

A small boy with his mother is climbing the stone steps to the door. She is carrying a brown leather shopping bag by her side. They enter the shop. I see through the open door the small boy rest his chin on the shop counter while tapping a thrupenny bit on the wooden surface. He takes a step back to enable him to get a better view of the sweet-filled glass jars which line the shelves behind the shop keeper.

Jars of his favourites.

Winter mixtures, aniseed balls, sherbet lemons, pear drops, dolly mixtures, liquorice comfits and penny gobstoppers.

His mother completes her purchase of raisins, currants and sultanas which are weighed out on the brass and iron scales and tipped into three blue paper bags. There will soon be a fruit cake mix and the small boy, with encouragement either from his mother or aunt will be allowed to run his index finger around the brown coloured china mixing bowl and lick off the leftovers.

His mother passes something to him. He smiles and replaces his coin in his short trousers pocket, and points out a jar.

The shop keeper takes it down, unscrews the lid and weighs out four ounces of sherbet lemons on his scales, ensuring once again that the platform with the weight on it is level with the tray of sweets. With a chuckle he tips them into a small white triangular paper bag and twists it shut. He passes it to the boy in exchange for the coin his mother had given him. The shop keeper puts his hand into the jar, takes out a sweet and hands it to the boy who gives him a beaming smile.

He places it in his mouth and sucks hard on it.

They leave the shop.

The boy takes the shopping bag and carries it proudly down the steps.

I feel a shiver pass through me as they both appear to stare through me, before vanishing as quickly as they had arrived.

## .PART TWO - THE ORCHARD.

I stand looking, not at the farm garden orchard but a smart, freshly painted white bungalow. For a fleeting moment an air-shimmer, and the view becomes one I remember so well. Trees with fruit hanging heavy, including Victoria plums, the flesh dripping juice, honey golden and wasp-sucked.

The linhay\* with its tar-black painted roof, blistered and resembling a toad's back. Inside on a ledge, four laying boxes where Rhode Island Reds and Light Sussex came to lay each morning and where the bantams strutted out. Their heads held high, their stance haughty.

The after hay-making ritual is taking place. An assortment of iron paring 'ooks, 'ood 'ooks, a scythe and an axe lying next to the oak-stand mounted grindstone.

Small hands turning the wooden handle, the boy eager to please.

The wheel revolving slowly.

Iron pressed against stone.

Water droplets from the stone splashing against his cheeks, leaving rust freckles.

His chuckles become laughter as his father tells him his annual dry joke about wetting the dry whet stone in the sharpening process.

His father leaves the linhay, goes to a tree, returns with a plum which he places on the outstretched palm.

The scene vanishes. My fingers close on thin air as the bungalow reappears. I walk up the road, in my memory the sun glints on a sharpened scythe blade never to be used again in summer fields thick with thistles.

Each spring the farm came under siege from a marauding force.

Across the fields two ancient tribes marched unchecked,  
fierce warriors, their sharp-edged blades unsheathed. By early June  
their ranks had grown, their helmets feathered with purple plumes  
as they laid claim to land which they considered theirs.

In mid July, the lone recruit set out with shirt sleeves rolled, to halt the rout.

Coiled, taut, steel hawser veins threatened to slice through the skin  
of muscle-knotted arms. Beneath the metal-melding sun

Sweat-oiled hand and oiled blade were fused as one.

From dawn 'til dusk he paced the battlefield to wage his lone assault,  
with measured swing he swept their ranks aside,  
each stroke slicing an arc through the enemy platoons.

Beneath the setting sun's blood rays the weary soldier shouldered arms.

His day's work done he tramped back home, the grass of Higher Orchard  
strewn with war's carnage. The thistles, spear and plume, defeated for  
another year. And as my father oiled his scythe, reinforcements for the fallen  
drifted down by parachute in readiness for the following year's theatre of war.

\* A linhay is an open fronted shed where farm machinery, including tractors, is often kept.

### .PART THREE - FINAL FOOTSTEPS DOWN THE LANE

In my hand the Acme kaleidoscope, with the little rhyme around the rim - 'Look through the peephole and you'll see, 1001 patterns as pretty as can be.' A present brought back by my aged maiden aunt Nell from one of her rare Thursday market day bus trips to South Molton over sixty five years ago with the words "A little treat for you. Give you hours of fun and Auntie'll enjoy looking into it as well."

I twist the yellow tin plate container, and in the tunnel of light, a shimmering scene forms in the colliding random multi-coloured tiny shapes.

From those days long ago, those childhood days, I glimpse the lane where I walked and stumbled my sandalled and Wellington booted way through the four seasons.

In the razor-sharp morning air it is a verdant landscape painting framed between two mowing meads - Higher Mead and Lower Mead of our family farm, and Beer Close Copse belonging to a neighbouring farmer. In previous centuries it had been a trackway between Shapcott Manor and the village of East Knowstone. The silence shattered by the scythe sharpening screams of the manor gleanies, cutting through the valley. My father's dry joke, "It'll cost you twenty one shillings to buy a guinea fowl."

On one side of the lane, the gert\* Debm beech hedge, laid every dozen years with bill 'ook and axe. Nothing wasted - kindling and logs for the open fire, pea sticks for the garden. Mighty and massive, the hedge cast its long dark shadow over the pockmark of pot holes in the stone rutted track way and over Higher Mead. The grass bank of the hedge pummelled each spring by primroses and violets, purple and white.

Another twist and the lane is transformed into the hay shed. I glimpse again those sun-filled, hay-filled, shepherd's red sky at night, golden syrup sun flowing across the sky at night, days. Those days of swathes, windrows, pooks,\*\* hay-sweep swept stacks and ricks. Somersaults, handstands, skipping and cartwheels. Human arms and legs over the mead and handmade axles, spokes, hubs and wheel-rims in a rumble-roll of cart wheels up the lane. Riding the load over the field towards the hay shed. A galleon carrying the precious cargo wrapped in a white bindweed sail cloth, and a turn twist of honeysuckle rope rigging. The flowers moth-sucked, the aroma overpowering my senses. At the base of the hay shed the scent of boot and hoof crushed chamomile filling the evening air where bats from the attic perform their aerobatic antics.

A third twist and the pattern dissolves, the hay shed becomes a two hundred weight hessian sack, filled to the brim with ears of wheat. My tiny fingers fumbling to untie the the binder cord knot. Slowly sinking my fingers into the cool grain. In my hands, summer-sun gold minted sovereigns. That first tactile sensation never to be recaptured. Watching the reaper-binder in Outer Six Acres. My childhood field of golden dreams, with sheaves to be thrashed in a trash of husk, chaff and dowse.\*\*\*

Another twist of the tinplate tube, and the hessian sack becomes the sheaf moulded from dough on the altar rail at the harvest festival service. On window ledges, apples, potatoes beetroots, carrots, asters, chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies. A wealth of produce crowning the farming year with its finest gem, the gigantic vegetable marrow, with my initials DJH scratched with a pin into the skin.

Another twist and the sheaf is an iron staved hogshead stored in the pound house on a stout wooden platform next to the oak press and the skatter. A new barrel tapped, and the first trickle into a two pint cider jug from the set of three displayed in the glass fronted china cabinet in the kitchen.

The sixth twist, and another pattern forms from those far off days and the hogshead is transformed into a long grey hand knitted stocking dangling from the foot of my parents' double iron and brass bed. Fingers in a frenzy of excitement feeling for the gifts, from the man I was afraid of. Sugared almonds, string tailed pink and white sugar mice, marbles, a juicy Jaffa orange,

a performing wooden monkey on a stick, mixed nuts and a green and yellow Dinky toy cattle truck. The final gift fumbled out, a blue balaclava hand knitted by Mother Christmas. On the floor just under the bed the two big presents, a Rupert Annual and a Magic Robot quiz game. Just after breakfast the final visit by the red-faced sherry drinking postman in his blue serge, with the red stripe, suit, his peaked matching cap and the sack with the Christmas Day gift and cards.

From the sack a tumble of winter memories. In the kaleidoscope pattern, the coloured shapes become a blizzard of falling flakes forming a wind blown drift of snow-filled delights. Waking up on that first snow-filled winter morning, the phosphorescent snow-glow on bedroom ceiling and walls. Peering through a breath warmed patch on one of the small thirty six window panes each etched with a fairy-tale scene of magical frost ferns and ice castles. First glimpse through crystal coated glass of court, gate and road. White on white on white. Outside and into a lane untrodden, flat and white, the silence shattered by the scream of the guinea fowls. Iron rimmed cart wheel tracks hidden from sight. Beech branch and bough bent over by the weight of winter. The first peed initial 'D' in lemon-yellow.

The first snowball rolled down the slope of West Furze Close. Bigger and bigger. My winter sun orb. Crash into a tree and my snowball totally eclipsed. The first taste of snow sweets. Snow pear drops, snow acid drops, snow winter mixtures and fluffy snow marsh mallows. The first built snowman in back court under beech trees where past relatives proudly carved their names in the trunks next to the 'ood ricks, where in a crevice between the faggots Jenny wren nested in a true feather-lined moss nest.

Winter replaced by a glimpse of returning spring as I give the kaleidoscope another twist. A special delivery in a steam train's guard's van at East Anstey station in a 'Handle With Care. Day Old Chicks,' cardboard box. The scent of paraffin from the heater and mash. The first suck on my fingers in the bucket of milk by the Ruby Red bull calf. The drift of snow drops in the garden orchard hedge, thaws and melts away, and is replaced by a golden trumpet call of daffodils which chime into bluebells.

The final twist and Shapcott Lane comes back into view. First blush of the shy white violets' opening petals. I see my father stopping to fumble-pick his rite of spring bouquet for my mother. From an ivy clump on an elder stump, a glimpse of lemon-yellow. A Brimstone butterfly takes to the sky in its waking, from winter sleep, flight. My father follows the fluttering wings, smiles and waves.

Walking down the lane towards him are my mother and Aunt Nell. All three face me. All are dressed in their Sunday best. In that final glimpse into the tunnel of light, they appear to be much younger than I ever remember them. Their faces radiant, lit up in beaming smiles, are no longer weary and lined. It is suddenly a summer's day, and the lane is more verdant than I remember it.

They wave as if beckoning me to join them. "Not yet," I murmur. "Not yet."

The image shimmers, blurs and vanishes, only the multi-coloured shapes remain. Hazed in a mist they collide for a final time to form another of the '1001 patterns, pretty as can be.'

I lower the kaleidoscope, place it in a drawer and turn the key. The end of those ever shifting and reforming patterns, the final footsteps down the lane. The brightly painted canvas with the brush-stroked images and vibrant colours of childhood hanging in my memory-gallery fade with each passing year, together with the sounds of farm implement, harness, hand tool, animal and bird which grow ever fainter as I approach the evening of my life.

\* A Devon word being a corruption of great

\*\* A Devon word for a heap of hay ready to loaded onto the cart

\*\*\*A Devon word for the dust blown around when corn is thrashed.

.IS WRITING POETRY.....

The parlour converted into a bedroom. My grandfather growing smaller and smaller in a shrivel-stick heap of protruding bones. "Trouble with his privates," whispered my mother. Her tone implying no further questions. "Give him your hand to shake."

From beneath the sheet, a tremble of spider's legs crept out ensnaring my index finger in a gentle grip. Strength sapped, his hand fell back in a tightly rolled ball, of frustration. The scent of urine strong. His eyes a memory web of shining strands.

A fist flick, and a two-hundredweight hessian sack of corn was in the back of the Shire horse-pulled blue butt cart. Another twist of the knitted wire-veined wrist heaved the long-handled prong-load of hay into the summer sky. Hands crafting and shaping a wooden gate.

Grimacing, he heaved himself up in the single bed, "Not a line on your hands," he chaffed "Soft and pink. Never make a real man's hands. Never done a real day's work and never likely to. And you a farmer's son." Coughing, he collapsed back into the bed. The stench of urine stronger.

Today, I sort ears from the chaff, with each sack carefully weighed before being placed upon the cart. A harvest nurtured with due love and care. Today, I guide the tool to shape and form from raw materials a sound and solid structure. These hands, a man's, still soft and pink,

place words upon a crisp white sheet. Today as I compose my lines I think about his words and ask myself the question.....  
Is writing poetry real work  
for me a farmer's son?

## .BETRAYAL.

Every summer term you came to the school for Open Day.  
Never in the morning for the service and the choir-sung anthem,  
cows to be milked, shippens to be cleaned. Punctually at two o'clock  
you arrived at the green gates. A lift from a nearby farmer

whose son was also at the boarding school. Always in a sports jacket,  
brown check Harris Tweed and grey Terylene trousers. Lifebuoy soap  
not quite masking the smell of cows. "A good crop o' hay, carried.  
teddies\* doin' well, God willin.' Pays to put in a good 'ole 'eap o' dung."

How I despised your tongue-tied colloquial accent, your fumbling  
manners, juggling with cup, plate, saucer and serviette on the garden lawn.  
Hands for milking and cleaning out the shippens. No kiss passed between us  
in the quad where the car was parked. Turning away at your leaving,

pretending you weren't really with me. My act of cruel betrayal.  
Envyng the Daks navy blue pin stripe suits, leather soles and after shave  
of the classmates' parents who were doctors, solicitors and bank managers.  
My thirty pieces of silver.

\* West Country word for potatoes.

## .IN THOSE DAYS.

In those days of white washed, cob walled, shippens  
the newly born Red Ruby sucked my fingers.  
Hessian sacks in the granary days, when  
the roof rafters in summer sprouted  
mud-pellet saucers, which in my eyes  
grew out of the wood, horse mushroom-like.  
Each summer Saturday, counting upturned  
bee skep nests beneath the iron guttering  
on cream painted barn and stable walls.  
Throwing my red rubber ball high in the air  
as close to the nests as I could get it,  
in those carefree days of innocence.

In those happy days cocksfoot, Timothy, fescue,  
rat and fox tail, grew long and lush in Higher Mead.  
The cuckooflower, her loosely fitting pale lilac smock  
rippling in the morning breeze as sharp blades clicked,  
cutting ever wider swathes into my childhood, as I grew older.  
After hay making, those corn stalk binding,  
stooking into shocks of six, eight or ten sheaf days.  
Gleaning facts from my 'Observer's Book of Flowers,'  
each one when spotted, ticked off in my I-Spy book.  
From a rabbit burrow, the harvesters' brown glass bottle  
removed, the black rubber stopper unscrewed.

The flagon raised to my quivering lips. The first hesitant sip,  
turning into thirst quenching gulps.  
The stopper replaced, the bottle carefully  
pushed down deep into the hole.  
I become a wizard of cosmic proportions,  
harvesters appear to double in number.  
The sun, a gigantic ball, bounces over the sky  
in a nightmare landscape. And suddenly I can fly  
high over rooftops, beech, ash and oak trees.  
A swoop, and I'm diving over farmstead and cottage,  
skimming just like my swallows and martins  
above stone angels, crosses and monuments.

The ground splitting open. With a jingle, rattle, jangle,  
skeletons rise up from graves and circle the tower.  
My arms and legs a tangle of puppet string limbs,  
my body falling into the stubble.  
Waking up behind a shock, bare arms and legs sun-scorched,  
the flesh, corn stalk pricked. My head on fire,  
my mouth and throat burning. That first taste of cider,  
never to taste the same again, never to be so strong again  
as on that golden corn cutting afternoon.  
Brewed in the pound house and stored in the hogsheads.  
Lion mane golden, trapping the rays of the sun,  
its bite leaving teeth marks in my imagination.

Each September, sadly watching from my bedroom window  
the annual gathering on telegraph wires across the road.  
This was my late summer harvest from granary  
stable and barn. Each year, a little more of my childhood  
departing with them. The sadness intensifying that morning  
when the sky was no longer a bubble-burst of song.....in those days.



.TINTS ON GLASS, SEPIAS, AND BLACK AND WHITES.

In the sideboard drawer a hoard of stored memories,  
entombed in mothballs they share a communal grave.  
Placed under shrouds of lace cloths and linen serviettes  
faces from four generations are buried here.  
Annually, and on special occasions  
the tomb was opened, the contents removed.  
Exhumed, the bodies lay strewn on the tabletop  
where fumbling fingers rummaged through the pile.

Tongues resurrected lives, some stretched a Biblical span,  
others were all too brief. Passed from hand to hand  
past deeds in the passing are brought to life,  
as a loved one lives and breathes once again.  
A lifespan re-enacted in a kaleidoscope of memories;  
On a thick pile rug a chubby baby gurgles,  
in life film developed, but no print from the negative.

Teenage sweetheart cuts a dashing pose in Sunday best double breasted suit,  
in life tints faded soon after the print was displayed .  
A farmer with shirt sleeves rolled up, pitches sheaves into a cart,  
in life soon mounted in a stiff cover album.  
Here are those destroyed by war's harsh bullet.  
Kept upright by a loved one's memories  
they stand to attention, the khaki faded,  
their faces frozen in celluloid smiles.

Click of the shutter, click of the safety catch.  
Two shots. One prolonging, the other ending life.  
A collection of tints on glass, sepias and black and whites.  
In the eye of the lens, the lens of the mind,  
they will not age. Snapped when time stood still,  
they hold their pose in a blurred limbo of tears.

“This book had a tremendous effect on me..... A wise book full of love for a way of life, respect for people of all kinds and a great relish of the physical world”  
Michael Moorcock. Renowned and Award winning novelist (Referring to ‘The Farmhouse Tree.’)

“One of the best books to be published in the West Country this year.”  
Martin Hesp. Editor at large ‘Western Morning News.’ (Referring to ‘The Farmhouse Tree.’)

“A wonderful memoir which made me nostalgic for a place I don’t know and a time I certainly haven’t lived in.”  
Judi Spiers, Radio, tv presenter and journalist. ( Referring to ‘The Farmhouse Tree.’ Book of the Week on Radio Devon.”)

“He is superb at describing the characteristics of ordinary people. ‘In Memory: Death of a Farmer,’ is a masterpiece.”  
Cornwall schools’ library Association Journal. (Referring to long poem ‘In Memory: Death of a Farmer’ in poetry collection ‘Sudden Arrival’ and in ‘The Farmhouse Tree.’)

“The poem, speaks of a sadder part of their lives.....it struck me deeply when I read it.”  
Rebecca Armstrong. Features editor of the i paper. (Referring to the poem - ‘This Is The Disposable Age,’ in poetry collection ‘Dear Tom,’ ‘Final Footsteps Down The Lane,’ and ‘The Farmhouse tree.’)

“I confess I am identifying with ‘A Poor Farmer.’ Reading the poems is rather like watching one’s life slide by, a sort of interpreted history of self. Which of course is the accolade.....Really, really enjoying.”  
John Lewis-Stempel. Naturalist, writer and farmer. (Referring to “Final Footsteps Down The Lane.”)

